A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
COUNSELORS’ TRAINING APPLICABILITY TO STUDENTS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
WELLBEING

by

Vanessa Costello

Liberty University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the self-perceived preparedness of elementary school counselors’ to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2016) stipulates in its National Model that school counselors are to assist students in their social-emotional wellbeing through their school counselors’ competencies. This study sought to fill the gap in the literature regarding elementary school counselors’ experiences in utilizing their training to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The central question guiding this study is, “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” A purposeful selection was employed to obtain 10 participants from elementary schools. The data was viewed through the theoretical lens of Dweck’s (1977) growth/fixed mind-set theory which includes incremental and Knowles’ (1975) adult learning theory to obtain a phenomenological understanding of the school counselors’ experiences. A verbal frequency scale, semi-structured individual interview, and focus group questions were utilized to obtain data saturation. Data analysis was achieved through horizontalization, clustering, and textural-structural description to identify meaning and essence of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Four main themes emerged from the data namely (a) social-emotional encounters, (b) mindsets, beliefs and self-directedness, (c) ASCA: one size does not fit all, (d) training versus reality.

Keywords: academic training, adult learning theory, American School Counselors Association (ASCA) National Model, entity (fixed) theory, incremental (growth) theory, intelligence, social-emotional well-being
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List of Abbreviations

American Counseling Association (ACA)
American School Counselor Association (ASCA)
American Psychological Association (APA)
Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES)
Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP)
Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) [formerly NCATE and TEAC]
Council for Accreditation and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC)
National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)
National Defense Education Act (NDEA)
Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP)
Urban Child Institute (UCI)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-perceived preparedness of elementary school counselors to foster and promote their students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Social-emotional wellbeing was defined as a student’s holistic, subjective state present in a range of feelings and social skills such as emotional regulation, confidence, resilience, caring, establishing, and maintaining positive relationships, and setting achievable goals, which is acquired over time and applied effectively in their respective social environment and academics.

Chapter one explicated and gave background information on the existing problem and the difficulties elementary school counselors experience in facilitating students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The focus of this study was to explore the applicability of elementary school counselors’ self-perceived training and how they utilized their training in real-world situations. Chapter one explicated the importance of this study and what instigated the impetus to conduct this research.

Further discussion in this chapter includes the work of elementary school counselors and their ability to foster students’ social-emotional wellbeing as outlined by their school and ASCA. Additionally, the training and program requirements that have prepared school counselors to complete their roles as elementary school counselors outlined by the various state departments of education, the Council for Accreditation and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP, formerly NCATE and TEAC) was explored. Information was gathered utilizing a verbal frequency scale, individual interviews, and focus group questions. School counselors were asked to speak on their individual experiences regarding the study topic.
Background

In recent years, there has been extensive research interest (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Buchanan & Hudson, 2000; Green, Howes, Waters, Maher, & Oberklaid, 2005; King & Kostewicz, 2014; Oberle, Domitrovich, Myers, & Weissberg, 2016; Romero, Masters, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014; Schonert-Reichl, Oberle, Lawlor, Abbott, Thompson, Oberlander, & Diamond, 2015; Stewart-Brown, 2000) in the social-emotional wellbeing of students and its effect on their learning. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) reported that for children to meet developmental milestones, learn, grow, and lead productive lives, it is critical that they are healthy. “Good social-emotional [wellbeing] … is a key component of children’s health and healthy development” (CSSP, 2012, p. 2). This interest prompted the development of programs such as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Mindfulness, Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI), and Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) that assist students in achieving the goal of optimal wellbeing (Crean & Johnson, 2013; Gruman, Marston, & Koon, 2013; King & Kostewicz, 2014; Schonert-Reichl, et al, 2015; Stephan, Paternite, Grimm, & Hurwitz, 2014; Thompson, Oberle, Gadermann, Guhn, Rowcliffe, Schonert-Reichl, 2017; U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2017; van de Weijer-Bergsma, Formsma, de Bruin, & Bogels, 2012).

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) stated that school counselors are the primary personnel in recognizing and addressing the social-emotional needs of students in schools (ASCA, 2017). ASCA (2017) adopted into its literature the position that school counselors are trained to implement comprehensive programs that cater to the social-emotional issues of students that have the potential to impede student’s learning. Additionally, ASCA (2015) stated that school counselors are equipped with training to recognize and respond to the
mental health needs of students through early intervention and crisis services. The ASCA (2016) National Model describes in part that school counselors are to work with students with social-emotional difficulties through small group or individual counseling. In the school counselors’ competencies, school counselors are required to know and understand “. . . the nature of personal/social [now social-emotional] counseling in schools and the similarities and differences among school counseling and other types of counseling, such as mental health . . . counseling, within a continuum of care” (ASCA, 2012, p. 157).

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Defining the concept of social-emotional wellbeing was a complex and extensive undertaking. It incorporated a range of topical areas dealing with both the social and emotional wellbeing of a person. The term wellbeing has many facets and is often used for a myriad of states such as financial, educational, or organizational (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Nelson, Tarabochia, & Koltz, 2015). Dinham (2007) wrote that the term, ‘well-being’ lacks definition, both as a concept and in practice. Thus, there emerges a range of factors identified as inherent in it or against which it is recognizable and/or measurable. Yet, at the same time, there is little or no consensus about what it really means or looks like and therefore, to produce and reproduce it, and to know that it is there, proves highly difficult except in the most general of terms (p. 183)

The ASCA (2012) National Model incorporated the wellbeing of students as a part of school counselors’ competencies. The National Model (2012) description of the former domain personal/social development is “maximizing each student’s individual growth and social maturity in areas of personal management and social interaction” (p. 142). However, the
National Model (2016) has no definition for social-emotional development which is a more comprehensive term. Conversely, ASCA has written position papers regarding the school counselor’s role in assisting students with mental health, trauma, suicide, and social-emotional development (ASCA, 2015; ASCA, 2016, ASCA, 2017, ASCA, 2017). Each of the position papers outlines the rationale for their position and the school counselor’s role in assisting students. Therefore, the change from personal/social to social-emotional may be due to the varied mental health issues students are experiencing in recent years. Some researchers (CSSP, 2012; Kaffenberger & O’Rorke-Trigianni, 2013; Nelson et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2013; Walley & Grothaus, 2013) described social-emotional wellbeing from the perspective of a student experiencing social-emotional issues, that school counselors interact with daily that affect students’ learning. Other researchers (Bass, Lee, Wells, Carey, & Lee, 2015; Harrist, Swindle, Hubbs-Tait, Topham, Shriver, & Page, 2016) described social-emotional wellbeing as a healthy interpersonal and intrapersonal aspect (resiliency) of students learning to cope with issues in their lives as it affects their learning and appropriate expression of social and emotional behaviors.

Stewart-Brown (2000) stated that wellbeing incorporates happiness and morale. However, in the academic field the term becomes more difficult because of its subjective view (Stewart-Brown, 2000). In researching social-emotional wellbeing to find a definitive meaning, many other terms associated with the concept of wellbeing were found. The Urban Child Institute (UCI) views social and emotional wellbeing from a developmental perspective (ages 0-3) and defined it as “the change over time in children’s ability to react to and interact with their social environment” (UCI, 2017, para 3). The organization stated that this definition includes a child’s temperament, attachment, social skills/competence, and emotional regulation. Another
national organization, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), promoting social-emotional learning, defined social-emotional wellbeing as a “process through which children…acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2017, para 1). The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), developed the Social/Emotional Wellbeing Survey (SEW) to ascertain students’ level of wellbeing. ACER defined the term utilizing three aspects of wellbeing namely, (a) a scope of positive and negative emotions and behaviors that children and adolescents experience, (b) a degree of individual strengths and social, emotional, and learning ability, and (c) resilience, environmental nurturance, and stimulation and connectedness with others at home, school, and in their communities (ACER, 2012).

Another definition comes from Stewart-Brown (2000) who, in her development of a wellbeing model, utilized previous research on mental health, social wellbeing, and health and disease. She postulated that mental wellbeing is a combination of a child’s cognitive and affective states. The cognitive state relates to the child’s thinking and interpretation of his social world. The affective aspect relates to the child’s feelings in navigating his or her social world. The combination of both areas of a child’s life is affected by the child’s environment at home, in the community, and at school. Stewart-Brown (2000) also mentioned genetics as a determinant in how children perceive their environment. Several other studies (Grusec, 2011; Mitchell, McLanahan, Notterham, Hobcraft, Brooks-Gunn, & Garfinkel, 2015; Romens, McDonald, Svaren, & Pollack, 2015; Schore, 2015; Slavich & Cole, 2015) have found links between genetics and environmental influences. Research findings reveal that an individual’s gene
expression can be altered by his or her environment (Grusec, 2011). Therefore, family structure, poverty, social-emotional events such as exposure to extreme stress, can alter children’s social-emotional wellbeing. Based on cognitive, affective, and genetic influences in a child’s life, Stewart-Brown (2000) defined emotional wellbeing as “a holistic, subjective state which is present when a range of feelings, among them energy, confidence, openness, enjoyment, happiness, calm, and caring, are combined and balanced” (p. 32).

Considering the various definitions discussed, it was important to have a definitive designation of social-emotional wellbeing for this study that incorporated the various definitions as it related to the topic of this study. Therefore, for this study, social-emotional wellbeing was defined as a student’s holistic, subjective state present in a range of feelings and social skills such as emotional regulation, confidence, resilience, caring, establishing, and maintaining positive relationships, and setting achievable goals, which is acquired over time and applied effectively in their respective social environment and academics (CASEL, 2017; Stewart-Brown, 2000; UCI, 2017).

**The School Counselor**

School counselors are tasked with identifying and working with students who have social-emotional issues (Gruman, et al., 2013). However, some researchers (Bains, 2012; Bains & Diallo, 2016; Gruman et al., 2013; Walley & Grothaus, 2013) purport that the work of school counselors in schools rarely includes time to manage these issues with students based on their training and the non-school counseling activities that school counselors do. Non-school counseling activities are defined by ASCA (2012) as “any activity or duty not related to the development, implementation or evaluation of the school counseling program” (p. 142). Some non-school counseling activities ASCA listed are (a) supervising classrooms, (b) assisting
principal in their duties, (c) data entry, (d) performing disciplinary actions, (e) keeping and maintaining clerical and student records which are not the ASCA required duties for school counselors. Chandler, Burnham, Kiper-Reichel, Dahir, Stone, Oliver, Davis, & Bledsoe (2018) conducted a quantitative study on the non-counseling roles that school counselors performed. They stated that “Regardless of the achievement level of the school, participants in the study acknowledged that non-counseling duties demanded most of their time with a small percentage of their day spent providing direct counseling services” (p. 9).

There is a large population of students who have negative emotional and behavioral patterns (Child Mind Institute, 2016; Department of Mental Health and Social Care and Department of Education 2017; Foster, Rollefson, Doksum, Noonan, Robinson, & Teich, 2005; Perou, Bitsko, Blumberg, Pastor & Ghandour, 2013). The Child Mind Institute (2016) reported that “one in five children suffers from a mental health or learning disorder” and by age 14 over 50% of children have developed mental health issues. These included substance abuse, anxiety, ADHD, and depression. Mental Health of America (2017) reported that 5.13% of children have substance abuse and/or alcohol issues, 7.4% have severe depression, 11.01 struggled with major depression and .771% struggled with emotional disturbance. (State of Mental Health of America, SMHA, 2017). The Children Welfare League of America (CWLA), a group of private and public organizations that serve children and families in renovating and affecting improvement of policies that impact the lives of children nationally, reported that in 2016 over 21% of children in nation were diagnosed with emotional and behavioral conditions (CWLA, 2017).

The ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model stipulated that school counselors should spend 80% or more of their time performing direct, indirect, and responsive services to students. For
the remaining 20% ASCA stated that this time can be utilized for program management, school support services, and fair-share responsibilities. As the stipulated requirement is 80% or more it may be the accepted norm for counselors to utilize all their time on school counselors’ duties. One study (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008) examined the actual duties of school counselors and alignment with ASCA stipulations. The findings indicated elementary school counselors engaged in various non-school counseling activities, such as bus duty, as opposed to their other building level counterparts.

Direct, indirect, and responsive services entails meeting the immediate needs of students. In ASCA’s (2016) National Model, some of these services are (a) lessons given to all students in each grade level, (b) addressing immediate needs of students in small groups, (c) consultations and conferences with parents and staff and (d) individual student planning, counseling, crisis response and referrals. These services are geared towards assisting students with achieving academically in school. Slaten and Baskin (2014) assert that “. . .the ASCA model encourages a major time commitment for school counselors to be creators and implementers of curriculum for classroom-based interventions” (p. 79). Some researchers (Auger, 2013; Goodman-Scott, 2013) stated that school counselors perceive themselves as not adequately trained to manage the inflow of the social-emotional needs of their students. Goodman-Scott (2015) conducted research on school counselors’ perception of their training, real-world occupation, and identity as secondary education school counselors. The findings of this research revealed that the school counselors believed their academic training did not fully prepare them for the reality of the work they performed. Although they were trained in aspects of the social-emotional wellbeing of students, and therapeutic orientations, their perception of their training was that they were not adequately prepared to practice fully the demands of counseling, implementing programs, and
administrative duties.

There are stark variations between Goodman-Scott’s (2015) research and this study. Goodman-Scott’s (2015) study examined a national sample of secondary school counselors’ self-perceived preparedness inclusive of building level and the effects of building level on the school counselors’ practice of their perceived training in their schools. She utilized a quantitative methodology whereas this study will utilize a qualitative methodology. This study was of elementary school counselors’ training applicability to their respective duties with emphasis on students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Additionally, this study investigated elementary school counselors’ self-perceived training based on their individual experiences. Research (Bain et al., 2014; Carlson & Kees, 2013; DeKruyf, et al., 2016; Kaffenberger & O’Rorke-Trigiani, 2013; Walley & Grothaus, 2016) on the work that school counselors perform or need to perform concluded that there was either lack of adequate training, lack of clinical supervision, or school counselors were not trained for the realities of their work.

School counselor training encompasses a completed master’s program to obtain licensure or certification which is dependent on the state requirement. Program accreditation is important for guidance, professionality, and standardization of best practices, to counselor education programs. The counseling accreditation agency that accredits counseling programs is the Council for Accreditation of Counselors and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The CACREP standards for school counseling are followed by over 300 universities and 700 counseling programs (CACREP, 2016). The standards set by CACREP focus on program delivery and preparation of students for the counseling profession (CACREP, 2016). Not all school counseling programs are CACREP accredited because it is not a requirement in all states for licensure or certification. However, for this study the CACREP school counseling standards
(2016) will be discussed to further explain school counselors’ academic training. School counseling programs under CACREP accreditation are 48 credit hours or 72 quarter hour programs. Conversely, CACREP will require school counseling to be a 60 credit hours program by 2020. School counseling programs accredited by CACREP are required to train students in the following core courses:

- Professional Orientation and Ethical Practice
- Social and Cultural Diversity
- Human Growth and Development
- Career Development
- Helping Relationships
- Group Counseling and Group Work
- Assessment and Testing
- Research and Program Evaluation

Specialized areas of study are additional to the core courses. CACREP requires that all school counselor candidates have knowledge and skills in the following:

- Foundations: history and development, school counseling programs, career development, collaboration and consultation, assessments
- Contextual Dimensions: leaders, advocates, change agents, crisis, and trauma management, recognize mental health issues, substance abuse.
- Practice: evaluate programs, academic development, promote graduation rates, techniques is personal/social counseling, implementing programs, accountability data (CACREP standards, 2016).
Most school counselor programs include knowledge in the areas of (a) human development and learning, (b) counseling and group guidance, (c) evaluation and assessment, (d) career and educational development, and (e) school counseling programs/professional knowledge (Oklahoma State Department of Education, SDE, 2017; …). Practicum and internship requirements are fulfilled through stipulations from the university’s school counseling program. In some cases, candidates must receive an endorsement/recommendation letter from the university to be certified and/or licensed by their state. Some accreditation agencies in various states do not stipulate that school counseling programs are required to be CACREP accredited, however, programs must be state approved, be accredited, and have program standards. Some states view school counselors as educators which gives rise to role ambiguity and confusion (Chandler, et al, 2018). This is one subject that will be discussed with school counselor participants concerning their perspective on how they view their role which directly points to the theories that will be utilized for this study.

In previous research (Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013; Bains, 2012; DeKruyf, et al., 2013; Goodman-Scott, 2015; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015) elementary school counselors’ voices are unheard regarding their actual experiences and self-perceived preparedness to deal with the social-emotional issues of students. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate elementary school counselors’ experiences of their self-perceived training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing.

**Situation to Self**

My work as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) contract worker has allowed me to work with children in public schools. In my work, I have found that many of my clients have social-emotional issues that they struggle with daily. Another aspect of my work is interacting
with school counselors regarding scheduling times when I can see my clients at the school. In these brief interactions, I have wondered about the work of school counselors regarding their training and the reality of their work at schools. Most of what I have observed with regards to their work is mainly administrative and managing behavioral problems of students. My interest stems from understanding their perceived training from their perspective and how they utilize it daily.

My epistemological philosophical assumption is that to understand a phenomenon it is best to learn from those who have experienced the phenomenon. My philosophy is based on my belief that everyone has a narrative that can only be told by that individual to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Elementary school counselors have in-depth experiences that inform their actions at their work. The impact of those experiences is gaining a fuller knowledge of the work they do and how they accomplish their work based on their perception of their training and navigating real world experiences. Adding to their narrative is the preparation they received, its adequacy or inadequacy, and their views on whether they can or should foster and/or promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing as outlined by the ASCA National Model. This philosophical assumption is utilized to gain textural insight of the school counselors’ experiences of their training and the reality of their work. Furthermore, from an axiological perspective, my views are that school counselors are mental health practitioners primarily and, therefore, should practice counseling more than administrative work. This is also one of my biases concerning the work of school counselors. This is my experience based on training I received along with students who were studying to become school counselors. However, there are multiple realities with regards to school counselors and the value they place on the varying aspects of their training and work.
This study explored school counselors’ experiences using the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model with elementary students and their perception of their academic training preparing them for the realities of working in their positions. Creswell (2013) asserted that the researcher who uses an epistemological philosophical assumption in a qualitative research can gain subjective experiences of participants by getting close and building a researcher-participant relationship that adds strength to the research. My epistemological assumption is that an individual’s experiences are subjective. Their narrative of their experiences is their reality and can only be told by the individual. Knowledge then becomes subjectively constructed by the individual’s experiences.

I approached this as a social constructivist valuing the “. . . complexity of views rather than narrow meanings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). The use of this philosophical approach was to build a collaborative relationship with participants allowing them to give in-depth information that will lead to a greater understanding of their experiences as they perceive them. Due to my involvement as a therapist and working in a different field of counseling, bracketing myself from the study was essential. *Epocche* or bracketing, as explicated by Moustakas (1994) is the removal of prejudgment and biases. The researcher, he explains, acknowledges her biases and prejudices, and set them aside so that experiences of others can be heard and recognized from a new and lived perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, setting aside my biases, I immersed myself into the experiences and descriptions of the school counselors. This process led to a greater understanding of the school counselors’ experiences adapting to their positions and understanding their perception of their training alignment with their actual work. Additionally, I focused on the dichotomy of school counselors’ perception of their academic training and how they use this training in their schools for the social-emotional wellbeing of
students, any administrative duties, and the academic work they do at their schools. Social constructivism allowed for gaining knowledge regarding participants’ experiences with training applicability through a verbal frequency scale, interviews, and focus groups. The format of a verbal frequency scale, interviews, and focus group gave participants a forum where they were comfortable in speaking about and sharing their experiences in a non-threatening environment of their choosing.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is a disparity between school counselors’ training and its applicability with the work they do at their schools. The ASCA (2012) National Model requires school counselors to assist students in their learning by counseling them regarding their social-emotional wellbeing. However, school counselors’ work in schools encompasses non-school counseling activities that may impede their work with students in this area (Bains, 2012; Hanchon & Fernald, 2013). While the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model purported that school counselors should spend 80% or more attending to direct, indirect, and responsive services of students, research (Bains & Diallo, 2016; DeKruyf et al., 2013; Goodman-Scot, 2013) revealed that some school counselors do not have the time or in-depth training to do this. Several researchers (Bains & Diallo, 2016; Carlson, & Kees, 2013; DeKruyf et al., 2013; Kaffenberger & O’Rourke-Trigiani, 2013) have studied the work of school counselors in various arenas regarding their training and the extent that their training is applicable to the social-emotional domain of ASCA National Model and competencies. A quantitative methodology is often utilized for most of the research on middle and high school counselors and students’ social-emotional or mental health issues. Research focus is mostly on counselor training, workload of school counselors that are not therapeutic based, and how to generate data to assist students in their academic performance. The problem is
the paucity of research that gives a voice to elementary school counselors regarding their perspective of their training as it relates to their actual work. With the many educational issues being researched, little research has been done with regards to elementary school counselors working with the ASCA National Model in conjunction with their self-perceived training.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-perceived preparedness of elementary school counselors to foster students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Social-emotional wellbeing will be described as a student’s holistic, subjective state present in a range of feelings and social skills such as emotional regulation, confidence, calm, caring, establishing, and maintaining positive relationships, and setting achievable goals, which is acquired over time and applied effectively in their respective social environment (CASEL, 2017; Stewart-Brown, 2000; UCI, 2017). This definition is based on various interpretations and definitions of other researchers and organizations that focus on the social and emotional wellbeing of children. Training will be identified as a school counselors’ educational program at the master’s level whether by CACREP accreditation or other accreditation bodies with at least two years of working as school counselors.

The theories guiding this study are incremental and entity theories as put forward by Dweck (1975) which looks at fixed/growth mindsets and adult learning theory purported by Knowles (1975) which looks at self-concept and experience that may change an individual’s perspective. These theories will examine school counselors’ perception of their training in terms of learning more to facilitate working in this domain or fixed beliefs regarding the melding of their training and the reality of their work. Additionally, these theories will explore the malleability of counselors to evaluate and make changes to fit the needs of students’ social-
emotional wellbeing.

**Significance of the Study**

This study has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance. This study is empirically significant because no researcher has covered the training applicability of school counselors with regards to elementary students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Researchers have covered middle and high school counselors training with regards to mental health issues of students (Carlson & Kees, 2013; Gruman et al., 2013; Kaffenberger & O’Rorke-Trigiani, 2013), data driven counseling methods (Goodman-Scott, 2013; Milsom & McCormick, 2015; Watkinson & Gallo, 2015; Young & Kaffenberger, 2015), career counseling (Konstam, Cook, Tomek, Mahdavi, Gracia, & Bayne, 2015; Slaten et al., 2013), and academic achievement (Rowell & Hong, 2013), but no researcher has address this topic. Quantitative and descriptive surveys have been conducted on school counselors work with students in elementary schools, however, they were not qualitative in nature and did not address elementary school counselors’ perception of their work in fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing (Bass, et al., 2015; Harrington, Griffith, Gray, & Greenspan, 2016; Watkinson & Gallo-Fox, 2015).

The theories that provide a theoretical framework in this study were developed to investigate growth or fixed mindsets and adult learning. I applied the tenets of these theories to frame this research. Dweck’s (2000) incremental (growth) and entity (fixed) theories are based on research involving children, college students, and adults examining their academic functioning and mindset. This study utilized the theory to examine the fixed or growth mindsets of elementary school counselors. The theory was used to frame the phenomenon as to school counselors’ actions and beliefs with regards to their perceptions of their perceived training applicability to fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Knowles’ (1975)
adult learning theory focus is based on how adults learn and geared towards teaching adults in an institutional setting. However, for this study, the theory was utilized to frame elementary school counselors’ self-directedness with regards to the reality of their work after their training.

The practical aspects of this research may assist in the development of principles and policies concerning the work elementary school counselors perform with regards to students’ social-emotional wellbeing and school counselors’ professional development strategies and practice. The description of school counselors lived experiences dealing with promoting the social-emotional wellbeing of students in an elementary school setting will hopefully add to current research regarding their training applicability and its alignment with the school counselors’ competencies as outlined by ASCA (2012). Additionally, this study may assist school counselors as a self-reflected tool or as a support system. This study may also assist in behavior changes of school counselors in addressing the social-emotional issues of students through their training.

**Research Questions**

In investigating the lived experiences of elementary school counselors, the following sub-questions formulated from the central question “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” were addressed as a guide to the study. Additionally, the sub-questions will incorporate both theoretical framework theories of this study namely Dweck’s (1975) self-theories and Knowles’ (1975) adult learning theory. The incorporation of the theories in the sub-questions is to assist with understanding each participant’s personal experience and their mindset in navigating their work. The theories will also help to examine growth and change as elementary school
counselors’ perspective on how they incorporate their training, ASCA National Model and the reality of their work with the social-emotional wellbeing of students.

**Sub-Question One.** How do elementary school counselors describe their self-perceived preparedness applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?

Quantitative research on the social-emotional wellbeing of students revealed that more training is required (Bains & Diallo, 2016; DeKruyf et al., 2013; Walley & Grothaus, 2012). However, there is a paucity of research on the experiences elementary school counselors who have students with social-emotional issues (Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015). This research question seeks to gain an understanding of those experiences from elementary school counselor participants. Their description of their experiences may help to balance the information regarding the social-emotional issues of students and how school counselors utilize their training to facilitate assisting students with these issues.

**Sub-Question Two.** How do elementary school counselors describe their perception of professional and/or personal growth regarding how they might address social-emotional issues since their formal training?

The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) state that school counselors should engage in professional and personal growth regarding their legal and ethical responsibilities (B.3.e). Dweck (1975) and Knowles (1975) both purport growth in their theories regarding experiences and learning. This question explored participants’ perception of how their experiences affected their professional and personal growth and how they utilized any growth they have experienced in the area of addressing students’ social-emotional issues and/or promoting social-emotional wellbeing. This question also seeks to explore participants’ belief of the malleability or fixed outcomes of their experiences. Delving into elementary school
counselors’ perception of their mindset regarding their early approach to students’ social-emotional wellbeing immediately after training and any changes they have made to their approach now will further explore the question, mindset beliefs, and self-directedness as outlined by Dweck (1975) and Knowles (1975).

The school counselors’ ethical standards lend itself to a growth mindset in that it requires continuous growth for school counselors. For example, the ethical codes indicate that school counselors’ professional development and personal growth are to be ongoing (standard B.1.e). Furthermore, the codes indicate growth in how school counselors address the social-emotional needs of students (A.1.b, A.1.c, A.1.e). This question explores growth and fixed mindsets based on Dweck’s (1975) theory tenets and Knowles (1975) theory regarding one’s environment and experiences contributing to their self-directedness.

Sub-Question Three. How do elementary school counselors describe their use and/or knowledge of the school counselors’ competencies presented in the ASCA National Model?

The ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model delineates a copious number of competencies that school counselors should adhere to. Among these competencies are those that are specific to the social-emotional domain namely, “provide responsive service” (p. 157) during and after a crisis, distinguish between direct and indirect services, utilize quantitative and qualitative data for evaluation of programs and promote social-emotional wellbeing for all students. Bryant-Young, Bell, and Davis (2014) posited that the ASCA National Model, although stating counseling knowledge and use in its competencies, does not mention supervision of school counselors or any training requirements that will assist school counselors in their work. However, ASCA’s ethical standards state that school counselors may seek supervision regarding the promotion of students’ social-emotional wellbeing (ASCA, 2016). Bain (2012) stated that
inconsistency in school counselors’ training preparation has led to problems in the carrying out of their duties. He further purported that “…inadequate or ill-designed school counselor preparation may hinder the success of the student…” (p. 3). This question examined the alignment of the school counselors’ competencies and their training regarding the ASCA National Model. Additionally, it is hoped that this will give a voice to elementary school counselors on their experiences utilizing the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model.

**Sub-Question Four.** How do elementary school counselors describe the duties and responsibilities of their position at their schools?

DeKruyf et al. (2013) and Kaffenberger and O’Rourke-Trigiani, (2013) both conducted studies concerning school counselors’ duties/responsibilities. They posited that school counselors’ workload, lack of a specific identity, and inability to be both counselor and academic administrator conflict with working with fulfilling the social-emotional domain as presented in the National Model. This study examined school counselors’ self-perceived training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing at the elementary level. Therefore, it was interesting to note the usage of their training as it relates to the many social-emotional issues of students at their location. This question examined if school counselors’ self-perceived training inadequacy or non-counseling work may be an impediment to assisting students with social-emotional issues.

**Sub-Question Five.** What is elementary school counselors’ perception of the social-emotional wellbeing issues of elementary students at their school?

Carlson and Kees (2013) conducted a quantitative study regarding school counselors addressing social-emotional issues of students. The study revealed that although school counselors had a level of comfort with some of the issues students presented individually, there
was a level of discomfort that stemmed from training applicability to some of the cases that were presented to them and not having enough time to conduct group or individual counseling that is necessary to meet these needs. Research (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012; Medford & McGeown, 2016) has shown that students with healthy social-emotional wellbeing achieve higher academically than students with social-emotional difficulties.

This question examined the level of social-emotional issues that school counselors interact with daily. ASCA (2012) states that social-emotional issues impede students’ achievement. School counselors are tasked with assisting students to raise their level of educational achievement through the domains to set students on a successful educational, career, military, etc. path. School counselors are not to blame; however, school counselors might be able to support the fact that if they are better trained there may be a greater impact of the role of school counselor in a school setting. Therefore, school counselors’ perceptions of students’ social-emotional issues, their role, and the extent to which they believe their training prepared them to foster and promote social-emotional wellbeing among the students in their schools to assist with academic achievement was examined utilizing this question.

**Definitions**

1. *ASCA National Model-* A framework for school counselors to follow regarding assisting students with academic achievement. The model is a guide for school counselors and the school counselors’ competencies required (ASCA, 2012).

2. *Adult Learning Theory* – “process of maturation for a person to move from dependency toward increasing self-directedness…at different rates…” (Knowles, 1988 p. 43).
3. **Elementary School Counselors** – “. . .professional educators [K-5] with a mental health perspective who understand and respond to the challenges presented by today’s diverse student population” (ASCA, 2017, para 3).

4. **Entity Theory** – belief that basic abilities, intelligence, talents are fixed traits (Dweck 2012, para 6).

5. **Incremental Theory** – belief that talents and abilities are developed through one’s effort, resilience and being taught and that one can work at being smarter (Dweck 2012, para 6).

6. **Intelligence** – human motivation based on beliefs of whether they can gain more knowledge and skills or not (Dweck, 2000).

7. **Social-emotional wellbeing** - a student’s holistic, subjective state present in a range of feelings and social skills such as emotional regulation, confidence, resilience, caring, establishing, and maintaining positive relationships, and setting achievable goals, which is acquired over time and applied effectively in their respective social environment (CASEL, 2017; Stewart-Brown, 2000; UCI, 2017).

8. **Training** - school counselors’ educational program at the master’s level within their state whether by CACREP accreditation or other accreditation bodies with at least two years of working as school counselors, internship and alternative programs for school counseling.

**Summary**

There is currently a dearth of information concerning school counselors fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing. This study investigated elementary school counselors’ training applicability to work with this demographic. Several studies (Moyer & Yu,
2012; Ohrt, Webster, & De La Garza, 2014; Slaten et al., 2013; Van Velsor, 2009) have found that there is more that needs to be done to assist students with social-emotional issues. Other studies (Oberle et al., 2016; Harrington et al., 2016; Brackett et al., 2011) have found that there is a strong link between social-emotional wellbeing and academic success. The responsibility of keeping students engaged despite their social-emotional issues has been placed mainly on school counselors as students spend a majority of their time at school (ASCA, 2017). I investigated the scope to which elementary school counselors’ training prepared them to manage the influx of social-emotional issues displayed by elementary-aged students. Through school counselors’ own description of their experiences, greater understanding of the phenomenon was gained. The information gathered from their experiences could expand the literature concerning the depth of problem and how school counselors are managing. The theories utilized for this study explored the mindset of school counselors and their approach to fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Additionally, school counselors’ perception of their ideal work environment based on their training and the realities of their actual work.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-perceived preparedness of elementary school counselors to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The study explored school counselors’ perception of the applicability of their academic training to the ASCA (2012) competencies and requirements in promoting the social-emotional domain of the model. This study utilized two theoretical frameworks: (a) Dweck’s (1977) incremental (growth) and entity (fixed) theory and (b) Knowles (1977) adult learning theory or andragogy. These theories framed this investigation of school counselors’ perceptions of their experiences, their professional and personal growth, their views on how they accomplish their work and the part their training plays in assisting them with issues that impede students’ learning and performance in the social-emotional domain.

Review of literature pertaining to the study was written to reveal the gap in literature. This gap was seen through current and previous studies that did not fully address this aspect of the problem but gave insight into the problem that exists. For this study, topics on current data regarding training of school counselors, use of ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model, and the social-emotional domain was discussed. Furthermore, comprehensive review of previous research literature was reviewed concerning school counselors, their self-perceived training, and work done to acquire a detailed perception of the gap that exists.

The research questions are a guide to the literature review. The main purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of elementary school counselors’ academic preparation to foster and promote the social-emotional wellbeing of students as outlined by the ASCA National Model. This study also explored school counselors’ perspective on the alignment of their
training adaptability with, school counselors’ competencies and their actual work in their respective schools. Research discoveries regarding school counselors’ workload, lack of time, less than extensive training, and identity issues was highlighted and discussed in this review. Finally, because the study is focusing on elementary school counselors, information specific to this demographic was the focal point.

**Theoretical Framework**

To further gain understanding of the topic being studied the two theories that emerged as relevant and beneficial are Carol Dweck’s self-theories and Malcolm Knowles’ adult learning theory. Dweck’s (1975) self-theories focus on learned helplessness which later developed into incremental or entity beliefs that people have regarding their performance and competence. Knowles (1975) adult learning theory which includes self-directed learning, explicates adults’ beliefs about aspects of their learning that motivates them is the second theory that assists in structuring this study. The ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model promoted andragogy by presenting school counselors with several competencies that they must achieve to assist students with social-emotional wellbeing so that students can accomplish higher academic performance. With the nation having a large percent elementary-aged students with social-emotional issues (CWLA, 2017; Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017; Mental Health America, 2017; Perou, et al, 2013), the theories were used to investigate the perceived alignment of elementary school counselors’ training in conjunction with the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model and how these counselors perceive that their situation is fixed or malleable. Additionally, based on Knowles (1975) theory, this study explored the extent to which school counselors believe they become more self-directed in their work.

**Self-Theories**
Dweck (2006) writes of her obsession when she was younger, to understand how people coped with failure. This obsession led to several studies on the subject. Dweck (2015) recounts her beliefs about her abilities as a student and her avoidance of failure by not taking on challenging tasks (Talks at Google, 2015). Dweck (2016) credits learning of Alfred Binet’s (1857-1911) purpose for inventing the IQ test as a turning point in her beliefs about intelligence. She wrote that his belief that an individual’s intelligence can increase through training and practice impacted her view of intelligence and abilities (Dweck, 2016). Dweck (2016) recalled that 30 years prior working with her doctoral student, they found that some students placed immense importance in proving their ability to accomplish a task. Other students chose to learn more despite any failures they had regarding their ability to complete a task. This revelation led her to realize that ability had two meanings, namely “...a fixed ability that needs to be proven, and a changeable ability that can be developed through learning (Dweck 2016, para 2). Since then Dweck’s (1975) mindset theory that begun through her studies on learned helplessness, has been utilized in various arenas, especially academic. In one research on teachers Dweck (2015) found that teachers with a fixed mindset tended to group their students based on the students’ abilities. This added to the students’ low achievement. The teachers’ belief that some students were low achievers allowed those students to continue to be low achieving. In contrast, teachers with a growth mindset, their students who were low achieving, thrived and did well academically.

Dweck (1988) stated that an individual’s perception of challenges whether as a threat to their abilities or an opportunity to grow and learn more affects how the individual approaches goals. Dweck (2000) explained that her work “...present research that spells out adaptive and maladaptive motivational patterns ... illuminating basic issues of human motivation, personality,
the self, and development” (p. xii). The definitions of each theory are that “entity theory is the idea that intelligence is a fixed entity … incremental theory is the idea that intellectual ability can be increased through one’s efforts” (Dweck & Molden, 2005, p. 25).

**Entity Theory (Fixed Mindset).** An entity point of view is that the acquiring of skills is fixed. Therefore, there is not much an individual learns after training. The fixed mindset individuals, Dweck (2005) asserted, are performance driven. She explained that these individuals set performance goals which “is about winning positive judgements of [their] competence and avoiding negative ones” (Dweck 2005, p. 15). Based on Dweck’s (2000) explanation of her theory, as it relates to school counselors, the myriad of tasks they perform can derail fixed mindset performance goals ideas, especially non-school counseling duties that may be a larger part their work. Dweck and Molden (2005) stated that entity mindset individuals “believe in fixed intelligence and are oriented toward competence validation, [for them] negative outcomes speak to a lack of ability” (p. 126).

Therefore, school counselors with a fixed mindset may find it disconcerting when their training does not fully align with the duties they perform at their schools. As with the teachers in Dweck’s (2015) research, school counselors with a fixed mindset may view working with students’ social-emotional issues as challenging and overwhelming and consistently refer. Dweck (2005) postulated that the entity mindset individual’s tasks must “look smart” but they sacrifice learning opportunity. This study explored the possible presence of school counselors’ fixed mindset through their narrative of their transitioning from training to their real-world positions.

**Incremental Theory (Growth Mindset).** An individual’s incremental viewpoint is the perception that skills are acquired over time. Dweck (2005) explained that incremental
individuals have a goal learning mindset. Dweck (2000) stated that “learning goal … [is] … increasing [an individual’s] competence. It reflects a desire to learn new skills, master new tasks, or understand new things” (p. 15). Therefore, if school counselors view their position as one to learn from as they complete their duties and gain competence, regardless if their self-perceived training was adequate, they will continue to grow and assist students despite the extra effort they must put into their work. One study (Gero, 2013) on teachers’ growth mindset found that these teachers were willing to (a) engage in professional development through workshops or reading new literature, (b) learn from other experienced teachers, (c) requested feedback concerning their work, and (d) confronted problems. Dweck and Molden (2005) stated that “when … people believe in developable intelligence and are oriented toward competence acquisition negative outcomes speak to effort and strategy” (p. 126). This research examined the incremental point of view by exploring changes elementary school counselors made in transitioning from their perceived training to the reality of their position and their mindset regarding the use of the ASCA National Model with students’ social-emotional wellbeing.

Examination of elementary school counselors’ mindset with regards to their belief of whether their self-perceived training was comprehensive enough in preparing them to manage the reality of their position and whether they can or should learn more was investigated in this study. Also, this research examined school counselors’ perception of the ASCA National Model as an added aim of their perceived training in preparing them to foster and promote the social-emotional wellbeing of elementary students. While incremental and entity theories are applicable to school counselors’ growth and fixed beliefs, it does not fully address their transition from their perceived training and navigating the reality of their work. Therefore, Knowles’ (1975) adult leaning theory also informs this study.
Adult Learning Theory (Self-Directed Learning)

Knowles’ (1975) adult learning theory was heavily influenced by the writings of Eduard C. Lindeman. Lindeman’s (1926) book titled *The Meaning of Adult Education* put forward certain tenets of adult learning that Knowles (1975) built on to develop his theory of adult learning. Knowles (1975) himself reported on the profound impact that Lindeman had on assisting him in formulating his theory. Knowles’ (1975) theory of adult learning assumes learning is a part of an individual’s growth which moves the individual from dependency to self-directedness. Individuals grow at their own pace based on their learning experiences. Knowles’ (1975) theory purports that through an individual’s growth and development, experience accumulates that continues the process of learning. These experiences have meaning to the person as learning becomes more important in managing real-life situations. He stated that knowledge and skills are gained through these experiences that is later applied to real-life situations. These experiences build competencies.

Knowles (1998) purported six principles namely, (a) the individual’s need to know, (b) self-concept of the individual, (c) the individual’s experiences, (d) readiness to learn, (e) how an individual learns, and (f) individual’s motivation to learn. Knowles, Holden, and Swanson (1998) posited that “. . . learning is a change in the individual, due to the interaction of that individual and his environment, which fills a need to make him more capable of dealing adequately with his environment” (p. 12). Knowles (1984) explicated that adults’ learning is lifelong. Formal education is where an individual is dependent, but as the individual moves away from a formal education of dependency, self-directedness takes place through the experiences the individual garners from their environment or climate.
Therefore, utilizing the tenets of Knowles’ (1975) theoretical principles of adult learning theory, school counselors’ academic training gave them a basis from which to grow. As they complete their work, they are moving from a place of dependency, which is being trained to be school counselors, to self-directedness, which is utilizing training and making necessary adjustments. The social-emotional issues of students that school counselors encounter, based on Knowles’ (1975) theory, is a learning environment that should help school counselors gain experience and therefore, growth in their field. However, as Knowles (1975) pointed out, individuals learn at their own pace and, in some cases, the shift from dependency to self-directedness does not happen. Holton, Swanson, and Naquin (2001) stated that individual differences can impede the process of learning. They posited that individuals are unique and therefore, learn in diverse ways. Hence, school counselors, each being unique in their experiences and beliefs, can differ in their perspective on whether their experiences with students’ social-emotional issues have promoted school counselors’ growth or not.

Incremental, entity, and adult learning theories were relevant frameworks for this study in investigating school counselors’ perception of their work with the social-emotional aspect of elementary students. Moreover, the theories examined how their self-perceived training impact the fostering and promotion of the social-emotional wellbeing of students. Dweck’s (1975) theories are grounded in an individual’s motivation and performance based on that individual’s beliefs, while Knowles (1975) theory explores an individual’s self-directedness and utilizing experiences to learn and grow in their work. Both theorists utilize personality and motivation theoretical developments. Dweck used Bandura and Piaget for her self-theories while Knowles utilized Maslow and Rogers. Both Dweck and Knowles purported the tenet of motivation in their theories. Dweck (1975) looked at motivation from a mindset and personality trait, while
Knowles (1975) explored motivation stating that an individual’s experiences is an intrinsic motivational tool. For this study, school counselors’ transition from training to real-world and navigating their duties was explored utilizing the tenets of these theories. Additionally, these theories assisted in further understanding school counselors’ motivation and confidence in their abilities despite their perception of the adequacy or inadequacy of their training.

**Related Literature**

A literature review is an elementary yet significant aspect of any research. This related literature established how this study may enhance and review what is already known to further explicate the problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To achieve that goal, this related literature first gives an historical overview of school counseling and the contributions of counseling pioneers to the current school counseling landscape. To build on the history the roles of various counseling bodies was discussed to further give an understanding of the work that has been done and its impact on school counseling. Finally, literature regarding the state of children’s mental health in the United States further highlighted the problem, how it has been viewed, and the work that needs to be done.

**Historical View of School Counseling**

Knowledge of past events and historical narratives allows for greater understanding of present and future actions (Liu & Hilton, 2005). Therefore, the past informs the present. This is true of the history of school counseling.

Vocational guidance, as school counseling was first called, was a means of meeting the training needs for jobs during the industrial revolution. The Industrial Revolution brought about the need for various job skills. Gysbers (2010) stated that the Industrial Revolution brought about “… industrial growth, social protest, social reform, and utopian
idealism” (para, 118). The social conditions at the time called for major changes as the social, political, and economical fabric of the era were rapidly changing (Paisley & Borden, 1995). Herr (2002) purported that school counseling came about due to the economic events such as the Industrial Revolution and social events such as the vast number of immigrants that converged on the United States and the migration of those from farm lands, to find jobs that, in most cases, they did not have the skill to perform. The rapid growth of immigrants and migrants to industrial towns bred social unrest and political avarice. Child labor was prevalent, and workers were taken advantage of. The Industrial Revolution and all that came with it, became the catalyst that started the vocational guidance movement as with it came the need to change the social fabric of the nation to accommodate a rapidly changing world.

Lysander Richards, George Merrill, Eli Weaver, Frank Parsons, Jessie B. Davis planted the seeds for what is now known as school counseling, during the late 1800s and early 1900s. For this study, only the work of Frank Parsons and Jessie B. Davis is discussed. Frank Parsons (1854 – 1908), known as the father of vocational counseling, became concerned about the training of men and women in meeting the industrial vocational needs of the era. Parsons (1909) stated that “No step in life … is more important than the choice of a vocation … vital problems should be solved in a careful scientific way, with due regards to each person’s aptitudes, abilities, ambitions, resources, and limitations” (p. 3). Parsons’ work solidified for most the need for vocational guidance especially during the heights of the Industrial Revolution (Gysbers, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Jones, 1994). Parsons is noted as being the first to use the term vocational guidance. He organized and established the Vocation Bureau of Boston in 1901
to assist students’ transition from school to the working world. In that time, he put forward the “principles and methods of vocational counseling that guided the counselors in their work” (Jones, 1994, p. 287). His vision of vocational counseling was steeped in scientific analysis, moral convictions, and social justice (Jones, 1994). Parsons’ scientific foundation led him to the belief that a psychological component to vocational counseling was necessary (Gysbers, 2010).

Jessie B. Davis’ (1871 – 1955) contribution in pioneering school counseling is found in his work with students at the schools where he taught and performed in an administrative position. He established the Grand Rapids Junior College where he furthered his vocational guidance work. Davis is purported to be the first school counselor in the United States because of his work at some of the schools where he taught (Pope, 2009). Davis (1912) asserted that:

…guidance means the better understanding of one's own character; it means an awakening of the moral consciousness that will lead the pupil to emulate the character of the good and great who have gone before; it means a conception of oneself as a social being. (p. 458)

Davis is better known for implementing the first systematic and comprehensive school counseling program at Grand Rapids Central High School where he taught in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Davis, 1912; Gysbers, 2010; Pope, 2009). This work by Davis was innovative at the time as vocational counseling introduction into public school system was relatively new and not on the scope that Davis had implemented his system (Aubrey, 1977; Gysbers, 2010; Pope, 2009). The work of both Frank Parsons and Jesse B. Davis helped usher in a new era of vocational counseling that eventually evolved to
what it is today. Their theories and principles regarding school counseling left an indelible mark on the field of professional school counseling.

Amidst the work of Parsons, Davis, and others in the Vocational Guidance Movement, vocational guidance eventually became a subject area in public schools and was known as vocational education. At the time, teachers were requested to teach vocational education along with their regular class. Gysbers (2010) noted that vocational education was impacted by societal organizations in that period namely, “… the mental hygiene (mental health) movement, progressive education, the child study/development movement, and the psychometric (measurement theory) movement” (para. 470). This changed the scope and focus of vocational counseling. As the needs of society changed, so did the foundation of vocational education. Psychological aspects of the student were introduced into vocational guidance when it was discovered that pointing students to a vocation included understanding the personality of the student (Aubrey, 1977; Gysbers, 2010). Pioneers and others involved with vocational counseling wanted a change in how and by whom it was taught. With this shift, the need was for qualified individuals to fill the role of vocational counselors instead of teachers with years of service. Myers (1924) wrote of the need to have trained individuals to complete this work. He stated:

…vocational guidance is becoming recognized as a specialized educational function requiring special natural qualifications and special training . . . While valuable work has been done in these ways, experience has shown that few teachers have the personal qualities, and fewer still have the necessary knowledge, for effective counseling . . . The institutions offering this training
have marked off fairly definite bodies of knowledge and a fairly definite
technique to be mastered by one who prepares for the work of counselor. (p. 139)

Vocational guidance was lastly introduced in elementary schools to assist students by
giving them individual attention that would help them adjust to their learning requirement and
academic performance (Gysbers, 2010). As vocational counseling evolved so did its
professional identity. Trained individuals were hired to fulfill the role of vocational counselor.
Along with this, responsibilities and duties shifted to focus more on counseling than
administrative. Vocational counselors became more involved with students’ counseling needs
than the administrative and vocational aspects of vocational education (Aubrey, 1977; Gysbers,
2010).

The 1950s and 1960s represented a significant turning point in vocational counseling.
Aubrey (1982) asserted that the launching of Russian Sputnik and James Conant report on
American schools were some of the events that took place in reforming vocational guidance and
counseling. The significance of these events was that more vocational counselors were hired in
public schools. Herr (2002) asserted that the 1950s and 1960s brought reform to vocational
guidance and counseling in the form of vocational counselors being professionally prepared for
their positions in public schools. The late 1950s saw the publication of a book that characterized
the American high school education. This report put forward by James Conant revolutionized in
several ways how school counseling should be conducted in schools. Conant (1959) outlined 21
recommendations on how to improve various aspects of the high school system, including school
counseling. Conant (1959) recommended that school counseling should begin at the elementary
level, cooperation among the various levels of education namely elementary, middle, and high,
and that the student-counselor ratio should be 250-1. He recommended that school counselors
were to supplement parental advice and work along with parents in students’ academic achievement. He further recommended individualized programs and career counseling for students. Conant’s (1959) recommendations helped usher in systematic counseling programs and individualized programs for public school students (Aubrey, 1977; Herr, 2002). Counseling of students was a major part of the vocational counseling program. By launching Sputnik, the Russians won the race to space between the eastern and western nations. This single event is purported to be the major catalyst for the federal legislation of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Herr, 2002). Through this act, universities were being heavily funded to train individuals who could work as vocational counselors in secondary schools. The purpose of training was that qualified school counselors could identify talented students who would in turn be educated at universities in the scientific field. The implementation of specialized programs was to identify these talented students. Guidance and counseling would assist these students in greatly improving their academic performance (Aubrey, 1977; Gysbers, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001, Herr, 2002; Paisley & Borders, 1995).

With this shift from vocational counseling to vocational and guidance counseling, counselors were viewed as individuals who provided therapeutic services to students to assist them in their academic performance. However, Cinotti (2014) wrote that the 1970s brought with it economic and environmental issues that led to changes in the work of counselors. To alleviate the loss of job due to economic issues, counselors took on more administrative duties and less counseling. The 1990s brought on another shift in school counseling. The focus became programmatic. To create a systematic approach to counseling, various program models were introduced to add direction and a solid purpose to the profession (Cinotti, 2014). Gysbers (2010)
stated that the 1990s was a time of shifting and defining the role of the school counselor. The need was for a definitive position on the role and responsibilities of school counselors. As early as 1980s there was a struggle to define school counselors’ role and responsibilities. Schmidt (1984) wrote that there should be an agreement of the professional role of school counselors. He stated that training and responsibilities should align with the roles counselors will fulfill in schools. In the 1990’s the concern was meeting the social-emotional needs of students, especially in elementary schools (Aubrey, 1977; Cinotti, 2014; Gysbers, 2010). Even then students’ social-emotional wellbeing needs were on display and school counselors were tasked with assisting them. However, a definitive conclusion of what school counselors should do was not concrete.

The development of the school counseling profession has changed in many ways through the years. The back and forth shifting of the role and responsibilities of the profession has caused numerous debates on what school counselors should focus on (Cinotti, 2014; Collins, 2014). In the 21st century, the profession has not come to an agreement as to the definitive work of school counselors. School counselors also question their role whether they are educators or counselors (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). In their 2011 survey of 5,300 middle and high school counselors, Bridgeland and Bruce (2014) estimated that 67% of the counselors who answered the survey questions were unsure of the requirements of their work. The argument of school counselors’ identity and training that started at the beginning of the vocational education movement continues.

American School Counseling Association

The development of ASCA was born out of a need to unify school counselors under an umbrella organization. The National Vocational Guidance Association (NVGA) established a
separate organization for school counselors. In 1953, the ASCA was chartered as a division of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) which was later renamed the American Counseling Association (ACA) (Gysbers, 2010). Since its establishment, several key events helped shaped ASCA into what is today. The organization grew through its journal publications namely, *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling* and the *School Counselor*. Both journals were eventually combined into the *Professional School Counselor* (Gysbers, 2010). Throughout this time, there was a clamoring for accountability especially with the involvement of the NDEA. Significant changes were required, as the belief was that the school counseling profession lacked professionality (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). To this end, the ACA and the American Association of Counseling and Development (AACD) proposed activities and functions of the professional school counselor. This assisted ASCA in defining roles, proposed counseling programs, and set goals for school counselors (Dahir, 2001; Dahir, Campbell, Johnson, Scholes, & Valiga, 1997). By 1997, ASCA had established definitive standards for school counselors. Dahir (2001) stated that “professional school counselors were encouraged to shift from the delivery of a menu of student services to the development of a more structured and programmatic approach for school counseling to address the needs of all students” (para. 11). The implementation of ASCA standards for school counselors led to more reforms within the profession. The Wallace-Reader’s Digest Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) played a key role in the publication of the ASCA National Model. Along with the Education Trust, a not-for-profit organization, TSCI and ASCA’s collaborative efforts was to close the achievement gap that existed and set academic standards for school counselors. In 2003, the ASCA National Model was published.
The ASCA National Model is a framework of the guidelines, competencies, and vision for school counselors. The model was established in 2003 to assist school counselors in implementing counseling programs to foster comprehensive counseling programs for all schools. The framework comprises of four components (a) foundation, which is the professional competencies for school counselors to meet the needs of all students; (b) management, which focuses on assessment and tools for evaluation of the counseling programs; (c) delivery, which is the direct, indirect, and responsive services that school counselors organize and perform; and (d) accountability, utilizing measurable terms to examine and implement school counseling programs (ASCA, 2012). These components act as a guide for school counselors in accomplishing their goals in the three domains purported by the model namely, academic, career, and personal/social, now changed to social-emotional. The model purports four main themes leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. The ASCA National Model promotes student achievement through counseling programs that enhances the academic, career, and social-emotional wellbeing of students.

The ASCA National Model

The ASCA National Model has impacted elementary to secondary school counseling programs. One most recognized impact is the establishment of Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) that fully utilize all aspects of the National Model in some schools. Established by ASCA in 2003, RAMP is conferred on schools that systematize to the ASCA National Model standards and principles which is data driven school counseling programs (ASCA, 2016). The goal is to have all schools utilizing the ASCA model for a comprehensive counseling program. There are almost 600 schools that have been designated RAMP schools (ASCA, 2016). The ASCA National Model has led to many states revising their school
counseling programs to correspond with the tenets of the model. Most schools follow various standards of the ASCA model.

Some schools adopt a variation of the National Model for their school counseling program in accordance with the ASCA National Model (Studer, Diambra, Breckner, & Heidel, 2011; Mau, Jiaqi, & Hoetmer, 2016). School counselors are required to be qualified by their state and have a masters’ degree. Furthermore, most schools require school counselors to have knowledge or training in how students learn, knowledge of classroom behavior management and instruction, how to assess students, and student achievement. The ASCA National Model does not stipulate any specific academic requirements for school counselors training except a master’s degree (ASCA, 2012). Each state has its own academic requirements for school counselors therefore, the academic requirement of states varies.

Although the model is being utilized fully in RAMP schools, there are criticisms of the model with regards to diversity, social justice, and waning attention to the therapeutic aspect of the model (Slaten et al., 2013). Bauman and Crethar (2008) wrote of other criticisms the ASCA National Model have received namely, (a) an inability to adapt to all school environments, (b) no accounting for administrative tasks school counselors are given by administration, and (c) ignorance of school counselors’ mental health training. The ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model is purported to promote the social-emotional wellbeing of students and give school counselors ways to implement programs, gain knowledge, and skills. However, the therapeutic aspect of the model is not highly promoted due to school counselors performing non-related counseling duties in schools (Reiner & Hernandez, 2012; Trice-Black, et al., 2013; Mau, Jiaqi, & Hoetmer, 2016).

One study (Studer, Diambra, Breckner & Heidel, 2011) on school counselors’ perception of the usefulness of the ASCA National Model to their school environment stated that they had
difficulties implementing the counseling programs suggested based on the inadequacy of their training and the realities of their work. Building on the Dweck’s (1975) theory of incremental and entity beliefs, school counselors’ perception of their training and subsequent growth or fixed beliefs are interwoven into how they approach and accomplish their work. The question of how school counselors’ approach their work after formal training reflects on their beliefs regarding their abilities. For example, Trice-Black, Riechel, and Shillingford (2013) studied school counselors’ perception of the ethical boundaries of confidentiality in their work. Various themes emerged from the study, namely, counselor training and professional development. The school counselors reported that there was a discrepancy between their graduate training and the realities of their work. Some of the participants of the study reflected that the reality of their experiences did not align with their training and professional development was lacking in that it was about the administrative aspect of their work instead of ethical boundaries. Yet, in many instances the national model works (Cinotti, 2014). For example, RAMP schools have grown over the years and is now in 43 states (ASCA, 2016). Martin and Carey (2014), in their evaluation of the ASCA National Model, found that most schools that fully implemented the model had lowered behavioral issues in their schools.

The ASCA National Model seeks to promote students’ academic success through school counselors giving direct, indirect, and responsive services to students. These services include “activities designed to meet students’ immediate needs and concerns … provide all students with the knowledge, attitudes and skills appropriate for their developmental level... and activities designed to assist students in establishing personal goals…” (p. 1). Much of this is incorporated in the social-emotional domain of the model. Researchers have defined the social-emotional development of students as mental health issues (Auger, 2013; Carlson & Kees, 2013; Erickson
& Abel, 2013). The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) describes these issues as anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and eating disorders stemming from environmental causes such as family and community life (NIMH, 2017). Gruman, et al. (2013) in their article on transforming school counseling programs to assist students with mental health issues state that “school counselors are . . . equipped to recognize and address the social isolation that may lead to self-harm, anxiety that is associated with deficient performance on tests, and depressive symptoms . . .” (p. 333). With these descriptions, it can be seen how social-emotional issues can affect students’ academic success. Therefore, the need for school counselors to promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing is evident. However, researchers (Carey & Dimmit, 2012; Goodman-Scott, 2015; Goodman-Scott, Betters-Bubon, Donahue, 2015, Slaten, et al., 2014; Schiele, Weist, Youngstrom, Stephan, & Lever, 2014) continue to study interventions that can assist counselors in promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing and requiring more training and supervision for counselors based on ASCA (2012) requirement for this domain to be fostered and promoted.

School Counselors’ Training

The training of school counselors has a long history that mirrors that of the history of school counseling itself. Individuals were trained as vocational counselors when the need arose for vocational counselors to be qualified for the position (Gysbers, 2010; Schmidt, 2014). Teachers were vocational counselors as a means of necessity for vocational counseling to become a part of public schooling. However, as the workload became overwhelming the pioneers of school counseling argued that school counselors needed to be trained proficiently for the position (Gysbers, 2010; Paisley & Borders, 1995). Formalized training of individuals for vocational counseling became apparent when the needs of students became necessary to address
(Paisley & Borders, 1995). Teachers did not have the formalized training needed to address these needs. As with school counseling, the NDEA brought changes to the school counselor training (Baker, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Whiston, 2002).

The NDEA of 1958, along with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, were both catalysts for changes in the field of school counseling. Both federal acts brought about changes in how school counselors were trained and what was required (Baker, 2001; Dugan, 1960; Gysbers and Henderson, 2001). As school counseling began to develop into a specialty, professional associations, such as the ASCA and APGA, put forward stipulated ethical standards for the profession. At the same time, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) and the National Career Development Association (NCDA) collaborated, especially in federal legislation, on behalf of the profession and the work school counselors should do in schools namely career, personal development, and planning (Gysbers and Henderson, 2001; Sweeny, 1991).

**Accrediting and Credentials**

By the 1970s, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) was the accrediting body for both teachers and school counselors. However, the American Counseling Association (ACA, formerly APGA), in association with ACES, had established CACREP as a counselor accrediting body and began accrediting programs in 1981 (Sweeney, 1995). The CACREP standards were the same as outlined by ACES for a master’s degree program. By 1987, CACREP, now an affiliate of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), was the accrediting body for standardizing school counseling programs at master’s and doctoral levels. The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), established in 1982, added to the school counseling training framework. The organization required specific subject
area training and knowledge namely, (a) human growth and development, (b) social and cultural foundations, (c) helping relationships, (d) group, lifestyle and career developments, (e) appraisal, research and evaluation and (f) professional orientation (Bobby, 2011; Foster, 2012; Gladding, 2012).

Whereas CACREP was established for the accrediting of counseling programs in universities, the NBCC was established for the certification of those counseling programs. Foster (2012) explicate both agencies collaborated in the optimal training and certification of school counselors. These agencies were and still are essential to the field of school counseling. However, although the various changes and programmatic standards over the years have continued in school counseling the debate regarding school counselors’ training persists. With the shifts in roles, identity, and workload, school counselors’ academic training is either adequate for the tasks they perform or in need of more training (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Morgan, et al., 2014). Issues of professional identity and defined duties and responsibilities regarding school counselors is still a problem (Astramovich, et al., 2013; Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; Cinotti, 2014; Hanchon & Fernald, 2013). The duality of counselors’ role, that of educator or counselor, impacts school counselors’ academic training and subsequent work after graduation. This has caused, in some instances, a disparity (Reiner & Hernandez, 2012; Slaten & Baskin, 2014; Slaten, et al., 2013). An example of this can be found in crosswalking or standards blending that school counselors utilize when completing classroom activities. For its National Model (2012) ASCA attached the ASCA National Standards: Developmental Crosswalk Tool. This form, ASCA points out, is to assist school counselors in planning guidance curriculum. The form conveys to school counselors, methods of blending school counseling activities with other subject areas through their crosswalk standards. “ASCA National Standards for personal/social
development guide school counseling programs to provide the foundation for personal and social growth as students’ progress through school and into adulthood” (ASCA, 2004). The social-emotional competencies in the guide outlines early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school crosswalk. Incorporating health, safety, and emotional issues with communication skills, the standards integrates social-emotional tenets with core subject area. For example, “Develop positive attitudes toward self as a unique and worthy person; Learn techniques for managing stress and conflict” (ASCA 2004, p.9).

However, Lopez and Mason (2018) stated that there is a great need “. . . for continuous improvement of counseling skills and knowledge of interventions through professional development”. Lopez and Mason (2018) conducted a research on school counselors use of ASCA’s lesson plans. The researchers utilized lesson plans posted on ASCA Scene website and completed a content analysis. Their research found that most of the lessons were social-emotional (personal/social) standards which was completed mostly by elementary school counselors. They also found that “. . . school counselors need further training in incorporating standards and developing learning objectives. . .” (p. 9) and that many of the lesson plans did not have accommodations as ASCA stipulates in its school counselor ethical standards.

Another aspect of school counselors’ training is the growing interest of students’ social-emotional wellbeing. School counselors need additional training to foster and promote the social-emotional wellbeing of students. Research (DeKruft et al, 2013; Kaffnenberger & O’Rorke, 2013; Slaten & Baskin, 2014; Young, et al., 2014; Young & Kaffenberger, 2013) shows that students social-emotional wellbeing influences higher academic performance. Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman and Zumbo (2014) conducted a longitudinal study to ascertain the effect of adolescents’ social-emotional wellbeing on academic achievement. Oberle
et al. (2014) analyzed student-reports, teacher-reports on student’s social-emotional skills, and standardized testing results from grades 4-7. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that there is a link between students’ social-emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. They could predict students’ academic achievement by grade seven.

Another view is that the problem is not with school counselors’ academic training, but that professional development and supervision are lacking (Carlson & Kees, 2013; Duncan et al., 2014). Most of the work completed by school counselors are non-school counseling activities, such as data entry and dealing with disciplinary issues. This further complicates the role and professional identity of school counselors which impact their training. Hanchon and Fernald (2013) studied the work of school psychologists in various academic levels and found that most of the work school psychologists accomplish was with the placement of students in special needs programs, assessment, and eligibility determination instead of counseling with students’ mental health needs. School counselors also perform work that is stipulated as inappropriate by ASCA standards. In Bridgeland and Bruce’s (2014) national survey of 5,300 middle and high school counselors, it was revealed that school counselors work was mainly administrative and accountability. Perera-Diltz and Mason (2010) define accountability as the “ability to provide documentation of effectiveness of professional activities outcomes” (p. 53).

In the Bridgeland and Bruce (2014) study, middle and high school counselors were asked to give feedback on several statements based on the reality of their jobs and their preference. A large percent of the school counselors (72%) preferred to “reduce administrative and other tasks to focus on counseling,” 39% stated that administrative tasks, such as test administration and school schedules, was done far too much by school counselors, and 93% stated that “personal needs counseling is an aspect of the counselors’ job.” (p. 21). Overall,
school counselors preferred to spend more time working with students on social-emotional wellbeing that would assist in bridging the achievement gap (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). School counselors are in the position to assist students with social-emotional issues. Bass et al. (2015) stated that “school counselors are responsible for the development of students’ socio-emotional [wellbeing]” (p. 516). Schools are the first place where students’ social-emotional issues are identified (Collins, 2014; Goodman-Scott, Betters-Bubon, & Donohue, 2015). It is important to foster students’ social-emotional wellbeing in school therefore, counselors’ academic training needs to be changed to manage the influx of social-emotional issues that exists (Goodman-Scott, 2015; Walley & Grothaus, 2013). Goodman-Scott (2015) conducted a survey research on high school counselors’ perceptions of their preparedness and job activities. Based on the findings, she posited that school counselor training is lacking regarding consistent standardization which allows for differences in training. She contended that even with CACREP, the licensure and internship of the states are varied.

**Licensure and Certification**

The inconsistencies that exists in the various training requirements and standardization impacts the work that school counselors accomplish. The ASCA (2017) state certification requirements concerning school counselors, lists the academic and licensure requirements of each state. All states require a master’s degree while some states have an alternative path if the master’s degree is not in school counseling. Most school counseling programs in the nation require 30 credit hours. Most states require internship and/or practicum ranging from 100 – 700 hours. Some states require 1 – 3 years teaching or counseling experience while some states test candidates on their teaching and learning knowledge (ASCA, 2017).
The ASCA state certification information demonstrates the disparity and inconsistencies that exists in the school counseling field regarding training and licensure requirements. For some states, school counselors need a teaching degree or certificate to practice school counseling whereas some states do not have that requirement. Some states offer provisional licensure or certification between 1 – 2 years for school counselors to complete all requirements to be fully licensed or certified. As such, this lends itself to the academic training requirements with regards to the counseling aspect of school counselors’ training. Moyer and Yu (2012) asserted prior teaching experience is not a necessity but stresses the importance of on-the-job experience. In their study, they found that school counselors believe they were more effective when they had prior experience in counseling. Knowles (1975) argued that prior experience is invaluable in moving to self-directedness. School counselors are tasked with various duties and responsibilities that they may be ill-prepared to perform. However, having prior experience in their field of study assists them in completing their work including counseling.

**Social-Emotional Wellbeing in American Schools**

In the last three decades emphasis has been placed on the social-emotional wellbeing of students of all ages (Kaffengerber & O’Rorke, 2013; Perfect & Morris, 2011; Walley & Grothaus, 2013; Yoshikawa & Zigler, 2000). The term social-emotional issues and mental health illness is used synonymously in this study. Other researchers have also linked social-emotional issues with mental health illness (Kaffengerber & O’Rorke, 2013; Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016; Walley & Grothaus, 2013) such as stress, anxiety, depression, mood disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, etc. The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR, 2013), a Center for Disease Control and Prevention report, in describing the state of mental health in the United States reported that between 2001-2007 children ages 4-17
had a high percentage of emotional and behavioral problems stemming from various situations in their lives namely, poverty, abuse, lack of preventative care, and community issues affecting the family. Researchers of the MMWR reported that children 4 -11 years old displayed some mental health problems that affect their everyday functionality (MMWR, 2013). The MMWR (2016), a nationwide report, stated that 15.4% of children 2-8 years old had social-emotional issues.

The state of social-emotional issues among elementary aged children has long been a topic of interest since the advent of school counselors in elementary schools. In one study by Perrone and Evans (1964) the researchers surveyed elementary school counselors on their preparation needs to act as school counselors in the elementary setting. Elementary school counselors’ response was that there was needed preparation in developmental psychology in response to the needs of the children they served. Bailey, Deery, Gehrke, Perry, and Whitledge (1989) in their study of the issues in elementary school counseling posited that, “the recognition of the importance of the elementary counselor being a front-line mental health professional . . . in the schools is central to addressing the . . . concerns that are raised” (p. 5). Hardesty and Dillard (1994) ranked the activities of elementary school counselors in comparison to the activities of secondary school counselors. Their research revealed that elementary school counselors ranked drug counseling, abuse counseling, and family relationship counseling among the top 5 of 17 activities that they perform at their schools. Greenberg, Domitrovich and Bumbarger, (2001) reported on the mental health of school aged children. Based on several reports from various governmental agencies namely, National Advisory Mental Health Council, National Institute of Mental Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Institute of Medicine, they asserted that the prevention of mental health issues was uppermost in the work of these
agencies. They reported that the prevalence of social-emotional issues is rising, and preventative measures needed to be in place.

The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics conducts an annual survey reporting on the status of children in the United States. The report, Children in America: Key Indicators of Wellbeing, looks at federal data concerning the health, living environment, and education of children and their families. The 2017 report indicated that the state of mental health or social-emotional issues of children is dire. They estimated that currently 17.9% of children 4 - 11 have experienced maltreatment. The report also estimated that children living below the poverty line ages 0-5 is 10.2% and for children ages 6-17 it is 8.3%. Connolly and Green (2009) in their research on elementary aged children of divorce reported that there was a significant increase (39%) of social-emotional issues that children experience due to divorce. Perfect and Morris (2011) based on their research on school-based mental health services stated that 20% of children and adolescents have experienced or are experiencing social-emotional issues namely anxiety (5-18%), and depression (4.3%). Research on the prevalence of mental health issues among elementary aged children has led to various research on prevention at the elementary level (Dykeman, 1994; Hardesty & Dillard, 2004; Perfect & Morris, 2011; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Yoshikawa & Zigler, 2000) where once it was mostly at the secondary level. The work of intervention and prevention most often fall to the elementary school counselor (Bailey et al. 1989; Dykeman, 1994; Ernst, Bardhoshi, & Lanthier, 2017; Kaffenberger & O’Rorke, 2013; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Walley & Grothaus, 2013).

The growing interest in children’s social-emotional wellbeing has been at the forefront of many research with regards to how best to assist America’s children (Fiat et al. 2017; Oberle et al. 2016; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).
Report (2016) estimated that by the age 18 approximately 49.5% of children will have a diagnosable mental illness. The estimates are based on “diagnostic interviews done by professionals of a large, representatives of young people” (Child Mind Institute, 2016). The report outlines onset age of some social-emotional issues namely by age 6 early onset of anxiety disorders, by age 11 ADHD and behavioral problems, by age 13 mood disorders, and by age 15 substance abuse. The prevalence of children social-emotional issues has prompted the implementation of several programs throughout the years to assist students’ learning (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellenger, 2011; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003; Fiat et al. 2017; Greenberg et al. 2003; Schonert-Reichl et al. 2015).

Schools are seen as the best format to reach children with social-emotional issues (Kaffenberger & O’Rorke, 2013; Montanez, Berger-Jenkins, Rodriquez, McCord, & Meyer, 2015; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel 2011; Simon, Pastor, Reuben, Huang, & Goldstrom, 2015; Vostanis, Humphrey, Fitzgerald, Deighton, & Wolpert 2013) based on the time children spend at school. The school counselor is then tasked with the duty of assisting this growing number of children with social-emotional issues they may be experiencing. The function of the ASCA National Model was partly to assist school counselors in implementing programs that can support children with these problems (ASCA, 2015). The model’s emphasis on personal/social (now social-emotional) when it was first published and distributed may have been an attempt to assist school counselors in attending to the social-emotional needs of students. Sancasiani, et al, (2015) stated that “…mental health promotion is most effective when it takes place early in a persons’ life” (p. 21). In their study, Sancasiani, et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review of universal school-based randomized controlled trials on the promotion of
students’ wellbeing. They hypothesized that by improving students’ emotional and social skills this would have a positive effect on their academic performance and overall wellbeing. Utilizing information from various school-based interventions that focused on social-emotional competencies, the authors found that students’ social-emotional wellbeing directly impacted academic achievement. Quality Counts, a national report by Education Week, which is an education magazine both in print and online, ranks states nationally on education. Quality Counts (2018) ranked Massachusetts 1st in education. Based on the indices utilized by Quality Counts to rank and grade the states, namely finance, k-12 achievement, and success rates, Massachusetts has put in place resources that aligns with the indices. The state raised the funding of public education beginning in 2000, focus on students’ social-emotional needs, and recognize the impact of poverty on students’ social-emotional wellbeing and academic performance (Wong, 2016). To this end, the Massachusetts Department of Education (MDOE) have put in place measures to counter the problem of students’ academic achievement by appointing an assistant superintendent of social-emotional learning (MDOE, 2016). Social-emotional learning is an integral part of the MDOE curriculum and instruction for all schools, and focus is placed on students’ social-emotional needs because of its direct link to positive school performance (MDOE, 2016).

Grimes, Haskins, and Paisley (2013) studied the work of school counselors in rural areas on social justice advocacy. The qualitative study utilized a social constructivist theoretical framework to attain a deeper understanding of these school counselors’ experiences. The study revealed that socioeconomic struggle and marginalization of students’ due to poverty was evident. The authors stated that this impacted student success and that school counselors’ advocating on behalf of themselves and students throughout the community was necessary.
Although the study examined the advocacy aspect of the ASCA National Model, it also pointed to the social-emotional issues that students experience based on their home life and their community and school environment. The socioeconomic struggle affected students who, in turn, felt marginalized by the poverty status.

As Grimes, et al. (2013) pointed out poverty has a negative effect on students’ social-emotional wellbeing which impacts their academic success. With the issues of poverty, waning healthcare, and a rise of social-emotional issues among elementary aged students, the work of school counselors in the elementary school setting is more prominent as they interact with these students on a daily basis. Recently, ASCA started the RAMP designation program which is “conferred only after school counselors complete a detailed application substantiating their efforts to develop and implement comprehensive, data-driven, accountable school counseling programs guided by their schools’ specific, identified needs” (Wilkerson, Perusse, & Hughes 2013, p. 172). The implementation of RAMP designation was to assist school counselors in formulating and performing needed tasks through systematic programming that would help students in achieving academically. Some of these programs are to assist with the social-emotional wellbeing of students (ASCA National Model, 2016).

Summary

The chapter explicates the two theoretical frameworks which are the foundation of the study. The use of Dweck’s (1975) incremental and entity theories will examine the growth and fixed mindsets of school counselors with regards to their training and the reality of their work. Knowles’s (1975) andragogy theory complements incremental and entity theories by investigating school counselors’ perception of self-directedness which can be linked to their growth or fixed mindset. The school counseling profession is at a turning point. The need for
changes in academic training is evident based on the voices of school counselors with regards to the varying aspects of their work. The ASCA National Model has many benefits, however, more work needs to be done to assist both school counselors and the students who benefit from its implementation. The training areas of therapy, supervision, and experiential exposure have been highlighted as needing evaluation and subsequent changes that will enhance the work of school counselors.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of elementary school counselors. The study specifically examined the applicability of elementary school counselor’s training to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Social-emotional wellbeing was defined as a student’s holistic, subjective state present in a range of feelings and social skills such as emotional regulation, confidence, resilience, caring, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and setting achievable goals, which is acquired over time and applied effectively in their respective social environment (CASEL, 2017; Stewart-Brown, 2000; UCI, 2017). This chapter explicates the various research methods that were used to conduct this transcendental phenomenological study. The use of transcendental phenomenological design is explained along with a justification for the use of the participant, setting, and procedures. My role as the researcher is described, as well as my interest in the topic and its importance in this field of study. A thorough outline of data collection, analysis of data, and questions that was used in verbal frequency scale, interviews and focus groups with participants was included in this chapter.

Design

This study utilized a qualitative method of inquiry. The overarching purpose of this qualitative study was to gather purposeful information from school counselors who experience the phenomenon. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posited that qualitative researchers “... study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpreting phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Yin (2016) agreed, writing that “qualitative research involves studying the meaning of people’s lives, as experienced under real-world
conditions . . . it represents the views and perspective of a study’s participants” (p. 9). Therefore, the rationale for this phenomenological study is to gain a deeper understanding of elementary school counselors’ experiences with the phenomenon, fuller description of those experiences, and discovery of commonality among the experiences that may add to the literature on school counselors. A qualitative design allowed for in-depth, robust, and subjective experiences of school counselors in how they experience the phenomenon in their natural setting.

This study employed a phenomenological design that let the school counselors’ voices be heard on their lived experiences. A phenomenological approach provided a description of the meanings of a group who has shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). A transcendental phenomenological study, as described by Moustakas (1994), addressed intentionality or underlying meanings of the perception of a phenomenon and intuition, a fresh perspective of a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenological approach was used to clarify and enlighten the lived experiences of elementary school counselors with regards to the phenomenon. This approach utilizes various methods of data collection to obtain meaningful encounters, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of the school counselors. For example, Moran and Bodenhorn (2015) utilized a phenomenological qualitative approach to investigate the lived experiences of school counselors’ collaboration with mental health agencies. Their study yielded information that was new and useful in that it added to existing literature and gave a greater understanding and clarification of school counselors collaborative efforts. Creswell (2013) asserted that a phenomenological approach assists in finding commonality among persons who experience a phenomenon. The main purpose of my use of this design is that:

Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a
prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, … by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experiences. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41)

Along with being a qualitative phenomenological study, this study specifically utilized a transcendental type of phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) posited that the purpose of a transcendental phenomenological design is to obtain an in-depth, open, and unique description of a phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) explained that transcendental phenomenology “is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (p. 49). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of school counselors with regards to elementary students’ social-emotional wellbeing as outlined in the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model. The experiences of the school counselors differed, but within their experiences there was a thread of commonality that made investigating their experiences significant.

In utilizing transcendental phenomenological design, my beliefs, experiences, and biases were identified and removed or bracketed from the process of gathering data for this study (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) explained that “*Epoche* is a necessary first step” (p. 33). *Epoche* is a method of perceiving a phenomenon without judgement or biases to gain a new understanding and can perceive a phenomenon through the eyes of those who have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher sets aside all previous beliefs and biases that might hinder gaining meaning and an essence of the experiences being described (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). A level of subjectivity was closely monitored to conduct this research as transcendental phenomenological research requires bracketing by the researcher which assisted in leading to textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ experiences.
Research Questions

The central question that guided this study is: How do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing? From the central question the following sub-questions were formulated to respond to the study topic:

SQ1: How do elementary school counselors describe their self-perceived preparedness applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?

SQ2: How do elementary school counselors describe their perception of professional and/or personal growth regarding how they might address social-emotional issues since their formal training?

SQ3: How do elementary school counselors describe their use and/or knowledge the school counselors’ competencies presented in the ASCA National Model?

SQ4: How do elementary school counselors describe the duties and responsibilities of their position at their schools?

SQ5: What is elementary school counselors’ perception of the social-emotional wellbeing issues of elementary students at their school?

Setting

The setting of the study were elementary schools from all over the nation. The selection of this setting was purposeful as it relates to the study. Utilizing elementary school counselors from various states assisted in giving a broader view of the problem studied. With regards to social-emotional wellbeing, the nation has a large number of elementary aged children experiencing mental health and social-emotional issues (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017; Mental Health in America, 2017; National Alliance on...
Mental Illness, NAMI, 2015; Perou, et al, 2018; Weare, 2015). ASCA recommends that the ratio of school counselors to students is 1:250 (ASCA, 2014). However, based on ratio fact sheet 2015-2016 most schools are far above that ratio, with one school having 1:680. The rationale for selecting this setting is based on the following points: (a) the rising number of children with mental health and behavioral issues (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017; Mental Health in America, 2017; NAMI, 2015, (b) the small number of school counselors available to assist students (ASCA, 2014), (c) previous research on school counselors’ training and their actual work.

Within this setting, there are many elementary schools. The considerable number of elementary schools in the nation is a factor in its selection. Most elementary schools in the nation has at least two school counselors. Therefore, there should be an adequate population of school counselors to choose from. Hence, there was the opportunity to acquire the required number of participants needed for this study.

Participants

Creswell (2013) denoted that between 3–15 participants are ideal for a phenomenological study. For this study, 10 -15 participants were identified who fit the criteria namely, school counselors in an elementary school, with two years or more working as a school counselor, having knowledge of the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model social-emotional domain, and have attained a master’s degree in counseling or a related field. Purposeful sampling was utilized to find participants for the study who fit the criteria. My aim was to gain maximum variation in my sample namely gender, race and ethnicity, varying ages, years of experience (2 - 20 years), CACREP and non-CACREP training, and teaching experience and no teaching experience through a demographic survey and an established verbal frequency instrument.
Snowball sampling was also utilized. Adler and Clark (2015) explained that snowball sampling involves the use of the participant group to identify other potential participants who they know fit the criteria and have experience with the phenomena. In addition to snowball sampling, school counselors were invited to participate through the ASCA Scene an ASCA national website. The personnel of ASCA Scene was contacted and I was given permission to email a recruitment letter and survey link that was posted to ASCA Scene. Additionally, the recruitment letter was published in their monthly newsletter. The online survey included a recruitment letter, consent form, demographic survey and the School Counselors Activity Rating Scale (SCARS) developed by Scarborough, (2005). Participants were selected based on their responses on the demographic survey and the SCARS. By sending out the SCARS to all school counselors who responded, I had hoped to obtain at least a 5% - 10% response rate and about 50 participants responding to the link on ASCA Scene and the newsletter. Then I would be able to purposefully select 10 - 15 out of the 50 based on varying demographics I wanted represented in my sample. Furthermore, I chose to utilize participants for the study based on the “richness” of their responses to the items on the SCARS. This assisted in alleviating any issues that arose in obtaining the required number of participants for the study. However, there were 35 respondents of which 10 participated in the study.

The SCARS (Appendix G) was developed by Janna L. Scarborough in 2002. In 2005, Scarborough conducted a study to analyze the reliability and validity of the instrument. The purpose of the SCARS is to “assess performance of actual and preferred job duties currently being carried out by practicing school counselors” (p. 275). Scarborough (2005) explained that the SCARS uses a verbal frequency scale. The verbal frequency scale assisted in measuring the frequency of a particular action instead of the extent to which a participant agreed with the
statement as in a Likert scale (Scarborough, 2005). The SCARS is a 50-item instrument sorted into four factors namely, counseling, coordination, consultation, and curriculum. Each factor has two subscales namely, actual and preferred. The verbal frequency scale utilized in the instrument is a 5-point scale which included “1 = never do this activity” to “5 = routinely do this activity”. Scarborough (2005) explained the Cronbach’s alpha of each factor for the actual and preferred subscales. Subsequently, the counseling factor has nine items with Cronbach’s alpha .85 actual and .83 preferred. The coordination factor has 13 items with Cronbach’s alpha .84 for actual and .85 for preferred. The consultation factor has seven items with Cronbach’s alpha .75 for actual and .77 for preferred. Lastly, the curriculum factor has eight items with Cronbach’s alpha .93 for actual and .90 for preferred (Scarborough, 2005). The SCARS instrument was emailed to me by its developer, Dr. Scarborough for use in my study.

I purposefully selected participants for the study from elementary schools by utilizing a recruitment letter, consent form, demographic survey and the SCARS instrument. The demographic of school counselors in the nation is mostly Caucasian, female, approximately 36 to 45 years old (Data USA: School Counseling & Guidance Services, 2016). A small percentage of school counselors are male within the same age group. Years of experience vary between 2 to 15 years working at their school as counselors. I kept participants’ personal information private by using pseudonyms arranged alphabetically for identification and on a double password protected computer. Yin (2016) posited that most qualitative studies use pseudonyms to give participants anonymity unless otherwise requested.

**Procedures**

First, to test for face and content validity interview and focus group questions were reviewed by experts in the field of school counseling and mental health. Five reviewers were
chosen. Two reviewers currently work as school counselors, two are mental health professionals that work in a school setting and outside school with elementary aged children, and one is a professor at a university who works in school counseling. Cronbach’s alpha (α) was calculated for the interview and focus group questions. There are 39 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1= not clear, not relevant, not related to research question to 5 = very clear, very relevant, very related to research question. The α score is .96 which indicates a high level of internal consistency. Interview questions were pilot tested after IRB approval, utilizing three elementary school counselors. The pilot testing evaluated the questions and possible responses I may receive from actual participants. Based on the responses on the pilot test, some questions were modified, one question was removed due to repetition in the response, and one question was added to further delve into participants’ experiences. With IRB approval, an email with the link to the online portion of the study namely the study recruitment letter (Appendix C), consent form (Appendix B) demographic survey (Appendix E), and SCARS instrument (Appendix G) were sent to the personnel in charge of ASCA Scene. The recruitment letter was emailed to the same personnel which was placed in ASCA’s monthly newsletter. Potential participants who respond to the link on the ASCA Scene website I contacted by email to set a date and time for face-to-face individual interviews conducted through WebEx. Selected participants answered questions concerning the criteria outlined for participants on the demographic survey namely, (a) years of experience, (b) training received, (c) knowledge of the ASCA National Model, (d) school counselor-student ratio and (e) social-emotional issues they have encountered in elementary setting. Participants were allowed two weeks to respond to the survey link and recruitment letter in the ASCA newsletter. Potential participants who responded to the link posted on ASCA Scene and the newsletter who did not set dates for individual interviews
received a follow-up email as a reminder.

While obtaining participants who match the criteria, interviews were scheduled with those who had responded previously based on the requirements I mentioned for maximum variation. Interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the participant. There were three focus groups which were completed via WebEx due to participants’ location nationally and the size of the group. For each focus group, I obtained group consensus concerning time convenient to participants as it related to their time zone and availability. Each group was given three dates and times for the interviews. Participants who were in the same time zones participated in groups one and two. However, group three had three different time zones and therefore three different times. Fortunately, these participants were willing to accommodate me in order to complete the information necessary for the study. The focus groups were recorded on WebEx along with one other recording device namely, Olympus digital voice recorder VN702PC during interviews with each participant and in focus group for later transcription when analyzing the data. I utilized Moustakas (1994) reduction and elimination, structural and textural descriptions and essence of experiences to conduct data analysis along with ATLAS.ti V8 to assist with data analysis. An audit trail (Appendix L) was created to assist with a detailed collection of documentation regarding various facets of this research. External auditing was conducted by knowledgeable experts in the school counseling and research field after the findings of this research. Additional batteries and recording devices were on hand in case of any mishap with designated recorder. I bracketed (epoche) myself through memoing and journal entries (Appendix K) to keep my biases out of the participants lived experiences as much as possible (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas, 1994) explained this as epoche which is focusing on the experience of the participant instead of utilizing the researchers’ preconceived ideas or biases.
The Researcher's Role

Eisner (1998) asserted, “The self is the instrument that engages the situation and makes sense of it. It is the ability to see and interpret significant aspects. It is this characteristic that provides unique, personal insight into the experience under study” (p. 33). As an LPC, my client base is mostly children, adolescents, and adults with mental health issues. In delving into their lives to facilitate methods of helping themselves, I found that most of the issues they face came about when they were elementary-aged children. I began questioning the role of school counselors and the work they did and wanting to know how they managed the influx of students’ social-emotional issues. I wanted to know the difference in identity and work of a school counselor from a LPC working with students with social-emotional issues. This knowledge can only be gained from someone who has experienced the phenomenon. My training, which included 60 credit hours, 200 hours of practicum, 600 hours of internship prepared me for my work and I perceived minor variation between my training and my current work. Most school counseling programs are 30 credit hours with 200-600 internship hours. Therefore, this study looked at school counselors’ transition from training to real-world and their perception of preparedness for the work they currently perform.

My work as a therapist takes me to elementary and secondary schools to see children and adolescents. School counselors often refer students to me through the agency I contract with for counseling. In the three years that I have been working in this capacity, I recognize that my case load regarding elementary students with mental health issues has grown. This could be attributed to limited mental health resources available in the state, the high percentage of students with social-emotional issues stemming from home life and community environment, and poverty in the state (Mental Health America, 2016). When students need individual
counseling regarding mental health issues such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, depression, sexual and physical abuse, etc., they are referred to me to see them and not school counselors. Having shared some courses with students training to become school counselors, who also received training in mental health issues that affect children, I wondered why this aspect of their training had limited usage in their work in the public-school system. This study was borne out of that curiosity as to reasons school counselors were not using that part of their training in the schools if they were trained adequately to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing, and their perception of being prepared to counsel students with social-emotional issues. I am interested in elementary school counselors, due to the client cases I have. Therefore, I utilized a qualitative research methodology to gain the information for my study and obtained a better understanding of school counselors’ experiences and thought-processes regarding this phenomenon.

My role as a researcher is to understand the work of school counselors in relation to the needs of elementary-aged students’ social-emotional wellbeing, and their perception of their training to meet those needs. As a therapist, I admit that there are some biases that I bring into this study, including differences in utilizing similar training, differences in purpose or mission of position based on therapeutic training, and performing the job for which training was received. However, using Moustakas’ (1994) method of bracketing, I identified and set my biases aside to minimize their effect on the data collection and analysis of this study.

As mentioned previously I worked in a few of the schools in this setting, however I did not utilize any of those schools for the study. My association with the school counselors is minimal. Most of my elementary school clients are referrals from school counselors who give my contact information to parents to contact me through the agency for counseling services for
their child/children. Other associations I have with school counselors are getting potential clients class schedules and signing in on the days that I see my clients. On very few occasions, school counselors ask about the progress of my client, but I am limited in what I can say due to confidentiality codes in counseling ethical guidelines. I have clients at only one school in my location, therefore, school counselors at the schools I have clients were not contacted.

Data Collection

To acquire the experiences of elementary school counselors concerning their self-perceived training preparedness to foster students’ social-emotional wellbeing, I utilized SCARS, individual interviews, and focus group to collect data. Creswell (2013) stated that these methods of data collection are ideal for a phenomenological study. A triangulation strategy was used to collect data for this study. Merriam (2016) described triangulation as the use of multiple data collection methods to verify acquired data. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) explained that “Triangulation may establish that the information gathered is generally supported or disconfirmed . . . it enhances the meaning through multiple sources and provides thick, rich descriptions of relevant information” (p. 115). Therefore, multiple sources of data collection, namely, SCARS, individual interviews, and focus group assisted in obtaining data relevant to the study to acquire an in-depth and elucidating description of the phenomena of the study. The purpose for this sequence was to select the required number of participants, to acquire data relevant to the study, and gain textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon from those who are experiencing it.

Recruitment Letter, Demographic Survey, and SCARS

The purpose of the demographic survey was to obtain information on the number of school counselors within the setting that met the criteria for the study. I utilized the recruitment
letter to obtain participants for the study. The demographic survey was used to acquire the information I needed to select the school counselors who fit the criteria namely: (a) years of experience, (b) training received, (c) accreditation information, (d) knowledge of ASCA National Model, and (e) being elementary school counselors who have experienced working with students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Additionally, the SCARS was used as a data collection tool to gather information with regards to school counselor ideal and real duties specific to the theoretical framework of my study. Although purposive sampling was used, I chose participants who fit the criteria outlined in the demographic survey (Creswell, 2013).

**Interviews**

Patton (2015) stated that qualitative interview questions are dependent on features, such as: (a) the theoretical traditions that inform the study, (b) focus and nature of the study, (c) length and (d) setting of interviews, interview format (conversational, standardized) and the interviewers’ experience. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) purported that structure categorizes interview questions. They purported that interview questions are either highly structured/standardized and are predetermined in order and wording, semi-structured which is, an assortment of structured and unstructured questions, and unstructured questions which are open-ended, flexible, and conversational questions. The individual interview questions for this study were semi-structured and open-ended allowing for unscripted additional questions. Additionally, I kept interviews between 40 minutes to an hour building rapport with participants with the first few questions and inviting their input in the last few questions. The format was conversational, which put participants at ease to freely describe their experiences in-depth. All the interviews were via Webex, which allowed for deeper understanding of the participant’s experiences and to observe hidden nuances and idiosyncrasies during the interview.
Semi-Structured Open-ended Individual Interview Questions (Appendix H)

1. Please tell me about your path to become a school counselor.
2. How and why did you choose this profession?
3. Describe your daily routine regarding your work as a school counselor.
4. What was your preparation process in becoming a school counselor?
5. Describe your transition from formal training to working as a school counselor.
6. What challenges did you experience when you first started working?
7. Describe any personal adjustments you made during your transition.
8. Describe any professional adjustments you made during your transition.
9. What, if any, challenges did you experience making these adjustments?
10. What are your challenges now?
11. How did you mollify the challenges in the past and now?
12. What is your perceptions regarding congruence with your work and your training?
13. Describe your experience working with elementary students at your school.
14. Describe students’ social/emotional issues you encounter at your school.
15. What is your perception of your training to meet the social/emotional needs of students at your school?
16. How did your training prepare you for working with students’ social-emotional issues?
17. What is your perception of students’ social-emotional needs affecting their scholastic achievement?
18. Describe any adjustments you made to accommodate working with students social-emotional issues at your school.
19. How do you utilize the ASCA National Model in your work as a school counselor?

20. How are the school counselors’ competencies relevant to your work with regards to students’ social-emotional wellbeing?


22. What are your main duties/responsibilities as an elementary school counselor?

23. Describe your weekly workload?

24. What aspect of your work do you find frustrating/affirming?

25. Is there anything else you would like to share on the topic?

I asked questions 1 through 25 to gain an overview of the participants’ daily activities, knowledge and usage of the ASCA National Model, and his or her perception of the phenomenon. Wright (2014) stated the importance of open-ended questions in an interview. These questions, he contended, should be probing to obtain relevant descriptions that align with the research questions and the goal of the research. The study helped me gain knowledge and understanding of elementary school counselors’ experiences with students’ social-emotional needs. The goal of these interview questions was to obtain in-depth descriptions of the school counselors’ experiences.

Questions one, two, four, five and 12, 13, and 15 align with research question one. These questions were specific to school counselors’ perception of their training applicability and its impact on their current work. Carlson and Kees (2013), Goodman-Scott (2015), Walley and Grothaus (2013), and Young et al. (2014) conducted qualitative research relating to school counselors’ perception of their training to perform their role at school. Each research found that more training was needed for school counselors to perform their work as outlined by ASCA.
Walley and Grothaus (2013), in their study on school counselors’ training to recognize and identify mental illness in adolescents revealed that the participants believed that their graduate coursework content was limited.

Questions one, two, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, and 11 gave data regarding school counselors’ perception of their graduate training in fostering and promoting elementary students’ social-emotional wellbeing. These questions also gave insight as to the theories framing this study. Based on school counselors’ response these questions assisted in determining school counselors fixed or growth mindset, motivation to enter the field of school counseling, and their approach to managing any challenge they encounter and fostering students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Dweck (2016) stated that individuals often see growth mindset as a positive outlook and flexibility in thinking and a fixed mindset as close-minded. She explained this is not the case, as an individual may be flexible in their thinking and still have a fixed mindset. Furthermore, Knowles’ (1975) theory looked at the motivational aspect of school counselors’ decisions with regards to these questions. These questions explored the extent to which school counselors are self-directed, especially with the number of years they have been in the profession and experiences they have had with the phenomenon. Research question five examined any professional and/or personal growth that had occurred during school counselors’ tenure at their specific school.

Utilizing questions 19, 20, and 21, I obtained relevant data regarding ASCA National Model usage. Research conducted on school counselors’ knowledge and usage of various aspects of the ASCA (2012, 2016) National Model revealed that school counselors did not perceive that they had adequate training in the model or the applicability of the model to their environment (Milsom and McCormick, 2015; Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015; Young &
Kaffenberger, 2015). Young and Kaffenberger (2015) conducted research on school counselors’ use of data to impact student academic performance as recommended by ASCA (2012, 2016). The research revealed that school counselors needed professional development to train them in knowledge and usage of data and accountability skills.

Questions three, eight, nine, 10, 11, 22, 23, and 24, examined past research findings with regards to time commitment in carrying out the counseling aspect of their work. Researchers found that school counselors’ workload and every day activity does not allow for time to conduct individual counseling to students with social-emotional needs as recommended by ASCA (ASCA, 2012, 2016; Bain, 2012; DeKruyf et al. 2013; Kaffenberger & O’Rourke-Trigiani, 2013; Reiner & Hernandez, 2012). Additionally, questions 4, and 16 will provided data with regards to research question three. Researchers have found that non-counseling related duties interferes with the recommended work that school counselors are to perform (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011; Slaten, et al, 2015).

Questions 13, 14, and 17 align with research question five. This study examined school counselors’ interactions with students’ social-emotional needs. I included these questions to examine the growing rate of students’ social-emotional issues that school counselors encounter. Researchers have found that there is a link between students’ social-emotional wellbeing and academic achievement (Durlak, Domitrovitch, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; Humphrey, 2013; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovitch, & Gullotta, 2015). These questions explored school counselors’ perception of the social-emotional issues of students at their school and any link they perceived existed between social-emotional issues and academic achievement based on their experiences.

Question 25 is a culminating question which gave school counselors the opportunity to
voice any further information they deem necessary to explicate their experiences. Patton (2015) stated, “we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe . . . The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into another person’s perspective” (p. 426).

Focus Groups Interview and Member Check

Patton (1987) asserted that focus group interviews “is a highly efficient qualitative data collection technique” (p. 135). In utilizing focus group interview, I provided an opportunity to the school counselor participants to “provide checks and balances on each other” (p. 135) with regards to the extremity and inconsistencies of their perceptions. Focus group interview also assisted me in focusing on the phenomenon and discover shared views that assisted in obtaining patterns and commonality from their experiences.

I conducted three focus group interviews using WebEx to accommodate the total number of participants, their schedules and various locations across the United States. The focus groups were concentrating on the interaction of participants with each other regarding the phenomenon and to compare and come to the shared meanings of their experiences (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). Seidman (2006) wrote that focus groups have two main purposes, finding the commonalities of participants’ information and verification of that data. Each participant received through the U.S. mail or via email with attachments of a transcription of their individual interview along with a member check form. Participants analyzed their transcripts and responded on the form regarding the validity of the information enclosed.

Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Appendix I)

1. Tell us your name and how long you have worked as a school counselor.

2. Tell us your reasons for participating in this study.
3. What are you most interested in letting others know with regards to your experiences as an elementary school counselor?

4. What is your perception of what a school counselor does?

5. Think back to your formal training and subsequent transition into your role as an elementary school counselor. What do you remember mostly about that time?

6. What improvements, if any, would you suggest concerning your training?

7. What influences or informs your decisions with regards to your daily routine?

8. Utilizing the handout as a guide, in what ways does the ASCA National Model inform your work with regards to the social/emotional wellbeing of students at your school? (see appendix J).

9. How would you describe your use of the ASCA National Model?

10. If you do not use the ASCA model, describe your school counseling methods of accomplishing your goals?

11. What has been your experience working with elementary students?

12. How would you handle a difficult problem regarding a student?

13. What is your format for managing students’ social-emotional issues?

14. If anything, what would you change about your job?

Questions one to 13 were follow-up questions from the individual interviews, group questions to obtain broader, deeper, textural content of the participants’ experiences, and to understand in-depth the participants as a group. The questions were linked to the research questions and assisted in obtaining a broader view of the phenomenon. The goal of focus groups interview was to have all participants discussing and sharing their experiences on the various aspect of the topic. Questions one, two, three and four were introductory questions that allowed
participants to build rapport and converse openly about their experiences. Question five required participants to reflect on their experiences regarding training, transitioning, self-directedness and growth that were discussed in individual interviews. Additionally, participants got the opportunity to share these experiences with each other that heightened the value of the data that I gathered. Questions six, seven, eight, nine, and 10 were culminating questions based on individual interviews. Questions 11, 12, and 13 focused on participants experiences directly related to students’ social-emotional issues, and further explored commonalities in their narratives from their experiences. Question 14 was a culminating question. Participants were given the opportunity to again reflect on and share their views with regards to their decision-making skills, professional and personal changes they had made during their time, their input regarding elementary students’ social-emotional issues, and any additional information that they perceive as relevant to the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an important aspect of any research study. Gay et al. (2011) stated that for qualitative research data analysis begins with the initial interaction with participants in the study. Furthermore, they assert that data analysis and interpretation are critical aspects of the research process to gain an understanding of the data. I utilized three methods of data analysis in enhancing my understanding of the participants’ experiences namely: (a) reduction and elimination, (b) structural and textural descriptions and (c) essence of experiences. Transcription of data gathered from interviews and focus groups was completed by professional transcriptionists.

Reduction and Elimination
Moustakas (1994) explained that reduction and elimination are important aspects of transcendental phenomenology data analysis. He explained this method as a description of the phenomenon’s “unique qualities of the experience . . . that stand out” (p. 128). Reduction and elimination allowed for in-depth analysis of the data, especially the interviews to “determine the significant, relevant, and invariant meanings that provide descriptions . . . of the experience” (p. 130). Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenological reduction is a process of continually perusing and eliminating data attempting to “grasp the full nature of the phenomenon” from the perspective of the participant. This process gives the researcher the advantage of experiencing the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the participant. Reduction allowed the researcher to grasp the intricate meaningfulness of the phenomenon and be able to cluster those meanings and identify significant themes within the participants’ experiences. Therefore, finding the essence of experiences.

Horizonalization, another of Moustakas’ (1994) mode of data analysis, is a strategy utilized in transcendental phenomenology to highlight significant statements of the participants’ experience from the transcribed interview responses that gets to the richness of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Horizonalization as explained by Moustakas (1994) is a means of seeking to find the meaning and essence of each experience. He posited that horizons are exhaustive in nature and therefore there is continually some vantage point of an individual’s experiences that is explorable. Horizons, Moustakas (1994) postulated, are different aspects of the phenomenon. In this case, each school counselor participant had differences in their experiences, however, there was thread of sameness that could be found each time their experiences were examined from various perspectives.
The identification of themes is another important transition in the reduction process. Moustakas (1994) posited that as phenomenological reduction proceeds and horizontalizations take place, identification of themes is the inevitable outcome. Moustakas (1994) described identifying themes as a next step after “clustering the horizons” which leads to finding significant meanings in the experiences being investigated. He explained that as data is reduced, and horizons are found, the structural and textural aspect of the process leads to identifying themes within the context of each experience. To achieve reduction and elimination for this study, I utilized ATLAS.ti V8 to assist in analyzing the data from the interviews and focus groups. The ATLAS.ti V8 is a qualitative data analysis software that systematically analyzes qualitative data and assists in discovering hidden meanings in semi-structured and unstructured data. It was used to integrate the large data obtained through verbal frequency scale, interview, and focus questions and explicate complex information which allowed for a visualization of the commonality or essence of the study.

Structural and Textual Descriptions

Moustakas (1994) contended that structural and textural descriptions are essential to transcendental phenomenological studies. Structures are the underlining of textures and are fundamental (Moustakas, 1994). These types of descriptions are embedded and allows for totality, freshness, and openness in each description. Moustakas (1994) posited that textural and structural descriptions are the “what” and “how” of participants’ experiences concerning the phenomenon being studied. He explained that the texture and structure work in constant association with each other. The textural descriptions ask “what” concerning the experiences. Therefore, the textural descriptions of elementary school counselors regarding their training and students’ social-emotional wellbeing is what their experiences are, their personal perspective
concerning the phenomenon and the meaning they have given to these experiences. The structural descriptions of their experiences are how they have navigated the reality of their jobs, how they construct meaning of the phenomenon through their experiences, and how they describe their lived experiences. The utilization of textural and structural description of phenomenon “creates a fullness in understanding the essences of [the] . . . experiences” (Moustakas 1994, p. 79). Therefore, the questions that were asked of each participant were semi-structured and open-ended to elicit these descriptions that were used to draw out patterns and themes relevant to the study.

**Essence of the Experience**

The essence of the experiences is what Moustakas (1994) described as the final truth. The essence of the experiences is found after phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, textural, and structural descriptions take place. He explained that the final analysis is the synthesis of the meanings to come to commonalities within the experiences of the participants. Each participant had their own perspective and constructed meaning of their experiences but taken all together these constructed meanings had a common thread that was the final truth of all the experiences put together. Moustakas (1994) explained that the purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to transform and “bring to light” (p. 26) the fullness of an experience from those who have lived the phenomenon. He further explains that there is intentionality involved in this process to get to the essence of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. To get a full understanding of a phenomenon the preceding process was completed with time and intentionality, immersing oneself into the experiences of others regarding a phenomenon. Without judgments or preconceived ideas, a synthesis of meanings was found within these experiences to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon. Van Manen (2014) posited that
“phenomenology aims to grasp the exclusively singular aspects . . . essence . . . of a phenomenon (p. 27).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed four criteria for establishing trustworthiness namely; (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. I employed various methods including (a) memoing, (b) auditing, (c) member check, (d) triangulation, etc. to achieve trustworthiness in this study.

Credibility

Credibility looks at believability of the research findings. In other words, can the results be trusted based on how the research was conducted. Establishing credibility in a study requires several strategies namely: (a) triangulation, (b) peer review, and (c) member check. Credibility in a qualitative study substantiates and gives coherence to interpretations and findings of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posited that triangulation is “. . . one of the best-known strategies to shore up the internal validity (credibility) of a study” (p. 243). Triangulation uses several data sources to examine the phenomenon that under studied. For this study, peer review, member check, and reflexive journaling will be utilized to achieve credibility. The triangulation process of this study assisted in gaining a rich and robust understanding of the participants lived experiences. Additionally, it added to understanding and development of the research regarding the experiences. Creswell (2013) stated that triangulation verifies data from various sources to substantiate a theme or perspective. This was achieved by the utilization of multiple methods such as peer review, expert analysis to peruse findings and make reviews, and utilizing various theoretical perceptions concerning the phenomenon that was studied (Creswell, 2013).
Peer review is a method that is an external audit and assisted in establishing credibility. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that peer review can be accomplished by utilizing two outside peers to review my data analysis procedures. They were asked to view the raw data and transcripts to determine how I arrived at themes and the essence of experiences. The peers I utilized were persons who have a working knowledge of the various methods of qualitative data analysis.

I employed member check by allowing participants an opportunity to read the information, make corrections, and add information to their experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that this process is critical to establishing credibility. I asked participants to review their information garnered through their individual interviews and focus groups. This process assisted in understanding their experiences.

Moustakas (1994) wrote that in a transcendental phenomenological research the researcher is responsible for setting aside preconceived ideas of the phenomenon being studied. I achieved this important aspect of transcendental phenomenological study through bracketing myself utilizing reflexive journaling (Appendix K) which added to the credibility of the research. Creswell (2013) wrote “. . . it is important that the researcher not only detail his or her experiences with the phenomenon, but also be self-conscious about how these experiences may potentially have shaped the findings, the conclusions, and the interpretation drawn in the study” (p. 216). Reflexivity allowed me to reflect on my biases that could have affected the research process. Therefore, I bracketed out personal assumptions and beliefs from participants lived experiences.

**Dependability and Confirmability**
Dependability and confirmability relate to the consistency of the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) purported that qualitative research does not require reliability which seeks to replicate the study findings, instead qualitative research seeks to ascertain the thickness and richness of the data collected. Therefore, to establish dependability and confirmability in this study, I utilized audit trail strategy.

Proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), an audit trail refers to a detailed description of the facets of the data collection and decision making throughout the research process. This includes (a) reflections, (b) data interactions, (c) data collection issues, and (d) analysis of data (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The researcher records the research process in detail whether by journaling or memoing. To establish dependability and confirmability in this study, I utilized an audit trail (Appendix L). The purpose was to create a trail that could be audited, to review my processes and procedures and ensured that they were sound.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the findings of a research can be utilized in other frameworks. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that establishing transferability the research provides “. . . only the thick, rich description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach the conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (p. 316). A strategy to establish transferability is maximum variation which refers to sampling. Patton (2015) stated that maximum variation includes “. . . purposefully picking a wide range of cases to get variation on dimensions of interest. . . document diversity and . . . identify important common patterns that are common across the diversity . . . on dimensions” (p. 267). I established maximum variation by seeking out, through sampling, a diverse group of participants inclusive of men, women, varying ethnic backgrounds, years of experience, and age group.
Since qualitative data does not involve generalization, transferability allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the experiences of the participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

To address ethical considerations regarding the participants of the study and the study itself, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before beginning the study. I pilot tested the questions before acquiring participants. Some changes were made to the questions based on the results of the pilot testing. Access to setting was conducted by emailing ASCA Scene a link to the online portion of my study namely, a recruitment letter, informed consent, demographic survey, and SCARS instrument. Additionally, the recruitment letter was placed in ASCA’s monthly newsletter to gather participants. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and double password protected computer where data was stored. However, confidentiality in the focus groups was difficult as members of the focus group could have spoken with others outside of the group without my knowledge. The information gathered from the focus groups was protected. After a period of three years, the acquired data will be deleted as stipulated by the IRB and federal regulations. Information regarding confidentiality was conveyed to participants in terms of locked files, password protected computer, and participant and site pseudonyms to protect their identity. These measures ensured that confidentiality is addressed and maintained. Any conflict of interest was addressed prior to beginning the study and during the study.

**Summary**

Chapter three provided information regarding how I conducted the study, the important characters in the study, and how the importance and necessity of the study was explicated through data. Considerations were given to trustworthiness and ethics regarding my role and
working with the participants who were chosen for this study. Each section of this chapter is essential to understanding the direction of the study. Data collection and analysis are important tenets of a transcendental phenomenological study. It gives deeper, richer textural and structural descriptions that assist in in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences as elementary school counselors’ perceived training applicability in fostering/managing students’ social-emotional development (Creswell, 2013). Analysis of data collected allowed for additional knowledge and understanding of the experiences of a single participant and as a group. Each aspect of their experiences was dissected to find commonalities that explained the phenomenon at length. As Moustakas (1994) explained, the themes and meanings of each experience is exhaustive as it is viewed in various perspectives. Whereas for this research the information gathered was to explain elementary school counselors’ perspective of their training with regards to students’ social-emotional wellbeing, different perspectives of their experiences can be found. There is always more to learn and understand from the data that was gathered.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the self-perceived preparedness of elementary school counselors to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing utilizing their training. Chapter four is a description of participants’ work as elementary school counselors, their background, personal experiences, reasons for choosing this profession, and relevant demographics of each. Furthermore, in this chapter an examination of the results is given for further comprehension of the topic being studied. Employing data collection methods, SCARS instrument, individual interviews and focus groups, responses were analyzed to obtain in-depth information relevant to the topic. The central question guiding this study was “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” To investigate fully the phenomenon the following research questions were formulated and addressed:

SQ1: How do elementary school counselors describe their self-perceived preparedness applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?

SQ2: How do elementary school counselors describe their perception of professional and/or personal growth regarding how they might address social-emotional issues since their formal training?

SQ3: How do elementary school counselors describe their use and/or knowledge of the school counselors’ competencies presented in the ASCA National Model?

SQ4: How do elementary school counselors describe the duties and responsibilities of their position at their schools?
SQ5: What is elementary school counselors’ perception of the social-emotional wellbeing issues of elementary students at their schools?

Based on the data collection methods employed for this study, themes emerged and were further solidified using data analysis. Chapter four provides information concerning each participant that led to their selection and the use of their stories to investigate the phenomenon. Moustakas’ (1994) reduction and elimination, horizontalization and structural and textural methods of data analysis assisted in finding rich stories, patterns and themes, and useful data that added interesting insight to this study.

Participants

The participants of this study were selected utilizing an online survey inclusive of recruitment letter, consent form, demographic survey and SCARS instrument. A post was placed on the ASCA website ‘ASCA Scene’ where members were asked to volunteer their time to be a part of the study. Of the number of elementary school counselors who are members of ASCA, 35 responded to the recruitment letter, consent form, demographic and SCARS instrument. On the demographic questionnaire, respondents gave information on their school counselor/student ratio, the university they attended, the masters’ they acquired, the length of their courses, internship, along with age, years of service, and social-emotional issues they encounter at their schools. On the SCARS instrument they responded to statements regarding actual work they do and what they would prefer to do on their jobs. Of the 35 respondents, 25 declined to participate after signing the consent form and completing the demographic survey and SCARS instrument. Their reasons for declining were varied namely, unavailability due to not having time to complete the study, non-responsive to email reminders for interviews and being too busy with their home and work life. A total of six participated in the individual interview and the focus
group and four participated in the individual interviews only. Of the four who did not complete the focus group, three were unresponsive to emails requesting their participation and one was unable to join due to interrupted internet service.

SCARS instrument, demographic survey and individual interviews were utilized to complete the 10 participants needed for this study. Nine participants were Caucasian females of varying ages, between 20 – 60 years, who have worked as elementary school counselors and have been school counselors for two years or more. One participant was a Caucasian male. All participants hold a masters’ degree. Six participants have a masters’ degree in school counseling and four have their degrees in a related counseling field. Five previously worked as teachers before becoming school counselors, three worked as Licensed Professional Counselors and two went into school counseling after their graduate programs were completed. In compliance with IRB stipulations, each participant was given a pseudonym. Pseudonyms are required to keep the confidentiality of the participants. Therefore, the pseudonyms are in alphabetical order based on first interviewed to last namely, Alicia, Beatrice, Carl, Danette, Evelyn, Farrah, Gloria, Hannah, Iris, and Jackie.

Table 1 displays demographic information of participants that was obtained for selection purposes.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>290:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each participant description provides demographic information, years working as a school counselor, previous work before school counseling and what led them to choose elementary school counseling as a profession.

**Alicia**

Alicia started her school counseling journey as a Licensed Professional Counselor. She received her degree at a local university in Counseling Psychology. She recalled about her path to becoming a school counselor “I started noticing as I was working with adults that they were
just missing basic skills. Like basic conflict resolution skills, communication skills, emotional regulation skills, thinking to myself that someone should be teaching this in the schools” (Alicia, personal communication August 6, 2018). At this point, Alicia recalled she started thinking about becoming a school counselor. Alicia has worked as a school counselor for over five years. She stated that she continues to deal with the problems she noticed in her adult clients in her elementary school students. Alicia is a staunch advocate of the ASCA National Model and is working towards developing her elementary school into a RAMP designated school which would be the second one in her state.

**Beatrice**

Beatrice has been an elementary school counselor for over five years. She earned her degree in Community Counseling. Beatrice attended a university that gave her the option of school counseling or community counseling. She stated, “I chose community counseling because I did not think I could work as a school counselor.” She began working with a counseling agency as a school-based therapist in the school system. Beatrice remarked on the irony of not wanting to work within the school setting as a school counselor then working in schools through the counseling agency. She found that she loved being in the school. She then decided to get her alternative certificate in school counseling through her state. Beatrice explained, “My decision to become a school counselor was that I learned that I loved the school environment and I preferred doing short term counseling and guidance classes with the children”. She continued “. . . there’s a lot more to being a school counselor than sitting in a room and doing therapy and that’s the part I love.” (Beatrice, personal communication August 8, 2018).

**Carl**
Carl is the only male in this study. He explained when his interest in school counseling began. “I was working as a portrait photographer working mostly with children. Their behavior in that setting drew my interest to school counseling. I wanted to work with children on a one-on-one basis” (Carl, personal communication August 9, 2019). He stated he wanted to be there for them. Carl received his degree in family counseling. He began working at a day treatment facility with adults with high needs. Carl stated that his work at the facility honed his skills to work with elementary aged children with social-emotional needs. Carl recalled that when he first started working as an elementary school counselor, he utilized some of the programs from the day facility to work with the students. He stated he made some modification to these programs for them to fit the needs of the children and foster wellbeing.

**Danette**

Danette was working as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) when she decided to become a school counselor. Danette worked as a CNA for 2 years before becoming a school counselor. She stated,

Well, I’m actually an older person. I’m in my 50s. I went back to school to get my masters’ degree. I was 48 and I’ve been wanting to do counseling for a while, because I like working with kids. I enjoy helping them figure things out, and, help them deal with the things they have to deal with” (Danette, personal communication January 15, 2019).

She stated that she went back to university to get her masters after having her family. She received her masters’ in school counseling and began working a few short months after graduating. Danette has worked as an elementary school counselor for two and a half years and have found her position both rewarding and frustrating. She stated however, that this is a
position that she loves. She recalled doing an induction program in her first year of school counseling which allowed her to work with high and middle school students. However, she remembered her internship at the high and middle school as horrible as her “supervisor was not very good at supervising. She just handed me a bunch of paperwork and said, ‘Here, this is what you’re going to do.’” (Danette, personal communication January 15, 2019). She stated that the work that she does now as an elementary school counselor is nothing like her internship experience.

**Evelyn**

Evelyn was hired as a school counselor during her internship period. In describing her path to become a school counselor she explained, “I did not have any classroom experience, I wasn’t a teacher like most people who are school counselors... but I knew from an early age I wanted to work with children and teens” (Evelyn, personal communication January 27, 2019). She recalled working as a youth pastor to fulfill her calling but stated that it did not work out for her. She then began her studies to become a school counselor and now knows this is where she belongs. She stated that she made her choice to become a school counselor when she realized she wanted to build a relationship with the kids she worked with at church. She stated, “I wanted to be able to sit down with them, find out what’s going on and be able to reach them on a personal, deeper level... be able to build those deeper relationships with the kids” (Evelyn, personal communication January 27, 2019). Evelyn completed her masters’ degree in school counseling. In describing her program, she stated, “...my program was a hybrid program, so it was basically like half of my classes were counseling classes and the other half were education classes and they came together to give me a school counseling degree” (Evelyn, personal communication January 27, 2019).
Farrah

Farrah was a middle school teacher who recognized that her students were experiencing social-emotional issues. She recalled, “I found that I was spending time with my students talking over with them issues they were experiencing that was affecting their learning. I realized that the support for students experiencing social-emotional issues was not there” (Farrah, personal communication February 9, 2019). She recalled her frustration with seeing school counselors in her district mainly dealing with scheduling and testing. Farrah stated she felt she needed to help and so decided to get her masters in school counseling to work with students addressing their social-emotional needs. She stated that she chose school counseling not only to help children but “to change the culture of school counseling in my district and school” (Farrah, personal communication February 9, 2019). Farrah completed her masters’ degree in school counseling. She stated that she believed that school counseling was her calling in life. Farrah has worked as an elementary school counselor for over two years and have found her position both challenging in changing the status quo and rewarding when she recognizes changes in her students.

Gloria

Gloria began as an English schoolteacher. In her years of working in that capacity, she found that school counseling was a better fit for her personality. She recalled going back to university to obtain her masters’ in school counseling. She stated that she completed her degree, while she stayed home to raise her children. Gloria explained that her interest in school counseling stemmed from her desire to work one-on-one with children. She stated,

I was already in teaching, and I had some personal experience with counseling as a young adult and it just made sense. I'm more introverted and I wanted to work more
one on one or with small groups, versus 30 plus kids that I was teaching at the time”
(Gloria, personal communication February 10, 2019).

She stated that counseling helped her, and she wanted to do the same for younger children.

Gloria explained that she adopted many of the school counseling programs, with some modifications, to assist her in her work and with students social-emotional wellbeing.

**Hannah**

Hannah received her degree in counseling because she wanted to do agency counseling. She recalled being burnt out during her internship period. Hannah has an undergraduate degree in Higher Education and worked in student affairs at the college level. When she entered the school system she worked as a high school counselor for eight years. Hannah explained that her work in student affairs at the college level helped her in obtaining necessary skills to work with high school students. Although a new field for her she stated that she has adapted to her work as an elementary school counselor over the eight years she has been at this new school. She stated,

I was transferred to an elementary school. . . It was at that time a brand new school.

. . So now I’ve been at elementary level for eight years. From working at colleges, to high school, and now elementary for eight years” (Hannah, personal communication February 12, 2019).

Hannah stated that she never envisioned herself working as a school counselor but has found the position rewarding in some ways although not being her ideal position. She states, “Every move has been really not my choice, but it has ended up . . . I have to choose to make the best of it and that has been my outlook” (Hannah, personal communication February 12, 2019). Hannah believes she was chosen for her current position and this is where she belongs. She joked that she started out in higher education and now working in elementary, so it seems as if she is going
backwards like Benjamin Button. Despite the changes her career has taken, Hannah finds her position challenging and rewarding and loves working with her students.

**Iris**

Iris described her path to becoming a school counselor stemming from her teaching career technology for 12 years. She recalled,

> You know, I enjoyed teaching, I taught high school... and I guess I kinda felt like I was a mentor a lot of times to my students and spent a lot of extra time with them one on one, talking about stuff. They came to me because they spent a lot of... I don’t know, it was just kind of a different structure from the classroom setting, and so that just kinda led me into the counseling field and pursuing that of a school counselor (Iris, personal communication February 15, 2019).

Iris stated that she worked as a K through 12 school counselor before an elementary school counselor position opened up. She stated that working with all grades help prepare her for her current job as an elementary school counselor. Iris asserted that she loves working with elementary school students. In reflecting on the work of elementary school counselors and her current job she stated “...they were so moldable still, and you know, we were able to get them, hopefully started on the right path” (Iris, personal communication February 15, 2019).

**Jackie**

Jackie recalled her choice of being an elementary school counselor stemmed from an experience with her younger brother,

> ... well, first it kinda started off as I was helping my brother out... when he was applying for colleges, I just kinda naturally became his school counselor. I was setting up college visits and doing all the research and things and I really enjoyed
doing that . . . then I started working with the kids at the theater company. It kinda solidified it for me. I was like, okay, this is really what I wanna do (Jackie, personal communication February 12, 2019).

Jackie recalled that school counseling was not a profession that she considered especially after she completed high school. She stated that her work as a choreographer for high school musical theater and working with children in a recreational setting, along with assisting her younger brother helped her make the decision to obtain her masters in school counseling. She further stated that she has enjoyed working with children and has never regretted that decision. Jackie completed a masters’ in school counseling along with a masters’ in psychology. After completing her masters’ in psychology, through a series of events in her life, she decided to pursue her masters’ in school counseling.

Results

This study examined the lived experiences of elementary school counselors self-perceived perspectives of their training as it relates to the social-emotional wellbeing of elementary students. The results of this study are an accumulation of the information gathered through various data collection tools utilized to give an added perspective of elementary school counselors lived experiences. To obtain the data necessary for this study a demographic survey, the SCARS instrument, individual interviews and focus groups were utilized to examine commonalities and themes relating to the phenomenon. It was apparent from the information obtained through these data collection tools that indeed there were commonalities and relevant themes that were present. Each tool yielded its own information which when put together gave a broader view of the phenomenon. Each experience, though different in various ways, I saw commonalities running through. This made for very interesting individual interviews and focus
groups as the differences culminated to a shared understanding among the participants and for me as the interviewer. Each interview continually changed my perspective of the work that elementary school counselors do and how they navigate their world. My changed perspective is recorded in my reflexive journal (Appendix J). The richness of the interviews further allowed me to see the participants’ perspective and how they have put meaning to these experiences. During the focus groups, participants spoke with each other about their experiences and were able to bounce ideas off each other as they answered my questions and asked questions themselves. Though from different states and various districts it was interesting to see the interactions and commonalities they shared. I was able to verify some themes that I thought of during the individual interviews as they came through during the focus groups.

**Themes Development**

Moustakas (1994) posited that reduction and elimination, horizontalization, structural and textural descriptions and essence of experiences are foundations of the transcendental phenomenological data analysis process. In order to develop themes for this study I read each transcribed individual interview and focus group responses several times. The process of developing the themes for this study began with utilizing the responses on the SCARS instrument not only for selection of participants but their actual and preferred duties as school counselors. The individual interviews gave a greater overview of the experiences and further solidified for me a better understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experienced it. The focus groups sessions were the culminating portion as the participants could also see the commonalities of their experiences even though from various states, districts and backgrounds. As I read each transcript, I made notes of various statements that were repeated and broke down those statements to the common thread that was running through each. This, as
Moustakas (1994) posited is clustering of horizons. The commonalities were placed in the ATLAS.ti V8 as codes to further reduce and eliminate statements that did not align with the topic, research questions and trajectory of the study. Moustakas (1994) stated that horizons are exhaustive and there is a continual vantage point of the experiences of others based on the participants’ experience. I found this to be true and was at times distracted by the abundance of themes that were displayed throughout. However, utilizing the data collection tools and the premise of my study, I was able to develop relevant themes. To further develop themes, structural and textural descriptions were utilized. This Moustakas (1994) described as the what and how of the participants’ experiences. This process allowed for in-depth study of what the experiences were regarding the topic and how elementary school counselors described these experiences. This process created more sub-themes. Putting everything together, I was able to develop four central themes that represented the essence of the experiences of elementary school counselors with the phenomenon.

Table two provides a breakdown of the themes developed from the structural and textural descriptions from the data collection tools.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essence of Experiences:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Emotional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Theme Development*
preventative, every day is different, more mental health at elementary level.

Mindset, Beliefs and Self-directedness
Challenges, changed mindset, experience, commitment, professional/personal growth, mindset and self-directedness, transitioning, working through challenges, changes, boundaries.

ASCA: One Size Does Not Fit All
ASCA, ASCA’s role, administration, administrative assistance/hindrances, advocating, role ambiguity, non-counseling duties, duties and responsibilities, time commitment.

Training v Reality
Training, self-perceived training, teaching experience, perceived training, motivation, experience, routine is a myth, lessons and teaching, administration.

**Social-emotional encounter.** To gain an understanding of the participants’ experiences I first looked at the social-emotional encounters they have in their setting. The individual interviews and focus groups further explained their encounters and their experiences with this phenomenon. Some participants recalled being surprised at the level of social-emotional issues they found at their elementary schools when they first began. Beatrice recalled:

At first, I was shocked at some of the behaviors I was seeing. Shocked. Because, I mean I was raised very . . . You don’t talk back like that. You don’t scream. You don’t yell. You don’t hit. You don’t kick. Here I have been bitten multiple times. I had to go to urgent care twice for human bites. I’ve been kicked. I’ve been spit at in the face. I’ve been headbutted. I’ve been elbowed, I’ve been kneed. I’ve been punched. All these things have happened here at school. That’s something they don’t prepare you for.
Jackie stated “Oh man. There’s a lot. Surprisingly. There’s a lot. Everyone’s like ‘oh, why do you need an elementary school counselor? They [students] don’t have problems.’ And I’m like ‘they have a lot of problems.” Hannah recalled when she first started working as an elementary school counselor and encountering the level of social-emotional issues that she “did not have an expectation of that. But now unfortunately, I am not surprised anymore.”

Participants explained the level of social-emotional issues they encounter regularly. Some participants have worked at the middle and high school level in the past and explained the encounters they have experienced and still experiencing. The topic of the study encompasses participants’ fostering and managing social-emotional wellbeing in their elementary students. In order to understand the importance of carrying out their work to assist elementary aged students with this aspect of their lives it is imperative to have an understanding of what they deal with.

Beatrice described the social-emotional issues she grapples with as:

The vast majority of issues that we encounter have to do with attention and focus. Behavior, defiance, outbursts things like that. Anxiety. We have a lot of kids that have anxiety issues. We have some children that have depression. We have some children that are on the spectrum. There’s actually a lot more of that [spectrum] now than I would have assumed there would be.

Alicia explained, “We have a lot of anxiety, that seems to be the biggest issue that we’ve had to deal with. Followed by depression. . . and then we have some students that have trauma background.” Carl described his encounters as:

Loss of parent, either due to incarceration, deportation or death. My kids are below the poverty line . . . We have lots of students who don’t know where their next meal is coming from. We face a lot of hunger issues. There’s a lot of anxiety here.”
Danette described social-emotional issues at her school as:

With elementary, a lot of kids have parents who are divorced. Their parents are not speaking to each other, the kids are kind of in the middle of all that . . . some of them think it’s their fault and that creates some other issues . . . More anxiety . . . friendship issues.

For Evelyn it is “. . .the inability to self-regulate. They don’t understand their emotions at all. They are either one extreme or another.” Farrah’s description was that,

The biggest one I’m encountering right now is attention issues, attention deficit, not being able to pay attention, off task in class, impulsivity. Also, emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, not knowing how to compromise and interact appropriately with others. These are big ones. Anger management is a big one.

Gloria described her encounters from the perspective of how her school is attempting to handle social-emotional issues. She stated:

We’re seeing, obviously we have all the same ADD, ADHD, prevalence. There’s always a lot of that. My school has a special program for autism, so we work closely with students with autism. I’ve seen, we have fosters in our school, so we’re dealing with kids that have abuse issues, neglect issues, abandonment. Those are some of my high concerns. Those are my high needs kiddos. But then ultimately, we had all the other aspect too, where we [students] don’t have friends. We don’t know how to persevere. We don’t know quite how to conflict manage. All kinds of things.

Of all the participants Hannah is one that stands out in the area of social-emotional encounters. She explained that her encounters have been “ADHD, we’re seeing ODD. We’ve
got schizophrenia, homelessness, food scarcity, gosh.” She stated that some of the problems stem from home issues that students are grappling with. She mentions the homelessness and food scarcity issues at her school are high and leads to other comorbid issues. Both Iris and Jackie encounter similar issues stemming from family functioning. Iris stated,

I feel like the theme this year has just been students struggling emotionally with broken families . . . a percentage has been from divorced families, broken families, single parent, that’s been a high percentage. I see in my older kids . . . some anxiety and them just struggling with that. And then in my youngest . . . in my pre K-ers, we’re seeing a lot more behavioral type challenges that are stemming from bigger issues.

Jackie described her encounters much like Iris, Danette and Carl,

Actually, a lot of sad cases. I have a few students whose parents are, at least one of them is either on drugs, in rehab, has been arrested. I work with a lot of kids whose parents are going through a divorce. And then a lot of these kids have anxiety . . . also social issues. A lot of these kids don’t know proper social skills.

The participants’ social-emotional encounters have a common thread in that they contend with many social-emotional issues on a daily basis. Though differing in some aspect they deal with many types of social-emotional issues with young children. These encounters are similar in many ways regardless of the socio-economic background of their schools, the state or the district. It is interesting to note that the participants all believed that social-emotional issues were more prevalent at the elementary level. Some participants, who have worked as counselors at the high school and middle school levels, have commented on the abundance of social-emotional issues they face at the elementary level in comparison. Brown, Fite & Poquiz (2015) in their study of
elementary aged students experiencing stressful life events stated, “. . . elementary school-aged children report greater emotional distress and are more likely to appraise events as threatening to their own wellbeing or that of their family” (p. 593).

Another interesting fact was that the school counselors in this study were trained in fostering and managing social-emotional issues. The study findings revealed that although having the tools to work with student’s social-emotional issues, there were a variety of hindrances that did not allow for spending needed time in direct service with students. Time constraints were among some of the reasons for this dilemma. From their perspective the counseling aspect of their work was necessary especially dealing with the high volume of social-emotional issues they encounter daily.

Mindset, beliefs and self-directedness. This theme examines the mindset challenges and changes that developed these school counselors into who they are at work and personally. Additionally, it examines their self-directedness and how they navigated their world of work to accommodate their transition. The elementary school counselors in telling their stories recalled mindset changes they had to make. Although Dweck (2006) states that people can have a growth mindset in some things yet a fixed mindset in others, the participants recalled how their beliefs and focus changed with each challenge they encountered on their job. They also remembered personal changes they had to make in how they approached their thinking in and outside of their work. Beatrice stated,

There were a lot of challenges. It sounds crazy but you just don’t really know what it is like until you’re here . . . Because when you get into the day to day, there’s just a lot more to it. I have found that I have had to be way more flexible than I thought I
would be about time and where I’m used and how I’m used (Beatrice, personal
communication, August 8, 2018).

Alicia, who worked as an LPC recalled,

I really had to adjust my way of thinking because you know, I had some clients with
some pretty serious trauma backgrounds and so, things don’t really phase me but that
doesn’t mean that child isn’t very important. And same kind of thing with teachers,
when they would come in hyped up about something, and in my mind, it wasn’t
really that big of a deal, but I couldn’t respond as though it was nothing because it
meant something to them. And so, I think that was a big adjustment in thinking, just
kind of seeing things through the eyes of other people (Alicia, personal
communication August 6, 2018).

Of the 10 participants, Carl and Iris recalled that the challenges they faced, their transition,
and working as a school counselor was relatively easy. Carl stated,

It was a very easy transition. I was working out some small groups every day in the
day facility that I worked in. In fact, I was doing groups about four or five times a
day, so when I started as a school counselor, I just brought that same material and I
just started doing those same groups over and over again. And it was a real easy
transition to do the school counseling (Carl, personal communication August 9,
2018).

Iris stated,

For me I think I rolled into the transition pretty smoothly. I’ve always been the
type of person that if I didn’t know the answer, I’m not afraid to go ask and find a
person who does. And so, like I said, . . . to me I feel like it was pretty smooth
transition for me. It wasn’t a big struggle. There were some minor things, but I
would say they all were minor (personal communication February 15, 2019).

Danette however, remembered more challenges when she was completing her internship. She described that period as “horrible”. She went on to say about challenges she had at her current position, “I think the major ones were getting to know the kids, getting to know the parents, . . . forming those relationships” (Danette, personal communication January 15, 2019). Evelyn, who is the youngest of the participants, described her transition and challenges thus,

It was tough because you go in preparing to help with students’ emotional needs and behavioral needs and academic needs, but you’re being put in a position where you are responsible for analyzing court documents, and making decisions and have to . . . And so legally I felt like I’m not trained to do this . . . I don’t know. It’s probably totally me. I was self-conscious and not confident in that respect. It was hard for me to go and make decisions like, ‘Ok, tell all my teachers’. It’s going to make them all mad at me because I’m going to say ‘you don’t get 30-minute break once a month anymore. You’ve got to stay in the classroom,’ . . . You have to come in, make decisions on what to do that’s best for all the other kids, and best for the teacher, and best for the [school] environment (Evelyn, personal communication January 27, 2019).

Like Evelyn, Farrah recollected her transition and challenges as being difficult and having to make decisions she did not feel qualified to make. She stated,

When I came out, there was definitely some dissonance, sometimes where I was very confused and did not feel adequately prepared. I remember sitting in my
counseling office in my first year, which is so funny looking back on this now. I remember sitting in my office going “what am I supposed to be doing?” . . . I wasn’t allowed to pull kids out of class. I felt kind of powerless . . . and I felt like a failure . . . it was very frustrating. I was told to chair 504 meetings, ARC meetings . . . those were some big time legal things and I really messed those up . . . It was frustrating (Farrah, personal communication February 9, 2019).

As these elementary school counselors continued their narratives on their transition and the challenges they experienced, they also spoke of the adjustments that they had to make and what influenced these changes. For most it was a mindset change, some included changing beliefs and utilizing experiences to assist them in their work as elementary school counselors. They learned through their experiences that making necessary adjustments changed how they thought about their profession. Advocating for themselves, recognizing and implementing changes helped them both professionally and personally. Knowles (1975) discusses self-directedness from the perspective of learners’ self-concept. He postulated that as the learner’s self-concept is solidified through experiences, they develop a self-directing personality. “They see themselves as being able to make their own decisions . . . and at this point people also develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others as being self-directing” (p. 46). Their experiences helped shaped how they navigated their work and in so doing began advocating for their positions to be recognized by administration. They created professional boundaries for themselves.

Gloria described herself as an introvert. However, she stated she had to be different in her approach to the position she loves. She stated she felt it necessary to let others know
that the work of a school counselor is more than what the general public, school administration and teachers may think. She stated,

There’s just a mentality out there that [school] counselors don’t nearly work as hard as teachers. And I never want anybody…I wanted to be able to stand alongside them and let them know that I work as hard as they do. So that’s been a challenge because sometimes I’m trying to counteract some of the negative perception that strangers sometimes have of [school] counselors. Because I think historically our role has changed greatly in the last 20 years easily, it’s changed a lot, where we’re a viable person in the school to do a lot of things . . . (Gloria, personal communication February 10, 2019).

For Hannah and Jackie who both went from high school to middle school and now elementary school the transition was difficult. Hannah recalled her transition in terms of not ever thinking that she would be an elementary school counselor at this time in her life. Although challenging when she began eight years prior, she described the changes that she had to make including making peace with her position. She explained,

. . . it was having to change the way that I relate and related to students. Also, because I had to change my mindset because I was used to high school students, and it was very different. So, I had to change the way that I…I’m still doing some adjusting for that, even after I’ve been here eight years. But I think I’m finally starting to get into the . . . adjusting to it after eight years . . . I have finally accepted that I am here for a reason, and truly . . . It’s my daughter actually who’s help me with this because she had said to me numerous times that I touch and make a difference with more students at this level than I would ever at the college
Jackie,

So, at the high school level, it’s much easier to just have a natural conversation because they are more mature, and you can be more direct with them. And on the elementary level you have to really get down to their level and kind of be like a kid. So, I had to get into that mindset of what they are thinking, like what would they want to be doing right now? . . . I had to ask a lot more questions, which was challenging for me because I was so used to just like a back and forth conversation. At first it was difficult and now I’m starting to get used to it and it’s coming naturally (Jackie, personal communication February 12, 2019).

The narratives of each participant concerning their transition, challenges and adjustments they made to accommodate the work they do points to Dweck (1975) and Knowles (1975) theories regarding mindsets and self-directedness respectively. Although the background of each participant varied it could still be seen that they shared a transitional story and overcoming the challenges that came with their transition. Whether their transition was difficult or relatively smooth each had to make changes to how they approach their work as elementary school counselors.

**ASCA: one size does not fit all.** An interesting fact is that all the participants are members of ASCA. Yet as they explained through their stories some see the ASCA Model as a useful tool for their school counseling program while some completely disregard its guidelines for various and valid reasons. The ASCA National Model (2012) was put in place to “. . . move school counseling from a responsive service provided for some students to a program for every
student . . . [provide] uniformity to standardized school counseling programs . . . [and] help students overcome barriers to learning” (pp. x, xi). These elementary school counselors explained the relevance of ASCA in their school environment to assist them through its competencies on fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing. They discussed the extent to which they utilize the model and the barriers that negate the goals of ASCA in their schools. Additionally, they discussed its feasibility or lack thereof to their work.

When asked of their knowledge of the ASCA National Model in any aspect most of the participants had knowledge of it as all are members of ASCA. However, their use of it was a different matter. Beatrice stated,

I follow it loosely. I just have to be honest. The ASCA model to me just seems so Pollyanna. Like it just seems like in a beautiful world full of rainbows and unicorns. This is how you would be a school counselor. It’s just not like that, guys. And what’s crazy is these are school counselors, so there must be schools somewhere where school counseling is like this. There’s got to be somewhere (Beatrice, personal communication August 8, 2018).

Alicia on the other hand is the only participant who fully utilize the model as she is attempting to get her school RAMP designated. She asserted that the program works for her and makes it easier for her to complete her work as a school counselor. She stated, “I think it’s a good way to sort of self-evaluate. You know, am I doing these things? . . . So, I think it’s a great framework. It’s a great way to self-check and self-evaluate.” However, she added the caveat “but I don’t think that it . . . it doesn’t cover everything, because there’s just things that can’t be put into words” (Alicia, personal communication August 6, 2018). Farrah who has been an elementary school counselor for 13 years described her use of the model as,
I’ll be honest, when it first came out, I really didn’t use it at all, and I just looked at it as, not hogwash . . . I looked at it as awesome, but it just wasn’t practical. I just, I was surviving. Now that I’m more seasoned and experienced, I’m coming full circle, and I’m coming back to it, and I’m really digging it and really wanting to incorporate more parts of it (Farrah, personal communication February 9, 2019).

For some participants there is little to no use of the model and their knowledge of it is limited. Both Carl and Danette had the same response to the question of knowledge and usage of ASCA. Carl stated his knowledge of the model was limited and that he used programs that he had implemented or programs that other school counselors in his district utilized. Danette’s responded “To be brutally honest with you I don’t” when she was asked about utilizing the model in her day to day activities as a school counselor. Most of the participants utilize the model in some part while some did not. Some of the barriers cited by participants was their ratio. Hannah has a ratio of 952:1. Hannah posited that the 80/20 rule of direct and indirect services with her ratio is something she cannot do. However, she stated,

I think that it is something for us to use as guideline, and I think it’s something for us to use to be able to start. Not start, but engage in conversations about ‘here’s the model, here’s what we’re working towards’. It’s something for us to use for advocacy for our field . . . Using the guidelines for ‘here’s what a school counselor should be doing, and here’s what a school counselor should not be doing’. . . (Hannah, personal communication February 12, 2019).

Evelyn stated, “It hasn’t been relevant since I was in school. I haven’t had to look at it.” She further explains regarding implementing the 80/20 rule “No. Because it’s unrealistic because we could never do 80% direct time to 20% indirect or we would not be effective in our particular
roles” (personal communication January 27, 2019). Gloria is one of the school counselors at her elementary school. She works along with another school counselor to complete their work. However, Gloria stated that due to budget cuts she will be the only school counselor at her school this coming year and will then have a ratio of 900:1. Currently, she said that the model is something they utilize. She stated

I’d say I’m pretty comfortable with it, but I’ve had to do a lot of work in understanding it, because I wasn’t taught that. Our whole evaluation is based on the ASCA model, so that’s new this year. But over the last eight years there have been different aspects. Our whole evaluation hasn’t always been focused on ASCA but there have been pieces (Gloria, personal communication February 10, 2019).

Jackie like Beatrice stated that implementing ASCA is difficult. Jackie has a ratio of 522:1 whereas Beatrice’s ratio just decreased from 520 to 420:1. Jackie explained about the 80/20 rule at her school,

That will never happen. It’s just unrealistic. No, really! Realistically, it’s more 40/60 if I may say, even a little bit less than 40. So, I would like to do a lot more counseling than I do. So that’s definitely not accurate. But in terms of like development, like age development. . . that did really help me understand children.

But other than that, really have not utilized ASCA standards and competencies.

Other barriers that participants pointed to was administration, and role ambiguity in terms of how they are viewed by parents, teachers and administrative staff and non-counseling duties. Gloria recalled having to utilize the ASCA model to advocate for changes in some of the duties she had when she first started. She stated,
I document my time and I took the breakdown of ASCA’s percentages and we looked at it . . . that’s what I took to my administrator and said, “Look I’m using way too much time doing paperwork. This program that you want me to be basically a glorified secretary, has to go” . . . That’s what I said. Like my principal, I show him stuff and he’s great and he’s a school counselor advocate, but he looks at it and goes “Oh interesting.” I mean they have no idea (Gloria, personal communication February 10, 2019).

Administration for some participants is either an assistance or a hindrance. Jackie explained,

I do all the administrative, like the clerical stuff, like Google sheets and docs required for that. And again, doing bus duty in the beginning of the day and the end of the day, doing afternoon announcements. And then whatever else they want to throw at me. Really. I’m constantly volunteered to do things . . . So, I think the majority of my position is non-counseling related duties (Jackie, personal communication February 12, 2019).

Beatrice spoke of being overwhelmed with non-counseling duties and administration not understanding her role. She points out that a lack of understanding of her role is pervasive in her school. In her state an elementary school counselor is not mandated, and they are referred to as educators, therefore she believes that this further threatens her role and advocating for it. She stated,

The schools have committees that you have to be a part of. So, I’m in charge of United Way fundraising. So, I’m in charge of social committees as well. So, I plan birthdays and principal’s day and secretary day and nurse day. I’m in
charge of the Christmas party. I do that too. . . . And you go on the ASCA, the thing and it tells you all the things you’re supposed to not be doing as a counselor. . . . and I mean good luck with that. That’s in a perfect world. That is never going to happen. Oh April, well half of March and all of April I’m doing testing. I’m in charge of testing. The whole thing . . . a lot of times I am doing the principal role as well (Beatrice, personal communication August 8, 2018).

Most of the participants spoke of administrative hindrances they had that impeded their work as elementary school counselors. Some had praises for their administration lending assistance by recognizing their roles as school counselors. Each participant had an experience with working with administrators who did not understand their roles and consequently given non-counseling duties as a part of their daily docket. During the focus group interviews one thing that was evident is the importance of administration whether at the school or district level understanding the role of the elementary school counselor.

Administrative hindrance was often referred to by some participants as a deterrent to complete their job. These hindrances were described administrative and staff lack of understanding of the work of an elementary school counselor or lack of knowledge of what elementary school counselors are supposed to do. The following quotations highlight their personal experiences with administrative hindrance.

**Hindrances.** Beatrice: . . . another challenge I have of administration not understanding and respecting the roles of counselors, how important they are to the district, that we don’t just enroll kids in classes . . . So, this school right now has about 420 students as of today. It was about 520 in my first year. It’s super difficult for one counselor for 520. It’s difficult at 420 and
at 500 the state recommends that there be two counselors. This district would never do that. So, it’s working with administration, advocating for yourself can be really challenging.

Hannah: ...some of us as counselors, are being used as full time teachers. All day every day in the classroom doing lessons. That’s how I was. When I first started at the elementary level my principal said to me, “You’re not a counselor, you need to think of yourself as a teacher.” I had not taught, like been in a classroom.

Farrah: I don’t like it [non-counseling duties]. I hate that kids sometimes suffer because of it. There have been times when I’ve cut off sessions because it’s time for car rider duty, or because they need me to do the announcements. That’s not right, it’s just not right.

Jackie: I think teachers sometimes don’t realize the extent of our work, and how busy we really are. And I think that’s why a lot of times things do fall on us because they think, oh we’re just sitting in our office waiting for somebody [students] to come in to counsel them. And that’s not the case obviously. . . I think they [ASCA] could educate the administration more on what we do. So, then the teachers would understand too. If the administration could communicate that to the teachers, there’d be a better understanding.

Those who had administrators’ assistance were appreciative of the effort as it made their work less difficult. Additionally, administration that assisted had an understanding of the work of elementary school counselors and made it easier for school counselors to advocate on their own behalf. The following quotations highlight their personal experiences with administrative assistance.
**Assistance.** Gloria: . . . helping our administration understand that if you want us with these kids, that stuff is what’s taking us away from working with kids . . . I work for somebody that highly values the program that we [other counselor] have built up together. And when I come in and I really ask for something to be considered being taken off my plate, they’re almost always obligatory in doing that.

Iris: I kind of feel lucky because in my previous district counseling was maybe a part, like a tenth of the other nine tenths of things I do. But I would say here at this school, counseling and those three things [coordinating SEL instruction, guidance lessons for all students, individual and group counseling] are probably 90% of what I do.

Alicia: I’m very fortunate. My principal has a special ed background, so to certain things and almost always, she is on board with whatever I decide, which is very lucky. ASCA has a principal-counselor agreement, so we’ve gone through that and identified roles at the beginning of the school year and that’s really good to have those talks.

**Training v reality.** The objective of this study was to examine the training applicability of elementary school counselors to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. To investigate this phenomenon, the participants’ training and self-perceived preparedness was explored utilizing their masters’ program, alternative training, and internship experiences and the meanings they presented through these experiences. Alongside their self-perceived preparedness experiences were the realities of their work as it compared to the training they received. With the rise of social-emotional issues at the elementary level, the training of school counselors and other contributing factors were explored to arrive at a theme that encapsulated these experiences.
The patterns and commonalities of each participant’s response was instrumental in creating a fuller understanding of the phenomenon.

To obtain the information regarding the phenomenon being studied participants were asked a series of questions regarding their training and their actual work. The SCARS instrument yielded data of the participants’ actual and preferred work. This provided insight as to their beliefs about their work in particular and what elementary school counselors should be doing overall. When conducting the individual interviews and focus groups it was evident that the participants had much to say about their training. For Gloria who received her master’s degree in the early 2000s but stayed home for a few years before starting her work as a school counselor there was some difficulty adjusting. She recalled,

I graduated in 2003 and I didn’t go back into counseling until my daughter was in second grade . . . So school was different . . . So, when I went in, I felt like I wasn’t prepared in the sense of we never studied ASCA in the early 2000s. I didn’t know like 504s. We had never been trained for that. So, I felt like I was definitely a little bit behind because of my stay at home period (personal communication February 10, 2019).

At this stage of her career, Gloria stated that she meets with college students who are interning at her school. She stated that based on questions they ask and their behavior overall she commented “Quite honestly, I’m not sure anybody is really trained for this job, especially elementary because it’s so varied. The jobs and the tasks. I don’t think I went in completely trained at all” (personal communication, February 10, 2019).

Beatrice who was trained as a Licensed Professional Counselor first started working in a school-based counseling program with an agency. This is where she decided to become an
elementary school counselor. She completed an alternative track in her state to become as school counselor. She described her training,

... the preparation process really consisted of me meeting the counselor that was here before I came here ... and just kind of getting an overview of what’s going on here, and basically it just me figuring it out once I got here (her current position). It was a lot of crying. I went home and cried a lot ... But I mean the first couple of months that I was here, there were 7000 acronyms in education. I mean there are a million acronyms for all sorts of things. I would sit at meetings, and they would spout all these acronyms and I would just write them down and then come back to my office and Google them because I had no idea what they were (personal communication August 8, 2018).

Jackie holds a master’s degree in school counseling. She reflected on her training in comparison to the work that she does at her school. She stated,

It could be different in every school (university). It probably is, but my graduate program, I can tell you did not prepare me as well as I would’ve have hoped for this position. Mental health counseling is completely different from school counseling. Because you don’t have an hour to sit with a student and talk about feelings, you just don’t. My principal told me ‘max 15 – 20 minutes with each student because there’s other things you got to do’ (personal communication, February 12, 2019).

Most of the participants had similar experiences regarding their training. Some saw their mental health training as necessary but felt they needed more due the school counseling duties they had which did not leave much time for the individual and group counseling with students. Danette
who also studied school counseling reflected on that time of her life. Her practicum she stated was horrible. She stated regarding her training,

As far as the education piece, the part that I did had . . . two tracks to get your degree mental health counseling or school counseling. There wasn’t as much, many classes related to school counseling, it was more mental health . . . I would have like to have seen more things or more classes geared towards school counseling . . . I’m not sure there was a lot of congruence just because they hadn’t, . . . the program I did had more mental health stuff, we’re prepared to deal with the kids who are suicidal or perhaps suicidal ideation, from that aspect it was good (personal communication, January 15, 2019).

Danette stated that she would have liked to learn about the data driven aspect of her work instead of mostly mental health counseling. Carl’s description of his training is his perception of what his graduate program needed to provide him with. He commented,

The school [university] and the training gave me the book knowledge to be able to say attention is what this kid is seeking . . . the day treatment facility, that gave me the best training . . . The grad school stuff gave me some book knowledge and the theories and stuff like that . . . (personal communication, August 9, 2018).

Alicia, like Beatrice, started out being an LPC. She is the only participant seeking RAMP credentials for her school. When asked of the congruence of her training and the reality of her work Alicia’s response was,

. . . my program for graduate school was a little different. We had a cohort program where we shared a lot of classes with people that were on the school counselor track. Like I said we shared a lot of courses with school counselors and
so when I decided to make the jump into school counseling, I did what is called an alternative certification. My district had sent me through some training . . . But other than that, I felt pretty prepared to start my position as a school counselor (personal communication, August 6, 2018).

Evelyn who also completed a masters’ program where some of her classes were a part of a hybrid program, spoke of the process of her training where the classes were mixed. Her training involved learning mental health and school counseling. She admits that her university did talk about the differences between training and reality. She stated,

We were told like, . . . you will probably work at a school that this isn’t exactly how it will be. We were kind of made aware of that. It wasn’t like we were in this program . . . and like got into our position we’re like blindsided . . . But the preparation was all ASCA, as if you were one counselor to 250 kids. You’re going to spend 80% of your time with direct relationships with kids, 20% indirect. You are trained about small groups, about classroom guidance, about short-term therapy, about three sessions with an individual, . . . Yes, I mean we talk about it all the time, my co-counselor and I, how we were both trained in a dream world. And then you get into reality and it’s definitely more clerical, more administrative . . that’s kind of where I’m at which is really sad because I love being a counselor, and there’s so much I want to do, but it’s not reality (personal communication, January 27, 2019).

Iris stated that her program had a lot to do with the mental health aspect of her work. But of the reality of her work she stated that there were some difficulties but when she changed schools it became easier for her to utilize her training. She stated that she worked in a small school district
at first and that for her was a ‘major learning curve.’ As she wore a lot of hats, most of which did not reflect what she was trained for. However, she went on to say of her current position, “I’m definitely much more focused here on counseling. I have a few other minor responsibilities . . . but pretty much most of my day is counseling.” Hannah reports a somewhat similar experience. Having worked for years as a college coordinator then a high school counselor she found that her work now as an elementary school counselor utilized her master’s degree training in counseling.

. . . I will say that that degree even though I got it in ’94 serves me more as an elementary school counselor than it did as a high school counselor. And that is what I’m dealing with on a daily basis here at the elementary level. We’re dealing with mental health (Hannah, personal communication, February 12, 2019).

However, she adds that her training did not cover everything nor was training made available to her for other aspects of her work as an elementary school counselor. She recalled, “I was running under fire, if you will, because I had no training for that [teaching]. None. Nothing. I didn’t have classroom management, and I didn’t have lesson plans preparation it was . . . I had no help whatsoever” (Hannah, personal communication, February 12, 2019). Farrah’s described her experience from training to reality as a shock. She doesn’t think that she was not prepared to do the work but unprepared for the difference between training and reality. She explained that for her it was mainly administrative, and she was not utilizing her training. She recalled being told “. . .don’t mention mental illness. It’s not your job to do that. You are not qualified to do that.” She goes on to say,

I’ve been told, when a student is in crisis, not to refer out. I will say, I’m very bold, blunt and obnoxious. I speak up a lot and educate people about what we’ve
Research Question Responses

In order to arrive at a fuller view of the elementary school counselors’ experiences the central question “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” was put forward. Consequently, five sub-questions were sourced from the central question and the phenomenon being studied. Utilizing the breakdown of what each sub-question was seeking to find out through this study, the following responses were obtained.

Sub-Question One. How do elementary school counselors describe their self-perceived preparedness applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?

This question examined self-perceived preparedness applicability through the lived experiences of elementary school counselors. Several studies (Bains & Dallo, 2016; DeKruff et al., 2013; Walley & Grothaus, 2012; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015) have put forward that there is a lack of training for school counselors regarding students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Although these previous studies were conducted with middle and high school counselors and were quantitative in nature, I examined them again to find out if the same is true for elementary school counselors. This study utilized the lived experiences of elementary school counselors and found that although there was some training lacking the participants all revealed a heavy reliance on the amount of mental health training they received. For most of them their mental health training helped them to deal with the abundance of social-emotional issues that elementary-aged students presented. However, some participants revealed that due to other duties they had, they were at
times, unable to carry out duties relating to mostly one-on-one time with students who needed the attention. Beatrice shared in her interview,

I think one of my biggest things is trying to find balance between the kind of putting out fires stuff that comes up every day while also managing things that I really like to have in place. I’d love to have more regular small groups with students. I’d love to be able to say, ‘you’re going to come to my office at 10:00 every Tuesday and work.” Because some kids need that (Beatrice, personal communication, August 8, 2018).

Regarding training applicability, the participants applauded the mental health training they received. In their estimation and experience they revealed that the elementary level has an abundance of social-emotional issues that need to be addressed on a daily basis. Even though a few of the participants reported that unlike other counseling positions that required an hour to spend with a client, in school counseling 15 to 30 minutes for each student is allotted to school counselors for counseling at the elementary level. Some participants suggested that training in how to effectively counsel children in this short span of time should be a necessary part of graduate training. The participants further self-perceived that the applicability of their training in other aspects of their work as elementary school counselors lacked various features. This was based on their experiences and how they perceived what was necessary for them to have learned. Some of the participants stated that one of their biggest challenges was classroom teaching and management. That training, they posited, would have been relevant and useful to their transitions. Jackie stated “In my last position I taught a character education class, but I don’t have a teaching background. I feel like at least part of our education should have been learning how to teach a class” (personal communication February 12, 2019).
Both Carl and Farrah spoke of how invaluable their teaching experiences were for their transition into being elementary school counselors. Carl stated “I learned so much from a teacher’s perspective by teaching 5th grade that when I became a school counselor . . . it just made it better for me . . .” (personal communication August 9, 2018). Gloria, who was a teacher for a number of years before training to become a school counselor, stated how useful teaching experience is to the work of an elementary school counselor, “Personally, I think it’s the best way to go. I think that a school is a system that takes some getting used to. The schools are complicated. So, my background has helped me immensely in just understanding how schools work” (personal communication February 10, 2019).

For some participants they believed that training at the graduate level should include understanding legalities. Since most of the participants are chairpersons or sit at every 504, IEP and various other meetings and responsibilities some questioned how much of that are they really responsible for. Farrah stated,

. . . I really wish I had more training in what is the legal side of things, like school law. I’m constantly having people tell me things and I’m wondering is that really the way the law is written? What my limits are as a school counselor? What legally I am obligated to do, and where that fine line is of confidentiality, and where can I lose my license if I don’t report things? Some more of the legal ethical, I wish I had more classes in that (personal communication February 9, 2019).

**Sub-Question Two.** How do school counselors describe their perception of professional and/or personal growth regarding how they might address social-emotional issues since their formal training?
This study utilized Carol Dweck’s (1975) growth and fixed theory along with Malcolm Knowles (1977) adult learning theory, specifically self-directedness. To obtain an understanding of the mindset and self-directedness of each participant, questions were asked regarding their transition period, challenges they faced in the past and currently, and how they dealt with those challenges. Both Dweck (1975) and Knowles (1977) referenced motivation as an impetus for their theories. Knowles (1977) promoted the belief that adults change their learning goals as they become more experienced.

Utilizing the tenets of both theories in questions both for the individual interviews and the focus groups there was a visible thread of commonality with the participants as both self-directedness and a growth mindset were evident. Based on the training most of them receive, the reality of their actual work for most of the participants led them to the conclusion that they had to learn, adapt and make necessary changes. For some this was a struggle as they had set beliefs of how school counseling should be based on their training. However, their circumstances did not deter them but motivated them over their years of working to work within the system and advocate for changes in their position. Hannah shared

Well, I came from working from high school. I had to really adjust the way that I was in elementary . . . at an elementary level, especially kindergarten was a big change for me. That was very different . . . but it’s been fine, it’s just been a very different experience for me. Over the last eight years that’s been my biggest adjustment . . . figuring out the best way to teach the social-emotional skills and on a level that they’re going to be able to carry it through to first grade and beyond (personal communication, April 22, 2019).
Jackie recalled the same experience and having to make adjustments to accomplish her goals as an elementary school counselor. She shared,

I went from high school to middle school, then to elementary school. All very different breeds, and you definitely have to adjust . . . when I came to elementary, I was very surprised at how much drama there is . . . and how much mental health issues there are at this age level. It really surprised me . . . it’s a very, it’s a lot of like going with your gut kind of thing . . . and that I had to figure out as I transitioned in my job. Kind of like making a judgment call. That’s what happens a lot of the time (personal communication February 12, 2019).

Participants spoke of finding a way to make their jobs work for the children they counseled and for the other aspects of their jobs was a pervasive theme. Changing mindsets and beliefs were paramount both personally and professionally. Farrah (personal communication February 9, 2019) shared personal adjustments she had to make,

Other adjustments I had to make were that I had to realize that I wasn’t going to be able to change the world the way I wanted to. When I worked with kids, of course there were success stories, but they were few and far between a lot of times. I had to personally adjust to the fact that the changes that I made were going to be long term, and that I may not see the results now. It may be years and years before I do that. That was hard.

Beatrice (personal communication August 8, 2018) shared about professional adjustments she had to make and mindset changes,

Thankfully super on the growth end, because I’ve had to experience so much, and it’s really shaped what I have become good at . . . you get better at it the more you
do it . . . I don’t think you can come into this job with a fixed mindset. Truthfully, because I mean you have to grow . . . just based on the fact that you don’t even know what you’re getting into because you don’t know what the job’s really going to look like until you’re there. If you don’t allow yourself the ability to grow, then you’re not going to succeed.

Sub-Question Three. How do elementary school counselors describe their use and/or knowledge of the school counselors’ competencies presented in the ASCA National Model?

The main focus of this research question was the role ASCA played in the work of the participants. Of the ten participants, only one was fully utilizing ASCA for their elementary school and seeking RAMP designation. Alicia’s view of ASCA’s relevance to her work for her was paramount. She utilized the full spectrum of what ASCA requires of school counselors. For her ASCA works when employed accurately. She stated that her school counselor to student ratio (272:1) is closer to ASCA’s recommendation (250:1). She acknowledges the fact that her ratio is considerably less than most elementary schools in her district and other states. However, she still believes that ASCA is a useful tool for every school counselor especially those at the elementary level regardless of the ratio.

This research question examined the alignment of ASCA’s school counselor competencies and the actual work of the participants. It also examined additional issues that participants believed were impeding the full use of ASCA in their respective schools. For the most part, a few of the participants used ASCA in some parts of their elementary school counseling work while some did not use it at all. Some believed that although they were not using ASCA, some of their work may reflect some of ASCA’s requirements. Jackie explained the extent of her use of ASCA. She shared
I . . . honestly, I don’t follow it. None of the schools that I’ve ever worked in has said you must follow ASCA standards. It just doesn’t happen that way and there’s really no time to make sure your hitting every single point. I can’t even give you like one bullet point from my ASCA standards book. I don’t even know like . . . I really don’t even remember. It’s just oh, delivery implementing. We don’t follow that. I don’t even know what to say about it honestly . . . If I had the time to implement those kind of things I would, but everything is just on the fly pretty much (personal communication February 12, 2019).

Time commitment and ratio was pervasive throughout among the participants as reasons for being unable to fully implement ASCA. Jackie has a ratio of 522:1. Gloria currently has two school counselors at her school, herself and her co-counselor. Gloria states that they use ASCA to advocate for their duties and to do school counseling duties as outlined by ASCA. However, Gloria stated that her co-counselor will not be there for the new school year and therefore her ratio will change from 450:1 to 900:1. With the ratio she now has, Gloria explained the benefit of having a co-counselor and utilizing ASCA. She shared,

I think it works if you . . . I mean, first of all, that’s why I spent all last year documenting every 15 minutes, how I was spending it. And I didn’t do it every day. But when you are able to sit down and break it all down, and my co-counselor and I did that, it was like we’re not that far off. We’re doing okay. Do I wish I had 250 to one? Yeah. Because I think I’d actually get somewhere with some kids. And so, I have to look at all of that, to go for this school. It’s working (having a co-counselor) and that’s what has helped with ASCA.
Iris explained the extent of her use of ASCA standards. She gives some reasons as to why she finds the model useful but not in some areas. She explained,

I spent a lot of time exploring that when I did my counseling degree. To be honest with you, have I pulled it out since then? At some workshops, you know, professional development kind of referred to it again. I guess I have a good base of understanding of it. Do I pull it out week to week in my own personal work environment? No . . . I definitely try to pay attention to my time spent, you know, in direct services and indirect services to students. I’m good at accounting my time and my number of students seen. I think I stay really in tune with the ethical side of counseling . . . I guess that’s probably what I pull from the most of it.

For these elementary school counselors, they are cognizant of the ASCA standards and requirements but from their perspective there are other variables that constrain them from utilizing the model to its fullest. Whereas some would like to be able to implement the program into their school system various obstacles, they believe, need to be removed. Administrative hindrances, large ratio, socioeconomic realities in their district, budget cuts and role ambiguity on the part of those they work with are some of the barriers the participants spoke of. However, whatever parts of the ASCA competencies in terms of its application to their specific environment these school counselors are willing to utilize. An interesting fact that was noticed by me was the varying ratios dictated the extent to how ASCA was utilized in each school, even to the smallest degree.

**Sub-Question Four.** How do elementary school counselors describe the duties and responsibilities of their positions at their schools?
This question examined the duties and responsibilities of elementary school counselors and the effect of this on how they foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. For these participants they have found that the social-emotional wellbeing of the students is paramount for their learning and continuing education. All the participants spoke of the necessity to assist students with social-emotional wellbeing. However, duties and responsibilities are most time restrictive in carrying out this part of their work. Some of the participants have advocated for social emotional learning in their schools and district. For a few of the participants this is slowly becoming a reality in their districts. Each of the participants have had mental health training in their masters’ studies. Therefore, they have come to see the importance of that training in their work. However, they are impeded by their duties and responsibilities. One of the obstacles that some of the participants face is the fact that their roles are most times dictated by administration. Therefore, regardless of their training the status quo of the school or district dictates mostly the work that school counselors do. For example, Hannah speaking of advocating over the years spoke of the concern she has and other school counselors speak of regarding administration,

. . . that is who sets the tone for your school. I’m the president of my county’s school counselor association. We had an orientation for the new counselors . . . we suggested to them that they needed to have a meeting with their principals and say “here’s how I envision my day, how I envision my week, here’s what my goals are,” so they can put that out and so they can make sure that things are . . . they’re on the same page as the administrator and not ending up doing cafeteria duty for hours at time (personal communication February 12, 2019).
Most of the participants acknowledged that whether in the past or currently their duties and responsibilities encompass non-counseling duties which they find impeding. Those who experience administrative assistance spoke of a working relationship with administration that came through administration understanding, to some degree, the role of the school counselor and/or the school counselor doing extensive advocating for their position. However, the overall description of their duties and responsibilities were for some overwhelming and interruptive especially at times when these non-counseling duties impeded their counseling duties and spending one-on-one time with students who needed it. For those who had administrative assistance and were able to advocate largely for their roles to be define by ASCA they were able to, at most times, complete counseling duties they had.

**Sub-Question Five.** What is elementary school counselors’ perception of the social-emotional wellbeing issues of elementary students at their school?

This question investigated the perception of elementary school counselors on the level of social-emotional issues that they encounter among their elementary students. On the demographic survey participants were asked to state the social emotional issues they dealt with at their elementary school. Table three lists the issues and the number of participants who encounter these social-emotional issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social-Emotional Issues</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism Spectrum</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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An interesting topic which was discussed with all the participants was their daily routine. One pervading response was that routines were somewhat mythical and that every day was different. Each participant described that although they planned their week in advance crises took precedence. One participant explained,

It is hard to have a daily routine I find, because I do a lot of crisis intervention at the school and you just kind of don’t know what you’re walking into every day. I do tend to stick to my routine with my classes and things like that, but there are a lot of days when hours just get away from me (Beatrice, personal communication December 8, 2018).

Alicia, who follows the ASCA National Model explained that although she has a set routine she follows daily, there are days when that is not feasible. She stated that her day is influenced by the issues she is met with each morning and make decisions on how to get ahead of the situation. She stated,

I would say I track how many kids come into my room and what they come in for. So, if I’m noticing a lot of kids are coming in with conflict resolution problems or things that happen at recess, then I know I need to get out there at recess and I need to observe some things. I need to help kids model, in that moment, conflict
resolution skills . . . but then sometimes it’s just one of those days of the squeaky wheel gets the grease . . . kids dealing with something big, my time goes to that.

So, no day ever looks the same, that’s for certain (personal communication, December 8, 2018).

For each participant, sticking to their routines was difficult considering the many social-emotional issues they had to contend with daily. The consensus of the participants were that social-emotional issues were prevalent at the elementary level, which for most was unprecedented. Some participants believed that social-emotional issues were on the rise due to undue pressure placed on young children through familial issues or simply not learning basic skills. While some believed that the stigma associated with social-emotional issues was slowly being lifted so parents were not afraid to report or discuss issues their elementary aged children were experiencing. Regardless of the reasons these participants stated that this aspect of an elementary student’s wellbeing was crucial as it affected so many elements of the student’s learning and needed to be addressed.

Summary

Chapter four explicated the results of the research on the training applicability of elementary school counselors in fostering and promoting social-emotional wellbeing of their students. Utilizing demographic survey, SCARS instrument, individual interviews and focus groups to gather information on the phenomenon, the findings were discussed. The information yielded codes that were later used to formulate the essence of experiences and the themes that best described the participants experiences concisely. Each participant although having their own experiences, came together based on commonalities and patterns that were identified during analysis. Analysis was performed by reading through individual and focus groups interviews
along with examining responses on the demographic survey and the SCARS instrument. The themes that developed from the data collected were (a) social emotional encounters, (b) mindset, beliefs and self-directedness, (c) ASCA: one size does not fit all and (d) training v reality. Each of these themes were drawn from an abundance of structural and textural descriptions from the quotations of the participants in their interviews. The themes were carefully chosen to fully illustrate the meanings and essences of the participants’ experiences.

Each theme was an examination of the commonalities expressed in the participants’ shared experiences. Social-emotional encounters delved into both the topic and what the participants views were of the social-emotional issues at their schools. Utilizing the description of the social-emotional issues each of the participants experience it was necessary to highlight them from their perspective. Some participants revealed their shock at the level of social-emotion issues they dealt with and how they sometimes changed their routines to accommodate this on a larger level than they had done in the past. The second theme explored the challenges that the participants worked through as they learned more about their work. Their transition experience into becoming the elementary school counselors they are now for most shared the commonality of being difficult. This allowed for changing views, attitudes and behaviors to accommodate their work and the children they are there to serve. The third theme looked at their work and utilizing and implementing ASCA. Very few of the participants had less than a 400:1 ratio which for most was a hindrance they had to accommodate to assist all their students. An interesting fact is that each of the participants believed that although their numbers were great, they were committed to helping each child that needed their assistance. Some cited the influence and hindrance of administration to them carrying out their work along with the need to redefine their roles. Lastly, for the fourth theme participants examined their training and its applicability
to their work. Most felt that other training should be incorporated as the reality of their work revealed. However, a few participants thought that their training was just to give them a working knowledge of their jobs.

Responses to research questions were addressed. The central question was “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” with ensuing sub-questions. These were answered by employing data from the individual and focus groups interviews. Overall the data revealed that the tools to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing were in place. However, there were various barriers to completing this task on a regular basis. Non-counseling duties, role ambiguity, administrative hindrances, family affairs (poverty, incarceration) were only a few of the barriers that needed to be overcome to fully promote and foster students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The data revealed that each participant had either advocated or were in the process of advocating for changes at their schools and at the district level. This they believed would help with others understanding their roles and therefore they would be better equipped to do the job of an elementary school counselor.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of elementary school counselors’ self-perceived training applicability to foster and promote their students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Ten participants provided insight through their lived experiences to contribute to the data necessary to understand the phenomenon being studied. Participants responded to questions on their perception of their training applicability, the reality of their work contrasted with the training they received, the duties and responsibilities they performed regarding promotion and development of elementary aged students’ social-emotional wellbeing.

Chapter five is a culmination of the data gathered through the SCARS instrument, individual and focus group interview questions. In this chapter the findings were summarized and further discussed in detail. Theoretical, empirical and practical associations of this study were explored and related. The implications of this study and how it may impact elementary school counselors and school counseling is highlighted. The delimitations and limitations of this study along with recommendations for future research are incorporated to broaden the scope of this study for future reference and potential usage.

Summary of Findings

The participants were forthcoming, vulnerable and in-depth in sharing their experiences as it related to the phenomenon. The data obtained was vital to understanding the phenomenon and to view it from the perspective of those who lived it. The central question of this study “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” was designed to discover the various ways elementary
school counselors perceived and described their training based on the current reality of their work with fostering and developing elementary students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The central question yielded five sub-questions which examined the what and how of elementary school counselors to accomplish the phenomenon being studied. Moustakas (1994) stated that “In the process of explicating intentional experience one moves from that which is experienced and described in concrete and full terms, the what of the experience, towards its reflexive reference in the how of the experience” (p. 79). Each sub-question was a branch of the central question to obtain the data needed to fully grasp and explain the phenomenon.

The first sub-question: How do elementary school counselors describe their self-perceived preparedness applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing? The participants agreed that their training was lacking in various instances, but they had a grasp on how to foster and promote wellbeing among their students. Some participants stated that classroom management training was a necessity along with learning about the legalities of school counseling as understanding school law was important to their work. For some of the participants having a pervading focus on mental health counseling in their training, although fruitful for an elementary school counselor, more training was necessary as the reality of their work revealed that the elementary school counselors’ position is encompassing. They reported the wearing of many hats as they were expected to do both counseling and non-counseling duties, along with other responsibilities. For all the participants the mental health portion of their training was pivotal to their work, but some lacked the training of shorter counseling sessions used at the elementary level as opposed to longer sessions used in the other school divisions. Overall, participants agreed that they were mostly prepared to foster and promote elementary
students’ social-emotional wellbeing but existing barriers in their work as school counselors impeded the performance of this vital function.

The second sub-question: How do elementary school counselors describe their perception of professional and/or personal growth regarding how they might address social-emotional issues since their formal training? This was an examination of the participants’ growth and self-direction or lack thereof. The participants revealed their transitions, changes they had to make, and how they contended with these changes. One of the participant’s responses suggested that transition was relatively easy. However, this participant’s responses leaned more towards a fixed mindset in that there was a certain arrogance in the responses. Whereas the other participants revealed their vulnerability when going through the transitions, this participant revealed did not. The data obtained revealed that these elementary school counselors had a difficult transition in many instances. One of these instances was their collective internship experiences. One participant described the experience as horrible. Others who did not have an internship experience felt like they were thrown in the deep end and had to figure things out for themselves. Growth was a major realization for most of the participants as they came to understand through their experiences that their initial view of the work of an elementary school counselor required that they grow and change as they became more self-directed in their work.

Sub-question three: How do school counselors describe their use and/or knowledge of the school counselors’ competencies presented in the ASCA National Model (2012, 2016)? ASCA has put forward guidelines for school counselors to follow in order to perform their work. Some of what is required by ASCA is 80% direct services with 20% indirect services toward students. For most of the participants this was not something they believe could be accomplished due to the abundance of social-emotional issues they dealt with at their schools and their student to
school counselor ratio. Their description of their knowledge and use of the ASCA National Model saw a pattern of responses namely, high ratio, time commitment, other duties and administrative misunderstanding of their roles. The consensus was that ASCA was wishful thinking considering the reality of their work. However, one participant utilized ASCA fully but admitted that the smaller ratio that existed at school made it easier to implement. Some participants were able to introduce parts of the ASCA model in their schools but found it slow going especially in areas where the district or school administration were not on board.

Sub-question four: How do school counselors describe the duties and responsibilities of their position at their schools? The participants’ description of their duties and responsibilities although varied, mostly explained hindrances and assistance they experienced in carrying out their work to assist students. Most participants agreed that some of the duties and responsibilities they performed do not fit the job description of an elementary school counselor. They stated that some of these non-counseling duties impeded their work with students and at times is an interruption to assisting students with social-emotional issues. Most of the states and districts represented by the participants seemed to have a set idea of what a school counselor should do. However, the participants argued that advocating for their position regarding their duties and responsibilities was pivotal as most administration had very little understanding of what school counselors have been tasked to do. In some instances, some participants described their work as glorified clerical assistants or administrative heads as some did the work of the principal when he or she is absent from school.

Sub-question five: What is school counselors’ perception of the social-emotional wellbeing issues of elementary students at their schools? An interesting element that was pervasive with all the participants was the abundance of social-emotional issues that they
encountered at the elementary level. Some of the participants were shocked at their initial experience with this occurrence and were glad of what mental health training they received in the masters’ degree program. However, for some the level of social-emotional issues at the elementary stage caused them to change their perspective. One participant explained multiple incidences with various students that were violent due to the student(s) lack of knowledge of emotional regulation. Though having some training in mental health counseling, some participants stated that their training seemed tame in comparison to the reality of their work with fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Some believed that their training was lacking in assisting them with the reality of their work.

**Discussion**

The following discussion examined the findings of the study utilizing the revelations from the information obtained through the experiences of elementary school counselors with students social-emotional wellbeing. The empirical literature is an examination of the findings of previous studies as they relate to this study’s findings where similarities and differences are explored. This is also an in-depth exploration of the theoretical framework through the lens of the performance and experiences of the participants in this study.

**Empirical Literature**

This study was designed to describe the lived experiences of elementary school counselors with the phenomenon being discussed. Varied research has been conducted on the work of school counselors, but most have been quantitative and mainly on middle and high school counseling. The research conducted for this study is qualitative in nature and uncovered information on social-emotional issues of elementary aged children, ASCA and school counselors view of their training applicability. Utilizing previous research and this study’s
findings empirical evidence will confirm some findings and contribute to the literature already existing. The question of elementary school counselors’ training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing was investigated through qualitative means. Each participant spoke of their experiences relating to the topic of the study.

Bridgeland and Bruce (2014) conducted a survey of middle and high school counselors (5,300) on their role as school counselors. The study showed that 67% of the school counselors surveyed were unsure of the requirements of their work. From the experiences of the participants of this study, it was revealed that elementary school counselors perceive their roles as all encompassing. Most of the participants of this study revealed that the reality of their work did not align with their training as they found that although they understood their work based on their training, that perspective changed when they entered the work environment. Some participants described their first foray into elementary school counseling as a “glorified data entry clerk.” Coll and Freeman (1997) conducted a study on elementary school counselors’ role conflict in comparison with middle and high school counselors. They posited that elementary school counselors reported having higher levels of role conflict due to unrelated duties and incongruency with their training. Other research (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Chandler et al., 2018; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2018; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008) have given evidence that the work that some school counselors perform does not align with the majority of their training or with the ASCA model.

The use of the ASCA model by participants was limited. Only one participant followed the model in order to obtain RAMP designation. However, in many instances the participants believed that the requirements of the model were close to an impossible task especially with their school counselor to student ratio and the mental health issues that abounded at their schools.
Previous research criticism of the model included (a) an inability to adapt to all environments, (b) no accounting for administrative tasks school counselors are given by administration and (c) ignorance of school counselors’ mental health training (Fye, Miller & Rainey, 2018). The findings of this study evidenced that these criticisms are valid. Although some of the participants were currently attempting to utilize aspects of the model, the full scoop of the model was not implemented. The model did not fit the environment of every school represented by the participants. They believed that the possibility of lessening the ratio to what is stipulated by ASCA would be next to impossible. In describing their experiences, it was evidence through the data patterns and subsequent themes that the model worked largely with a smaller ratio than what most of the participants had. The willingness however to utilize the model was apparent but the work of one counselor to 900 students along with other duties and responsibilities made the task more difficult.

Studer et al. (2011) conducted a study on the perceptions of school counselors regarding the usefulness of the ASCA National Model which revealed that one of the reasons they had difficulties implementing the model in their schools was inadequacy of their training and the realities of their work. Although my study findings revealed that there were some beliefs among participants on the inadequacy of their training, participants pointed out that that was due largely to the administrative aspect of their training and the reality of their work. Additionally, participants were unaware of the large number of social-emotional issues they would face at this level of education when they first began working after their training. A modicum of research (Carey & Dimmit, 2012; Goodman-Scott, 2015; Goodman-Scott, et al., 2015; Slaten, et al., 2014; Schiele, et al., 2014) have examined the abundance of social-emotional issues in schools and have concluded that these issues affect the academic progress of students. Furthermore,
research has recommended further training and supervision for school counselors to foster and promote social-emotional wellbeing in students (Bain et al., 2014; Carlson & Kees, 2013; DeKruyf, et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott, 2015; Kaffenberger & O’Roke-Trigiani, 2013; Walley & Grothaus, 2016). However, the study participants in my research stated that their mental health training was adequate in assisting students, but their workload, ratio and administrative duties prevented them from providing the in-depth direct services they wanted and needed to provide. Another revelation concerning training was the legalities of their jobs and the short period of time they had to do individual counseling with students. Though they had the mental health training, their training was for one-hour sessions. In reality they had 25 minutes or less per student to spend doing individual counseling with students and it was not consistent as their duties and responsibilities sometimes took precedent. This view aligns with Bridgeland and Bruce (2014) survey findings that school counselors (72%) preferred less administrative duties so they can focus on the counseling aspect of their work.

This study examined the level and types of social-emotional issues elementary students presented. The investigation yielded interesting facts from those who experience the phenomenon. Based on the social-emotional encounters the participants experience there is a high incidence of social-emotional (mental health) issues among elementary aged students which includes the autism spectrum, anxiety, depression etc. The findings of this study revealed that not only has the number of incidences risen but reporting of mental health issues is also on the rise. Since the school is the environment where these issues are easily identified (Collins, 2014; Goodman-Scott et al., 2015; Bass, et al., 2015) great importance is placed on assisting students as they move on to the next educational level of their learning. Crises care was prevalent among the participants and some found that care in most cases was reactive instead of preventative.
This becomes a major part of the academic success of the students who experience social-emotional issues. Some factors that contribute to the ongoing care of these issues were poverty, homelessness, failure on the part of some parents to provide care through other resources, and school counselors’ unavoidable inconsistencies with individual counseling of students. Little research stressed the importance of managing the high incidence of social-emotional issues of students (Kaffenberger & O’Rorke, 2013; Perfect & Morris, 2011; Walley & Grothaus, 2013; Yoshikawa & Zigler, 2000; Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016). The data of this study showed that this is indeed a problem that needs to be addressed. Elementary school counselors believe they are equipped to foster and promote students’ wellbeing however, there are many hinderances that impede the flow of care that they are allowed to provide in a school setting.

**Theoretical Framework: Self Theories and Adult Learning**

The theoretical framework for this study includes Carol Dweck (1975) growth and fixed mindset theory and Malcolm Knowles (1975) self-directed theory. These theories were utilized for their reliance on how people are motivated and grow. This study examined the work of elementary school counselors with students’ social-emotional issues. That is to say, how elementary school counselors have navigated assisting students through the training they received and their perception of their work performance after formal training. The findings of the study correlated with Dweck’s (1975) theory of fixed and growth mindset and Knowles (1975) adult learning. The participants reported a change in thinking and performance based on their experiences. The growth mindset leads to a need to learn and consequently an affinity to accept challenges, continue even in setbacks, work harder to make things better, receive feedback and learn from it, collaborate with others and be inspired and learn from mentors. Most of the participants demonstrated a growth mindset and self-directedness. They believed that the
work they were doing was important because it involved the lives of children. The consensus was that the social-emotional issues of their students, regardless of what it might be, was not all the student was and each participant believed that this was their calling: to assist in whatever way possible a student in need. This was their driving force to continue doing their work despite the many hindrances. One participant stated that the work of school counselors was of great import but was hardly recognized in administration. This participant chose to receive training at the administrative level to work as an administrator with a greater understanding of school counseling. Dweck and Yeager (2018) posited that “People’s beliefs are a fundamental part of their personality and motivation . . . People’s beliefs about themselves, others and the world can powerfully shape their goals . . . (p. 362).

Each of the participants explained their jobs based on their experiences. Some of the participants completed their masters’ degree in other counseling related fields while some completed a school counseling masters’ degree. However, this did not reflect on their motivation to perform as an elementary school counselor. Conversely, the challenges were greater for those without a school counseling degree as opposed to those who had one. All the participants except one described more challenges upon entering the reality of their work. Those without a school counseling degree had additional challenges coming from a mental health agency and now in a completely different setting. Those with teaching experience had less challenges in that area than those without. Most of these challenges took place at the beginning of their work. Most revealed that their current challenges are mostly with advocacy, administration and ratio.

These challenges that each participant experience motivated each to make changes to the status quo through advocacy. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2015) contended that “The resource of highest value . . . is the learner’s experience. Experience is the learner’s living
textbook” (pp. 9-10). The participants showed growth through learning from their experiences. Their past and present experiences assisted them in making decisions and changes in their personal and professional lives. However, one participant seemed somewhat overconfident in his responses. This participant’s complete reliance on previous knowledge from one environment (adult mental health facility) that was entirely different than the current environment (school) was interesting. This participant believed that any change was unnecessary to fit the new setting. This participant displayed less vulnerability and more of a rigidity in beliefs that past successes would carry through in a completely different environment. Dweck and Yeager (2018) stated that “someone can hold a growth mindset much of the time but certain events, such as highly challenging tasks, important setbacks, or harsh criticism can push them into a fixed mindset” (p. 364).

One participant reported the inevitability of growth in elementary school counseling. Most of the participants reported that every day was different, so it was not possible to stay the same throughout the years. Those with experiences of over 14 years attested to the fact that the challenges they faced brought about change and growth. However, all stated that challenges were a major part of their work. Whether these challenges and changes were positive or negative, they understood that they had a part to play and a choice in their approach. How they navigated the realities of their work was for most vital to the continuation of their work with students. In a magazine interview with Lakewood Media Group (1989) Knowles explained the premise of self-directedness and how adults learn to become self-directed. He postulated that, [T]hey have a deep psychological need to be self-directing; they bring into any learning situation resources from their previous experience and training that are a rich resource for one another's learning; they are task-centered, problem-centered
and life-centered in their orientation to learning; and they are intrinsically motivated to learn, given the right conditions and encouragement. I emphasize that when people learn through their own initiative, they usually learn more effectively and retain the knowledge longer than they do when information is didactically transmitted to them by others (para. 27).

This was evident in most of the participants. Their need to learn from their experiences and make changes despite their challenges, steered them into self-directedness.

Both theories relied on for this study assisted in giving a broader view of the participants experiences. Dweck’s (1975) self-theories assisted in viewing the experiences from the viewpoint of how the participants managed the challenges they faced, the changes they made and the lack of growth or growth that was achieved as they navigated their work. Knowles (1975) self-directedness viewed the motivation participants had in light of their experiences coming from a place of dependency (training) to self-directedness (learning from their experiences). The theories were better understood from my perspective as I was able to bracket myself and view the phenomenon through the eyes of those who experienced it. Additionally, the participants’ experiences were more explicable when viewed through the lens of Dweck’s (1975) fixed and growth theories and Knowles (1975) self-directed theory.

**Implications**

The results of this study regarding the phenomenon of elementary school counselors fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing yielded findings that have theoretical, empirical and practical implications. The implications may be impactful on existing literature and the field of elementary school counseling. This section addresses these implications
Theoretical Implications

The utilization of the fixed and growth theory and self-directedness assisted in further understanding of the motivation and growth that can take place in an experiential environment. The participants of this study each lived through the phenomenon. From the description of their experience patterns were created through the changes they made and advocated for themselves and others in their field. Although their backgrounds in terms of training, were in different counseling masters’ degrees, that did not greatly impact their experience and work performance. On encountering setbacks and challenges, the participants learned to work in their environment to make personal and professional adjustments. Their experiences when they first started working assisted them in making decisions despite the training they received. Knowles (1996) posited that experience is invaluable to an individual and therefore a deep investment is place in them. The rich foundation of an individual’s experience relates to new experiences. Through this, the individual learns, and this learning takes on new meaning as they (the meanings) are related to past experiences.

Motivated by the necessity for change based on their experiences through the years, the participants were able to navigate their environment for the good of the students they served. Some participants report shock at the abundance of social-emotions issues at the elementary level. However, in recognizing this problem they became cognizant of the professional and personal changes they had to make and utilized collaborative efforts to learn and grow. Dweck (2000) stated that the growth theory does not predict that an individual will change but, given the right environment change can occur. This is evident from the lived experiences of the participants. While some saw the necessity for change in how they approached their work
despite their training background and the inconsistencies of their work, some did not. This does not mean that an individual’s mindset cannot change but may not be motivated to do so.

**Empirical Implications**

Current findings revealed that there is a paucity of research on elementary school counselors’ experiences with the social-emotional wellbeing of elementary aged students (Humphrey & Wigglesworth, 2012). Although some research has studied the incidence of mental health issues in schools most of those findings are mainly on middle and high school counseling and are quantitative and descriptive in nature. Previous research (Bains & Diallo, 2016; Carlson, & Kees, 2013; Kaffenberger & O’Rourke-Trigiani, 2013 Walley & Grothaus, 2012) posited that school counselors training is lacking in dealing with students’ mental health issues. However, this research revealed that the participants had training qualifying them to foster and promote elementary students’ social-emotional (mental health) wellbeing but other barriers (ratio, administrative tasks, time constraints and non-counseling duties) prevented them from performing counseling duties.

Another fact in line with previous research (Child Mind Institute, 2016; Department of Mental Health and Social Care and Department of Education 2017; MMWR, 2016; Perfect & Morris, 2011) is the abundance of mental health issues among children ages 4 to 17. This was confirmed in the findings that pre-school students presented with social-emotional issues. However, the quantity of social-emotional issues at the elementary level was revealing. Research on the social-emotional issues of students are mostly directed towards middle and high school students. All the participants related their surprise at the level of social-emotional issues they encountered at their schools. This shows the necessity of elementary school counselors working more in a counseling capacity than administrative.


**Practical Implications**

This study provided practical implications for school counselors and administration through its findings.

*Implications for elementary school counselors:* Based on the description of their work and the training received participants revealed an incongruity between the two. This is an indication that formal training though necessary cannot prepare for every situation that the reality of the job will uncover. Therefore, elementary school counselors should be prepared to create meanings and make decisions on their experiential background and collaborative learning. Advocating on their behalf in school environments where the work of an elementary school counselor is regulated to administrative tasks and non-counseling duties is necessary. Recognizing their role and advocating for it may take time but it is a vital part of their work as elementary school counselors. Furthermore, elementary school counselors must become aware of the social-emotional issues of elementary-aged children as this impact students’ success at school (Oberle et al., 2016; Harrington et al., 2016; Brackett et al., 2011). Formal training provided the background and tools required to become an elementary school counselor but ongoing experience and learning opportunities will provide the essentials for performing the work.

*Implications for administrators:* Based on the data gathered from the participants many of their administrators in the past and in their present jobs, have limited understanding of the work of elementary school counselors. Some of the participants reported that they have been given clerical and legal responsibilities that are not in the scope of the duties and responsibilities of an elementary school counselor. The major implication of this research for administrators is for them to have a greater understanding of the work of elementary school counselors.
Necessary workshops geared specifically towards elementary school counselors and their administrators would be useful. The participants who viewed their administration as a hindrance reported and need for greater advocacy on their part and ASCA to inform principals of their work. This they believe would alleviate elementary school counselors from performing non-counseling duties. The participants who reported having administrators who were assistive had a better working environment. Alicia is the only participant seeking RAMP designation. Her school is fully following the ASCA model. She remarked “...my principal was like ‘I just need to teach you how to operate in the school, but you know everything you need to know as far as how to work with kid.’” She further stated that the administration and staff at her school is aware of her defined role as elementary school counselor. The participants’ revealed that support from administration would make advocating for their position less difficult. Therefore, the implication is that the role of school administration is paramount for the elementary school counselor working with students’ social-emotional wellbeing.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

There are several contributing characteristics of this study that form the delimitations of this study. This study examined the lived experiences of elementary school counselors training applicability with the social-emotional wellbeing of their students. The topic is a delimitation characteristic in that although there were other relating problems that could have been chosen, those were not necessary to focus on to obtain the findings of this study. The topic was chosen out of curiosity on my part to understand the work of elementary school counselors as an LPC and in any way reveal through the findings how important and necessary the work of an elementary school counselor is. The use of ASCA Scene as a means of gaining participants was for its accessibility to a wider range of elementary school counselors from different states.
ASCA Scene provided elementary school counselors with varying ethnicities, locations, interests and it was the best setting for obtaining school counselors who have the years of service, experience and background in elementary school counseling. Additionally, the varying years of service provided differing perspective yet yielding patterns that showed commonality. My intention was to conduct the research in one region of the country however, a broader understanding of the phenomenon was gained due to changes to the setting and accommodating participants nationwide.

Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach to obtain data on the research topic allowed for broader view which explained well how the phenomenon affects others. The transcendental phenomenological approach was also geared to the objectives of this study. Based on my interest in the work of elementary school counselors due to my own work as an LPC, the objectives of this study were to identify the work of elementary school counselors and their training effectiveness in assisting students with social-emotional issues. Additionally, how did they accomplish this task with other duties they had to perform. Therefore, knowledge of social-emotional issues of elementary students was necessary to meet this objective. As a consequence, elementary school counselors who have worked with students with social-emotional issues (mental health) with training in that professional field were the only participants I needed for this study.

To further understand the lived experience of these elementary school counselors it was necessary to utilize a theoretical framework that would explicate fully the meanings and motivation of the participants. After much searching for theories that would align with the objectives of this study, I decided to utilize Dweck’s (1975) self-theories which came out of her study of learned helplessness and Knowles’ (1975) self-directed theory. Both theories provided
in-depth evidence of ways people are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically. These theories assisted in me viewing elementary school counselors through the lens of how they faced challenges and what changes they made to accommodate and make the best of their challenges. Additionally, to explain their growth from their initial transitions to their current work as elementary school counselors. The participants’ transition from training to reality utilizing these particular theories made it easier for me to bracket myself from their lived experiences and understand them from their point of view. This leads to the research questions which is another identifying characteristic of the delimitations. The central question and subsequent research questions were formulated out of interest based on the objectives of this study, experience and knowledge of participants’ understanding of the phenomenon and the practicality of obtaining saturated data.

This study was limited by some participants not completing the last portion of the research. Some of the participants opted out of the focus group portion for varying reasons. While some opted out by not responding to emails reminders only one had internet issues that caused the participant to miss the online meeting. Another limitation was time zones. There was some difficulty in getting all participants on an agreed upon time as they had various time zones. This helped in delaying the focus group interviews till when participants could attend based on a synchronized time of day relating to their time zones. Another limitation was the use of the internet to interview participants. There were instances where the participant’s wifi was off and therefore participants had to log back on to complete the interviews. Additionally, two participants completed most of the interview utilizing the phone option on Webex until the very end of the interview.
Recommendations for Future Research

This research contributed to the lived experiences of elementary school counselors with students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Recommendations for future research include a narrative from school counselors from different school levels lived experiences of the social-emotional issues students. It was stated in this research that the focus of elementary school counselors was dealing social-emotional issues of elementary students whereas the focus of middle and high school counselors is mostly on career and academics. It would be of interest to know if this is a general belief of school counselors of varying levels. Further research can include elementary school counselors experience with ASCA and how they have or have not implemented the program in their schools with a high school counselor-student ratio. Another recommendation for future research may be conducted on the lived experiences of the working relationship between elementary school counselors and their administration. The participants indicated that administration can be a hindrance or an assistance to their work. Further investigation can be conducted on the perspective of both administrators and elementary school counselors on the social-emotional wellbeing of students at the elementary level and how best to approach it. Lastly, this research can be expanded utilizing more than 10 elementary school counselors.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of elementary school counselors nationwide on their training applicability with students’ social-emotional wellbeing. The study results yielded valid information that adds to previous research. Four themes were developed from the data obtained from 10 participants. The themes, social-emotional encounters, mindset, beliefs and self-direction, ASCA: one size does not fit all, and training versus reality, dissected the data to provide a broader and more in-depth understanding.
of the participants’ experiences. Each theme succinctly but efficiently explained the phenomenon from the lived experiences of the participants.

The central question of this study “how do elementary school counselors describe their training applicability to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing?” yielded five sub-questions that were satisfied by the responses of the participants. These experiences of the participants were further examined through the lens of two theoretical frameworks namely Dweck (1977) self-theories and Knowles (1975) adult theory utilizing self-directedness. The theories helped in deciphering information on the mindset and motivation of participants regarding their counseling work in elementary school. The results of this study also yielded empirical, theoretical and practical implications for previous research, the deeper understanding of the theoretical outcomes and practical suggestions for both elementary school counselors and administrators. Recommendations for future research that will add to this research and to the phenomenon were provided.

The work of elementary school counselors is encompassing but, for the most part, gratifying. Despite the challenges these participants discussed in their interviews, they show a love of the work they do and compassion for the students they serve. Their motivation is to help as many students at the elementary level before they enter middle and high school. They are dedicated men and women who believing that they were called to their positions are willing to perform at their best to influence a brighter future for their students. On this dissertation journey I met some wonderful individuals who were encouraging, committed and helpful. This paragraph is my thank you to the participants who contributed to the completion of this study. By being vulnerable in telling their experiences, I learned that elementary school counselors are hardworking individuals whose focus are the students they serve. Their dedication to the work
they do is not based on monetary compensation (Although that would be very beneficial for them) but on their commitment to help a child in need. Though they face many challenges they overcome them so they can be their best selves for their students. I applaud all my participants for sharing their experiences with me and pray that their hope of helping and touching the lives of the children they serve will forever be accomplished. Thank you.
REFERENCES


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Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request, January 2015. Retrieved from


APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Letter of Approval

Dear Vanessa C. Costello,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

The Graduate School
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter/Email

11/20/2018
Dear Potential Participant

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my research is to investigate school counselors’ perception of the applicability of their training to fostering students’ social-emotional wellbeing and enhance school counselors’ workplace performance and ability to navigate student’s social-emotional issues utilizing ASCA National Model or other methods. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are an elementary school counselor, have worked as a school counselor for two years or more, have experience working with elementary-aged students social-emotional issues, have a masters’ degree, have a working knowledge of ASCA National Model (2012, 2016), and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic survey and the SCARS instrument. Selected participants will be interviewed individually and participate in a focus group in person or via Webex. Interviews should take approximately 1 hour for you to complete. Your name and other identifying information will be requested by the investigator of this study as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate please click the link to complete the attached consent form, demographic survey, and SCARS instrument, then submit the completed forms. If selected, I will contact you to schedule an interview. Participants will be given a $20 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the study.

Sincerely,

Vanessa C Costello, MA, LPC, Ed.S.
Appendix C: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 6/21/2018 to 6/20/2019 Protocol # 3251.062118

CONSENT FORM

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ TRAINING APPLICABILITY TO STUDENTS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Vanessa C Costello
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on elementary school counselors’ perception of their training applicability to fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Additionally, this study will explore elementary school counselors’ perceptions of how helpful the ASCA National Model is to their work with elementary students. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary school counselor, you have 2 years or more of experience, you have worked with students with social-emotional issues, have a master’s degree, and have a working knowledge of the ASCA National Model (2012, 2016). Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Vanessa C. Costello, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to investigate through the phenomenological approach how elementary school counselors describe their experiences fostering and promoting students’ social-emotional wellbeing utilizing their training.
**Procedures:** If you are interested in completing this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a demographic survey. (10 minutes)
2. Complete SCARS instrument. (20 minutes)
3. If selected as a participant, take part in a one-on-one, audio-recorded, semi-structured interview at a place convenient to you or via Webex. The interview will be recorded on at least three devices. The interview will involve a one-hour, sit-down session with open-ended questions or a Webex interview, to gather as much information regarding your personal experiences with the topic. (45 – 60 minutes)
4. If selected, participate in a focus group of approximately 15 to 20 participants in this study. The focus group will be approximately an hour and a half in person or on Webex. The questions for the group will be semi-structured to allow for discussion and group perception of the topic being studied. (60 – 90 minutes).
5. Complete member check based on your interview transcript. Your transcript will be emailed to you. You will have two weeks to complete this member check and return to me via email address vwilliamscostello@liberty.edu (30 – 45 minutes)

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
Benefits to society may include assisting with changes to how school counselors are trained to foster and promote students’ social-emotional wellbeing. Additionally, this may contribute to current literature in changing school counselors’ duties with an emphasis on students’ social-emotional wellbeing.

**Compensation:** Participants will be compensated for participating in and completing this study with a $20 Amazon gift card.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify any participant in this study. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms, and their identity will only be known to me. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Research records will be stored securely in a double password protected computer. The audio-recorded data collected for this study will be transcribed, and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. For the focus groups, I am unable to assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.
The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 6/21/2018 to 6/20/2019 Protocol # 3251.062118

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Vanessa C. Costello. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 954-825-1434 or vwilliamscostello@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at glcollins2@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant                                                                            Date
The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 6/21/2018 to 6/20/2019.
Protocol # 3251.062118

________________________________________
Signature of Investigator                   Date
Appendix D: Demographic Survey

1. What is your age?
   - 20 - 30
   - 31 – 40
   - 41 – 50
   - 51 – 60

2. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   - Bachelors
   - Masters
   - Doctorate

4. What is your race/ethnicity?
   - Caucasian
   - African American
   - Hispanic
   - Native American
   - Asian

5. Where did you complete your degree?

6. What was your degree accreditation?
CACREP
CAEP
COAMFTE

7. How long have you worked as a school counselor?
   • 1 – 10 years
   • 11 – 20 years
   • 21 – 30 years

8. What is the student-counselor ratio at your school?

9. What was your counselor preparation like in terms of?
   a. Years of study
   b. Courses completed
   c. Internship/clinical supervision

10. Which of the following social/emotional issues of students have you worked with at your school?
    • Depression
    • ADHD
    • Anxiety
    • Phobias
    • Autism Spectrum
    • Drugs
    • Extreme anger
    • Other __________________________________________________
Appendix E: Email Permission for SCARS Instrument

SCARS instrument

Scarborough, Janna L. <SCARBORO@mail.etsu.edu>

Tue 1/2, 11:29 AM

Costello, Vanessa Camiel

SCARS Pamphlet2.pdf

34 KB

Scarborough, Janna L. <SCARBORO@mail.etsu.edu>

Sun 7/28/2019 11:21 AM

Hello Vanessa,

By my previous email and through this communication, I grant you permission to use the SCARS and site appropriately for your dissertation research. You may put the SCARS in your dissertation appendix. When you submit articles for publication based on your dissertation, please exclude inclusion of the entire instrument with the articles but reference as appropriate. Congratulations on being this far in the process and best of luck! I would love to see you results if you do not mind sending me a way in which I may access your dissertation when complete.

Best,

Janna

Janna L. Scarborough, Ph. D.
Dean in the Interim
Professor

Box 70685
Warf-Pickel 319
Johnson City, TN 37614
scarboro@etsu.edu
http://www.etsu.edu/coe
Appendix F: Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your path to become a school counselor.
2. How and why did you choose this profession?
3. Describe your daily routine regarding your work as a school counselor.
4. What was your preparation process in becoming a school counselor?
5. Describe your transition from formal training to working as a school counselor.
6. What challenges did you experience when you first started working?
7. Describe any personal adjustments you made during your transition.
8. Describe any professional adjustments you made during your transition.
9. What, if any, challenges did you experience making these adjustments?
10. What are your challenges now?
11. How did you mollify the challenges in the past and now?
12. What are your perceptions regarding congruence with your work and your training?
13. Describe your experience working with elementary students.
14. Describe students’ social/emotional issues you encounter at your school.
15. What is your perception of your training to meet the social/emotional needs of students at your school?
16. How did your training prepare you for working with students’ social-emotional issues?
17. What are your perceptions of students’ social/emotional needs affecting their scholastic achievement?
18. Describe any adjustments you made to accommodate working with students social-emotional issues.
19. How do you utilize the ASCA National Model in your work as a school counselor?

20. How are the school counselors’ competencies relevant to your work with regards to students’ social-emotional wellbeing?


22. What are your main duties/responsibilities as an elementary school counselor?

23. Describe your weekly workload?

24. What aspect of your work do you find frustrating/affirming?

25. Is there anything else you would like to share on the topic?
Appendix G: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Tell us your name and how long you have worked as a school counselor.

2. Tell us your reasons for participating in this study.

3. What are you most interested in letting others know with regards to your experiences as an elementary school counselor?

4. What is your perception of what a professional school counselor does?

5. Think back to your formal training and subsequent transition into your role as an elementary school counselor. What do you remember mostly about that time?

6. What improvements, if any, would you suggest concerning your training?

7. What influences informs your decisions with regards to your daily routine?

8. In what ways does the ASCA National Model inform your work with regards to the social/emotional development of students at your school?

9. How would you describe your use of the ASCA National Model?

10. If you do not use the ASCA model, describe your school counseling methods of accomplishing your goals?

11. What has been your experience working with elementary students?

12. How would you manage a difficult problem regarding a student?

13. What is your format for managing students’ social-emotional issues?

14. If anything, what would you change about your job?
## Appendix H: Reflexive Journal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Journal Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2016</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;: Recognizing that I felt that in some ways school counselors abandoned their training in that I had many students who felt they could not speak with their school counselors for fear of being disciplined. I think I have a very biased view of the work of school counselors partly because of some of the mental health issues that some of my clients have that is not being addressed at school. This affects their learning and motivation to learn. When my clients speak of their difficulties at school it affects how I think of school counselors but then I have to remind myself that our roles are different and so are our duties. Hence my interest in their experiences instead of my own biases. 9th: Finding a theoretical framework for my study that relates to school counselors training and the realities of their work is proving somewhat difficult. There are no definitive theories that speaks to that. I will have to inform my dissertation chair. I will continue my research for a theoretical framework that will be useful. 20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;: I found a theory that might be useful to my dissertation topic. I will have to research it some more it seems a bit convoluted, but I understand the gist of it. Self-theories by Carol Dweck seems to give an explanation as to school counselors' work and comparing their training with their actual work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;: Finally came up with a concrete topic for my dissertation: A Phenomenological Investigation of Elementary School Counselors' Training Applicability With Students' Social/Emotional Wellbeing. I was thinking about the direction I would like to go in and basically this is what I have in mind. Also, I was thinking to broaden it to middle and high school counselors, maybe. If I look at applicability of their training, I think I will get insight on how they view their training which would link well with the Entity and Incremental theories. 20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;: I was advised not to broaden my research to middle and high school counselors. I am sticking with elementary school counselors since their work is what first inspired me and there doesn’t seem to be much research on that demographic and social-emotional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;: I identified 2 persons to be a part of my committee members. One committee member works with elementary school counselors in her field.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Month</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>March – June 2017</td>
<td>Completed chapters 1 – 3. I sent them to chairperson to peruse and review. Chapters were reviewed by chairperson and sent back to me to make corrections and add more information to each chapter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2017</td>
<td>Formulated my questions for individual interviews, focus group, and demographic survey based on the premise of my study and incorporating Dweck’s self-theories and Knowles adult learning theory. Continuing to refine chapters 1 – 3 based on chairperson’s reviews. This is an ongoing process until I do my proposal defense.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August - October 2017</td>
<td>Proposal sent to committee members for review and feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2017</td>
<td>15th: Made changes to manuscript based on committee reviews. Questions were added to the individual and focus group interviews, some wording were changed to help with clarity, one research question revised and definition of self-perception of counselor’s training was modified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>9th – 15th: Sent individual interview and focus group questions to be reviewed by five individuals in the school counseling field. Review was completed utilizing a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = not clear, not relevant, not related to research question to 5 = very clear, very relevant, very related to research question. Responses were utilized to calculate Cronbach’s alpha α for the individual interview and focus group questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2018</td>
<td>23rd: Proposal and IRB application sent to School of Education for review.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2018</td>
<td>5th: School of Education review completed. 6th: IRB application sent in to IRB via School of Education and chairperson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2018</td>
<td>21st: Received study approval from IRB to begin second phase of dissertation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2018</td>
<td>4th: Completed pilot testing of questions. I was aware of by biases during individual interview process. Conducting the interviews with school counselors changed my mindset somewhat about their work and their perception of the ambiguity of their role in schools. 11th: First possible participant completed online survey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2018</td>
<td>6th: First individual interview. 8th: Second individual interview 9th: Third individual interview (This participant did not complete the focus group interviews and did not reply to reminder emails regarding the focus group interview)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I wondered if I could bracket myself as I am supposed to. The information gathered from my research seems overwhelming. During interviews I had to stop myself from finishing participants sentences. I stepped away from my preconceived ideas and fully immersed myself (as best I could) in participants’ experiences, especially with one of these interviews. There was some difficulty on my part to bracket my self as the participant displayed some overconfidence in his responses. The participant was very self-assured in responding to questions and I felt the participant was proving how good he/she was at their job. The participant stated there were no transitional challenges and everything was easy. I will have to bracket more in light of my biases with this participant.

| December 2018 | 8th: First focus group. The information gathered was invaluable. Seeing participants interact online and hearing their various prospective of their profession was interesting and added another dimension to the trajectory of this study especially from the viewpoint of the theoretical framework of this study. |
| January 2019 | 15th: Fourth individual interview |
| | 27th: Fifth individual interview |
| February 2019 | 2nd: Reposted online portion of study (recruitment letter, consent form, demographic survey and SCARS instrument) on ASCA Scene. |
| | 7th: Received nine additional respondents to online portion. |
| | 8th: Sent email to each respondent to set up individual interviews |
| | 9th – 11th: Received responses from seven respondent and interviews were set via Webex. |
| | 9th: Sixth individual interview, face to face via Webex. Though I had interviewed other participants this was different in that I was more open to the participant’s experiences. |
| | 10th: Seventh individual interview. By this interview I started seeing a pattern developing in some areas of my study |
| | 12th: I had two (eighth and ninth) interviews on this day and again I could see the patterns and themes emerging based on the responses to the questions |
| | 15th: Tenth interview with a school counselor that seemed nervous. I noticed her continually glancing at her office door although her responses leaned towards a more ASCA centered school counseling. This may have been my bias. This surprised me as I had become more open to immersing myself into the experiences of the participants. |
| March 2019 | 11th: Scheduled the focus groups for participants based on their time zone. This was difficult to execute since the participants lived in various states. |
Eventually with many emails back and forth I was able to form 2 focus group for the month of April.

17th: Since two of the participants did not respond to emails for focus groups, I requested permission to use the eight participants I had. However, the two had completed the individual interviews and so I received permission to utilize their transcripts to make up the required number of ten participants.

23rd: Edited manuscript for review by dissertation chair.

| April 2019 | 4th: Second focus group. One of the participants did not show up for this focus group so this was completed with only two participants. Yet the participants shared much about their work and spoke with each other. I found it interesting how during the interview the participants networked regarding their states and the differences and similarities they experienced. I recognized that they were deeply invested in their work and the children they were in charge of. |
| April 2019 | 22nd: The third focus group was the same with participants interacting and finding commonalities in their work and differences. It was interesting how the participants easily recognized the highs and lows of their work and openly expressed their views of being elementary school counselors. |

| May 2019 | 2nd: All interviews transcribed and returned. Read transcripts several times. Most of the month of may was utilizing the ATLAS ti V8 program. This process of reading and re-reading the transcripts helped solidify patterns throughout each participants story. Additionally, I found that I understood more their experiences as I read the transcripts. The themes formulation was a cumulation of the patterns, commonalities and differences the participants’ shared. It was easier for me to let go of whatever biases that may have existed at this point and see the phenomenon through the lens of the participants. I felt that I had to tell their stories accurately for others to grasps the participants’ triumphs, frustration and complete love for their work and the students they get to serve. |

| June 2019 | 3rd: Manuscript reviewed by dissertation chair |
| June 2019 | 4th: All completed individual interview transcript were sent to participants for member check. |
| June 2019 | 24th: All member check completed except the three participants who did not respond to emails regarding the focus group despite numerous attempts to contact them. |

<p>| July 2019 | 1st: Review form, transcripts with participant’s pseudonym and completed chapter four sent to peer reviewers. |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>16th</td>
<td>First review received. This reviewer mentioned a participant that seem very self-assured. The reviewer pointed out the participant’s responses seemed too perfect. I found out it was the same participant I had made mention of.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24th</td>
<td>All peer review forms returned.</td>
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### Appendix I: Audit Trail

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Audit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/21/2018</td>
<td><strong>Acquiring participants</strong> – Participant selection was through the ASCA website, ASCA Scene and their monthly newsletter. A recruitment flyer was sent out via the newsletter and the survey portion posted on ASCA Scene for potential participants. This decision was made to alleviate any delays through the school districts, obtain the required number of participants for the study, and for further anonymity for selected participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/12/2018</td>
<td><strong>Permission</strong> – Permission was given to utilize ASCA Scene, a part of the ASCA website to post survey on site. Additionally, recruitment letter was published in ASCA professional counseling newsletter.</td>
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<td>1/5/2018</td>
<td><strong>Data collection tools</strong> – I made the decision to use the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (SCARS) instrument as a data collection tool. The decision was based on the theoretical framework of this study. The SCARS instrument will assist in answering questions with regards to school counselors’ self-directedness and growth/fixed mindsets. Individual interview and focus group questions were developed by myself for the study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/2/2018</td>
<td><strong>SCARS</strong> – A copy of the instrument was emailed to me by the developer Janna L. Scarborough for use in this study. (See Appendix E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/06/2017</td>
<td><strong>Individual interview and Focus group questions</strong> – These questions were tested for content and face validity. Five experts in the field were asked to rate the questions on a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1= “not clear, not relevant, not related to research question” to 5 = “very clear, very relevant, very related to research question”. Cronbach’s alpha was conducted in IBM SPSS 25 which resulted in $\alpha = .96$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/20/2017</td>
<td><strong>Questions added</strong> – Additional questions were formulated when testing the individual interview and focus group questions. The decision to add more questions was made based on deeper inspection of the research questions. The additional questions were formulated to strengthen and expand the data that will be obtained for the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/15/2018</td>
<td><strong>Focus groups</strong> – The decision was made to have two or three focus groups. Due to the study being completed on a national basis via Webex it is feasible to have more than one focus groups.</td>
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Appendix J: Peer Review Form

A Phenomenological Investigation of Elementary School Counselors’ Training Applicability to Students’ Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Peer Review Form

Thank you for reviewing my study regarding the investigation of school counselors’ perception of the applicability of their training to fostering students’ social-emotional wellbeing and enhance school counselors’ workplace performance and ability to navigate student’s social-emotional issues. This peer review form serves to share with you the results of my study. Additionally, it serves to increase the trustworthiness of my research by asking you to review data obtained through individual interviews and focus groups and to indicate your level of agreement with the themes developed through this research.

Thank you again for your time.

1. Due to your response to my request to review the results of my research several reports have been emailed to you along with my chapter four. Please take a moment to review the data and provide feedback of your review.

   The researcher has provided necessary data to review the results and ensuing themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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2. The next several statements will summarize the themes I identified during my data analysis. For each statement, please indicate your level of agreement with the validity of
the identified theme. You may also use the space provided to make any notes about each identified theme.

- **Social Emotional Encounters**

I agree that this theme is a sensible conclusion considering my review of the data provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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My notes about the theme, if any:

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- **Mindsets, Beliefs and Self-Directedness**

I agree that this theme is a sensible conclusion considering my review of the data provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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• **ASCA: One Size Does Not Fit All**

I agree that this theme is a sensible conclusion considering my review of the data provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>○</td>
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My notes about the theme, if any:

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• **Training v Reality**
I agree that this theme is a sensible conclusion considering my review of the data provided.

My notes about the theme, if any:

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