**A Phenomenological Study Exploring What Integrating Adolescent Identity Means to**

**Christian Public-School Counselors**


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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education


School of Behavioral Sciences

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**Abstract**

Adolescence is a numinous stage of self-discovery fraught with challenges and obscurities that threaten a healthy trajectory. Religion and spirituality are proven coping resources and school counselors can provide identity and meaning-making resources to aid adolescent development. However, religion and spirituality are often avoided in the public-school setting. Exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors is important toward clarifying roles and ensuring best practices. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors. Guiding questions include how Christian school counselors navigate identity and meaning making issues with adolescents, and counselor experience with integrating Christian identification and meaning making resources into counseling. Bowlby's (1958) theory on the significance of attachments and Erikson's (1968) identity theory guide this study. Criterion, opportunistic, convenience, and snowball sampling were conducted. Interviews are the source of data collection. Seven steps for conducting data analysis were followed and these steps are outlined in the methods section. Six themes emerged from the data collection process. Relationships were interpreted as spiritual, and a key formative process to adolescents, and professional care contributed to self-imposed limits on adolescent RS integration. A summary of findings and recommendations is provided.

*Keywords*: spirituality, religiosity, implicit integration, explicit integration, identification, applied integration, identity, meaning making.

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**List of Abbreviations**

American Counseling Association (ACA)

American Psychological Association (APA)

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Christian Counseling Supervision Instrument (CCSI)

Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT)

Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Internal Working Model (IWM)

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT)

Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Pew Research Center (PRC)

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Religion/Spirituality (RS)

Social Workers Integration of Faith-Christian (SWIF-C)

Spiritually Integrated Cognitive Processing Therapy (SICPT)

**Chapter One: Introduction**

**Overview**

Identity is a formative process susceptible to adversity and uncertainty. Security and predictability are common resources used to hedge against the threat of ambiguity and can mean the difference between healthy identity formation or confusion. Religion is often central to one's identity and a proven meaning-making resource for healthy coping. School counselors can provide identity and meaning-making resources to aid adolescent development; however, religion and spirituality are often avoided in the pubic-school setting. Exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors will develop clarity, multicultural awareness, best practices, and resources for integrating religion and spirituality into treatment. The following sections provide a historic, social, and theoretical summary of relevant literature, situation of self, a problem statement, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the research questions, definitions, and summary.

**Background**

**Historical Context**

Prior to the Enlightenment views of faith and mental wellness "have been well integrated" (Entwistle, 2010; Hall & Hall, 2021; Sanders, 2013; Yamado et al., 2020, p. 276). The seventeenth century Enlightenment is credited for the division of faith and logic as science was tasked with gathering empirical data and values were considered a religious domain (Jones & Butman, 2011). Freud (1994) declared the death of religion as his psychoanalysis marked psychology's induction into a scientific era and the pathologizing of religion. This contentious divide was the start of "a long history of ignoring and pathologizing religion" (Yamado et al., 2020, p. 276). However, it became apparent that the two were not mutually exclusive.

Newly formed conceptualizations of spirituality emerged alongside humanism in the mid-1940s and as empirical data validated the positive health correlates associated with religiosity interests evolved (Hall & Hall, 2021; Shaler, 2016). This scientific concession legitimized a spiritual domain apart from religiosity and spiritual practices like meditation, mindfulness, and yoga emerged. In the 1960s as spirituality gained momentum without empirical research "healthcare providers became concerned about the ethics of this practice" (Shaler, 2016, p. 53). Over the past three decades governing bodies like the American Counseling Association (ACA) have acknowledged data validating the mental health benefits of religion/spirituality (RS), and the integration thereof (Cook, 2020; Garssen et al., 2021; Hays & Erford, 2014; Jakovljevic et al., 2019; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Scott & Wolfe, 2015; Sue et al., 2014; Yamado et al., 2020). Yet, ambiguity and stereotypes remain (Alton, 2020; Hoffman, 2020; Holmberg et al., 2017, 2021; Lee et al., 2019; Oxhandler et al., 2021). For example, definitions of spirituality are diverse and fractured like the many RS methods used to integrate it (Entwistle, 2010; Tan, 2011), and secular interpretations of spirituality are humanistic and based on relational and physiological senses (Schwartz, 2016).

Conversely, Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) define spirituality as "human aspirations or goals that move beyond animal instinct and self-centered concerns to ultimate meaning and sacrificial services for others and the good of the whole" (p. 439). This value laden concept of spirituality is derived from a Christian worldview and highlights the significance of identity and meaning that is rooted in spirituality and religion. Numerous attempts have been made to integrate psychology with a spirituality defined by a Christian worldview (Tan, 2011).

According to Collins (1988), Adams (1973) is considered the grandfather of Christian psychology and data and integration have evolved over the decades since (Cook, 2020; Garssen

et al., 2021; Yamado et al., 2020), including childhood and adolescent research regarding the

significance of RS (Lee et al., 2019; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Although validity for RS is

strong, curriculum and methodologies for supervision are still lacking (Garssen et al., 2021; Hull

& Romig, 2021). Research into the significance of RS during the identity vs. role confusion stage

of adolescence is equally lacking (Garssen et al., 2021)—a developmental stage of particular

social importance (Erikson, 1968; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

**Social Context**

Religiosity is in decline in favor of an experiential spirituality (Pew Research Center

[PRC], 2019). This overidentification with spirituality has lessened the influence of a religious

state orthodoxy to the benefit of secular ideologies like humanism (Hall & Hall, 2021). A

concern is that "liberalism is morally bankrupt" and fluid interpretations of spirituality leave

adolescents lacking in moral meaning and identity (Franke, 2019; Koppelman, 2006, p. 647).

Koppelman (2006) states that "Understanding the fluidity of neutrality will not tell you what to

do. It will, however, alert you to the breadth of your options [and] that awareness can have

practical consequences" (p. 647). This secular ideology emerged in the 1970s along with

neutrality theory "simultaneously with controversies over abortion, gay rights, funding for the

arts, childcare policy, the roles of the sexes, and the place of traditional values in education and

especially in sex education" (p. 635). Koppelman stresses that this neutral ideology was meant to

"purge politics of the dogmas of orthodoxy" (p. 635).

Neutrality favors the introduction of identity recommendations that encourage

exploration of an experiential spirituality while neglecting the ordering effects of a moral

religiosity (Amerongen-Meeuse et al., 2020; Bock et al., 2021; Constantine, 2020; Krok, 2015;

Lee et al., 2019; Schwartz, 2016). Although trends in multiculturalism have countered the theory

of value neutrality to stress the value of minority cultural practices, Christian values are

marginalized in treatment manuals, ethical codes, and licensing boards in favor of humanistic

interpretations (Johnson et al., 2020; McGoldrick et al., 2005)—particularly sexual ethics (Hull

& Romig, 2021). For example, treatment recommendations for clinicians working with

adolescents with same sex attractions are to encourage the client to embrace the attraction in

hopes of lowing symptomology (Jongsma et al., 2014)—as opposed to the client working this out

for themselves. Obviously, the separation of church and state adds an additional layer of

complexity for Christian counselors working with adolescents in the public-school system

(Constantine, 2020).

A lack of operational definitions, supervision, and empirically supported methodology

causes counselors to rely on subjective interpretations and implicit methods of RS (Johnson et

al., 2020; Karl et al., 2021; Santrac, 2016). According to Sanders (2013) implicit methods do not

"openly, directly, or systematically use spiritual resources like prayer and Scripture or other

sacred texts, in therapy" (p. 229). This lack of cohesion results in an avoidance that denies

children and adolescents potential resources in a difficult stage of development (Erikson, 1968;

Karl et al., 2021). Techniques and interventions integrating RS are valuable resource for

adolescents struggling with identity and meaning making issues (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

According to Schwartz (2016), "adolescence is an optimal time for counselors to explore

issues of meaning and purpose with their clients and students" (p. 3). The author goes on to point

out that adolescents are ready and able and can benefit from interventions addressing meaning-

making and identity. However, counselors working in the public-school system often avoid or

rely on implicit methods of integrating RS into treatment despite the relevancy or need

(Foxworth, 1998; Gillespie, 2019; Kao et al., 2020; Lambie et al., 2008; Lewy & Betty, 2007;

Palmer, 2003; Plater, 2016; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Rosik et al., 2016; Schwartz, 2016; Sink, 2004; Tan & Wong, 2012).

**Theoretical Context**

Gary Collins (1988) is considered "one of Christian counseling's most influential worldwide ambassadors" and has best defined the "integrationist position, where biblical theology and the psychosocial sciences are integrated into a workable counseling model" (Clinton & Ohlschlager, 2006, p. 42). However, broad meaning and definitions, multiple models, differing views, and no central theory make integration difficult to achieve (Entwistle, 2010). Integration is "efforts at fostering faithfully Christian thinking and approaches to disciplines and professional cultures that have become distinct from theology in the contemporary era" (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021, p. 185). These collective efforts hope to foster a uniquely Christian psychology through integration.

Jones and Buttman (2011) write, "We use the term integration even though we regard it as problematic" as integration "implies that things that don't naturally mix must willfully be brought into connection, to be integrated" (p. 35). These same authors believe that faith and science are interrelated, and that any interpretation will be shaped by biblical concepts (p. 38). At its core attempts to integrate psychology and Christianity is a commitment to a biblical worldview (Jones & Buttman, 2011). According to Hall and Hall (2022) integration is a mending together of what should not have been made separate.

Over 30 theoretical models exist to guide the Christian counselor with integrating psychology and theology (Tan, 2011). These models address waves of integration (Tan, 2011), theory (Adams, 1973; Callaway & Whitney, 2022; Ellens, 2016; Webb, 2017), views (Myers et al., 2010), camps (Entwistle, 2010), domains (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021), traits (Gunnoe,

2022; Tan, 2011), technique (Neff & McMinn, 2020), spiritual resources (Johnson, 2017), etc.

However, andragogical efforts to teach integration offer poor concept retention rates and are

inconsistent among universities, and supervision seldom addresses spiritual issues (Alton, 2020).

Faith-based integrationists oftentimes rely on implicit methods and use psychological theory,

techniques, and interventions reflective of a Christian worldview. However, calls for empirically

supported methods are increasing (Johnson et al., 2020).

Faith based integration is multifaceted and underdeveloped operational definitions

complicate theoretical application and intervention (Hull & Romig, 2021; Karl et al., 2021).

Foundational views from relevant fields offer a theoretical framework to help strengthen the

need for a deeper understanding of how multiple factors influence adolescent development. For

example, identity theory is a major theory supporting this research and the seminal works of

Erikson (1968) is a cornerstone of identity theory which undergirds the empirical evidence for

adolescent spirituality and intervention. A better understanding of how practitioners view the

integration of Christian identity resources will help ensure these resources are reaching

adolescents who identity as Christian.

## Situation to Self

For this study, integration using implicit methods is assumed. According to Sanders

(2013), implicit methods do not "openly, directly, or systematically use spiritual resources like

prayer and Scripture or other sacred texts, in therapy" (p. 229). Christian counselors embody

characteristics of Christ that are now Rogerian principles taught as a cornerstone of the

therapeutic profession: empathy, genuineness, unconditional positive regard (Neukrug, 2014).

Most administrators, teachers, and counselors rely exclusively on implicit methods to integrate

their religious worldview. For example, many teachers view spirituality relationally and thus

utilize relational connection as a means for others to experience traits of God through themselves (Gibson, 2014; Gillespie, 2019; Glenn et al., 2009; Mata-McMahon et al., 2019; Palmer, 2003).

Adolescence is a time for meaning making and identity formation and the absence of a space to verbalize a moral theology because of counselor avoidance is a concern to this researcher (Bock et al., 2021; Erickson, 1968). It is the researcher's worldview and belief that an absence of a moral identity and meaning-making system like religiosity forces adolescents to make meaning and identity from trends and influential powers operating on secular ideologies, and the adolescent's subjective experiences (McWhorter, 2019). Although experiential methods are a healthy course of identity formation, the absence of a moral universality may be contributing to fluid interpretations and reality continuums that exacerbate confusion during a developmental stage known to require a meaning beyond the subjective self to stabilize identity.

It is my view that an identity in Christ permeates all other aspects of self, and that healthy development requires conformity to His image (Romans 8:29). Instead of relaxing the law to justify our sins (Matthew 5:20), one must rely on the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ (John 3:16), despite our shortcomings (Romans 3:23), as we conform and live out His character above our own self-nature (Romans 8:1-11). This personal belief system impacted the study because it assumes that a space for biblical meaning-making is crucial for healthy development and should be offered to adolescents in the identity vs. role confusion stage of development.

The motivation for conducting this study was to highlight the gap between the positive associations between RS and Erikson's identity theory, and to identify impediments for these resources. I use an axiological assumption acknowledging that the researcher is value-laden and that biases are present (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, a transformative paradigm acting for social improvements to address the powerlessness of a marginalized group will guide the

study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Problem Statement

Childrens' and adolescents' awareness of RS has proven relevant and an important construct toward healthy development (Boynton & Mellan, 2021; Cannon & Niederdeppe, 2022; Cook, 2020; Dulaney et al., 2018; Garssen et al., 2021; Magyar-Rusell et al., 2022; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2016; Temple & Gall, 2018; Weber & Pargament, 2014). Past research on childhood and adolescent RS demonstrates how this population views, develops, and practices RS (Bertman-Troost et al., 2007, 2009; Chan et al., 2015; Holder et al., 2010; Jordan et al., 2014; Marques et al., 2013; Puffer et al., 2008; Rew & Wong, 2005; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006); and current research has shown that children and adolescents benefit from the exploration and expression of RS (Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Chapman et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022; Krok, 2015; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Severe, 2020; Werk et al., 2021). Subsequently, Boynton and Mellan (2021) argue "it is critical for counsellors to create space for the sacred and be open to the spiritual dimension if they are to apply a holistic counselling approach" (p. 1).

However, counselors lack training and resources for integrating RS into adolescent identity development and routinely avoid these discussions (Boynton & Mellan, 2021; Babyak & Cook, 2019; Gibson, 2014; Gillespie, 2019; Kao et al., 2020; Lambie et al., 2008; Mata-McMahon et al., 2019; Mahipalan & Muhammed, 2019; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Pett & Cooling, 2018; Plater, 2016; Rosik et al., 2016; Schwartz, 2013; Sink, 2004; Soares et al., 2014). Boynton and Mellan (2021) note that few approaches address "spirituality in counseling with children" (p. 1), and according to Kao et al. (2020) there is a need for progress in clinical applications on the integration of RS with adolescents. Karl et al. (2021) notes that "few studies

have surveyed the current practices among those who identity as Christian therapists or counselors" (p. 298). Additionally, Krok (2015) calls for more research on the mediational role of meaning-making in relation to RS, and "guidance for mental health professionals who could use psychological interventions based on faith resources and meaning structures in enhancing individuals' coping abilities" (p. 202).

Therefore, the focus of current research and future recommendations dictate that the purpose of this qualitative and phenomenological study is to explore what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors. This research is necessary for developing clarification, training models and methods, and best practices that will provide adolescents with healthy coping and cultural resources for the ever-looming demands of adolescence.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors. Although the professional and ethical development of a counselor's multicultural competencies for integrating RS into treatment is widely assumed (McGoldrick et al., 2005; Remley & Herlihy, 2014; Sanders, 2013), Christians working in a setting like the public-school system often do not incorporate overt religious methods into therapy for fear of prejudice, pathologizing, and negative reactions (Lee et al., 2019)—yet child and adolescent spirituality is a vital construct of mental health and fitting for this stage of development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Clarifying roles, bridging services, and developing meaningful considerations for unbiased religious content is important toward developing empirically based religious methodologies as a coping resource for vulnerable youth who identify with a religion.

## Significance of the Study

Seminal works by Entwistle (2010), Johnson (2017), McMinn (1996), and Tan (2011), among others, offer varying models and interpretations for Christian integration and countless studies underscore the significance of RS in relation to adolescent mental health (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Additionally, theories of identity and attachment strengthen the need for identity and meaning-making methods as cultural resources for this stage of development (Bowlby, 2005; Erikson, 1968; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Schwartz et al., 2012). Despite the theories, models, and data strengthening the call for integrating religion and counseling there is friction between theology and psychology (Santrac, 2016), and Christian counselors lack clarity and guidance. As calls for integration ring louder (Karl et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Santrac, 2016), so too is the need for clearer and practical methods of integration which go beyond borrowing from psychology (Johnson et al., 2020).

Professional counselors are considered the gatekeepers of RS and public-school counselors have unprecedented access to adolescents (Florence et al., 2019). Many Christian counselors fear exposure in public settings and rely on implicit methods of integration (Lee et al. 2019). A study exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors will help clarify roles and expectations, improve best practices, bridge services, and develop technique and intervention. This would not only improve the work conditions and thus lives of those Christians practicing in the public-school system, but also provide valuable methods and coping resources to an adolescent population known for identity and meaning making struggles.

## Research Questions

### Central Research Question

What does integrating identity and meaning making mean to Christian school counselors

who work with adolescents in the public school system?

**Guiding Research Question**

How do Christian school counselors who work in the public school system navigate

identity and meaning making issues with adolescents?

**Guiding Research Question**

What is a Christian school counselor's experience with integrating Christian

identification and meaning making RS resources into therapy?

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**Definitions**

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1. *Applied integration* - "The attempt to either culturally adapt or accommodate secular
   interventions or helping approaches for use with a Christian population or to develop
   explicitly Christian interventions and helping approaches derived from Christian thought
   and practice" (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021, p. 181).

2. *Attitude* - a psychological tendency that involves evaluating a particular object with some
   degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

3. *Christian psychology* - "a psychology that accurately describes the psychological nature
   of human beings as understood according to historic Christianity" (Johnson et al., 2020,
   p. 155).

4. *Explicit integration* - "a more overt approach that directly and systematically deals with
   spiritual or religious issues in therapy and uses spiritual resources like prayer, Scripture
   or sacred texts, referrals to church or other religious groups or lay counselors, and other
   religious practices" (Tan, 2011, p. 340).

5. *Faith* - "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen
   (*English Standard Version Bible*, 1526/2001, Hebrews 11:1).

6. *Implicit integration* - "a more covert approach that does not initiate the discussion of religious or spiritual issues and does not openly, directly or systematically use spiritual resources" (Tan, 2011, p. 340).

7. *Identification* - "When people identify with the value of a commitment or choice, the feel volitional in maintaining and behaving on the basis of that commitment because they experience the commitment as a reflection of who they are" (Schwartz et al., 2012, p. 387).

8. *Imago Dei* - "the most perfect image of God (Calvin, 1559/1960, p. 190)" (as cited in Johnson, 2017, p. 79).

9. *Integration* - "efforts at fostering faithfully Christian thinking and approaches to disciplines and professional cultures that have become distinct from theology in the contemporary era" (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021, p. 185).

10. *Meaning-making* - "the process by which individuals make sense out of their turning points" (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012, p. 1058).

11. *Religiosity* - "a system of spiritual beliefs, practices, or both, typically organized around the worship of an all-powerful deity (or deities) and involving behaviors such as prayer, medication, and participation in collective rituals. Other common features of organized religions are the belief that certain moral teachings have divine authority, and the recognition of certain people, places, texts, or objects as holy or sacred" (APA, 2022).

12. *Spirituality* - "human aspirations or goals that move beyond animal instinct and self-centered concerns to ultimate meaning and sacrificial services for others and the good of the whole" (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 439).

13. *Value neutrality* - "the idea of value neutrality, or value freedom, implies the existence of

a research stance or practice independent from the value system and value judgements of the researcher or practitioner" (Burr, 2014, p. 2043).

## Summary

Like many teachers and administrators, Christian counselors working in the public-school system often rely on implicit methods of integrating their faith. However, unlike teachers and administrators, school counselors are also tasked with treating and providing life altering coping methods for mental health issues. Because adolescence is a developmental stage known for struggles and spirituality is a vital construct during this developmental stage, adolescents and their counselor deserve a safe space to explore religion and spirituality beyond a humanist self-production. Exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christan public-school counselors may help clarify roles and expectations that ensure a safe space for spiritual exploration and can provide religious identity and meaning as a coping method during this phase of development. Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

## Overview

The separation of church and state is multifaceted and complex. Christian counselors who work in the public-school system must balance their own first amendment freedoms with respect of the student's autonomy, as well as the codes of conduct that govern and protect all attending the public system. Although cultural competency is considered integral both professionally and clinically (McGoldrick et al., 2005), contemporary trends favor an ambiguous spirituality over a meaningful religiosity (Milacci, 2006). This trend subjects adolescents to a cultural influence of humanistic interpretation and experimentation. This setting restricts access to local culture and traditions offering coping skills and relational resources that coincide with their faith and developmental stage (Erikson, 1968). Little is known as to what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors who identify with and utilize these same resources.

The following chapter provides a conceptual framework for why the study will be conducted. It includes a related literature section that will provide information on what has been examined, what has not been examined, current trends and developments, and finally, highlight the gap in literature. Next, the theoretical framework focuses on identity theory and how it relates to attachment theory and the God image, and how this relates to religion and the value shaping role religiosity can play during adolescence. Finally, practical clinical applications are examined before a summary is provided.

This study will fill the gap by clarifying what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors who work with a population struggling with identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1968). The data provided will help to clarify professional roles and responsibilities, enhance understanding of how culture might be better utilized for coping

resources, develop best practices, and bridge services.

## Related Literature

**Secular versus Christian Conceptualizations of Spirituality**

Distance of the psychic structure and the person develops a space for spiritual exploration (Alton, 2020)—a space enhanced by somatic and mindful methods and cultivates awareness apart from internalizations gleaned from the past (Jones & Butman, 2011; Murdock, 2013; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2016; Uhernik, 2016). This felt sense of the present self is existential and spiritual (Frankl, 2000). According to Holmberg et al. (2021), "Spirituality is closely linked to the body, expressed as emotions, feelings, behavior, and relationship, and includes a humanistic view of life related to meaning, values, and coherence" (p. 79). A humanist view of spirituality is so encompassing it is confusing (Milacci, 2006). By default, the ego is the center of existence and interprets meaning-making and identity subjectively and apart from religious guidance. However, religiosity is a global phenomenon as 80% in the United States profess a religious affiliate and over 70% identity with a Christian denomination (PRC, 2019).

This humanization of the sacred lacks cultural and moral confines that are prerequisites for civility and potential resources for the exploration of the self in an otherwise tumultuous stage of development known as identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1968). Without guidance, a humanistic worldview enmeshes the child ego with the sacred to produce fluid powers that defy logic and understanding—a supernatural quality that fits well with a humanistic worldview obsessed with tribalizing its members (Franke, 2019). This is important because cultural identity formed during adolescence informs political worldviews that remain consistent across the lifespan (Rekker et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, most school-aged children attend public-schools with limited access to

cultural and theological interpretations of God from a Christian worldview in favor of an all-inclusive pluralistic approach emphasizing globalism and ethics (Barb, 2017). Barb (2017) adds, "Starting in the 1940s and the strict secularization of public education by the Supreme Court, religion became also largely marginalized and neglected in American schools concerned with not breaching the 'wall of separation'" (p. 205). Ironically, Goroncy (2017) argues that Christ's identity is "transposable" and more tolerable of other cultures than secular worldviews (p. 220). However, in a judicial attempt to limit denominational supremacy the court made a ruling that limited the religious worldview and shifted the sphere of influence toward secular ideologies (Barb, 2017). This was a judicial approach primarily concerned with civic inclusion and not mental (Feindberg, 2013).

However, spirituality is incomplete apart from religiosity (Hall & Hall, 2021). The absence of a religious worldview inherently produces a humanism that no longer competes with other religious narratives for meaning making and identity. Rather, children must make meaning and identity based on their lived experience—no matter how confusing or traumatic. Alternatively, a Christian spirituality is a distinct worldview and one with an augmenting modality that cannot be separated between the sacred and the secular (Hoffman, 2020). Ellens (2016) defines Christian spirituality as "the universal, irrepressible, human hunger for meaning" to which the scriptures answer (p. 44). Thus, spirituality is a part of an identity, and that identity is rooted in Jesus Christ—making it impossible to separate the man from the model or religiosity from spirituality.

During adolescence children begin to think more abstractly and develop more sophisticated inquisitions of their previous implicit knowledge of the spiritual (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Without religious models forged from centuries of critical thinking and collective

wisdom children must author their own religion based on their limited experiences. Hilton (2003) addresses the significant role of values in identity formation and argues their centrality— meaning that the cultural values expressed will shape identity. Although therapists are empowered to integrate RS into therapeutic objectives if appropriate and consented (ACA, 2014), childhood and adolescent spirituality is undervalued, rarely assessed, and seldom expressed ritualistically due to the perceived limitations (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Despite the new wave of multiculturalism promoting Indigenous practices and extensive data linking mental well-being and RS (Frunza et al., 2019; McGoldrick et al., 2005), empirically supported Christian integration remains limited in function (Alton, 2020). This is due to self-censorship and poor models of integration (Alton, 2020; Rosik et al., 2016). Regardless, RS supports client growth and should be complementary to all therapeutic endeavors (Frunza et al., 2019), particularly during this unique stage of development (Erikson, 1968).

**The Ambiguity of Integration**

Despite Sigmond Freud's proclamation on the death of religion, RS continues to play a vital role in the 21st century (Murdock, 2016). Like the predecessors of the sciences, psychology's prodigal return is ever-looming (Entwistle, 2010). Christian universities, Christian codes of ethics, professional bodies, empirically supported techniques, and interventions, etc., are evolving. Still, liberal governing bodies continue to dominate the profession and wield influence. Regardless, after decades of compiling undisputable evidence, the psychological profession no longer views RS as pathological but rather a resource and protective factor for Indigenous populations (ACA, 2014; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, attempts to integrate psychology and theology are met with near complete distrust not just from governing bodies in psychology but the church as well (Rennebohm &

Thoburn, 2017, 2021; Rotman, 2017; Santrac, 2016). Jay Adams (1973) recognized the need for

counseling training in seminaries after teaching a counseling course none of his colleagues

wanted to teach—a reluctant sentiment echoed by many in seminary that still holds true today

(Harvey, 2012). Although Adams (1973) promotes a moralistic method of counseling strictly

from the bible, and stanchly opposes psychological integration, he is often recognized in the field

of integration because his distinguishing works further an otherwise crowded field of healing

efforts (Tan, 2011).

Although integrative methods have advanced and are becoming increasingly

sophisticated and empirically supported, a Christian psychological movement is required before

Christian practitioners are not viewed simply as borrowers of the psychological profession

operating under secular authority (Johnson et al., 2020). Santrac (2016) argues, "there is no

future for the project of a Christian psychology without serious academic endeavor to find new

ways of integrating the scientific accomplishments of psychology and its implications with the

Christian worldview" (p. 231). Admittedly, not much is known about the effectiveness of

Christian tenants in therapy (Hoffman, 2020), and a positive regard from all governing bodies for

the health benefits and protective factors of a healthy RS is desperately needed to advance these

integrative efforts (Jakovljevic et al., 2019).

Attempts have already been made by authors to clarify approaches and to highlight the

usefulness of RS from a Christian worldview. For example, authors like Myers and Jeeves

(2003) provide a useful examination of human psychological and physiological development

through the lends of faith, and Entwistle (2010) offers a historical context of integration by

categorizing models of integration like the allies' model which presupposes that psychology and

Christianity can benefit from integration. McMinn (1996) is another figure and clarifies

integration from a practical applications view, which offers applicable techniques and interventions for therapists.

Additionally, Tan (2011) cites 27 models of integration, three major paradigms, and four basic approaches to integration, while providing a helpful review of major counseling and psychotherapeutic theories and techniques and offers a broad Christian appraisal including views of pathology and health and 13 of his own basic principles to Christian counseling. Tan (2011) and Johnson (2017) both advocate for a distinctly Christian psychology heavily grounded in theology. Other views include a theological perspective looking at historical and cultural contexts of pathology, examining human development through a theoretical perspective, and offering multiple views of integration (Balswick et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2010; Webb, 2017). Ambler et al. (2017) examines positive psychology and its compatibility with a Christian worldview, and Ellens (2016) offers a more up-to-date interpretation utilizing fear as the root of pathology and calls for a grace approach to counseling.

More recently Neff and McMinn (2020) attempt to further the conversation regarding integration that is less theological and more from a therapeutic lens. Gunnoe (2022) examines five developmental theories through a faith-based view, and Hall and Hall (2021) calls for the prodigal infusion of relational spirituality back into biblical theology; an attempt to reunite RS to that which man should not have made separate. Hathaway and Yarhouse (2021) offer a domains-based approach—like the five views—which look at integration from various perspectives to help organize the attempts at integration thus far. Finally, Hathaway and Yarhouse stress a distinction between basic and applied science, and explicit and implicit methods, and state that "We do not expect theoretical unity to be achieved by human scholars anytime soon, although some convergence and progress would not be surprising" (p. 87).

In short, despite the theoretical progress applied integration is still in its infancy (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021). The lack of integrative modality forces practitioners to rely on the safety of implicit methods of integration and to ignore overt methods that would otherwise provide valuable coping resources during a turbulent stage of development like adolescence (Alton, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). A stage begging for stability from centuries old collective wisdom, and less from a confusing experientialism producing fluid interpretations of a subjective truth. Coupled with ambiguous governances, this existential humanism is unrivalled. There is nothing left to combat a secular worldview and avoiding the integration of religious traditions and cultural beliefs denies adolescents sacred stones used for the foundational construction of civility.

**Utilizing Religiosity to Counter an Overreliance on Implicit Integration**

For this study, integration using implicit methods is assumed. Christian counselors strive to embody characteristics of Christ that are now standardized Rogerian principles being taught as a cornerstone of the profession: empathy, genuineness, unconditional positive regard (Neukrug, 2014). Most administrators, teachers, and therapists who are Christian routinely rely on implicit methods to integrate their religious precepts. For example, many teachers view spirituality relationally and thus utilize a relational connection as a means for others to experience traits of God through themselves (Cook, 2020; Gibson, 2014; Gillespie, 2019). Although this is an acceptable method of implicit integration and effective with many populations—particularly with young children—identity theory postulates that adolescence is a unique life transitional time of meaning-making and identity formation or confusion (Erickson, 1968).

Although implicit methods are an effective way to infuse one's spirituality, unfortunately, to adolescents, this approach does not look a whole lot different from secular models utilizing

Rogerian principles. In other words, spirituality lacks cultural values that are known to aid

identity formation (Hilton, 2003). It is the absence of religiosity as a moral and meaning-making

method in a stage of identity vs. confusion, and the countereffects thereof, that is a primary

concern. Ample data validates the health correlates from RS and multicultural competency

toward these efforts is expected (ACA, 2014). However, legal ambiguities, contradicting codes

of ethics, and fractured teaching methods limit attempts at integrating religiosity as a coping

resource for identity and meaning (Alton, 2020; Barto, 2018; Edman et al., 2016; Johnson et al.,

2020).

Most counselors avoid RS (Lee et al., 2019; Oxhandler et al., 2021; Scott, 2018).

However, avoidance of topics which directly pertain to adolescent development denies valuable

resources for coping during this life transition. A biblical narrative rich in meaning and identity

offers a counter narrative to an otherwise echo chamber for a fluid spirituality honed by

boundless experimentation. Therefore, faith-based integration assumes the paired construct of

RS, or implicit methodology with religious contributes, and serves as an operational definition

for this study (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021).

**Barriers of Faith-based Integration in the Public-school System**

*Identifying the Law*

Under the false guise of neutrality public schools can propagate secular values that are

increasingly anti-Christian (Brown, 2020; Newman, 2021; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Recent

correspondence between the Department of Justice and the Department of Education labeling

parents with conservative worldviews as domestic terrorists serve to highlight the stark division

between these worldviews (Constantine, 2020). Furthermore, the recent U.S. Supreme Court

ruling, and subsequent opinion concerning *Roe v Wade* and *Kennedy v Louisiana*, has made it

clear that tolerance, not exclusion or suppression, is the fundamentalist view of the U.S.

Constitution's framers (Constantine, 2020; Webb, 2002). This is a worldview that is uniquely

Christian and a perspective that encourages grace and tolerance for minority worldviews

(Entwistle, 2010). Therefore, public inclusion of differing and opposing worldviews (the

majority and minority) is more akin to tolerance and neutrality than is a social activism that

utilizes the power of governing bodies to impose a single worldview. The latter would better

represent cultural imperialism.

Although respect and tolerance of differing worldviews sacrifices a global ideology, it is

more inclusive (Moe, 2019). On this subject, Moe (2019) echoes these same sentiments when

arguing that "a culture of tolerance is superior to one that seeks to limit and constrict apposing

worldviews" (p. 105). Other scholars have argued for a responsible hermeneutical pedagogy

teaching about several religions (Pett & Cooling, 2018)—including Christianity and its historical

contribution to the founding nation. Since the Supreme Court's ruling in *Engel v Vitale* (370 U.S.

421) in 1962 and the removal of prayer, the idea of separation of church and state has taken on

new meaning beyond its intention (Constantine, 2020). Public schools are now in the position to

deny constitutional rights to some and entitle others based on secular worldviews (Constantine,

2020)—worldviews that have produced staggering deleterious effects for children and

adolescents in the absence of religious guidance (Constantine, 2020).

On this subject Dowd (2021) writes

When the curriculum privileges non-religious epistemologies, ideologies, and

worldviews, such as secularism and scientism, often to the expulsion of religious ways of

knowing and making meaning, then the schools violate the first amendment of the

constitution as intended by the supreme court. (p. 1)

Similarly, Newman (2021) stresses that education is fundamentally religious, and Melouka (2018) argues that experiential humanism falsely presuppose that their values of education, free speech, and rational thinking are democratic methods that will foster morality. This is a view in contrast of the Christian model on the brokenness of humanity. As it turns out a secular worldview is as religious as any other worldview and Christianity has the legal right and responsibility to compete for the hearts and minds of this nation's youth (Carlson & Kees, 2019); and counselors are in a unique position to offer methods that sustain the child's cultural values.

*Public School Administrator, Counselor, and Teacher Influence*

Spirituality is a contested term in education (Gillespie, 2019). Most attempts made to define spirituality include meaning-making as a construct. To pursue spirituality is synonymous with identity. Schwartz (2012) found that school counselors believed it important to address meaning-making and did so through identity formation. Still, the subject of spirituality is often avoided in their work with adolescents in the public school system due to the counselors' own identities as a public employee, fear of perceived repercussions, and the risk of imposing their own values (Schwartz, 2012). Regardless, "Choosing to disregard a student's spiritual beliefs and traditions is deemed unethical practice" (Lambie et al., 2008, p. 221).

Similarly, afterschool programs, religious teachings, class priorities, religious expression, and final interpretation of spirituality are influenced by the administrator's own religion and spirituality (Peters, 2010). For example, spirituality informed principal relationships, decisions, stress coping, and leadership traits (Peters, 2010). Relatedly, public-school teachers report no experience discussing spirituality during employment or educational pursuits (Drotar, 2011). Although teachers and students often define spirituality as relational (Drotar, 2011), many teachers choose to conceal their spiritual identities or express it indirectly or covertly because it

is a contested topic in the public-school system and often considered taboo (Babyak & Cook, 2019; Wartenweiler, 2020; Rosik et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, the ambiguous nature of spirituality makes it difficult to justify as even environmental agendas are expressed values capitalizing on a broad interpretation of spirituality (Johnson & O'Brien, 2013). An open discussion on the limits of integration, devotion, and literary and historical biblical texts would be helpful here. Noghiu (2020) argues for a spirituality-infused leadership that is more noble than the current model of impositions. This proposed spiritual-based leadership aims to reduce tensions and promote the valuable resource and protective factors of RS. It seeks to bring discussions of spirituality to the table to act in a more ethical and informed manner as opposed to suppression or avoidance.

Interestingly, RS curricular and best practices in developed nations have had a positive correlation with student mental health K-12 (Cunha & Comin, 2019; Ramakrishnan et al., 2018). The effortless way out is to make no time for RS which is the current protocol in the United States (Lewy & Betty, 2007). Without religious courses underscoring the moral development of a population the absence of these values becomes a tear in the moral fabric of the nation. It may not be enough to nurture a child or adolescent's spiritualty in a purely secular-humanist context. Focusing on implicit methods like creative expression, free-play, engagement with nature, mindfulness, and relational and character development may not provide the spiritual context many religions provide as people relate to the divine (Mata-McMahon et al., 2019). This is an ultimate identity and meaning-making experience (Clinton & Sibcy, 2002). At the very least, corporate efforts to normalize RS would undoubtably lesson stigma and counselor reluctancy and provide a safe theological alternative to identity formation beyond risky experimentation (Goncalves et al., 2014).

*Counselor Identity*

The therapeutic relationship accounts for most of the therapeutic growth (Neukrug, 2014), and theoretical orientation and technique is but a fraction of therapeutic gains (Tan, 2018). The therapist as genuine self (belief system, personality, attitude, faith, and values), in relationship, is an integral part of therapy and a cornerstone for the counseling profession (Neukrug, 2014). This likely accounts for the counseling field predominantly female (Clay, 2017), as women tend to be more relationally oriented than men (Eagly, 2020). The interpersonal nature of healing and its reliance on the person make a Christian identity inseparable from the therapeutic endeavor (Scott, 2018). Thus, "ethical codes limit integration, authenticity, professional development, and ultimately, healing" (p. 309). This results in a "fractured and disintegrated" professional self and hinderances for the client (p. 309).

Although interpretations between therapist and client can differ markedly (Prout et al., 2021), clients are often open to and want to discuss RS issues (Lombard, 2017; Magaldi & Trub, 2016)—particularly adolescents (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Despite the data underscoring the importance of RS, many therapists do not incorporate RS into treatment (Lee et al., 2019). Psychotherapists often avoid the topic altogether, either to protect the therapeutic relationship or unresolved RS identity in the therapist (Bernhardt et al., 2019; Magaldi & Trub, 2016). Often, attending to RS issues are anxiety provoking for the therapist which elicit biases toward RS (Balmer et al., 2012). For example, Holmberg et al. (2017) argue that spirituality is nonexistent in family therapy. Consequently, many in the profession recognize the need for training, supervision, models, and techniques to lower stress and counter these biases (Balmer et al., 2012).

Complicating matters, Christians in secular settings often fear institutional prejudice,

pathologizing from non-Christian colleagues, or the client's reaction and the effect on the

therapeutic relationship (Lee et al., 2019; Sum, 2021). Also, an adversarial environment has an

impact on the depth of integration (Natsis, 2016; Scott, 2018). In such cases psychotherapists

often utilize implicit methods for sharing RS (Magaldi & Trub, 2016), and despite Christian

influence these therapists understand the ethical standards of the profession and adhere to

them—seeking consent before addressing spiritual issues (Evans et al., 2021). Thus, identity

awareness prevents the imposition of values (Remley & Herlihy, 2014), and values are how

identity is expressed (Duggal & Sriram, 2021).

Thankfully, the psychotherapeutic profession no longer clings to the outdated notion of

value neutrality but instead embraces the data underscoring the necessity to develop a personal

awareness of values and permit the exploration of the client without imposition of one's own or

the expulsion of the clients (Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Unfortunately, the developmental stage of

school-aged children is experiential and lacks cultural or theological underpinnings which is

crucial toward the healthy development of morality and civility (Duggal & Sriram, 2021). For

example, generations lacking religious diversity exposure cling to a fluid spirituality and moral

humanism and are less tolerant of apposing worldviews (Constantine, 2020). Allowing

adolescents to develop their religious/cultural values through therapeutic endeavors offers an

experiential approach and safe alternative that counters unbridled exploration and intolerance for

Indigenous populations with different worldviews.

## Theoretical Framework

### Identity and Meaning

#### *Identity Theory and Formation*

Erik Erikson's (1968) lifespan model of development is a seminal work and foundational

to identity theory research (Schwartz et al., 2012). The author's model encompasses eight stages

of development, and adolescents (12-18 years old) in the fifth stage wrestle with identity vs. role

confusion (Erikson, 1968). In this stage adolescents attempt to answer the big question "Who am

I?" Utilizing values, strengths, and exploration, a felt sense of autonomy and identity can be

secured—albeit a lifelong process of testing and refinement (Erikson, 1968). Failure to achieve

identity can result in role confusion and hinder growth, increase the risk of pathology, and limit

interpersonal and professional development (Erikson, 1968).

The formation of identity forming systems such as values and beliefs are primarily

subconscious and require a more rigorous analysis like questioning or alternative worldviews to

deepen awareness and to refine an internal working model (IWM) (Fowler, 1981). According to

Noble-Carr and Woodman (2018) "constructing identity and meaning making is a difficult task

for all adolescents and is an increasingly isolated and complex endeavor" (p. 692). Cultural and

religious interpretations can provide identity and meaning-making resources that are less

subjective than humanistic interpretations appropriate for young and older populations, which

feel grounding, less fluid or abstract, and more relational.

The dichotomous task to construct identity and develop autonomy through close

relationships is known as individualization (Mclean et al., 2010). This process is complex, and

theory posits that multiple identities based on multiple relationships attribute multiple meanings

onto the self—motivating behavior (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021). The formulation of multiple

identities is hierarchical and value laden, and identities higher in the hierarchy are most

influential and recurring (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021). In other words, "Identities that are highly

valued are more likely to guide our behavior, impact how we see ourselves, and impact our

general sense of self" (p. 193). These hierarchies crystallize or remain diffused (Erikson, 1968;

Stark & Traxler, 1974). Thus, an enriched meaning-making learning environment offers more opportunities to cultivate a valued identity beyond a grandiose self. Conversely, limited opportunities and/or abuse thwart explorations beyond one's narrowed perception of self.

"Failure to understand one's core values can lead an individual to behave inauthentically" and attention to lived experience can heal by making meaning of the trauma (Temple & Gall, 2018, p. 189). But positive meaning beyond one's narrowed experiences, especially if negative, should also be considered as a preventative measure (Temple & Gall, 2018). Failure to add value beyond humanistic experiences will limit value formations less dependent on the self and provide value and purpose beyond the self. Because high-risk youths lack purpose, finding something to say "yes" to for future purpose seems less viable (McWhirter et al., 2013, p. 141).

Identity development is a fluid process and vulnerabilities impact the trajectory of identity differently than those who have structure and stability visive familial and social supports (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018). Trauma, relational discord, adverse challenges, isolation, and instability undermine identity and meaning (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018). "In the absence of positive connections and life experiences, vulnerable young people are often forced to use adversity and negative life events as the main reference point for their identity and meaning constructions" (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018, p. 692). Unsure of identity and operating subconsciously (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021), youth will "shy away from interpersonal intimacy or throw himself into acts of intimacy which are 'promiscuous' without true fusion or real self-abandon" (Erikson, 1968, p. 135). These defenses "cause an incapacity to take chances with one's identity by sharing true intimacy" (p. 137).

Although the literature on identity theory is extensive, the formative steps of identity or how this process materializes is unknown (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021; Negru-Sabtircia et al.,

2016). Negru-Sabtircia et al. (2016) state that "to date little is known about the manner in which these two constructs [identity and meaning] may be related in this developmental stage" (p. 1926). According to Bruin-Wassinkmaat (2019), "There seems to be a lack of theoretical and empirical understanding of how these adolescents develop their religious identities" (p. 62). Currently, research is primarily on personal and relational factors and little to no attention is given to "sociocultural and structural influences of cultural norms around hegemonic masculinity, religious institutions, workplaces, and parents as socializers of children's gender roles" which influence identity crystallization later in life (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021, p. 203).

For example, culture is the catalyst for changing political identity (Rekker et al., 2017). This suggests that foundational views formed during childhood and adolescents undergird identity formation and parents have the greatest access of influence. Negru-Sabtircia et al. (2016) note that "Future studies should investigate how culture-sensitive factors influence identity and meaning in life longitudinally: e.g., religiosity" (p. 1934). The authors add that, "From an applied perspective, our findings highlight that interventions aimed at increasing adaptive identity development should also capitalize on the manner in which adolescents develop their worldviews, and subsequently derive meaning from these worldviews" (p. 1934). Cultural values formed early in life are foundational and difficult to influence later in life.

### Identity Influenced by Parental Attachment

Attachment is defined as the innate need to connect relationally with another human being (Seligman & Reichenberg, 2016). John Bowlby (1907-1990) is considered the father of attachment (Gunnoe, 2022), and his contributions paved the way for family systems theory and therapy, and more (Jones & Butman, 2011). Bowlby's 1969 theory of attachment highlights biological drives like the innate need for safety and security and our frail humanness (Gunnoe,

2022). According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2013) "Most contemporary psychoanalysts place great emphasis on early attachment experience and its impact on subsequent development" (p. 182).

Bowlby (1980) postulated that relational interactions with attachments in childhood formulate IWMs and function as anticipatory and regulatory systems of cognition (Danquah & Berry, 2014). Four styles of attachment emerge: Secure, Avoidant, Anxious/Ambivalent, and Disorganized. A secure attachment forms when core needs of the vulnerable and developing child are met (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Conversely, those who experience rejection formulate an anxious attachment, those neglected may come to possess an avoidant style of attachment, and finally, children with a disorganized attachment may have been exposed to irregularity and/or abuse (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). These IWMs are rigid and predict behavior.

Mary Ainsworth (1978) furthered Bowlby's work and describes the convoluted process between mother and infant (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). For example, in a secure attachment trust is established and needs are communicated and met. In an anxious attachment, the child is hypervigilant and concerned about abandonment (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). The avoidant child is distant, and the disorganized child swings back and forth between styles of attachment. Both Ainsworth and Bowlby are foundational theorists in systemics, and many theories have developed from their contributions to inform and guide their approach.

Bowlby had a systemic view toward the mutually interacting systems between infant and caregivers for regulation (Brisch, 2002). This system is considered an imprinted survival function that relies on closeness to reduce anxiety (Brisch, 2002). Reese (2018) underscores this vulnerable state by likening a felt security and safety of home to "mother's heartbeat" (p. 15).

Bowlby (1980) regarded the first few years of life as critical toward healthy development and attachment. An attachment's own self-regulation allows the child to augment toward a peaceful equilibrium free of threats to self (Hughes, 2007).

In absence of a threat that would otherwise activate the limbic nervous system, diminishing access to the frontal lobe, the child is able to regulate and thus learn from the environment (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019: Steele & Malchiodi, 2012; Levers, 2012). The child can regulate emotion with proximity to a secure attachment. Boccia (2011) equates this attachment behavior to the "set point" of a thermostat—a child's physiological reaction to stress when safety is jeopardized (p. 22). Gunnoe (2022) adds that "the reason IWMs are resistant to change is that they are learned by the body and thus partially unconscious" (p. 91). In other words, the early formation of values may possess a physiological component that contributes to its rigidity and return later in life.

Trauma research confirms the idea that implicit knowledge exists subconsciously and stored in the body (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Chu, 2011; Levers, 2012; Sanders, 2013; Steele & Malchiodi, 2012; Uhernik, 2016; Van Der Kolk, 2015). The younger the trauma experience the more broadly ingrained the reaction to the feared stimuli (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Steele & Malchiodi, 2012). In other words, secure attachments are vital toward the health and well-being of the child's developmental trajectory.

Therapeutically, Hughes (2011) stresses the reliance of safety as opposed to using fear, shame, or force. Also, Danquah and Berry (2014) equate proximity seeking behaviors to the therapeutic relationship where the client can feel safe enough to explore troubling parts of themselves. Reese (2018) conceptualizes this therapeutic exploration as a longing "for the return of that attachment, and when his cries go unanswered, he can become hopeless that this first

attachment relationship is lost forever" (p. 15). According to Bowlby (1980), IWMs are formed from early attachments and are our earliest interactions that inform "expectations about how relationships work" (Gunnoe, 2022, p. 91). These expectations impact the perception of self and are then superimposed onto new relationships (Gunnoe, 2022)—including the divine.

*Identifying the God Image*

A child's internalized parental standards develop into a conscience during preschool years, and feelings associated with God develop around the age of seven (Gunnoe, 2022). The quality of these attachments influence development both socially and physiologically. Because infants depend on coregulation from well-attuned attachments to regulate stress, relationship and abuse are infused, and abuse becomes a "problem of distorted relationships" (Reese, 2018, p. 969). Thus, early attachments have tremendous influence on the relational view of God to self (Johnson, 2017). The mere absence of negative factors is not enough to quelch felt vulnerability and the quality engagement from a safe and well-regulated attachment figure is vital toward the development of a secure base (Sabey et al., 2018). Therefore, "emotionally supportive non-Christians" aid in the foundational development of the God image and Christians who undermine attachment can harm this view (Gunnoe, 2022, p. 111).

Attachment styles are linked to struggles also (Zarzycka, 2019). For example, Exline et al. (2013) found that both parents impact the development of a cruel image of God, and that a cruel image of God predicts RS struggles; and people's struggles define their theological interpretations (Tongeren et. al., 2019). Alternatively, a benevolent view of God positively correlates with health and wellbeing (Testoni et al., 2016), at least in part due to the anxiety reducing benefits of a secure base (Ellens, 2016). The more association of God as reality lessoned fear and anxiety and lowered the use of avoidance as coping (Testoni et al., 2016).

Interestingly, "the data suggests that a secure attachment relationship with God can compensate for poor caregiving that leads to insecure attachment and that the type of attachment we experience with our human caregiver does to some extent shape the way we respond to God" (Boccia, 2011, p. 25). In the most vulnerable state, notions of God are preconceived even before awareness. Modeling this vulnerability then becomes the pathway back to loving relationally (Davis, 2018). For the Christian, however, "the self is unthinkable without God" and "inextricably linked to who God is" (Draper, 2017, p. 12). God cannot be removed from the developmental stages of life without consequences, particularly for adolescences in the identify vs. role confusion stage. God is a model and extension for attachment and inventories have been developed that measure this attachment (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Importantly, Gunnoe (2022) concludes her assessment on attachment theory as "compatible with Scripture and can be incorporated in a Christian perspective on moral-ethical tendencies" (p. 104).

The Imago Dei is conceptualized as "the most perfect image of God" and is often congruent with self-image, and self-concept is interrelated with social beings for meaning as well (Johnson, 2017, p. 79; Webb, 2017). The author refers to this phenomenon as "self-other overlap" where individuals are prone to view themselves through others and engenders the term "self-God overlap" to describe a similar phenomenon when viewing ourselves through the benevolent views of God and the benefits thereof (Webb, 2017, p. 146). This dueling interaction can serve as a model not just for the view of God but also a model for interpersonal relationships (Moore et al., 2018).

The idea of God as the ultimate source of security and attachment is not a new one (Granqvist et al., 2012). Investigators believe parents aid in the early child formation of the God image (Krause & Hayward, 2015, p. 1505); and there are several theorists accepting of the

mental health benefits from viewing God as an attachment (Ellens, 2016). For example, Clinton

and Sibcy (2002) note,

> We understand from our earliest childhood experiences that our greatest fear is
>
> separation—being left alone, at the mercy of the surrounding, hostile elements. As we
>
> mature and become more self-reliant, that ever-present fear of being left alone morphs
>
> into the fear of death—death anxiety. (p. 158)

The authors add that

> We believe a core aspect of spirituality is an awareness of our vulnerability. As we
>
> become increasingly aware of our need and how truly vulnerable, we are, our attachment
>
> system flips on. And when that "on" light begins to glow, we are motivated to seek his
>
> presence" even if relationally through others. (p. 155).

In the felt security of a loving and trusting father a Christ-like identity is forged which allows us

to live free and without clinging to other identifiable constructs of identity for meaningfulness or

safety. Yet, attachment and the ongoing process of identity are inextricably linked.

**Attachment and Identity**

Attachment is "foundational" toward the development of identity (Pittman et al., 2011, p.

32). Attachment security "sets the stage for how adolescents' approach identity formation

processes" (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018, p. 306). Both attachment and identity are psychosocial

models of early development that develop through assimilation and integrative relational

experiences however, attachment emphasizes caregiver bonds while Erikson's (1968) model

underscores identity formation specifically during adolescence (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018;

McElwain et al., 2015; Pittman et al., 2011). Pittman et al. (2011) adds, "Where Bowlby's

paradigm emphasized evolutionary adaptation, Erikson (1968) emphasized culturally and

historically situational adaptation" (p. 36). In short, there is a clear overlap between the two models.

Research demonstrates that all stages of relational closeness, support, and security correlate with formative efforts that can be disrupted (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018; McElwain et al., 2015). For example, Young et al. (2019) found a "programming effect of early experience" that impacted physiological sensitivity to environmental input which predicted personality traits (p. 34). According to Kerpelman and Pittman (2018) this explains how development impacts experiential approach. Theoretically, secure individuals should achieve integration through "higher-quality exploration" despite the ever-looming threat (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018; Pittman et al., 2011, p. 41). Conversely, "negative models of self may be more likely to foreclose on their identities, thus lacking the determination to pursue their own identity" (Pittman et al., 2011, p. 42). Surprisingly, no studies to date have investigated this key premise using prospective data" (Young et al., 2019, p. 22).

Ideally adolescents make the shift to differentiate themselves from parents and engage more and explore internalized working models with peers (Bhatt & Pujar, 2020; Bowlby, 2005; Erikson, 1968; Pittman et al., 2011). However, Keizer et al. (2019) found no association between peer relationship change and adolescent self-esteem—indicating that attachment relationships are very impactful toward self-perception, despite the relational shift toward peers. Similarly, Bhatt and Pujar (2020) argue that "identity development plays an important role in adolescents' life which is greatly influenced by their self-concept and nurturing done by their parents" (p. 159). This relational self-concept is grounding and encourages exploration and commitment level which develops identity and wards against confusion (Bhatt & Pujar, 2020). Parents can foster positive self-worth and identity development during childhood and adolescence with

unconditional support and encouragement or undermine it using control and demanding compliance to parental expectations and goals (Bhatt & Pujar, 2020; Bowlby, 2005; Erikson, 1968; Keizer et al., 2019; Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018; Yu et al., 2018).

According to Kerpelman and Pittman (2018) "For both identity and attachment frameworks, sensitive responsive parenting is critical throughout childhood and into adolescence, and both models recognize that the way sensitivity and responsiveness are demonstrated changes with development" (p. 309). Although past research stresses autonomy and experiential learning to develop identity Yu et al. (2018) includes familial support to develop values and direction. Furthermore, according to Kerpelman and Pittman (2018), "identity formation includes growing self-awareness, which often involves negotiation of conflicts around attitudes, values, and goals within close relationships" (p. 306). Thus, current research indicates working with families to promote adolescent value development to help shape identity (Yu et al., 2018).

Kerpelman and Pittman (2018) note,

The integration of Erikson's psychosocial theory with the internal working models of attachment theory offers fruitful directions for elucidating the embeddedness of identity within relationships, clarifying how social interactions catalyze identity exploration and deepen self-understanding, and capturing the lifelong nature of identity development. (p. 312)

Although this blend offers a rich potential of scholarly development little is known about the relational impacts of identity formation—particularly in relation to attachment (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018). Regarding family science, Bortz et al. (2019) notes, "Varying concepts, scholarship, and theories in the field are capable of being unified and integrated with family systems thinking as our field's shared holistic framework" (p. 556). This will increase

complexity, address gaps, and develop applications (Bortz et al., 2019). The authors are hopeful

that these integrative efforts will unite the fractured literature under the umbrella of family

psychology (Bortz et al., 2019).

### *Religion and Identity*

A foundational worldview formed during childhood for many cultures is religion.

Religion makes meaning of spiritualty, and questions regarding RS begin during adolescence

because of teenagers' ability to think abstractly about theological issues (Feldman, 2014).

Although adolescents have limited conceptual understanding, a lack of opportunity for

meaningful engagement regarding RS is a contributing factor (Severe, 2020). Regardless,

adolescents are interested in developing their worldview and do have the capacity to engage

theologically (Severe, 2020). Although many adolescences begin to question their religious

beliefs and distance themselves from religiosity (Feldman, 2014), nonetheless these foundations

exist and exploration of these foundational values is part of a healthy identity formative process

(Becht et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2012).

There is a startling disconnect between an adolescent's "expression of identity and their

relationship with Christ" (Severe, 2020; p. 223). According to Severe (2020), adolescents'

express identity primarily through character traits and actions. The author notes, "Articulation is

a vital indicator of how an adolescent 'owns' their personal faith and expresses their identity in

Christ. This ownership must be contextualized to their life and experience. Teens must therefore

'reflect on the reality of [their] faith and articulate its content" (as cited in Severe, 2020, p. 218).

According to Noble-Carr and Woodman (2018), "The role of spirituality and religion in

vulnerable young people's lives is another emerging area within identity and meaning research"

(p. 676). This has researchers considering the possible necessity for a moral identity to be taught

undergirded by RS (Bock et al., 2021). As noted, the value and meaning an individual assigns a role or identity dictates the value hierarchy dominancy. Interestingly, although research utilizing identity theory is extensive, no research has examined the predictors, influences, or formation of father identity from an identity theory perspective (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021). Attachment experiences impact personality and relational development, and the meaning and value attributed from these lived experiences has a causal effect on identity formation.

Adolescence is regarded as a tumultuous stage of development fluctuated with change and adversity, and crucial and foundational for developmental trajectory having life-long consequences (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018; Schwartz, 2016). An essential task in adolescence is identity development and meaning-making is essential to this task and starts in adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018; Schwartz, 2016). Although little evidence exists as to how adolescents construct identity and integrate meaningful experiences, identity and meaning is critical during adversity and recovery and has many benefits toward psychological, social, academic, and overall well-being (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018; Schwartz, 2016). Conversely, negative cognitions of meaning predict a weaker identity and negatively correlate with overall wellbeing (Becht et al., 2021).

"Identity is concerned with sameness and difference at the level of social categorization, group affiliation, and intergroup relations, as well as at the level of individual consciousness or subjectivity" (Hammack, 2015, p. 2), and "meaning appears in the literature as both a process within identity development—meaning making as an outcome—attaining a sense of self-esteem, purpose, and a belief that one's existence is valuable" (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018, p. 673). Identity development and meaning-making is the threshing floor of adolescence and an optimal time for school counselors to address meaning, purpose, and identity issues (Schwartz, 2016).

Interventions and techniques focused on identity and meaning could mean the difference

between thriving and surviving (Schwartz, 2016). It might also provide a significant opportunity

to explore meaning through cultural values for identity formation—not just experimentation

toward the development of identity (Severe, 2020).

"Adolescence is a crucial life stage involving aspects of identity development and

decision-making that have potential life-long consequences" and there is a lack of research

regarding meaning-based counseling in school settings (Schwartz, 2013, p. 1). According to

Roehlkepartain et al. (2006), a worldview anchors a child's sense of being. Sink (2004) adds that

attempts at meaning-making and purpose are energizing and involve student morals and values.

However, the school setting discourages exploration or expression of spiritual beliefs (Schwartz,

2013). In the absence of devotion and limits of religious education, existential humanism is

experiential, subjective, and without counsel. Provided their prefrontal limitations fail to consider

long-term consequences of behavior, adolescents are vulnerable to fads, trends, and other

influences that, in the long-term, might prove to be unhealthy or detrimental (Fieldman, 2014).

Schools are important platforms for engendering spiritual and moral development, and

education facilitates a young person's self-actualization and purpose driven life (Lee, 2020).

Themes of childhood spirituality often include relationality, identity, connectedness, creativity,

and wonder—offering primitive yet experiential frameworks that (at least implicitly) shape

values and actions of moral consequence (Lee, 2020). And still, the quality of these experiences,

assuming that teachers and administrators are relational with even some students, in no way

ensures meaning or morality develops. Regardless, higher levels of RS correlate with mental

well-being (Magyar-Russell et al., 2020).

Positive views of the "self" correlate with relational domains that provide meaning and

value for the child. Relational spirituality becomes particularly important for healthy childhood development precisely because it reinforces to the child that they are the sum of their parts (Chapman et al., 2021). Unlike religiosity which has a purpose for condemning, spirituality is the experiential counter to the harsh reality of the law. Thus, relational spirituality and not religiosity is a significant predictor of happiness and life satisfaction in adolescence (Holder et al., 2010; Marques et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a significant decline in affiliation with religiosity during this transitional stage of development. However, religiosity is also linked to meaning and purpose and fewer depressive symptoms (Chan et al., 2015).

General revelations of God through experiential relationship with others informs the humanistic worldview and finds theoretical and empirical support in attachment theory, which is a theory widely accepted in Christian circles. Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) write that "After the first successful attachment to the primary caregiver(s), the infant can generalize the ability to attach emotionally to select others. The first year is crucial in shaping the young child's ability to make healthy attachments in other relationships" (p. 37). The authors add that during childhood and adolescence there is a transitional period away from the omnipotent parents and onto peers. This developmental stage is viewed also as a pivot away from God, but God can be used as a substitute attachment. The authors add that, "insecurity leads to a search for spiritual solutions, and that at least in institutionalized settings, this in fact works in the sense of helping the individual achieve increased security and attachment" (p. 205). On this point, an adolescent's worldview shaped by parents and their background should be considered (Bertram-Troost et al., 2007, 2009).

Conversely, an insecure attachment feels stress in relationship which motivates people to seek a vertical relationship with God as a secure attachment, and there is also evidence that this

attachment influences personality development in youth (Dansby et al., 2017; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Further, "it is not difficult to imagine why this is comforting for youth who have not experienced unconditional acceptance, or who feel that they are unable to meet other people's conditions of worthiness" (De Luna & Wang, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 358). However, attachment views of God as controlling suppress the authentic self and conflicts spirituality (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Life meaning encompasses individual notions of comprehension, organization, motivation, importance, and purpose (Dulaney et al., 2018). To many researchers, acquiring a deep-seated sense of meaning is considered the "ultimate stage of human development and necessary to achieve wellbeing" (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018, p. 673). Without prompting, numerous studies demonstrate that adolescents routinely engage in the search for meaning and purpose, which is a central and vital task to identity formation during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz, 2016). According to Schwartz (2016) meaning, in relation to identity formation, "clearly has personal, social, and academic implications" and "can stabilize and assist in transitions common to adolescence" (p. 4).

Adolescence is a tumultuous time and exposes the child to a developmental vulnerability littered with bouts of depression and anxiety to which they must make sense of (Dulaney et al., 2018). A pervasive sense of meaninglessness is spiritual and anxiety provoking and an existential threat (Frankl, 1967), and often a segway into depression for adolescents leading to self-destructive behaviors (Dulaney et al., 2018). Negative cognitions of self, the world, and the future is referred to as the "negative cognitive triad" and associated with depression (Dulaney et al., 2018, p. 40). According to Temple and Gall (2018) failure to analyze and explore existential concerns based on subconscious core values leads to an inauthentic identity. An existential-

humanistic approach encourages the exploration of a subjective truth instead of a truth that might

better align with foundational core values that remain unexplored and subconscious (Temple &

Gall, 2018).

> Rather, Krok (2015) argues that
>
> RS dimensions are central to the global meaning systems of many people, because they
>
> provided individuals with an integrated set of beliefs, goals and meanings which can be
>
> used to explain intricacies of the world and promoting positive reinterpretations of
>
> negative events through the sacred lens. (p. 197)

This exploration is an integrating process that allows thoughts, language, and emotions to link up

with subconscious core values to produce meaning-making and identity formation (Schwartz,

2012). Situational tests global meaning to refine an adolescent's core values (Krok, 2015). RS

has a "significant relationship with both meaning in life and coping styles among late

adolescents" that are "effective tools for young individuals that enable them to deal with personal

situations and problems" (pp. 200-201).

Fostering meaning lessens negative appraisals and weakens associations with depression

(Dulaney et al., 2018). McLean et al. (2010) note the centrality of life stories, and that

adolescence is a crucial time for these meaningful stories. Meaning in life is critical for well-

being (Dulaney et al., 2018), and extensive research links meaning and purpose to well-being in

adolescence (Schwartz, 2016). According to McLean et al. (2010), "those who make meaning of

past events are better adjusted in terms of self-esteem, depression, psychological well-being,

physical health, psychological maturity, and life satisfaction" (p. 184). Schwartz (2016) finds a

positive correlation between purpose in adolescence and well-being, life satisfaction, self-

esteem, and physical and psychological health. Dulaney et al. (2018) cite self-satisfaction, life

satisfaction, subjective well-being, and a decreased inflammatory immune cell in adolescence, as stemming from meaning and promoting adolescent well-being in the United States.

Despite little research exploring the role of meaning as a stress-modulator specifically during adolescence, meaning is associated with adolescent well-being, particularly those encountering repeat stressors, and suggests high meaning buffers stress impact in relation to depression (Dulaney et al., 2018). Because adolescents have little control over the psychological, emotional, familial, peer, academic, and community stressors they experience daily, meaning-making may provide an internal locus of control in unavoidable situations and transitions to reduce anxiety and depression and strategies targeting perceptions and cognitions will likely lessen the impact of potential multiple stressors (Dulaney et al., 2018).

Although meaning and purpose is a familiar topic prompted by adolescent students in session, particularly in the aftermath of challenging or traumatic events or identity formation, school counselors have not been trained to address this issue nor have designed interventions for a unique setting like the public-school system (Schwartz, 2016). Nonetheless, interventions addressing life meaning consistently lower depression, stress impact, and reduce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Dulaney et al., 2018); a therapeutic process known as post-traumatic growth for trauma survivors (Dulaney et al., 2018). Schwartz (2016) insists that, "Early adolescence is an ideal time for counselors to facilitate searching for meaning and purpose with clients for both preventative and therapeutic as younger adolescents encounter challenging transitions" (p. 1).

Validity for RS to mediate stress is extensive and religious meaning-making methods and interventions to make sense of loss or trauma are effective strategies in reducing anxiety/depression symptoms and promoting post-traumatic growth in adults (Dulaney et al.,

2018; Krok, 2015). According to Krok (2015),

> Empirical research has demonstrated that religion is not a mere defensive mechanism, but
>
> it can affect individual's cognitive and emotional processes underlying coping with stress
>
> events and although there is a conceptual difference between religiousness and
>
> spirituality, both concepts appear to share the common feature: the search for the sacred.
>
> (p. 198)

The author adds,

> The main reason lies in the well-established observation that S dimensions are central to
>
> the global meaning systems of many people, because they provide individuals with an
>
> integrated set of beliefs, goals and meanings which can be used in explaining intricacies
>
> of the world and promoting positive reinterpretations of negative events through the
>
> sacred lens. (197).

> Krok (2015) found that "the religious meaning system and spirituality had a significant

relationship with both meaning in life and coping styles among late adolescents" (p. 200). The

author notes that RS meaning-making is an effective tool for adolescents, and state that

> The ability to derive meaning from religious and spiritual behavior seems to be very
>
> important as the period of adolescence is associated with significant changes in decision-
>
> making processes regarding religion and meaning in life, and with establishing a coherent
>
> philosophy of life that contributes to further development. (p. 202)

Krok concludes the study stressing the mediational role of meaning and RS coping and promotes

the use of psychological interventions utilizing RS and meaning, to develop adolescent coping

abilities. Finally, Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) stress the importance of utilizing meaning-

making to support positive adjustments in such a developmental time as adolescence.

*Theoretical Applications for Counselors*

Faith-based integration is a definition that communicates a religious worldview considering RS as intertwined and inseparable constructs (Hall and Hall, 2021; Karl et al., 2021)—albeit different. Unlike secular humanism, the coupling of RS assumes that the human spirit must subjugate to the revelation of God's word. Apart from the tethering of religiosity the implicit spirit will be fluid and borderless until it finds meaning in other identities not of God. Although Christians in the public-school system often express God implicitly and interpersonally, and effectively, they are legally restricted from apostatizing and are ethically bound to avoid value impositions despite the benefits (ACA, 2014). Thus, adolescents rely on a secular-humanist worldview to interpret their life experiences in the absence of theological models of meaning. However, utilizing a child's cultural resources like religiosity, with consent, is not only permissible but multicultural astute (ACA, 2014; McGoldrick et al., 2005).

Unfortunately, few integrative models exist for teaching and practicing empirically guided methods of integration (Alton, 2020). One way to bridge this gap is to utilize sound psychological theories such as identity and attachment theory considering much of the integration literature accepts attachment and identity narratives. For example, Neff and McMinn (2020) distinguish between God concept and God image and relate this to explicit and implicit knowledge or the difference between religion and spirituality. Gunnoe (2022) states that "For this detailed explication of the natural processes impact on psychological development, Bowlby (1980) is a good theorist for Christians to know" (p. 111). According to Johnson (2017) parents are the initial impressions of the God image. After a detailed analysis of John Bowlby's attachment theory, Gunnoe (2022) concludes "emotionally supportive non-Christians can lay a foundation for children's eventual love of God, and Christians who neglect attachment needs

within the family or society can undermine children's capacity to eventually love God" (p. 111).

Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) note that children and adolescence relate to God and that this relationship can provide a "profound sense of security and well-being" that can offer security in the absence of a secure base (p. 357). Clinton and Sibcy (2002) underscore this profound need by pointing out that "As children develop, separation anxiety turns into a fear of death—death anxiety" (p. 155). Myers and Jeeves (2002) point out, however, that despite attachments foundational and enduring nature there are limits and that a secure earthly base is not enough. Therefore, God is considered the ultimate attachment figure (Clinton & Sibcy, 2002).

Moving beyond identity and into applied methods of integration, Ellens (2016) writes "the one (psychological model) that lends itself most readily to the clinical perspective rooted in a sound and thoroughgoing theology of grace is the emotional model" (p. 100). Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) shares an attachment view of love as well. Johnson (2004) writes that attachment is "the source and solution of fear" (p. 29). The author adds that "A secure attachment is characterized by a working model of self that is worthy of love and care and is confident and competent, and indeed research has found secure attachment to be associated with greater self-efficacy" (p. 31).

According to Rizkallah and Hudson (2019), counselors must address spiritual issues that threaten to harm healthy attachments because felt safety and security within relationships are fundamental toward cognitive and emotional development (Levers, 2012). The authors add that "By taking a circular approach to forming secure attachments among all members in the relationship, EFT provides an effective framework for spiritual inclusivity, while also addressing the negative impacts of triangulation" (p. 226).

Finally, Jay Adams (1973) writes,

From the beginning, human change depended upon counseling. Man was created as a

being whose very existence is derived from and dependent upon a Creator whom he must

acknowledge as such and from whom he must obtain wisdom and knowledge through

revelation. The purpose and meaning of his life, as well as his very existence, is derived

and dependent. He can find none of this in himself. Man is not autonomous. (p. 1)

From a psychological take, Webb (2017) writes, "the self-concept is interrelated; that is, the self

represents mental links to other social beings for meaning" known as "self-other overlap" (p.

146). Additionally, "self-God" overlap runs on the same principle, but research has not

confirmed if one's concept of God influences the view of self and vice versa (p. 146).

Regardless, there is a clear theoretical and practical link between parental and divine attachments

which have an impact on identity development.

Although the extraction of religious constructs associated with spiritualty has made it

more inclusive and experiential, the term as it stands today is almost meaningless (Milacci,

2006). This relocation of the experiential from religiosity gives the impression that religion is but

a cold list of dos and don'ts and spirituality is by far the better portion. Conversely, a divorce

from the sacred leaves spirituality—although titillating—fluid and directionless and because of

this is often overlooked despite its empirical relevancy (Milacci, 2006; Williams-Reade et al.,

2019).

Unfortunately, despite the empirical data, theories, models, best practices, ethics,

curriculum, and supervision, few therapeutic RS resources have reached the public-school

student. Identity and attachment theories are well-grounded and reputable psychological theories

with numerous theoretical adaptations, techniques, and interventions at the therapist's disposal.

Identity and attachment theories naturally consider the relevancy and importance of fathers, and

the data validates the benefits and consequences from a ruptured attachment like the father. Likewise, practical theoretical extensions from attachment to the God image are widely supported and the data presumes a logical and positive correlation.

Furthermore, identity theory is established in the literature and well supported with data and the positive health correlations with a stable identification. Although less is known as to how identity forms, it is known that adolescents struggle with identity and meaning-making during this stage of development and it could be that religious meaning-making and identity, and all its health benefits, could benefit a population struggling with questions religions have made sense of (Erikson, 1968). Also, research is clear that identity and meaning are crucial self-development constructs during adolescents (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). The alternative is to provide no meaning-making resources for coping and rely solely on an experiential interpretation of spirituality that provides no direction at all.

RS is neglected in psychotherapeutic training and this negligence often results in incompetence and avoidance in secular settings like the public-school system (Hodge, 2011; Magaldi & Trub, 2016). Despite over 90% of Americans believing in a higher power and well over three-quarters of the U.S. population considering spirituality an integral part of their lives, spirituality is often avoided in session due to a lack of professional preparedness (PRC, 2019; Williams-Reade et al., 2019). However, supervision instruments exist to evaluate students and training in RS increases comfort and engagement and promotes an integrated personal and professional identity yet universities teaching integration remain inconsistent and theoretical (Osborn & Jones, 2020; Paine, 2017; Williams-Reade et al., 2019). The sheer lack of therapeutic application in settings like the public-school system is a testament to the impractical nature of a secular-humanist environment.

Shaler (2016) argues that "an ethical integration of faith requires the consent of the individual and desire to integrate faith into counseling" (p. 56). Clients should be included in the decision-making process (Hodge, 2011). For example, the military use spiritual assessments to identify and utilize spiritual resources, like chaplains, for moral injury and can utilize methods like Spiritually Integrated Cognitive Processing Therapy (SICPT) to integrate RS with treatment (Pearce et al., 2018). To aid the practitioner several instruments that gage RS exist. For example, Wang and Jun (2020) list 13 religious-related psychological measures from 2015 to 2020.

Other assessments include the Psy-FI scale that measure faith integration among college students (Collison et al., 2019), the Christian Counseling Supervision Instrument (CCSI) which measures student competence from a Christian worldview, or the Social Worker's Integration of Their Faith-Christian (SWIF-C) which measures spiritual congruency among therapists (Oxhandler, 2019). Also, the Validation of the Theistic Spiritual Outcome Survey (VTSOS) measures the effectiveness of counseling utilizing faith-based integrative methods (Scott & Wolfe, 2015). Yet, few if any spiritual resources exist for the school population.

There is a need to address RS issues in counseling (Raine, 2017). Clinical supervision is considered an integral part of counseling education yet "at best, religious, and spiritual issues are occasionally discussed" (Barto, 2018, p. 235). Despite the models, relevancy, or interest, few counselors receive supervisory training in RS assessment and intervention (Hodge, 2011). Woodhouse and Hogan (2019) add that the rarity in RS training contributes to counselor anxiety, confusion, and avoidance regarding RS issues, particularly in a setting like the public-school system. This negligence may have grave consequences for developing students struggling to make meaning of broken attachments and painful experiences, leaving students desperate to cling to any identity that offers some measure of stability.

There are several overt methods which integrate RS and some with more empirical support than others. At the top of this list is mindfulness approaches adapted for Christians. For example, Williams-Reade et al. (2019) have looked at the RS concerns of mindfulness in counseling from the perspective of clients. Trammel (2017) conducted a phenomenological study of Christian use of mindfulness practices and found positive correlations. Mihalache (2020) stresses religious obedience when utilizing mindfulness practices. Finally, Garzon et al. (2022) have developed Christian Accommodative Mindfulness (CAM) to aid Christian practitioners or non-Christian practitioners in treating evangelicals in counseling.

Given the complexity of RS, implicit methods are often preferred. For example, De Luna and Wang (2021) examined the pervasiveness of childhood trauma to stress safety, relational connection, and meaning-making for the integration of the sacred. Although the authors utilize meaning-making as a potential conduit for God, this step is after the child has processed the trauma in a safe relationship, highlighting the subtle distinction between healing and resilience.

Technique is important but accounts for a fraction of therapeutic gain (Neukrug, 2014). The lion's share goes to the therapeutic relationship—conveying Christ-like principles like authenticity, congruency, and unconditional positive regard (Tan, 2018). And because children often define spirituality in such experiential and relational terms, it has been thought that implicit integration is enough. However, the recent mental health crisis in the public-school system is underscoring the need for meaning-making methods beyond a secular-humanistic worldview.

The proposed study questions whether a single-humanistic worldview approach to spirituality is in the best interest of the child or adolescent who is entering a stage of development known as identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1968). The grounding of attachment theory, the positive correlation between the God image and attachment research, and identity

theories postulations concerning stages of development, suggests not just that God and religious exposure could be very beneficial for the struggling adolescent (Feinberg, 2013), but also that the solely secular-humanist worldview approach that touts a fluid spirituality might be contributing to confusion.

Because RS is increasingly recognized in psychology as beneficial to health and wellbeing and integral to multicultural competency this study calls into question the legitimacy, effects, and consequences of placing adolescents in a setting like the public-school system that promotes a fluid notion of spirituality which is only held by approximately three percent of the world's population (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Negru-Subtirica et al. (2016) note that the "complex interplay between personal identity and meaning in life has been linked to positive adaptation" and "the exploration of cultural values to provide meaning may be as important as experiential methods to accomplish this same task" (p. 1926). Instead of relying purely on an existential humanistic method of exploration to acquire meaning, utilizing interventions that consider cultural identity and meaning might allow adolescence to flesh out their commitments to these values before subjecting themselves to unbridled quests for purpose.

Alternatively, White (2020) urges the unification of clergy and mental health professionals as an integrated approach that considers sanctification and Christian maturity— promoting a partnership between clergy and mental health professionals when needed. However, what this might look like in the public-school system is anyone's guess, but the absence thereof is increasingly evident and results in mystifying the human experience on par with the sacred (Pohlmann, 2020). Counselors partnering with local cultural resources like the Church would become a valuable resource for the struggling adolescent during this stage of development.

**Summary**

Erikson's (1968) seminal work is foundational toward the theoretical development of identity theory and related constructs like attachment support the regulatory need for a grounding identity steeped in culture, tradition, morality, and civility (Bowlby, 2005). Data supports a positive health correlation to RS and adolescents are included in this in-depth analysis (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Furthermore, the recent but established wave of multiculturalism demands counselor competency and the utilization of positive coping resources within community (McGoldrick et al., 2005). However, the ambiguity from multiple constructs (Kao et al., 2020), from legality to the very term spirituality, cause a reluctance and overreliance on implicit methods of integration which equates to avoidance and a hinderance to valuable coping resources for a population known to be struggling with identity and meaning-making (Erikson, 1968). This avoidance unintentionally creates a vacuum where humanistic and experiential interpretations of spirituality are left unopposed and to flourish, influencing a generation with a global worldview oftentimes counter to the Indigenous culture in which they were raised.

Although the somatic regulatory benefits from secure attachments are common knowledge in psychology and identity theory is well established and researched, little is known as to how identity formulates (Schwartz et al., 2012). Although experimentation is a healthy process of identity formation and identity is ever evolving, no guidance or influence from centuries old values and cultural traditions may be confusing and deregulatory, doing more harm than good to a population struggling against confusion (Schwartz et al., 2012). Although counselors often avoid the topic altogether little is known about how they interpret the clashing of worldviews or the need for tethering interventions and techniques derived from a structured religiosity—an approach that can challenge adolescents to refine their value system for identification and meaning-making purposes.

Exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christan public-school counselors could provide the data to clarify an otherwise complex paradigm contributing to avoidance and neglect. It may also help develop multicultural competency, technique, intervention, and best practices. It may bridge services and provide coping resources that combat confusion. Finally, it may offer an alternative methodology steeped in culture and tradition maintained for centuries to combat an existential humanism while also respecting other religions and alternative worldviews.

## Chapter Three: Methods

## Overview

A qualitative study exploring counselor interpretations of adolescents was conducted. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors. Secularists champion diversity and tolerance and multicultural competency includes integrating RS when warranted (McGoldrick et al., 2005). Unfortunately, many Christians working in a setting like the public-school system avoid RS for fear of prejudice, pathologizing, or negative reactions (Lee et al., 2019). However, RS is an important construct of mental health and a cultural resource for meaning-making and identity struggles (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors is important. This data can help bridge theory and methods for coping resources unique to adolescent development and ensure that these resources reach the struggling student. The following sections describe the method (qualitative/phenomenological), data collection (sampling/interview), and validity procedures of the design before concluding comments are provided.

## Design

According to Yin (2003), a research design is "the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusion" (p. 20). In other words, it ensures that the evidence pursued addresses the research questions under review (Yin, 2003). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) add that a study design is a systematic inquiry and should reflect your research questions, and "match with your worldview, personality, and skills" (p. 1).

This study is qualitative and phenomenological. This heuristic method dates to Aristotle

and is often natural to observers yet until recently has been difficult to define (Wu, 2015).

Heidegger is credited for bridging phenomenology and hermeneutics (Vagle, 2014). According

to Heidegger (2008) a phenomenon is that "which shows itself in itself, the manifest" (p. 51).

According to Giorgi (2009) "phenomenology is a philosophy that had its beginnings in the early

years of the twentieth century and became explicitly aware of itself in 1913" (Husserl, 1983, p.

4).

This method is systematic, yet flexible, and integrative (Rumi, 2019). It is an artful

observation of the lived experiences of others that looks for patterns of meaning and themes in

the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Uhler, 1987). It is the lived experience of the phenomenon itself

(Vagle, 2014, p. 20). It requires a caliber of humility "whereby we turn ourselves over to

openness, wonder, and inquiry" and "try to stop being so certain of what we know and think" (p.

15).

It was the best choice for this study because the theoretical construct of integration, as

well as the laws, ethical codes, and administrators who govern them, is multifaceted and

complex and much of what takes place in the therapeutic setting is experiential and subjective

(Engle et al., 1992; Rumi, 2019; Santrac, 2016: Strawn et al., 2018). As such, interpretations and

defenses of the subjects is a phenomenological approach that highlights impediments to existing

and potential therapeutic resources for adolescents, help to develop overt methods utilizing

centuries old and empirically valid religious principles shared by the super-majority, and offer

identity/meaning-making alternatives to secular-humanistic interpretations of the sacred

(Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Although psychology was founded on the premise of value-neutrality that myth has been

dispelled (Brown, 2020; Clinton & Ohlschlager, 2006; Fernandez & Hicks, 2019; Hamilton,

2013; Jones & Butman, 2005; Kandel-Cisco & Flessner, 2018; Kao et al., 2020; Koppelman, 2006; Nieguth, 1999; Peteet, 2013; Shaler, 2016). Today, the psychological profession recognizes the health benefits of RS and promotes the inclusion of RS within therapeutic endeavors whenever warranted (ACA, 2014; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). However, many sticking points remain when attempting to integrate psychology and religion, especially with regards to identity and meaning-making issues in a setting like the public-school system where RS is restricted.

## Research Questions

### Central Research Question

What does integrating identity and meaning making mean to Christian school counselors who work with adolescents in the public school system?

### Guiding Question One

How do Christian school counselors who work in the public school system navigate identity and meaning making issues with adolescents?

### Guiding Question Two

What is a Christian school counselors experience with integrating Christian identification and meaning making RS resources into therapy?

## Setting

The setting was comprised of the public-school system in southern Indiana. Many of the public schools within this region of southern Indiana are rural and express culturally conservative values and a most "realistic site" for this study because the location reflects the studies cultural objectives (PRC, 2019; Durdella, 2020c, p. 9). These schools employ school counselors, and a number of these practitioners identify as Christian and are a good

representation of the cultural community they serve (PRC, 2019). Conversely, the public-school system is a setting that places restrictions on these shared values. Therefore, the public-school system is a setting producing the phenomenon of the proposed research (Durdella, 2020c). This setting applies the "personal interests, converts professional experiences, considers practical issues, and works within the literature review" (p. 4). However, visiting the site directly was not necessary for this phenomenological approach (Durdella, 2020c). Because Christians often feel marginalized or alienated in the public schools, research was conducted offsite and online (Lee et al., 2019; Durdella, 2020b).

Adolescence spans ages 10 to 18, and includes elementary, middle school, and high school counselors, which were used for the study (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). These counselors serve a population who are experiencing common struggles to adolescence such as identity and meaning-making (Erikson, 1968), and due to the current contentious political climate and longstanding interpretation of division between church and state, Christian school counselors must tread lightly so as not to violate federal and state laws, professional ethical codes, and/or adversarial administrators or coworkers. Thus, the public-school counselors serving these adolescents were the best choice for this study. Data was collected through Google Meet. This research was gathered at the researcher's personal office and the online proxy for the participants was most convenient and preferred by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

## Participants

A perspective echoed in the literature is that there is no "magic number" for research participants (Vagle, 2014, p. 75; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although sample sizes vary, phenomenological studies often require fewer participants than other studies and less time in the

field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Kuzel (1992), six to eight participants are sufficient. Vagle (2014) references 10-15 participants depending on the need. Finally, Durdella (2020a) mentions five to 15 subjects. A total of eight self-identifying Christian school counselors were selected to participate in this phenomenological study and should be enough to achieve saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These individuals have "experienced the phenomenon under investigation, whom will be able to provide a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon, and who collectively represent the range of multiple, partial, and varied contexts … identified" (Vagle, 2014, p. 128).

Criterion and opportunistic, convenience, and snowball samples were used for this phenomenological study. Criterion sampling was used because the practitioners must meet criterion for participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Inclusion criteria included (a) 1+ years' therapeutic experience in the public school system, (b) a Christian self-identification and affiliation, (c) church attendance (2+ monthly visits), and (d) a willingness and ability to access the online platforms if desired. According to Durdella (2020a), opportunistic sampling identifies new cases as they appear in the field of research. Similarly, convenience sampling was used because of availability and willingness to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, snowball sampling was used to make participant recruitment more efficient (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and according to Durdella (2020a) snowball sampling results from asking participants to identify new participants.

Participants were approached for the study by phone messaging provided by others via convenience sampling methods and through contacts of the employees at each site (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020; Durdella, 2020c). A rationale for the study, provided in Appendix C, was presented to the participants who matched the purpose statement (APA, 2020).

No changes in numbers took place and eight participants were interviewed in the study (APA, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Also, an informed consent document (see Appendix D) was discussed with the participants (APA, 2020). Participants were not paid or compensated for their time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants verbally confirmed that they met the 1-year minimum work experience requirement.

**Procedures**

The data collection procedures listed were first reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval and the ethical data collection circle by Creswell and Poth (2018) was used as a model with strict adherence (see Appendix E). No pilot study or training was conducted, and participants were solicited by telephone or email (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, participants were given an informed consent prior to the first interview and met all criteria listed in this document before the first interview was initiated (Durdella, 2020b).

The interviews were conducted online (Google Meet); the researcher at a personal office and the interviewee at a setting favorable to them (Durdella, 2020c; McFarlane-Morris, 2022), and followed an interview process outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). The interview questions were used as a semi-structed interview and capture the relevance of the study to embrace and implicitly link theory (Agee, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Elton Mayo's method of interviewing, including active listening skills, was followed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Transcript analysis searched for meaning-making, themes, and patterns that speak to the essence of the phenomenon under review (Creswell & Poth, 2018; McFarlane-Morris, 2022; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Intercoder reliability was used for data analysis (Durdella, 2020a; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). This data was transcribed and stored securely in a password protected briefcase and computer file (Creswell & Poth, 2018; McFarlane-Morris, 2022).

**The Researcher's Role**

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), "The role of the researcher as a person, of the researcher's integrity, is critical to the quality of the scientific knowledge and the soundness of ethical decisions in qualitative inquiry" (p. 74). The authors go on to outline four fields including informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the researcher's role (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Braun and Clarke (2022) refer to this role as "subjective storyteller" (p. 6).

The researcher is a licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT) currently operating in private practice in southern Indiana, as well as a doctoral student in community care and counseling with an emphasis in traumatology at Liberty University. The researcher is a Caucasian male, Christian, Deacon, and considered an integrationist actively working on a Christian theory of integration for publication.

As it relates to this researcher's role and the qualitative nature of this methodology, various methods of bracketing were utilized to ensure that the participants and subsequent data were not influenced by this researcher's values, opinions, convictions, beliefs, etc. For example, memoing the researchers' personal thoughts and experiences with the data was included in the research to clarify any presuppositions regarding the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Using an axiological assumption, it seems practical to acknowledge these inherent values in hopes of attaining better therapeutic methods and client gains that are more representative of the population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, an ontological assumption tolerates multiple views of mental health (Creswell & Poth, 2018)—not just a late modern/secular worldview based on individualistic edification and symptom reduction (Johnson, 2017); or a view of spirituality that places the adolescent at the helm of meaning-making and identity.

A biblical worldview helped shape this study. Therefore, therapeutic effort tending to the

spiritual (experiential) may be viewed as biblically insufficient and potentially problematic,

particularly in identity and meaning-making that is a natural phase during adolescents

(Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Understanding the phenomenon of how Christian school

counselors make meaning of integrating identity will aid in understanding and clarification

procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Similarly, this study utilized a pragmatic interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Although integration encompasses a vast array of theoretically based literature (models,

phases, frameworks, methods, techniques, interventions, etc.) from multiple perspectives

(psychology, theology, neurology, pedagogy, professions, translations, denominations, etc.),

much less is known regarding the specific thoughts, feelings, and assumptions of those Christian

school counselors who are hesitant to implement faith-based integration in a setting like the

public-school system (Edman et al., 2016; Frunza et al., 2019; Loosemore & Fidler, 2019). This

approach is a valid design for this study because it attributes meaning from the practical

experiences of Christian school counselors (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 2009; Vagle,

2014)—contributing an applied view and thus valuable perspective to the subjective field of

integration (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## Data Collection

### Interviews

With regards to the interview, Giorgi (2009) writes, "What one seeks from a research

interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the

experience that a participant has lived though" (p. 122). The author goes on to note that the

successful completion from this attempt is easier than it sounds. According to Vagle (2014),

interviews are less about sameness and that "all interviews are treated as exciting opportunities to

potentially learn something important about the phenomenon" (p. 79). Yin (2003) states that

interviews are more akin to "guided conversations rather than structured queries" (p. 89).

Interviews are less generalized than questionnaires (McFarlane-Morris, 2022) and good

interview questions that align with the research questions are vital (McFarlane-Morris; Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016; Vagle, 2014; Yin, 2003). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offers a helpful

comparative list of good and bad questions. Also, probing questions are essential to discovering

deeper meanings, and a semi-structured interview will be used (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009;

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In phenomenology interviews are the primary source of data

collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews were stored as transcriptions for safety and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Protocols from Creswell and Poth (2018)

for recording procedures were used. Also, significant statements explaining experiences were

identified and cataloged, as well as common experiences and themes to which McFarlane-Morris

refers to as "concept mapping" (p. 31). A file naming system organized the data being collected

and data input was consistent and categorized for future In Vivo coding (Jugessur, 2022;

Saldana, 2016). Also, intercoder reliability guidelines were followed to ensure accuracy of

coding (Saldana, 2016). Input was consistent, and files were protected and easily located

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) audio

recording is the most common tool for data collection and transcribing the data will follow the

outline provided by McFarlane-Morris (2022).

Each participant was interviewed one time by the same researcher (APA, 2020).

Interviews ranged from no less than 30 minutes to as much as 1 hour and 30 minutes (APA,

2020). Interviews were conducted online (Google Meet), with the researcher at his office, and

the desired location for the participant. Because interviews online are becoming increasingly

popular this was the first option offered (McFarlane-Morris, 2022). Interview questions were

open ended and focused on the central concept of integrating identity as it relates to the public-

school system environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview followed a semi-structured

format which is flexible and outlined in Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). See Appendix B.

## Semi-Structured Interview

### Ice Breaker Questions

1. What got you interested in the school counseling profession?

2. What would you change, if anything, about your job?

### Central Research Question

3. What does an identity in Jesus Christ mean to you?

4. How do you interpret the mental health benefits and/or drawbacks of believing in a biblical narrative?

5. What does integrating identity and meaning making mean to you as a Christian school counselor working with adolescents in the public school system?

6. How would you define the term integration in the context of counseling adolescents?

7. Has there ever been a time when you believed it was necessary to adjust how you counseled a student based upon your own Christian identity.

8. How do you as a Christian school counselor make meaning of identity formation for adolescents outside of Jesus Christ?

### Guiding Question 1

9. Talk to me about your experience with adolescents and their adolescent development with regards to identity and meaning making?

10. How do you as a Christian school counselor navigate identity and meaning making issues with adolescents in the public school system?

11. How do you feel about addressing identity and meaning making issues as a Christian school therapist in a restricted setting like the public school system?

12. How do you as a Christian school counselor interpret conflicting ethical codes and treatment recommendations with regards to treating adolescents?

13. Have you ever faced a situation that you may have had when you believed it was necessary to address or avoid identity and meaning making issues.

**Guiding Question 2**

14. Do you have any experience with learning faith-based models, methods, and/or techniques addressing identity and meaning making issues?

15. What is your experience with regards to integrating religious identity/meaning making resources into therapy?

16. What is your interpretation of the effectiveness of addressing identity and meaning making issues in therapy?

17. Talk to me about how you believe the subject of religion/spirituality and adolescence impacts the therapeutic relationship?

**Closing Questions**

18. Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end this interview?

Basic active listening skills were utilized in this process (APA, 2020; Young, 2013), as well as the interview guide from Creswell and Poth (2018) that was adhered to throughout the interview.

**Question Summaries**

Questions 1 and 2 are simple icebreaker questions and are designed to build rapport and to elicit positive associations that help ease the interviewee into the interviewing process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; McFarlane-Morris, 2022). Questions 3 through 9 address the central research question "What does integrating identity and meaning making mean to Christian school counselors who work with adolescents in the public school system?" Particularly, Question 3 probes the interviewees' personal identification with Jesus Christ. Question 4 considers the mental health benefits of this identification. Question 5 is the central research question. Question 6 addresses whether there is a need for integrating identity into counseling, and Question 7 asks the interviewee to define the term of integration. Question 8 asks for a situation where counseling had to be adjusted based on their own Christian identity, and Question 9 probes how the interviewee conceptualizes an identity outside of Christ. Additionally, these questions are in keeping with the research questions in that they address therapeutic knowledge and experiences with adolescents to move beyond assumptions of their experiences as school counselors and to ensure sound appropriation and applicable theory is being applied (Agee, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Questions 10 through 16 address the first guiding question. Question 10 probes for the theoretical knowledge of adolescent development, specifically with regards to identity and meaning-making (Erikson, 1968; Feldman, 2014; McWhirter et al., 2013; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2012). Questions 11 and 12 address the experience of the interviewee, and Question 13 is the first guiding question. Question 14 gauges the trepidation or the lack thereof from the counselor when addressing this issue with adolescents. Question 15 probes the counselors legal, ethical, and professional interpretations, and Question 16 address potential

avoidance of the issue.

Questions 17 through 22 address the second guiding question. Question 17 probes the counselors' experiences with learning faith-based models, methods, and techniques. Question 18 is the second guiding question. Questions 19 through 22 probe the interpretation and use of techniques toward addressing adolescent spirituality about identity and meaning-making. And finally, Question 23 is a closing question that allows the interviewee to add concluding comments before the interview is terminated (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

## Data Analysis

"The process of making sense of the data is an attempt to capture" an accurate description for the "essence" of an otherwise "fluid" phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202; Giorgi, 2009, p. 89; Smith et al., 2022, p. 77). Although there is no one method for data analysis several authors do offer commonalities gleaned from the literature in step-by-step processes for the hermeneutic circle (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Giorgi, 2009; Saldana, 2016; Smith et al., 2022; Vagle, 2014). Nonetheless authors like Smith et al. (2022) do demand flexibility, stress "dynamism," and encourage "innovation" (p. 77). The following heuristic framework is like the step-by-step methodology outlined by Smith et al. (2022) (see Appendix A).

### Step One

First, review memos of first impressions from the initial interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). Memoing is a short reference of key ideas, phrases, or concepts of the researcher during the interviewing process (McFarlane-Morris, 2022). Memoing procedures are outlined in Creswell and Poth (2018) and will be used to document the thinking process of the researcher. This method adds reliability to the study because the procedures of memoing are an attempt to develop higher levels of analytical meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, listen to

the recording while imaging the voice of the interviewee to "slowdown" interpretive process of

data analysis and to help provide a cultural and personal context (Smith et al., 2022, p. 78).

Third, read the transcript and underline seemingly important experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Finally, the data will be organized separately and accordingly, represented by each participant.

**Step 2**

Reread the initial transcript—examining key words, phrases, emotional responses,

sentences, etc.—without reflecting on the content (Smith et al., 2022). Use "exploratory noting"

to provide a singular account for the underlined material (Smith et al., 2022, p. 85)—a process

known as lean coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Saldana (2016) coding is "a word

or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or

evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" and is a key process in data

analysis and includes many other processes (p. 4). In this step the volume of data is increased

(Smith et al., 2022).

**Step 3**

Use "experiential statements" to capture the complexity from the exploratory notes, to

begin the process of winnowing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018;

McFarlane-Morris, 2022; Saldana, 2016; Smith et al., 2022, p. 86; Vagle, 2014). Experiential

statements summarize the critical essence conveyed through the exploratory notetaking to help

"polish" the data (Smith et al., 2022, p. 87).

**Step 4**

Map the experiential statements by first copying the transcript (exploratory notes and

experiential statements included) and then cutting out the experiential statements and randomize

(Smith et al., 2022, p. 91). Next, put into "clusters" the experiential statements demonstrating

interconnectedness (p. 91).

**Step 5**

First, assign a title to each cluster thus far (Smith et al., 2022). Next, create "personal experiential themes" or PETs (Smith et al., 2022, p. 94). PETs winnow the data further into a theme. It is "a repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrence of action/data that appear more than twice" (Saldana, 2016, p. 5). These patterns or themes can produce a "thematic map" to help capture the essence of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 97). These PETs will be color coded and "stacked" to help identify and consolidate (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022; p. 97). Memoing will be used to help clarify the consolidating process (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022)—both for devising themes and/or sub-themes and stacking.

**Step 6**

Duplicate the process by repeating the steps with the next data and so forth until all the data sets are analyzed (Smith et al., 2022).

**Step 7**

Like the previous steps outlined, analyze all data sets, and group the PETs into groups known as Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. refer to this repetitive process as "scaling up" (p. 100). Again, GETs can be grouped into subthemes and consolidated, and memos detailing the rationale for consolidation are important (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022).

## Trustworthiness

### Credibility

Although a researcher can never capture the full measure of a true phenomenon internal validity or credibility is a crucial aspect of trustworthiness and refers to the extent the collected

data reflects reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is important to establish credibility because it links the data with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this methodology theoretical triangulation was used to help strengthen the causal link between the data and the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2014). For example, attachment theory, identity theory, meaning-making data, and a biblical worldview is used to interpret this link. Finally, bridling helps ensure that our "agency" does not determine the phenomenon (Vagle, 2014, p. 69).

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability refers to the consistency and replicability of a study, and confirmability refers to the confidence that the data collected reflects the participants views and not the researcher's bias's (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Providing detail of the context and setting of the study increases dependability and confirmability.

Reflexivity is an introspective attitude of the researcher during data collection to hedge against bias (McFarlane-Morris, 2022), and reflexive journaling is an additional step toward strengthening dependability and confirmability (Yin, 2003). Reflexive journals are "one of the most important practices you'll undertake on your research journey" (Braun & Clark, 2022, p. 19) and captures what is happening with the researcher regarding values and interests (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to remain flexible and adapt to conditions and detail these changes (Yin, 2003).

Peer review is a "discussion with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). Audit trails were used to provide a detailed process of the study carried

out (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, a peer review and audit of the analytic process was
undertaken (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Transferability**

Transferability is synonymous with external validity and demonstrates multiple
applications from the context described (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Transferability is concerned with generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thick descriptions
are a technique that researchers use to strengthen trustworthiness. Thick descriptions provide
detailed information about the setting with participants and this information is made available so
that readers can determine for themselves the level of transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
Although unique, there is a "natural generalization" that can be gleaned from personal
experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 262). Also, the multiple settings under the same
conditions and review help generalize the findings (Yin, 2003).

<center>**Ethical Considerations**</center>

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) ethics has a strong correlation to
trustworthiness as they note, "to a large extent, the validity and reliability of a study depend upon
the ethics of the investigator" (p. 260). Ethics permeates research and the interview is a "moral
enterprise" of sorts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 62). Ethical issues emerge when attempting to
translate private phenomena into public knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale and
Brinkman chart ethical issues throughout the stages of research and offer ethical guidelines
regarding informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, the role of the researcher, and
learning ethical behavior.

In this study pseudonyms were given to protect the participants from harm (Creswell &
Poth, 2018; McFarlane-Morris, 2022; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Furthermore, interviews with

participants were conducted online and off-site according to preference, and informed consent

was provided (McFarlane-Morris, 2022; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additional identifiable

information was altered to protect the participants from harm and a collaboration with

participants on what gets reported and how it gets reported will further ensure participant safety

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kyale & Brinkmann, 2009; McFarlane-Morris, 2022). Finally, data was

stored on a secure data collection system and files will be under lock and key (Creswell & Poth,

2018; McFarlane-Morris, 2022).

## Summary

Understanding Christian therapists in the public-school systems and their interpretation,

experiences, and navigation of RS issues and interventions addressing identity and meaning-

making issues requires a qualitative and phenomenological approach. Using axiological and

ontological assumptions, as well as a biblical worldview and pragmatic interpretive framework,

general theoretical questions elicited a deeper understanding of Christian school counselors'

interpretation, experiences, and navigation of RS with adolescents to assist in meaning-making

and identity formation struggles. Furthermore, the public-school setting, the participants as

mental health professionals, and the role of the researcher are described throughout.

Data collection procedures outlined in the chapter include the use of interviews, cognitive

representations, and documentation. Data analysis outlines seven steps. Finally, ethical

considerations in the chapter justify the use of pseudo names, off-site interviewing to protect the

privacy of the participants, informed consent, altered identity information, collaboration with the

participants, data securely stored, a file naming system, and memoing.

## Chapter Four: Findings

## Overview

In this qualitative study exploring what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors, this chapter details the data analysis process for thematic coding and interpretation. In the following sections, the participants, details of the analysis, and findings are presented. Thematic findings are presented in quotes representing the experiences and perspectives of the participants, and the processes for internal and external reliability are outlined. The purpose of this chapter is to report the data and to reflect the essence of the experience and perspectives regarding meaning-making and identity from Christian public-school counselors working with adolescents.

## Data Analysis Process

Following data collection, the information was transcribed and organized before coding increased the data (Smith et al., 2022). Experiential statements then "winnowed" (p. 86) the data before being randomized and "clustered" (p. 91). The data was winnowed further into personal experiential themes or PETs which were color coded and stacked to aid in the synthesizing process (Saldana, 2016). This process was duplicated with all eight transcripts (Smith et al., 2022). Recurring patterns, sentiments, and narratives emerged into themes and subthemes better known as group experiential themes or GETs (Smith et al., 2022).

Ensuring reliable and valid findings was an important part of this qualitative process. Thick descriptions detailed the context and setting of the study to increase dependability and confirmability (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Reflexivity and journaling guarded against researcher bias (McFarlane-Morris, 2022).

Member audits offered corrections to reduce human error and deepen dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Multiple stages of memoing aided in the organization of the researcher's thoughts and decisions (Smith et al., 2022). This allowed for bracketing the

researcher's thought process to guard against prejudice and ensure unbiased results (Smith et al.,

2022). Finally, peer review from multiple experts assessed the analytical process to ensure

scholarly rigor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These individuals asked several questions and offered

suggestions, and revisions were made. Collectively, these methods enhance credibility and

validity to ensure academic rigor.

<div align="center">**Participants**</div>

In this qualitative study, a group of participants was selected to provide varied insights

into how public-school counselors understand adolescent identity and meaning-making

development from a biblical worldview. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria

relevant to the research objectives and were recruited using snowball sampling methods (Smith

et al., 2022). Participants were all female, married with children, and public-school counselors

who identified with the Christian faith. Their age range was 31-49 years old with an average of

12.25 years employed and counseling children and adolescents in the public-school system. Each

participant was provided with information about the study's purpose and given informed consent

before the interview. To maintain confidentiality and protect the participants' identities,

pseudonyms were assigned to everyone and all identifying information have been removed or

altered. The researcher wishes to express sincere gratitude to the participants for their time,

openness, and willingness to engage in this study. See Table 1 for the participant demographics.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participants | Age | Counseling Experience |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Kathy | 49 | 22 |
| Casey | 31 | 6 |
| Shelly | 36 | 6 |
| Lisa | 57 | 25 |
| Marisa | 38 | 14 |
| Anna | 43 | 5 |
| Kayla | 37 | 5 |
| Janet | 57 | 15 |

**Kathy**

Kathy is 49 years old and has been a counselor for 22 years. She is Caucasian and female, and is married with children. Kathy has always been drawn to kids and taught children and adolescents in the public-school system for five years before transitioning into the counseling role. She felt a desire to help and influence others on a deeper level than academia. She noticed a deeper longing and need for help from children and adolescents that persuaded her into pursuing the counseling role. She enjoys counseling students and cares deeply for the population she serves. She is a baptized believer who participates and attends church services and identifies with the Christian faith.

**Casey**

Casey, a Caucasian female, is 31 years old and has been a public-school counselor for six years. She is married and has a child. Early on Casey had an interest in helping others. Growing

up she did not experience many of the challenges her students faced and over time she developed

a deeper understanding of the needs of her students and desired to do more. Although she never

wanted to be a counselor, the position opened and her desire to acquire new tools for helping

resulted in her application and eventual hiring as a school counselor. She is a baptized believer

who attends church services and identifies with the Christian faith.

**Shelly**

Shelly is a 36-year-old Caucasian female who is married with children. She has been a

public-school counselor for six years. Shelly always wanted to work with kids but after

becoming a teacher the classroom setting felt overwhelming. Having struggled with mental

health issues as an adolescent herself, Shelly felt the one-on-one counseling format might be a

better fit for her personality. After marrying and having children herself, she transitioned into the

public-school counseling role that offered her the schedule she loves and the more manageable

one-on-one format of counseling. She is a baptized believer who attends church services and

identifies with the Christian faith.

**Lisa**

Lisa is a 57-year-old Caucasian female who is married with children and has

grandchildren. Lisa always knew she would become a teacher but never considered counseling

students until approached by the superintendent who offered her the job. After seven years of

teaching, she accepted the role as counselor and began her counseling studies while transitioning

into counseling adolescents. It turned out to be a good fit for her as she learned quickly that she

preferred the one-on-one format that counseling typically offers. Lisa is a baptized believer who

participates and attends church services and identifies with the Christian faith. She is also a big

believer in prayer and is involved with various prayer groups.

**Marisa**

Marisa is a 38-year-old Caucasian female who is married with children. After working for years in a different industry she started to question life choices and got back to church. Wanting to make an impact she began contemplating how best to do so when in church the idea of school counseling came to her. This was an emotional experience for her as she felt it was a call from God. Soon after, she began pursuing an education in school counseling. She has been a public-school counselor for six years. She is passionate about her role as counselor and considers her work with children a blessing. She is a baptized believer who attends church services and identifies with the Christian faith.

**Anna**

Anna is a 43-year-old Caucasian female. She is a wife and mother, and prior teacher for over 15 years. Anna noticed a negative shift in the student population which emphasized the need for more relational support. The increased needs, coupled with teacher burnout, had her open to other roles within the school setting. Her principal suggested counseling and offered up this position. Anna accepted and began earning her degree in school counseling while counseling students. She has been a public-school counselor now for five years and loves this job. She is a baptized believer who attends church services and identifies with the Christian faith.

**Kayla**

Kayla is a 37-year-old Caucasian female, and she is a wife and mother. Kayla always wanted to work with youth from her own early experiences in youth camps. She began a career in social work which eventually led her to assisting the school system and ultimately a slow transition into counseling. After being offered a school counseling job by a principal, she accepted the role and began her training as a school counselor. She has been a school counselor

now for five years. She is a baptized believer who attends church services and identifies with the

Christian faith.

**Janet**

Janet is a 57-year-old Caucasian female and wife and mother. She has been a counselor in

the public-school system for 15 years. She began her career as a social worker but always wanted

to be in a public-school setting. A grant for social work allowed her the opportunity to work in

schools with the student population. She loved the work and all populations. She decided to go

back to school to get a degree in school counseling while she worked as a social worker in the

school system. After the grant expired, she made the transition into public-school counseling.

She loves the work and considers it a blessing. She is a baptized believer who participates and

attends church services and identifies with the Christian faith.

<div align="center">**Results**</div>

The results section of this qualitative research paper describing what integrating identity

and meaning-making mean to Chrisitan school counselors who work with adolescents in the

public-school system, details the interview findings obtained through in-depth analysis of the

collected data. This section provides an overview of themes, patterns, and concepts from the

qualitative data to offer a comprehensive view of the research phenomenon. The section

examines rich narratives and thick descriptions, illuminating important qualitative information

that contributes to the study's topic.

**Results for Central Question**

Relationships emerged as a key integrative construct for counselors toward the healthy

formative process of identity and meaning-making in adolescence. All participants viewed

utilizing the relationship for expressed care and spirituality as central to their work with

adolescents and a key formative process for healthy development. Most all participants

mentioned the limited role of the counselor and the negative view of gender-fluid concepts on

adolescent development. Four themes and several subthemes resulted from the central research

question. The four themes that emerged are as follows:

(1) For these counselors, relationship is a key formative process that fosters healthy

adolescent identity development and meaning-making.

(2) Implicit religion/spirituality (RS) is integrated through the personhood of the

counselor.

(3) A negative view concerning the impact of gender ideology on adolescent identity

development.

(4) Therapeutic systems and resources are at full capacity or nonexistent.

### *Relationship is a Key Formative Process that Fosters Healthy Adolescent Identity Development and Meaning-making*

This theme captures the therapeutic value and utility of relationships as well as the

perceived importance and impact on healthy adolescent identity development. This theme is

comprised of three subthemes: (a) Counselor's expressed care, (b) Positive identity focus, (c)

Experiential/social-learning focus.

**Counselor's Expressed Care.** Counselor's expressed care captures the professional

essence of the counselor. All participants stressed qualities that are foundational to the

counseling profession: listening, empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard. For

these counselors, these qualities are the epitome to establishing and maintaining healthy

relationships for effective counseling and subsequent healthy identity development for

adolescents.

Lisa links the therapeutic role as counselor to an impact on the thinking processes of an adolescent when she states:

It's a lot of listening and refocusing or, you know, saying back to them what you're hearing because as far as giving them direction, I mean, I can throw different things out there but as far as … a lot of what I do is listening and rephrasing and helping them with their thinking process.

Lisa's comments broadly outline the boundary of this role and highlight the professional methods utilized by the counselor to maintain the relational bonds that the therapeutic profession deems crucial for connection and subsequent development. Most of the counselors reference their personal care as a motivation for pursuing this position and it is certainly a complementary attribute for the profession. With some trepidation, Anna's interpretation also aids in the conceptualization for the limits of this role when she notes, "as far as their identities, and I'm not sure if I'm answering this correctly or the way you need me to, but I feel like as far as their identity, I'm just coming to support whatever they're feeling." Again, this perspective illustrates the perceived significance of the counselor's role of expressed care and it the subsequent impact on adolescent development, and the professional limits that entails. Kathy echoes a similar sentiment:

I feel like that's helping them just to know that someone cares about them and to help them, you know, I think that helps them to … to figure out who they are—to just know that someone cares and someone's listening and someone's helping them realize what their potential is.

Kathy recognizes the therapeutic value of listening and its impact on adolescent identity and meaning making processes. Listening is caring and provides the therapeutic space toward

developing a budding autonomy. Marisa furthers this thought when she stresses the

developmental significance of relational care and sees tangible results in adolescent development

through the student's shy expressions. She states,

> They want that. I mean…it's funny because teenagers are, are quirky. And you know,
>
> they don't necessarily want to show that they like you. Sometimes I have kids that will
>
> put their head down as they go by but as soon as I say hi they smile and look up, you
>
> know, and, and, you know that you are making an impact and, and I have … I've heard,
>
> you know, kids say I care, you know, "she cares about us" or you know … they do want
>
> that.

Marisa interprets care synonymously with the counselor role and provides examples of

how this expression of care is desired by adolescents. Janet also recognizes the therapeutic value

of relationship and underscores its significance by stating, "To do our work and do it right and

know that we're serving, it takes time in relationship." Furthermore, Casey develops the

construct of counselor care further by addressing adolescent identity specifically:

> The effectiveness is just letting the person say what they want to say, what they want to
>
> deal with without judgement, because when it comes to identity, gender identity, self-
>
> identity, whatever type of identity … if they don't feel heard then they're gonna unravel
>
> quickly.

These counselors utilize basic counseling skills like unconditional positive regard to

establish a safe space for the adolescent to "be themselves" and explore their identity. This

relationship is viewed synonymous with the identity formative process of adolescents.

Additionally, authenticity plays no small role in cultivating this space as Kayla expounds on the

counselor notion of authenticity by stating,

Um … I think I always encourage students to be their own unique self, and I often role

model that to a fault (laugh) for these kids. You know, I try to help them know that it's

OK to be unique and it's OK to be what other people might consider weird. If you're

comfortable in your skin, you know you just gotta be you. And you know, I think that it's

so tough being a teenager these days and, in a world where kids have to deal with social

media, you know it makes it even harder because there's no privacy for kids to retreat

and make that time to, you know, really determine who they're going to be. They're

having to do it, you know, on stage practically.

Kayla interprets her role-modeling authenticity as a normalizing method to develop trust

and encourage self-exploration. Again, expressed care, from the professional counselor role,

utilizes professional skills that are perceived as aiding in the formation of identity and meaning-

making for adolescents. Shelly takes this thought a step further by infusing spirituality into this

dynamic. Shelly states,

I try to be the light for these kids. A lot of them come from bad homes—really tough

situations. Drugs. Abuse. All the things that you don't wish upon a child. Just to be that

light to be someone who cares and listens … A lot of these kids don't have anyone. They

don't get hugs. They don't get love. They don't get someone who cares to just let them

cry and talk about what's making them, you know … feel all these big feelings. And so, I

pray that I can be that. Whether or not I could say you know, God loves you to them. I

can't say those things. But hopefully they can feel that through me.

Shelly interprets her expression of care within the professional counselor role as

synonymous with her own expressions of spirituality. Relationships and spirituality are

interlinked and often subjective descriptions for a spiritual plain. Here, the counselor role is

viewed as providing personal and spiritual expressions that benefit the formative processes of

adolescents. Indeed, data demonstrates that school counselors and adolescents both often

describe spirituality in a relational context. For each of these participants, integrating identity and

meaning-making processes occurs on a relational plain and the fundamental helping skill of the

professional counselor allow each of them to develop and maintain personal relationships which

are viewed as foundational for healthy adolescent development, and this relational dynamic is

always a positive experience for the adolescent.

**Positive Identity Focus.** Positive identity focus is the second subtheme of the central

research question and is like the passive listening skills listed above; however, the counselor's

role is more directional in offering objective points of view, redirecting the student onto a

positive thinking path, and/or referring the student to mental health resources to combat negative

thinking patterns. For many of these counselors, integrating identity and meaning-making means

minimizing potential negatives and maximizing positives for healthy adolescent development.

Shelly states, "You try to guide them along in making those right choices for themselves, but

also giving enough space and grace to kind of be who they are." This interpretation infers that

adolescents need at least a minimal measure of guidance to ensure a positive trajectory. Although

minimal, guidance is subjective and attempts to steer the adolescent from risky behavior or

unhealthy coping is a genuine effort to maintain healthy and positive development.

Kathy echoes this sentiment when addressing identity directly:

To help them with their identity? I think that's a lot, probably like the last one [question].

Maybe just to try to … to help them to realize their talents and abilities and interests in

helping to steer them in positive paths to develop that.

Kathy goes on to stress the need for counselor discernment in preemptive care for adolescents.

This perspective highlights the volatile meaning-making processes of the adolescent and the legitimate need for good counsel. Kathy states:

>Well, I think you know … I tell parents a lot that if you know, if you don't help them get involved in something, you know, they are going to get involved in something, it's just … and it could, it's going to be … many times it's going to be negative—if you're not helping them … guiding them in that direction. So, I think it, at a young age, trying to help them to you know … realize what, what they're good at. What they like. What you know … to try to help nurture there, you know … self-esteem and how they feel about themselves.

>Shelly shares a similar view for the need for good counsel. She states, "So … I feel like if

I'm being proactive and preparing them for that [identity formation], then they're not going to struggle as much trying to figure out those things [what they identity with]." This proactive approach moves beyond passive listening and care to influence a safe explorative space which bends toward the students' natural abilities and strengths. Conversely, these school counselors recognize a vulnerability from negative influences and seven of the eight address this vulnerability and how they as counselors go about navigating it. Lisa states,

>When I know that kids are doing things, whether it be, you know … drugs, drinking, sex, that sort of stuff. You know, I try and talk with them about those risky behaviors and things that they … not in a condemning way because that's not my job to condemn anybody but talk about how this can impact your life down the road. How this can impact your future family or anything like that and try and make them look at some things from that standpoint. And remember that I was young and in high school once myself and did some stupid things but trying to let kids know that they can come talk with me. Let the

kids know that you know … I support them. Encourage them. Whatever. But also want them to make good decisions and, and … and think about the ramifications when they make a bad decision. How they're gonna impact them down the road.

Lisa addresses the reality of negative decision-making and the consequences thereof. She provides a safe therapeutic space for processing but also wants the adolescents to know the risk and impact this exploration might have on their future self. Although adults might be expected to express and then bare the full burden of their choices, adolescents have limited access to their frontal lobes which aid in anticipating future consequences and are heavily influenced during this stage of development as they navigate experiential learning to home identity. Kathy also expresses this balance between self-exploration and good counsel. She states,

And you don't want to say that's wrong, or you shouldn't do that. You know, because they don't want to hear that, you know. Until … I feel like you have to just put it in different ways and, and bring other, you know, ideas to have them see it from a different view.

She adds,

I mean, I … I always try to help kids to think about, you know, that right now just because you feel this way right now doesn't mean it's going to be that way forever. Like um … you know. So I don't think you need to be deciding right now what you think you're going to be for the rest of your life or what, you know … not make those life decisions right now because there's a lot of time for that and I try to help them work on themselves first and … and how they feel about themselves and if it, if it is anxiety, if they've got anxiety, depression, to try to get them the help that they need for that.

Kathy redirects the students to focus on positive formative tasks and to abandon

explorative prospects that might be beyond the student's current development or possibly signal

pathology. Similarly, Marisa states:

> I mean, obviously when they have, like I said, when they're…they're internalizing those
>
> things, that brings up bigger things and we sit and we just…you know…. Talk about it
>
> and, and try to help them see that not everything is about them, you know.
>
> This egocentric view is common to adolescents and demonstrates normative processes

and their limits. If a student is struggling in this area many counselors will make a referral for

additional services that go beyond the counselor role. Anna and Kayla validate this perspective,

and Kayla states, "But you know, as a school counselor, I tend to focus more along the surface,

and whenever those deeper needs come up make referrals, yeah … (laugh)."

Collectively, these counselors are cognizant of adolescent vulnerability and proactively

counsel students onto positive outlets of expression, positive thinking, or make a referral if this is

a struggle for the adolescent. This hands-on approach is interpreted as a safeguard against

negative influences and added coping resources for healthy adolescent identity development. A

positive focus, coupled with relational care, preps the stage for healthy and safe experiential

learning methods which are also considered vital for adolescent identity and meaning-making

processes.

**Experimental Learning Focus.** Experiential learning focus is the third subtheme and an

important construct toward the formative process of adolescence. Professional literature

considers experiential learning a key mode of exploration where students make meaning of these

encounters and accept or reject the experiences as sequence to their own identity formative

process. A student's interests, talents, activities, peers, and groups were interpreted by these

counselors as important factors in healthy adolescent development. Casey clarifies by stating,

Middle school is the time when I tell parents a lot … where you try out different

activities. Where you do get involved in clubs you normally wouldn't do because this is a

time to traverse high school. It's more about creating your next four years. Whatever you

want after school. So I think identity is such a hot topic with adolescents right now and

I'm always learning because I don't know some things, all the time, and I don't want to

screw up what I'm saying or telling kids because I feel like middle school, especially is

figuring out who they are and kids are just trying to figure out, you know, what they like

… what they don't like … who their friends are that day.

Casey draws a comparison between experiential knowledge and identity formation.

Along with relational care and maintaining a positive focus, experiential learning provides

adolescents with the platform for experiencing themselves and making meaning of these

collected experiences. Janet shares this view but with much more enthusiasm. She states,

I encourage! I always encourage all the way. I would say, explore, explore, and

experience all those experiences. Exposure to, to all of those things are important, and

because they're trying to figure out who they are … what they like … what they're good

at. That, that was, I would say, all of these things are important. I would encourage to

keep trying it—not to give up, you know. Not to just say I don't like it—I'm not gonna

do it. But, just to really be recognizing. You're gonna try all these different activities.

Sports etc., to find out what you are good at. What you like, and when you're learning

about people. You're just … learning activity or the the technique or the subject your

learning about other people and other other things outside of you that you didn't know

existed or that you didn't know about yourself. This is time to destroy and absorb all that.

Take from it what you like. Take from it what you know. What you like. Learn that you

are so good at that. But you're better at this.

Janet interprets these exploratory processes as exciting and ripe with potential—and healthy. Although risks are inherent to this process and often require relational care and a positive focus to maximize these encounters, the opportunity for this meaning-making process is viewed as necessary for healthy identity formation. Janet adds,

I even started way down in elementary. They would have five different specials and music, art, computer, PC library and they start, "I don't like this. I want this one. I want that one and I don't, I don't like this person or that person." It was just another chance to teach them no, you need exposure to all of these because you don't know. Um … it comes time to sign up for band, for junior high school and like everybody should try, Tou have no idea. There's so many decisions in here and, and you're gonna just learn not just music. You're gonna learn so many things. But you don't know you're gonna learn so much. The more the better. The more exposure we experience, the better.

For these counselors, experiential learning is viewed as an important process for adolescents. It provides opportunities to test interpretations. These counselors seek to maximize these experiences and encounters to encourage healthy development. Kathy addresses the negative impact of a limited exploratory process. She states,

I think so many times the kids that get you know, that have really...can get some serious anxiety and depression because they feel alone you know. And they feel like they don't know who they are, and they don't know where they fit in and so I think helping them to fit into a group so that they don't feel alone, and they know that there are other people that feel the same way they do and like the same things they do.

Kathy links these exploratory prospects to social-learning opportunities and notes the

negative effects of limited experiences on the psyche. For these counselors experiential learning

opportunities often provide a means for inclusion. Shelly states, "In adolescence, that's one of

their, you know, main focuses and just trying to find those friends that we have things in

common with. Not changing who we are just to be friends with someone." Experiential and

social learning are interconnected constructs that are viewed as promoting healthy adolescent

development. Like interests, talents, and activities, Shelly highlights the interconnectedness

between these constructs and relationship: "They, you know, they are dealing with friendship

problems and figuring out who they are." These counselors recognize that peer relationships are

a key construct for the formative process of adolescents. Marisa adds,

> They're internalizing somebody looked at them funny or somebody was walking behind
>
> them and talked, though they were obviously talking about someone else, you know.
>
> There's things like that they are internalizing and, and, making it about them during, you
>
> know, during that time.
>
> Providing the student with a safe opportunity to discover themselves through others is

viewed as an important aspect for these counselors. Acquiring these experiences is viewed as an

opportunity and limiting exposure is a detriment. Caring for the student and maintaining a

positive focus seems to be the foundation for encouraging and experiencing others through

activity. Collectively, the subthemes highlight the interpretation that for these counselors'

relationship is a key formative process that fosters healthy adolescent identity development and

meaning-making. Relationship is the spearhead in the counselor's arsenal to impact identity and

meaning-making adolescent processes in a healthy and constructive way. Maintaining a positive

focus and bridging experiential outlets provides the hands and feet for these relational efforts.

**Implicit RS is Integrated Through the Personhood of the Counselor**

Like the previous theme which utilizes the counselor role to express relational care to aid the adolescent in the formative processes of identity development and meaning-making, this theme demonstrates the multimodal use of the professional counselor role as governor of implicit RS in a restricted setting like the public-school system. Although the participants are aware of the legal and ethical limitations of the counselor role and religious expression in this restricted setting, many experience spirituality as unhindered and synonymous with the relational expressions of care listed above in theme one.

For example, Shelly states, "Um … I mean, I feel like I have a good balance already. I don't really ever feel restricted, at least in the school I'm at now." Marisa shares a similar view. She states, "I don't want to say I walk on eggshells because I really don't." Shelly adds, "I guess you just don't feel restricted. It's what I do with kids every day so … it already aligns with the values I have as a Christian." Marisa echoes this same sentiment: "I don't hide it. I just … I don't know that I use any other … any other tools. You know what I'm saying? Other than showing them that love."

It appears that in a restricted setting like the public-school system these counselors rely on the same implicit relationship for expressing care as they do spiritually. Although restrictions apply to overt methods, personal expressions, and resources, these restrictions do not seem to hinder relationships which are regarded as spiritual in nature for these counselors. The spiritual aspect of relationships is reflected in the counselor's view of the sacred and their own identity. Most of the counselors referenced God in the context of relationship. Casey states, "I think loving people as He loved people. So, I think that's as simple as I can put it." Shelly states, "Um … knowing that I'm fully loved for who I am and no matter the mistakes I make in life, it's gonna be OK." Similarly, Marisa states, "Leading that life and living that life being … you know

… loving and caring about others and just, you know, living your life to serve Him and, and, be

… um … more like Him."

Kathy shares the same sentiments when describing God but includes the word identity in

her definition when she states, "I belong to Him and that, that, that … that is my identity because

I belong to Him. We all belong to Him, and we are all His children." Kayla touches on the limits

of perfection and despite our flaws still loving others in relationship as modeled by Christ. She

states,

> Well … for me, I think you know, it's trying to live your life as much as you can in in
>
> Christ's image and you know, knowing that we are human and nobody's perfect. But that
>
> Jesus didn't expect that, you know, He wanted us to walk in His way and, and love His
>
> children as He did.

Finally, Janet provides a description linking identity to a relational God when stating,

> The ultimate counselor is, is, is, is … God and I would think of Jesus as my identity as a
>
> counselor. Even in school I took Him with me. You know, I had Jesus and God with me
>
> always at school, so that my identity, you know, I didn't outwardly speak it. It was there.
>
> I was wanting to be the hands and feet of Jesus to my students. And again, I didn't
>
> verbalize that, but I looked at that. I was serving. I saw Jesus as He served people. He
>
> was there for people, and I wanted … that's how I looked at my work. Um … so my idea
>
> is I … I wasn't alone in my identity. I didn't see myself as this, you know, people to see
>
> us as a counselor up on this pedestal and like, no, I don't do this alone.

These counselors are describing a malleable spirituality that is alive in relationship to

God and through others, and thus bypasses any policy restrictions limiting overt methods.

Although these counselors speak to and are aware of their own religious limitations in a

restricted setting like the public-school system the counselor role navigates these restrictions

well, while also providing ample opportunity to provide spiritual expressions through the

relational care of the counselor role. Therefore, these counselors feel free to express their

spirituality in relationship despite any hindrances on personal expressions of religion. For

example, Casey states,

> I have learned that actions speak louder than words. A lot of times, if people want to
>
> preach to me, that's fine. But don't be a jerk. I was just telling someone, I said … some
>
> of the worst Christians set in the pew every Sunday.

> Similarly, Shelly states, "You truly care about these kids and so you're just showing them

love and compassion, you know, even when they make bad choices." Shelly adds, "It's what I do

with kids every day is … already aligns with the values I have as a Christian." These counselors

interpret expressions of implicit integration as a caring part of themselves which aligns with the

professional counselor role. Upholding this role, whether interpreted as personal, spiritual, or

professional, is important to these counselors. Marisa provides several statements about this

phenomenon. She states,

> That's kind of my biggest thing is just showing them and behaving that way even not in
>
> the school setting. Like I don't want to go out and see me somewhere and then be
>
> completely different kind of person and you, you know … at Church or out and about,
>
> you know, or at the grocery store or, you know, wherever you are at, I want them to know
>
> that they're loved.

> Marisa considers the term integration and comes up with a similar conclusion, adding,

"So … I guess … I would define integration as, like I said, just showing them." She states, "I just

continue to love them." She clarifies further with "What I'm saying is I … I … just, I don't

adjust things necessarily based on my Christianity." Marisa concludes, "I don't hide it. I just … I

don't know that I use any other any other tools. You know what I'm saying? Other than

showring them that love." Marisa clearly associates her spirituality with her care, which is

expressed in the counseling role and derivative of the caring origins that led many into this

profession. Several counselors speak about this type of modeling. Anna writes,

> Um … yeah … I would say I integrate my faith by showing the type of values and
>
> personal beliefs I have without putting that on to someone necessarily or forcing them to
>
> belief the same thing. So, I show that through my actions through the words I use …
>
> through being kind and helpful … through trying to be as positive as I can … I … I guess
>
> that would be how I show it.
>
> Kayla shares the same sentiment:
>
> Um … I think that definitely the integration comes into the execution. I am a firm believe
>
> that actions speak louder than words, and I think that when we, as Christian counselors,
>
> are stepping into that world and role modeling, what it looks like to, you know, to show
>
> compassion and and you know, love like Christ. I think that that kind of increases
>
> integration just from role modeling.

These counselors describe God as relational, do not feel restricted to express their

spirituality in a setting like the public-school system, and express spirituality by modeling a

loving character like Christ. Interestingly, a subtheme emerged in the data that acknowledges the

experience of restriction on anything overt: Hinderances of RS integration. This subtheme helps

to clarify the perceived differences between religion and spirituality, and clearly delineates

restrictions to religion. Several of the counselors expressed caution or difficulty navigating

certain subjects. For example, Kathy describes a general struggle with conscience when moving

beyond relational care when she states,

> Well, I think it makes it difficult because there are many times when I want to, you know,
> be able to share things with kids that I feel like I maybe can't because of being in the
> public school, you know? So, I feel like many times, you know, I maybe don't say what I
> want to say because of that.

Kathy's reservations convey an awareness of either policy restrictions for expressing her own religiosity or the limiting role of the counselor to refrain from an imposition of values. Either way these counselors are aware of the limitations of their role and respect policy and professional limits. Shelly describes a similar phenomenon of feeling unhindered, and yet avoiding RS altogether. She states,

> Um … I've had kids openly talk about, you know, praying helps students work with
> anxiety and someone will talk about that. And I usually just say "That's great. That's
> great for you. I'm glad that that's something that helps you feel better. But I don't
> necessarily continue to discuss it, or you know, you know that could be a tricky, tricky
> thing. Like you know, say they went home, and you know … said we talked about that. I
> feel like if they're already a Christian home that … that … they're not necessarily upset
> talking about that, but you just have to kind of keep yourself safe as a counselor.

Shelly describes avoiding RS subjects even if the adolescent introduces the topic. The counselor references keeping oneself safe by avoiding RS topics altogether. In response to a follow-up questions, she adds,

> Um…if they bring it up? Is that what you mean—like spirituality, your religion? I mean,
> I find it refreshing in my heart because they bring that up. But like I said, I kind of have
> to just say, you know that's a working skill. It is. People can use … a lot of people in the

world use their beliefs and their religion to help them through difficult things and it's a

good coping skill. While that's not on my like wall of like … I had this little corner, with

different coping skills that they can choose from. There's not one on there that posted

religion, but you know, I … I do try to just reassure that yeah, that's a … that's a great

thing that you're able to do that and … you can move on from it.

Like many of the counselors, Shelly articulates no distinction from her own RS, which is

restricted in this setting, and the adolescents RS, which is not. This is a very important

distinction and provides a possible rationale for neglecting multicultural resources. This

misunderstanding superimposes policy restrictions on the adolescent and denies potential identity

and meaning-making resources and coping resources. The difference between counselor

apostatizing and multicultural competency is the difference between the counselor's RS and the

student's RS. These counselors respond with little regard to the former. For example, Anna

describes caution in revealing her Christian identity to students for fear of ramification. She

states,

> I'm very careful not to mention um … that I'm a Christian. Now if a child asks me if I go
>
> to church, or if they are a Christian, then yes, I will answer them. I go to church. But I try
>
> not to go too in-depth with that topic because you don't know how the family feels about
>
> it.

She adds, "Just occasionally you know, where they say I went to church with my

grandma and I was like…that's, you know, that's really good. I'm glad you could go." This

dismissal and avoidance of the adolescent's RS serves to highlight the ambiguity of RS policy in

a restricted setting like the public-school system and the default of avoidance at the expense of

the child's own cultural RS exploration and potential coping resources. The enmeshed notion

that the public-school counselor's RS is the same as the student's RS signals a lack of

multicultural training for public-school counselors. Regarding having received any multicultural

RS training all participants answered no.

   Kathy states, "No, I would say not just other than my own…what I know about the bible,

and I mean you know … what I've learned, it would just be my own interpretation." Casey

states, "No …(laugh)." Lisa states, "Um … no not really. I mean I've, I've read some, you know,

books and articles of different things, but nothing major in that area." Anna states, "Um … not

that I know of." Kayla states, "No, I of course got my master's through Indiana University, and

they did not have any faith-based models in, you know, in their curriculum. It is … so that's

something that I'm not personally familiar with." Finally, Janet states, "That wasn't a subject in

my training."

   The lack of RS training, coupled with the ambiguity inherent to laws, ethics, and school

policies, limits multicultural applications for struggling students who identify as Christian. These

counselors seem to confuse their RS with the student's therapeutic right and professional

expectation of multicultural care, and the adolescent's freedom to express their religious

ideologies. For example, Anna states that, "We can get in trouble legally to find out that I'm

talking to…talking to a student about church and my beliefs, and I wouldn't want to put anyone

in that situation either." She adds,

> Uh … um … on the present I don't' get anything … I mean I've … to me, it doesn't
>
> make it difficult to try to leave religion separate, and I've always been a public-school
>
> counselor. I do feel like it would be more difficult to say if I have come from a Christian
>
> school and then try to go public. I think that would be more difficult, but I feel like since,
>
> since that's what I'm used to you know, it's not hard for me to, you know, try to keep it

as separate as possible.

The personal expression of religion and the restrictions imposed on the counselor trump access to multicultural care for the student as all counselors speak from these limitations and impositions, and not the rights of the students. When pressed further about this multicultural access to care Anna states,

> Well, when you want to celebrate diversity and you want to recognize cultures other than what you see in your in your community, yeah, but like you said, along with wanting to celebrate those different cultures a lot of times with the culture there's a certain religion and it's hard because you still have to keep that separate.

A similar sentiment is echoed by Casey when she states:

> So … with my job, I have to be … I can't have an opinion on stuff. I'm just there, you know … I would say … not my monkey not my circus. So…technically, I can't. If I wanted to use a faith-based technique, I can't say it's faith based or people would be up in arms. I am open to it. So … I'm all … I've learned that in education you have to be a lifelong learner. What doesn't work one time might work the next time. I'm open to it. So, I just can't call it faith based because not everyone has the same religion at my school.

Although the counselor is open to utilizing RS methods, there is a misunderstanding for the appropriateness of its use. Multicultural care is viewed as a liability and avoided at the expense of the student regardless of if this is something the student wants to explore as part of their identity and meaning-making process and utilize as a healthy coping resource. Janet's statement below underscores the rationale for avoiding an assessment of multicultural resources. She states,

To be the one to initiate it and address it? Yeah, I think … I think the rule of policy. I'm

intimidated by the public-school rule policy. If I knew I had more of a gateway,

multicultural, if it's like this is just as much a part of it. It should be. It should be

something we should do with initially, like with where they stand for example, right?

What are, what are your, what are you beliefs you have? Any spiritual, spiritual beliefs,

religious beliefs? So probably, yeah … need to be more forward. If I know it's good to be

safe and but again, I'm not afraid of that persecution and the, or something I, I know its

missing. I mean it's, it's a piece that's just missing for for the students. So, we just keep

stepping around it and its, its so important. And I feel like, yeah, we should be. It should

be a way that I help them. Should be as much part of my assessment and interventions

and my follow up and my contacts as anything.

Janet describes a willingness and need for multicultural applications but is not convinced

that multicultural approaches are not restricted. She also expresses reservation if multicultural

assessment were to be part of the counselor's approach. Although the counselor does not seem to

be distinguishing her restrictions from the students' liberties, it serves to highlight the

multifaceted reservations. She states,

My friend, he said the thing that always made him so scared and leery, he said, you

know, if we open that up and if it's OK for us to talk about our faith and spirituality, then

we're gonna have to be open the way the law, the rule is now you know when I do this

point to, we're gonna have to open it up to everyone.

Janet adds,

I want to completely open this door and want full access and be able to talk very openly

about this because then, and this is going to have to allow for every religious belief to

come in and that's scary.

Janet's comments are multifaceted in that they address an ambiguous overlap between the counselors' own restrictions and the students' right to multicultural care. From a multicultural perspective, the student has a right to express their faith and to gain access to religious cultural resources that aid in coping and have nothing to do with the counselor's own religious standing. In other words, counselors will not be granted access to apostatize but rather, perform the full duties of the counselor role which is an ethical and professional expectation of the profession—to provide multicultural care to the student. Although avoiding adolescent RS certainly limits religious ideologies from permeating in the public-school system it does not restrain certain humanist ideologies from doing the same, some of which are considered by these counselors as quite harmful for the developing adolescent.

*A Negative View Concerning the Impact of Gender Ideology on Adolescent Identity Development*

This theme captures the perceived negative impact of recent gender trends on adolescent development. All eight counselors express a negative view with gender fluid ideologies and the harmful influence from media and other outlets. Casey acknowledges this far-reaching trend when stating, "Identity is such a hot topic with adolescents right now." Kayla shares a similar view concerning this ideological popularity and the increases in adolescent gender confusion when stating,

Um … well, I think we're definitely coming into, you know, a time where we're dealing a lot more with, you know, transgender situations. We're dealing with a lot of students who aren't sure about their sexuality where, you know, even just students that, you know, are struggling with who they are and so then they try to find that approval in others.

That's, you now, something that's ramping up for our students younger and younger."

All counselors view this trend as having a negative impact on adolescent identity development and seven of the eight blame social media specifically for this negative trend. Anna starts out acknowledging several possible contributing stressors that might be adding to the phenomenon. She states,

I just think its … you know … society, social media, COVID coming in in the middle of it was not good. And then the family dynamics have changed so much over the last twenty years. Kids don't have that normal family home that they used to, and we don't have that parental support like we did.

Anna goes on to address the specific negative role she feels social media plays in adolescent identity development. She states:

I see a lot of um … the students are being affected by social media and things that they do on videos online, which is scary. Um … so I think that's where a lot of the students you know nowadays are getting their identity traits from more … sometimes more than family members.

Anna believes children and adolescents are turning to media use in the wake of these stressors which is then able to impact identity development by influencing trends outside of the family or proximal peer group. Kathy agrees. She states, "Yes. Yes. And then they're isolated and getting on social media and just, you know, and that's who they, that, that, see becomes their, their friends … people they don't even know." Kathy is noting a shift from school peers to a global peer group and the subsequent influences. Lisa elaborates on this powerful influence, stating,

But so much, so many kids are so swayed by things they either read or see, or what their

friends or peers are doing, and just trying to get some of the … get some of the kids to,

it's OK to be you. You don't have to be something else just to try and fit in. That's easier

said than done, of course, but one thing that is really, it was bad, but maybe not bad, but it

was emerging before COVID. Then after COVID a lot of anxiety issues and a lot of just

panic attacks and things that, you know, twenty years ago that was a rarity and now it's

an everyday occurrence. And part of that, I think is they're not, they're not comfortable in

their own skin. They're being swayed too much by social media. And I think social

media is a big swayer as far as if they don't get enough likes that I'm not doing

something right. So, I think the whole social media thing has a lot to do with their

identity and who they try to be. And I was trying to tell kids that what you see on social

media is that person's best self. You don't see all the, you know, how many hundreds of

pictures they took before they got there. You don't compare yourself to someone's social

media post. But once again, it's easier said than done. Um … but I think social media has

a lot to try and shape kids and who they think they need to be.

Lisa notes the sway media has and how these platforms encourage comparison among

adolescents who are developmentally pursuing formative efforts of a stable identity. Lisa seems

to think that falling short of media standards through comparison is not healthy. Shelly expounds

on these perceived risks:

They're just put in front of a screen to figure it out. Um … things beyond what they

should know, and um … they find themselves in a lot of trouble or confusion about what

to do or who they should be. You know, maybe watch the TikTok and they try to be a

little older than they are and that's hard to navigate that you know … world of technology

and social media.

Shelly expresses her concern for the negative repercussions of media use on adolescents before she details the strategies, she uses to combat unhealthy media use. She states,

Um … we do a lot of lessons, especially with writers on digital citizenship and how to manage their time on technology and what's appropriate and what's not being so safe and how it affects their mental health. And who they will eventually become. You know, we didn't grow up with, you know, smartphones and the internet was just kind of coming out when I was a teenager and so I can't imagine growing up in that. Just trying to think of things in different ways because it's now for all of us. We're, we're raising this generation of kids that have anything and everything at their fingertips and that's really good. It's kind of a learning as you go. I'm a mom trying to navigate technology. No, no smart phone until you're much older kind of is.

Shelly empathizes with adolescents attempting to navigate new technology before stressing the negative effects she is witnessing firsthand:

I can see the negative effects it's having on fifth graders and fourth graders that comes from that. But I know that's a totally different topic, but it is forming their identities in a different way. Um … parents are busier, lives are busier, and I think they turn to that easy. Oh my, yeah, my kid can just sit on their phone for three hours when they get home and it's really impacting who they are or should be.

Shelly provides a work example on the negative impact of social media and how she navigated this issue. She states,

And now we have phones and social media and all this technology and they can get very confused about who they are, specifically an issue I dealt with my first year was we had a huge group of fourth grade girls think they were gay and that is a hard one as a Christian

and as a counselor trying to navigate that and being … I just wanted to let you know, I accept you for whoever you are but also, you're really young and maybe the feeling you have for this friend is you love them. They're your friend. But have you been on TikTok and Twitter and watching movies, advanced shows on TV and you're confused with what you really feel? And then the next day, they have a boyfriend and so (laugh)! You know, you try to guide them along in making those right choices for themselves, but also giving enough space and grace to kind of be who they are.

Shelly describes having to navigate between respecting the adolescent's own formative process and safeguarding the adolescent from what she feels is a negative influence on children who are accessing developmentally inappropriate content. Lisa exemplifies this collective frustration when she states,

Um … and of course, I said the whole trans issue and all that that's going on part of that, I blame just media in general and you can't turn the TV on anymore without seeing some sort of um … well its pride month so that makes it out there that much more. I just have some, you know, I wish that … media is a good thing and a bad thing and I just feel sometimes it's, it makes our jobs harder because it just gets so many different ideas that, you know, twenty years ago that was not an option. And I always tell kids their social media, it's like a power tool. If you were building a house and you had a power saw that's great because you can use that to cut through the lumber and all that suff. But I said, you can also cut your arm off and that's not a good thing.

Clearly, Lisa views transgenderism as a developmentally inappropriate focus that is predominantly pushed by the media—making her job more difficult. Casey shares a similar frustration. She states,

Like I said earlier, they're supposed to push the boundaries. They're supposed to kind of

start figuring out who they are. They're supposed to … they're creating core memories

for them to form as an adult, which is totally appropriate. It's really, really hard. I have

trouble understanding certain identity processes like the whole gender identity is a big

topic. I have a hard time sometimes, like wrapping my head around it. Or that change

their name every other day. I'm like, I don't even know my name half the time (laugh).

How do you know your name always (laugh).

Casey interjects humor as a method to highlight the difficulty in understanding and

navigating these delicate issues. She adds,

And those who are really, really, passionate about it don't bark orders. Don't scream and

shout at the wind and so serious about everything. I learned the other ones are pressing

the waters, seeing what reactions they will get. Seeing, you know, can they make a

statement. That kind of thing. It is normal, but a lot of times what I'm seeing now with

kids is they feel one way about their identity. Their parents feel a different way. And the

school is in the middle. Your child wants to be known as this, and he wants this. But you

don't agree with that. So, a lot of work becomes identity. We're on a very, very fine line.

Casey expresses frustration with being placed in the middle of parent-child conflicts. Lisa

shares this work frustration, and her comments highlight the differences in genuine identification

versus those adolescents who are more enthralled with the boundary pushing process. She

passionately states,

OK, well, yeah, this is … everybody wants to throw their sexuality into the ring, and you

respect me for this well and a lot of times when they're saying respect me because I'm

gay or because I'm LGBTQ or whatever the latest letter is … they're being disrespectful

in their own way. And it's hard to get through to them because if you try and say … you

know … Jonny doesn't have to agree with you, but Jonny has to respect you well you

know, they have, you know it … it leads to some arguments. It leads to fights. It leads to

Facebook posts about my child being bullied at school, when really the child's being a

bully because … demanding that you know, you accept the child.

Lisa is visibly frustrated and attempting to express her own feelings of being disrespected

by those who ignore her logic and beliefs and minimize the differences between respecting other

worldviews vs. conforming to another worldview. She goes on to say,

And it's very hard because my beliefs on those issues once again, I can't just come out

and say I think you're wrong. But I still you know, it's like OK, this is what you're

feeling a lot of times I don't think it is really what the kids feel. I think it's something that

they picked up on … on social media or sometime on TV they've read and they're like,

oh, this is gonna make me … I think a kid of 15 has no idea what he or she's really

thinking.

Here, Lisa is alluding to the emotional volatility of adolescence as this population

navigates and attempts to make meaning during the identity vs. role confusion stage of

development. She adds,

And when these kids are doing things to try and change themselves. That's, that's not, not

the time and we deal with so many things like that in school that take away from the other

stuff we need to be doing too and that's something that has gotten worse over the last few

years as well. And just … I just feel that if that is who you want to be, and that's who you

truly believe you are, you don't have to throw it in your face up in people's faces all the

time because I don't throw up in your face that I'm heterosexual. I don't, you know. And

once again, I know that it's not the standard counselor touchy feely response, but it's, it's

a very hard thing to deal with in the profession but …we do the best we can.

Lisa's frustrations are shared by many of the counselors, but it is important to note that

frustration with the left-wing ideological push by secular cultural and the media with disregard to

the adolescent's particular stage of development is not without compassion. Kathy addresses the

difficulty in having to be confronted with this new reality. She states,

Um … well there, I mean, there are times when you know, I, I wanted to just say … you

know, that's wrong. You know … that that's wrong and it's just … that's, that's not right.

But I know that I can't do that because that would just totally shut it down and it would

come across as judging. Especially with older kids. You know … like the whole gender

things and you know, the whole gender identity thing and then you, you know, students

just talking about things that they're thinking about. And, and I, you know, and I instead

of, I, you know, just don't want to, I have a heart, I can't just say, you know, that's wrong

or you shouldn't do that.

Kathy is expressing the multifaceted issue of empathizing with the student and

maintaining the counselor role while also recognizing the need for good counsel which maintains

a focus on what the counselor views as positive for the child's development provided their stage

of development. On this subject Kayla interprets transgender ideology as a negative—whether a

trend exacerbating confusion or indicating pathology. She also expresses her frustration with

those who are taking advantage of this trend. She states,

It's a bandwagon thing. For me that is so hard because I see the students that are

genuinely struggling with their traumas and and to see that almost belittled, their

experience, and so I never want to encourage something like that.

She adds, "Knowing the back history that these students deal with I understand their questioning." Kayla goes on to share some of the complexities of attempting to address these motivations without proper in-depth analysis. She states,

> It's especially, you know, when you're talking about transgender situations and sexuality you know, there's such a fine line between a student feeling unaccepted and you know, a lot of times, whenever those students are struggling with those personal questions, they're also struggling with a lot more, you know, nine times out of ten, those are students that are also dealing with mental issues of depression, anxiety, you know, suicide attempts, cutting behaviors. And so, it's very difficult sometimes to address those topics knowing that there's so many comorbid things happening.

Marisa shares the frustrations and limitations of a faith-based perspective that perceives gender ideology as a harmful trend with real-world consequences, which might otherwise counter a humanist view of development. She states,

> But you watch these kids, and you know, they're like, especially in their teen years trying to figure out themselves and … and they're so confused and they don't have … it's, and I think, like, you can't in a school setting, obviously, you're not supposed to push your religion on them and talk about the Lord and different things. So when they're struggling like that and there're, you know, they are talking about um … how they're going by this name or that name now and because they want to be a boy and what they're assigned at birth is female, you know, that's, that's hard to watch because you know that they're doing things that are hard, they're harmful to their future.

Here, Marisa seems genuinely concerned for the welfare of her students. She goes on to Say,:

I don't want to say a phase because it sounds bad saying that but it is usually a phase.

And so that, I mean there that part when you're looking at biblical principles and

different things like that, trying to figure out because that's you know, not something that

is really in depth in the bible at all. It's just, you know … so I mean that part that part is a

struggle for me.

These counselors express a negative view of a trending gender issue that restricts and

limits the counselor in providing what they perceive to be positive pathways of adolescent

development. They bemoan the fading status of traditional influences and credit media with

capitalizing on a comparative culture promoting unhindered humanistic ideologies that the

counselor's deem harmful to healthy adolescent development. These counselors recognize the

limited role as school counselors and the need for additional resources to combat the mental

health crisis in the public-school system.

### *Therapeutic Resources are at Full Capacity or Nonexistent*

This theme correlates with data on the need for more mental health services and

demonstrates the expanding workload of the public-school counselor and the limited role and

resources they can provide students (Naik, 2017). All the counselors interviewed recognize the

evolving and increasing relational needs of the student population and most state that a

welcomed change would be additional counselors to help manage the workload and meet the

needs of the student population.

In response to a welcoming change to their job Shelly states, "Um … I need a clone

(laugh)." Anna states, "Oh gosh … (giggle). Probably just to have more staff members at our

school helping the children." She adds, "Hm … but just to have a few extra people in place as

support along with the counselor because we're seeing a lot more behaviors the past few years, a

lot more discipline problems." Kathy states,

> Oh gosh … well, I, I feel like definitely to add more counselors … is that … I feel like it
> is a necessity. So maybe to add more of us so that I could have more individual times
> because at the school I'm at now, there are over nine hundred and there's only two of us
> so.

Marisa expounds on the limitations of the counselor role when stating, "You're only a small portion of their life." In addition to being a small role the school counselor has limits as to what type of services they themselves are able to provide. Lisa states,

> It's just as a school counselor, there's not a lot of therapy time going on. It's very close
> … it's very, very brief counseling, as brief counseling, very brief. Students that go into
> more therapy mode … like we have Life Springs come into the school a few days a week
> and we have some students that see some outside counselors as well. What they do with
> us as school counselors is I want to really say Band-Aid approach, but in a way it's a
> Band-Aid approach that helps them with the moment.

An expanding workload, coupled with the limited role of the school counselor, demands additional resources to manage the needs of this population. Casey speaks to this scarcity of resources when stating,

> There's a lot I can recommend for kids and a lot that I can recommend for eighteen and
> over. But there's not a lot of options or they're booked out much in advance of the
> problems right here, right now, so.

Janet's response focuses on the maxed capacity of additional resources when stating,

> All of our systems are maxed out as more supportive mental health is … that aspect
> alone. And it was just like we're , we're just putting Band-Aids on so many things inside

the school. You know, resources, referring out. I just … I know the issues are just

growing. It's broke. Getting bigger and yea, like you said, without this, this component

it's it's  it's really gonna just get words and worse, unfortunately.

In addition to having limited resources and those resources being maxed out, Casey

describes a lack of confidence in the systems that are in place to help with the struggling needs of

adolescents. She states,

When I think of, I think of … mental health facilities and I have a hard time sending kids

to those places because a lot of time sending kiddos, to those places because they have

such a quick turnover problem. It's like sticking a Band-Aid on the problem. And they

want the school to figure out or parents figure out what to do next, you know. Well … I

can't diagnose somebody. I can't prescribe medicines. I can't even tell you if I can even

make them take the medicines prescribed from one of those facilities. And I can't make

the parent make them get counseling. So it's kind of like a whole like … run the same

cycle over and over and over. You know? That's kind of why it's hard trying to find like

… you wanna fight for a kid but no one else is fighting for them. It's really, really hard to

make parents parent.

When considering the church as a potential added resource for adolescents Janet

responds,

So really, oh, minimal really a minimal amount. Yeah, there's not really anything there.

Prayer group with the Christian Fellowship, Christian Athletes that comes to mind you

know, still … it's just, it's minimal. Uh, I'm trying to think of my own experience. I'm

going around thinking. Sometimes there was a … a sports team that they might pray, but

not consistently, not consistently across the board.

Like most of the counselors, Janet recognizes a few church resources but acknowledges that their use is minimal or nonexistent in aiding the formative process of the adolescent. In response to this question Kayla states,

I … I would love to see more of our churches incorporating counseling. I was just thinking about that the other day. We have people in in our congregation that have a skillset to provide that, you know, that level of, of coping and it's not utilized, you know, that's something I think we're missing the mark on as, as a church.

Kayla recognizes the value of churches assisting students. Her comments reflect the reality of this disengagement. Marisa expresses her disappointment at the lack of engagement from the local church. She states,

I think at our churches, they're [youth groups] not as prevalent and I don't know why that is. It, I used to love going to church when I was a kid with my friends and and we had a great big youth group and now that's kind of it's real small and I think they, I think they have a youth leader now but this is different. I mean there's pockets of it. But there's not, just not a big area where kids want to go to, you know, and and … I'm kind of sad and I I wish because people aren't gonna you know, if they can't have gas, get them around town even. They're not gonna drive all the way to do something like that so … those resources, I think even giving them those resources to get to church or whatever it is, I feel like we need more … more youth-oriented groups.

All these counselors recognize an increased need for adolescent care but acknowledge the practical limitations of meeting this demand. The increase in need coupled with limited or maxed out resources, the ineffectiveness of some of these resources, and the small role churches play mean that adolescents are not getting the resources they need to ensure a positive developmental

trajectory. With maxed out or non-existent resources, churches are not being utilized in the identity and meaning-making processes of adolescents.

**Guiding Question One**

*The Professional Counselor Role Navigates Identity and Meaning-making Issues*

How these counselors interpret the integration of identity and meaning-making is largely the same as how they navigate identity and meaning-making issues—through the counselor relationship. Addressed above is the counselors' relationship as a key formative process that fosters healthy adolescent identity development and meaning-making to lend a positive trajectory for development. As noted, these counselors utilize basic counseling skills to deepen the counselor's expressed care for the student which is viewed as having an impact on identity and meaning-making.

These soft counselor skills, which are listed above in the central research question, are multifaceted in that they are not just a formative influence but aid the counselor in navigating identity and meaning-making issues. Identity and meaning-making issues beyond the passive confines of the counselor's expressed care oftentimes require a referral. Again, as noted in the central research question above, referrals aid these counselors in maintaining a positive identity focus without jeopardizing the therapeutic alliance. Expressed care coupled with a positive emphasis obviously limits potentially perceived negatives and navigates the adolescent onto a healthy experiential/social learning path. Rather than rehash the influences of relational care, the focus of this section will address the limited additional methods of navigating identity and meaning-making issues.

These counselors have additional methods to help navigate identity and meaning-making issues that are still operable within the confines of the professional counselor role. Role

modeling and teaching life skills, congruent with the counselor's beliefs, further aid in

navigating identity and meaning-making issues. With regards to life skills, they encourage values

that align with the Christian faith. This congruency allows these counselors to utilize most

adolescent life skills as a form of implicit integration of RS.

For example, Kathy states, "So … I feel like we try to … many times we are teaching

Christian things … friendship, you know, helping others and you feel better about yourself when

you help other people." Here, altruism, a fundamental Christian value, provides the counselor

with a sense of influence. She adds, "So … I feel like just trying to combat that and using

Christian principles, we just aren't saying this is from the Bible, but many times what we're

doing is really foundational you know … of love and caring about others." Foundational

Christian values are like basic life skills the counselor can utilize to feel genuine in a restricted

setting like the public-school system.

Kathy elaborates on the fundamental aspects of imploring these foundational values or

life skills. She states,

> And I, that's something I've dealt with a lot actually, and I think you kinda have to start
>
> basically at square one with someone like that and because they … it's not really ever
>
> occurred to them that … that people … why you should treat people kind. Or why you
>
> should care about anyone else or show that you care. It's never even occurred to them
>
> somethings. So, you know … I think you kind of have to start at square one like basically
>
> … like what, what my, you know, what I learned at Sunday school and what my kid
>
> learned in Sunday school at two or three years old, you know of have to start there. And
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> because so many of them, they've never, you know, when you talk about, I think,
>
> empathy, maybe I start there with empathy and you know…to help them to learn that it is

a skill if you know … and if you don't feel it in your heart, you just have to practice it

until you do feel it because so many of these kids, they're so hardened because they've

never learned how to are, about anyone or, or that they are … you know … they don't

know how to care for others because some … nobody had modeled that for them and so I

think that's kind of … start with empathy and then … I mean, I've had kids even say

why? You know … why should I care about him? Because he doesn't care about me, or

you know … like so it's … I think it's just … you start with that you know … like

putting yourself in someone else's shoes. How would you feel if, if you know what …

how do you feel when they do that to you? And even though they say they don't care they

do. So, I think … I think starting there.

Kathy's comments demonstrate the interconnectedness of foundational Christan values

and basic life skills utilized by the professional counselor. An emphasis of the counselor on life

skills that are in keeping with their hierarchy of Christian values provides a sphere of influence

for these counselors that feels meaningful, expressive, influential, and congruent to them. Shelly

shares a similar perspective regarding life skills reflecting Christian values. She states,

Just to be a good person, you have different character skills that we work on every month.

So, there's a topic every month that I talked about with kids and we home in on how, you

know, anti-bullying and respect and kindness and all of those things that kind of go in

with the fruits of the spirit. If you're a believer, but they're called life skills, so it's still

giving kids all of those things that they will be getting from learning from the Bible, but

they're just those skills that you just … be a good person or hard-working person.  A

friend.

Shelly is linking Christian values in the form of life skills with the fruits of the spirit.

These Christian principles or attributes are highly prized in doctrine and further explain how

counselors who identify with the faith do not feel restricted in a setting like the public-school

system. Coupled with expressed care and a hopeful focus, encouraging values that align with

Christianity provide these counselors a sense of influence despite the restrictions on apostatizing.

Janet makes a similar connection but expresses much more enthusiasm after reflecting on this

connection. She states,

> This triggered my mind that all the way down to the elementary, the life skills that we
>
> teach, all the life skills, and I always thought of how intertwined with faith and religion,
>
> and I was just teaching saying with different words, so you know, positive note! I feel
>
> like here … any schools you're starting at a young age and so I've seen in the
>
> adolescence, still … still trying to carry out those … all of those life skills and
>
> behaviors—interactions with each other. So, to me that was religious and although we
>
> didn't call it that, they didn't know that they did label them across the board. So, I'm
>
> thinking about all of them, whether they were in church or not, they … they were
>
> practicing. And so, from kindergarten up, you know, teaching them to practice and do
>
> those. And they forget, they don't always do that, but that that was neat. I felt like and
>
> that so many of those kids, none ever stepped foot in a church or heard the world, but we
>
> were. We were instilling those, those … those values, yes! I'm so excited! I forgot about
>
> that. I aways just feel like oh, I'm so excited I'm doing this thing with a cover over it!
>
> Janet concludes, "There's life skills that is within the Bible, we just don't have to say

that." These life skills are not just taught but modeled on the students. Because life skills are

synonymous with the counselor's Christian value system it provides an additional implicit mode

of integration that is modeled effortlessly by the counselor. For example, Shelly speaks to the

ease of it when she states, "I guess you just don't feel restricted. It's what I do with the kids

every day is … already aligns with the values I have as a Christian." Similarly, Casey states,

"Actions speak louder than words." She adds, "People shine in times of darkness." Marisa states,

"I guess I integrate it through the way I behave and not so much forcing it on anybody … just to

keep them comfortable."

Kayla also speaks to role modeling when stating,

I am a firm believer that actions speak louder than words, and I think that when we, as

Christian counselors, are stepping into that world and remodeling, what it looks like to,

you know, to show compassion and … and, you know, love like Christ. I think that that

kind of increases the integration just from role modeling, and then it does offer that

opportunity for the students to learn more because it makes them curious.

Anna touches on role modeling as a method of communicating values when stating: Um

… yeah … I would say I integrate my faith by showing the type of values and personal

beliefs I have without putting that on to someone necessarily or forcing them to believe

the same thing. So, I show that through my actions through the worlds I use through

being kind and helpful through trying to be as positive as I can. So, I guess that would be

how I show it.

In additional to utilizing expressed care to help navigate identity and meaning-making

issues of adolescence, these counselors rely on life skills that reflect a hierarchy of Christian

values which provide a sense of influence and implicit expression of RS. Role modeling these

values and skills provide these counselors with an additional way to navigate identity and

meaning-making issues. Collectively, these efforts provide a felt sense of congruency between

the professional counselor role, the person as therapist, and their personal expression of RS.

**Guiding Question Two**

*Limited Methods of RS Integration*

None of these counselor's report receiving any specific RS training. As discussed in theme two, Kathy states, "No, I would say not just other than my own … what I know about the bible, and I mean you know … what I've learned, it would just be my own interpretation." Casey states, "No … (laugh). Lisa states, "Um … no not really. I mean I've, I've read some, you know, books and articles of different things, but nothing major in that area. Anna states, "Um … not that I know of." Kayla states, "No, I of course got my master's through Indiana University, and they did not have any faith-based models in, you know, in their curriculum. It is … so that's something that I'm not personally familiar with." Finally, Janet states, "That wasn't a subject in my training."

As noted in previous sections, relational care is interpreted by these counselors as an expression of spirituality. Implicit methods beyond relational care include visible jewelry and tattoos that represent the counselor's faith, and prayer. Both Shelly and Lisa mention praying over the student body as a morning habit before the day begins. Although RS is primarily demonstrated through the implicit personhood of the counselor some of these counselors did utilize overt methods of RS integration. For example, regarding prayer Lisa and Janet both report praying with students in unique circumstances. Lisa states,

> I've had kids that I know are in a Christian home. Either because another parent or just know the families and there's been times like with kids at school and I probably get in trouble but, and I would always just say … I know you go to church. I know blah, blah, blah, I said. Would you like me to pray with you, or would you? Or are you OK if I pray for you? And I've never had a kid tell me no. So, I mean, I don't throw that out there for

everybody. But the ones … and I sometimes kids will come to me and be like "I know

you go to church."

Lisa's assumption highlights the ambiguity of school policy on this matter. Although

self-disclosure is appropriate when it is deemed beneficial for the client—particularly if it aligns

with the student's culture—Lisa expresses the potential for reprimand. Again, this example

highlights the ambiguity school counselors have when operating in a restricted setting like the

public-school system.

Similarly, Janet reflects on a crisis response at school and notes,

She said, "You prayed with me … over me … didn't you?" And I said I did. I looked at

her Momma. I said, "Is that alright?" She started crying. I mean, they were non-believers

but anyway. So … I'm just trying to think of examples.

Here, Janet utilized prayer in a unique crisis that reflected the dominant culture and clearly was

gaged appropriately in that situation as the mother cried in response to this expressed measure of

care, albeit religious. Although not a common occurrence and not always with a believer, both

Lisa and Janet used an overt method of prayer when they situationally deemed it most beneficial

for the student.

Other overt methods like faith-based apps, books, or journals were mentioned by some

counselors but admittedly rarely used. Faith-based referrals were mentioned by most counselors,

but nothing was considered consistent. Marisa states:

I do mean we … we do have like resources and stuff and it's all on a like a sheet.

Different churches are involved in that. Like for counseling, different services things I

think there's, I can't remember what church does it now. There's a church that does like

an addiction type group and, and different things like that. And that I have, you know,

handed them information on. But it's on with, you know, Meadows and all the other different services that can provide. So, so I mean it's not, I'm not saying go to this church and do this, but they are on their, so if that's those, they can.

Marisa expresses an attempt to show no bias in referral even if these resources might reflect the students' cultural preferences. Although it seems that these resources are lacking nonetheless, they are potential cultural resources for the student. Kathy is more forward-looking with her referrals. She states, "If it is anxiety, if they've got anxiety, depression, to try to get them the help that they need for that and, and to steer them toward like a Christian counselor outside of school." Kathy does not clarify whether these referrals are multiculturally appropriate for the student. Finally, Janet did mention discussing possible RS resources during staff meetings and documenting those conversations. However, she admitted to a hodgepodge of resources with nothing consistent.

Lastly, the most common overt method expressed by these counselors was self-disclosure. Like much with RS integration in a restricted setting like the public-school system, these counselors expressed a cautious tone when it comes to self-disclosure as a multicultural method. Kathy states, "I do share with them, you know, well, this is what I would do in this situation, or this is how I've, you know, I would pray about this situation. That helps me when I pray about things, or you know … and, and I … I'll tell them where I go to church." Kathy expresses little reservation in disclosing her spiritual self-care methods to some students.

Lisa is a bit more reluctant to admit self-disclosure as she seems to confess the practice. She states, "I've had kids before ask me about my beliefs and I figure if they ask me I don't, you know, look … I don't shy away from telling them." Anna expresses a similar sentiment but with more caution when she states,

> Now if a child asks me if I go to church, or if they are a Christian, then yes, I will answer
> them. I go to church. But I try not to go too in-depth with that topic because you don't
> know how the family feels about it.

Although self-disclosure is appropriate if it is gaged as having therapeutic value and
multicultural appropriate, again, these counselors express a measure of reservation.

Kathy expresses frustration in the current medical model approach as she justifies the
value of RS as it relates to her own disclosure to students. She adds,

> But yes … I do think you know … today sometimes we just rush just to put labels on
> things. And you know, when … and people are searching … always searching for the
> answers when the answers are in the Bible and, but we, we can't say, of course … I give
> my own. I tell them what I believe. I do share that. But it's just tough when I feel like
> that, we're trying to just do everything from the worldly perspective.

Finally, Kayla articulates the art of self-disclosure in a restricted setting like the public-
school system and reflects an appreciation for the value of culture when she states,

> Oh … such a slippery slope. Of course, you know, we being in a public school setting are
> not supposed to necessarily go form that standpoint however, I am very thankful to work
> in the small school corporation that I work in because we've always, you know, had the
> encouragement to be ourselves first and foremost. You can. So, you know, we have our
> own religious convictions. It is. We are never, you know, never frowned upon from, from
> sharing who we are, and I think that that's so important, but … we also are fortunate in
> that we are supported in … if the door is open, we can walk through it, you know.

Here, Kayla expresses gratitude for an accepting school culture and one permitting
genuine self-disclosure as a therapeutic tool. She goes on to say,

So, you know, I might have a student that will ask me, well, you know, you've been

through this or that you know … in your life and, and you're still happy. How can you be

happy when you've had this great tragedy or crisis or whatever, and that's an opportunity

for me to say, well, for me, what helped me through the day is my faith and talk about or,

um … you know., if kids ask me about God, I have that opportunity to share. It is … it is

… and so …. it's always that fine line that you don't let necessarily lead with it, but that

in my mind, I truly believe that my walk and how I shine is enough to open that door

when it needs to be open. And as I mentioned, I'm fortunate enough to be able to walk

through that door when it opens (laughing).

Kayla's comments reflect the broader context of her cultural community and underscore

potential for valuable cultural resources for the student who identifies with the predominant

culture. Still, few attempts are made to assess the multicultural need of these students. Although

some counselors do utilize overt methods of RS care they are limited to unique circumstances

and the students' own enquiries. Overt methods of RS are sparce and limited. These counselors

had little to no experience integrating identity and meaning-making RS resources into

counseling.

## Summary

Four themes emerged from the central research question. First, for these counselors,

relationships are a key formative process that fosters healthy adolescent identity development

and meaning-making. The counselors expressed care is the primary mode of influence for these

counselors. Coupled with a positive identity focus and healthy experiential/learning

opportunities, these counselors feel they can influence and navigate identity and meaning-

making issues primarily in an implicit way through relationship. Secondly, implicit RS is

integrated through the personhood of the counselor. Although all these counselors express feeling no restriction in a setting like the public-school system, nonetheless, most report difficulty navigating certain issues outside of implicit efforts. For example, many of these counselors expressed reservations in addressing religious content or ethical concerns.

Third, a negative view concerning the impact of gender ideology on adolescent identity development emerged from the data. Many of these counselors recognize the stressors from COVID-19, the breakdown of the nuclear family, a fast-paced culture, and global technology, which has provided social media the platform for excessive and fringe influences primarily through virtual peers they compare themselves to. Lastly, with all support systems maxed out or non-existent, few resources exist to help combat these negative influences and stressors.

The first guided question reiterated the multimodal use of the professional counselor role to navigate identity and meaning-making issues. Although this is predominantly done implicitly through the expressed care of the counselor, these counselors also utilized life skills in conjunction with their faith to influence and role model to the student these values. The second guided question focused on methods of RS integration. Again, the expressed care of the counselor is viewed as the primary method of RS integration; however, other implicit and over methods were utilized. Other implicit methods include symbols of faith and prayer before school. The overt methods were scarce but include referrals to apps, books, journals, etc. Self-disclosure was the most used method of RS integration and was limited to student enquiries.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore what integrating adolescent identity means to Christian public-school counselors. This chapter reflects on the shared experiences of the participants and offers insights into themes and subthemes of the phenomenon under investigation. The following sections include a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, an implications section, an outline of the study delimitations and limitations, and future research recommendations.

### Summary of Findings

The school counselors in this study interpret the counseling relationship as a key formative process that fosters healthy adolescent identity development and meaning-making. Relationships are the core modality used to express professional care, individual spirituality, and help navigate identity and meaning-making issues. The public-school counselors in this study rely on interpersonal relationships to express care, maintain a positive identity focus, and encourage experiential learning primarily through peer group relationships. The participants utilize relationship as a tapestry for expressed care and deem relationship foundational to the formative process of identity and meaning-making development—a sentiment echoed in the therapeutic profession (Jones & Butman, 2011; Kottler, 2015; Murdock, 2013; Neukrug, 2014; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2016; Thomas & Sosin, 2011; Young, 2013).

The professional role of the counselor utilizes care and sets limits on expressions of care that might otherwise become problematic (ACA, 2014). For example, for the participants in this study the therapeutic alliance takes precedence over personal expressions of care expressed in Christian values and ideologies. In this study, maintaining a positive trajectory includes avoiding

the imposition of values and emphasizing healthy positive alternatives, usually in relationships. For these participants, the professional counselor role navigates identity and meaning-making issues by role modeling and teaching life skills that align with their Christian identity. Values like empathy, kindness, friendship, and forgiveness are a focus of adolescent development and recognized by these counselors as influencing principles that align with their own faith.

Furthermore, the theme of care within the confines of the therapeutic relationship is interpreted as spiritual and regarded as an implicit method of integration for the participants of this study. Although these counselors report not feeling restricted in the public-school setting, they are aware of policy and legal restrictions for both the counselor's role and religious expression in this setting. Therefore, implicit methods of integrating spirituality through relationships are freely expressed and experienced as unhindered while overt expressions are oftentimes avoided. However, some of the members of this study will use self-disclosure of their Christian identity if the topic is initiated by the student and the counselor deems it appropriate. Furthermore, overt methods of prayer are utilized by some in rare circumstances such as crisis.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that all counselors in this study consider the students' religious and spiritual (RS) expressions as a professional risk and potentially illegal. Rather than a multicultural resource the student's RS is synonymous with the counselor's RS and thus mirrors these restrictions. Although the student's RS is important and multicultural practices are encouraged by ethical governing bodies, these counselors are hesitant to discuss the student's RS and often avoid it (ACA, 2014; McGoldrick et al., 2005). Therefore, multicultural coping resources like church, youth groups, prayer, and Christian fellowship is not an area of exploration for the student.

Another theme that developed from the data was a negative view concerning the impact

of gender ideology on adolescent identity development. Although some of these counselors

acknowledged the genuineness of some students, many of these counselors felt that gender

ideology was a cultural phenomenon with inherent risk and far beyond the developmental

compacity of adolescence. Witnessing adolescent boundary pushing, fluctuating and inconsistent

pronoun and gender use, and underdeveloped logic contribute to this position. Furthermore, these

counselors consider family withdrawal and excessive social media use as negative and

contributing factors to this phenomenon.

     Finally, these counselors note that systems of support are maxed out or non-existent, and

that the church does not seem to play a significant role in aiding these efforts. These counselors

do note that mental health referrals are often used for serious or conflicting ideological issues

and offer an additional route for managing sensitive subjects.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

**Empirical Literature**

     According to Holmberg et al. (2021), "Spirituality is closely linked to the body,

expressed as emotions, feelings, behavior, and relationship, and includes a humanistic view of

life related to meaning, values, and coherence" (p. 79). Counselors and adolescents alike

oftentimes define spirituality as a relational construct (Cook, 2020; Gibson, 2014; Gillespie,

2019; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Like previous research, these counselors define a relational

God that is central to their own identity and mental well-being. These counselors interpret

spirituality as a relational construct that is largely demonstrated from the professional counselor

role as expressed care.

     It is this expressed care that sets boundaries and best represents personal and spiritual

representations of self. The counselor role allows expression in a personal and spiritual way that

feels congruent with their faith and unhindered by school policy. Because relational care is deemed spiritual it supplies an implicit method of integration without violating policy. Although these counselors feel restricted regarding overt methods of integration these counselors understand the limitations of their role and can express themselves with care and abiding principles that best represent their faith and spirituality.

The separation powers between church and state are multifaceted and have taken on new meaning (Constantine, 2020). The interplay of laws and ethics makes policy on RS difficult to decipher. Because RS is a contested term in education many public-school employees choose to conceal their Christian identity and avoid RS discussions (Gillepsie, 2019; Wartenweiler, 2020). Furthermore, most counselors avoid RS topics altogether (Lee et al., 2019; Oxhandler, 2019; Scott, 2018). The participants of this study rely on expressed measures of care to integrate implicit RS and avoid overt discussions. Although some counselors in this study were willing to use self-disclosure if initiated by the student, all considered it a liability.

Oftentimes, RS is avoided due to the counselor's public identity, fear of repercussions, and risk for the imposition of values (Schwartz, 2013). These counselors expressed a professional awareness of the limitations of their role as counselors about apostatizing and they avoided value impositions to safeguard the therapeutic relationship. These counselors also expressed a hypervigilance to perceived repercussions for addressing RS issues within the public-school setting even if the student pursued these discussions.

Furthermore, RS issues are anxiety provoking for the school counselor and this anxiety can elicit biases toward RS integration efforts by dismissing the adolescents need to maintain avoidance (Balmer et al., 2012). Although avoidance is fear based, a potential bias expressed in this study is that implicit methods for addressing RS are enough for the adolescent. Therefore,

adolescent attempts at RS exploration were often met with counselor deterrence to maintain

avoidance. However, adolescence is a critical life stage fraught with challenges, risks, and

consequences (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz, 2013). Acquiring a deep sense of meaning is considered

the "ultimate stage of human development and necessary to achieve wellbeing" (Noble-Carr &

Woodman, 2018, p. 673), and adolescents struggling with identity vs. role confusion can benefit

from religious meaning-making resources (Dulaney et al., 2018; Erikson, 1968; Krok, 2015).

Although most of these counselors interpret God as relational and central to their identity

and wellbeing, how adolescents developed this knowledge was not discussed. Unresolved RS

identity in the counselor is a fracture that can encourage this avoidance (Magaldi & Trub, 2016;

Scott, 2018). The expressed comfort of RS separation may indicate a need for RS identity

formation within the counselor. Assisting the counselor with RS identity formation might limit

self-censorship and encourage the exploration of coping strategies that utilize the student's

culture (Alton, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). This can be accomplished in higher education,

supervision, and continuing education credits by encouraging the counselor to explore RS beliefs

in assignments and during supervision, building familiarity with RS assessments, and having

interventions and techniques that clarify roles and responsibilities.

Additionally, RS is neglected in psychotherapeutic training and this negligence often

results in incompetence and avoidance (Hodge, 2011; Magaldi & Trub, 2016). Spirituality is

often avoided in session due to a lack of professional preparedness (Williams-Reade et al.,

2019). Woodhouse and Hogan (2019) add that the rarity in RS training likely contributes to

counselor anxiety, confusion, and avoidance regarding RS issues. Corroborating past research,

none of the participants report receiving specific RS training. Although two of these counselors

attended a Christian university, they report a general guidance reflecting a Christian worldview

and no tools or resources to integrate RS methods.

Conversely, training in RS increases comfort and engagement and promotes an integrated personal and professional identity, yet Christian universities remain inconsistent and largely theoretical when it comes applied theory (Williams-Reade et al., 2019). Few counselors receive instruction and supervisory training in RS assessment and intervention, and this is a sentiment echoed by these participants (Hodge, 2011). Alternatively, these counselors rely on therapeutic relationships to support healthy identity and meaning-making processes. For these counselors, empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard are interpreted as foundational for healthy identity and meaning-making development for adolescence (Neukrug, 2014). Relationships are considered foundational for a healthy formative process, and these counselors rely on professional counseling methods to protect this relationship and encourage peer relationships to further aid this process.

For these participants, the role and limits of the professional counselor seem to offer relational care that is synonymous with the counselor's personal and spiritual character. The congruence of care and spirituality is a vehicle for implicit methods of integrating spirituality into counseling. These counselors operate within the confines of the professional role of counselor to respect and abide by school policies and procedures that set limits on personal expression of RS. By relying on the implicit nature of care counselors can provide a level of care that is congruent with their personal, professional, and spiritual character.

Although this expressed care is spiritually implicit, these counselors do report feeling restricted when the student's RS is made overt. Therefore, this study extends the literature by clarifying how Christian counselors in the public-school system interpret RS effort and highlight the need for professional clarity (Alton, 2020; Goroncy, 2017; Hall & Hall, 2021; Hoffman,

2020; Rosik et al., 2016).

The novel contribution of this study is the limits of care due to self-imposed restrictions. These restrictions limit access to cultural resources because it is assumed that discussion of these resources violates policy. However, what violates policy and law is apostatizing, not talking with an adolescent who brings up RS. Although the participants in this study leverage the professional role in a competent and respectful way, these self-imposed measures restrict adolescents' access to RS resources. Superimposing restrictions denies the adolescent cultural resources deemed important for development (Hays & Erford, 2014; McGoldrick et al., 2005). These resources are steeped in a Christian tradition that provide meaning-making and identity resources for the struggling adolescent that best align with his or her culture (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

**Theoretical Literature**

Many people rely on religious identity and meaning-making narratives for stability and coping. Adolescents in the fifth stage of Erikson's (1968) developmental model wrestle with identity vs. role confusion as they attempt to answer the big question "Who am I?" Failure to achieve identity can result in role confusion and hinder growth, increase the risk of pathology, and limit interpersonal and professional development (Erikson, 1968). The dichotomous task to construct identity and develop autonomy through close relationships is known as individualization (Mclean et al., 2010). An enriched meaning-making learning environment likely offers more opportunities to cultivate a valued identity beyond a grandiose self and "failure to understand one's core values can lead an individual to behave inauthentically" (Temple & Gall, 2018, p. 189).

In the absence of healthy relationships and positive experiences adolescents are forced to rely on adversity "as a reference point for their identity and meaning constructions" (Noble-Carr

& Woodman, 2018, p. 692). However, many religions including Christianity offer meaning-making narratives that account for adversity and reduce pathology. Although the literature on identity theory is extensive, formation is relatively unknown and little understood as to how identity and meaning relate to adolescence (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021; Negru-Sabtircia et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is "a lack of theoretical and empirical understanding of how these adolescents develop their religious identities" (Bruin-Wassinkmatt, 2019, p. 62). Currently, research is primarily on personal and relational factors and little to no attention is given to "sociocultural and structural influences of cultural norms around hegemonic masculinity, religious institutions, workplaces, and parents as socializers of children's gender roles" which ultimately influence identity crystallization later in life (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021, p. 203).

Bowlby postulated that relational interactions with attachments in childhood formulate Internal Working Models (IWMs) and act as anticipatory and regulatory systems of cognition (Danquah & Berry, 2014). Ainsworth (1978) furthered Bowlby's work and describes the convoluted process between mother and infant (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Furthermore, early attachments have tremendous influence on the relational view of God to self (Johnson, 2017). The idea of God as the ultimate source of security and attachment is not a new one (Granqvist et al., 2012), and there are several theorists who recognize the health benefits of a heavenly attachment and could offer additional support during Erickson's trust vs. mistrust stage of development (Ellens, 2016).

Not surprisingly, attachment is foundational toward the development of identity (Pittman et al., 2011), and this relationship impacts theoretical interpretations of God (Johnson, 2017). Adolescents begin forming interpretations of RS during this stage of development and religion is another foundational worldview formed during childhood (Feldman, 2014). Religion makes

meaning of spirituality as worldview anchors a child's sense of wellbeing (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Severe, 2020). Furthermore, schools are important platforms for engendering spiritual and moral development, and education facilitates a young person's self-actualization and purpose driven life (Lee, 2020). According to Krok (2015),

> The ability to derive meaning from religious and spiritual behavior seems to be very important as the period of adolescence is associated with significant changes in decision-making processes regarding religion and meaning in life, and with establishing a coherent philosophy of life that contributes to further development. (p. 202)

Unfortunately, few integrative models exist for teaching and practicing empirically guided methods of integration (Alton, 2020). Despite the empirical data, theories, models, best practices, ethics, curriculum, and supervision, few therapeutic RS resources have reached the public-school student. RS is neglected in training and this negligence often results in incompetence and avoidance (Hodge, 2011; Magaldi & Trub, 2016). Unsure, counselors rely exclusively on implicit methods of integration (Alton, 2020). This is not surprising considering attachment theory and the therapeutic value of relationships and the role this plays in counseling education programs (Murdock, 2013). Alternatively, training in RS increases comfort and engagement and promotes an integrated personal and professional identity (Williams-Reade et al., 2019).

This study sheds light on why these cultural resources are not reaching the student despite the health benefits and how the parting of religion and spirituality is a contributing factor in sustaining this division. In this study the participants regard relational care synonymously with spirituality and feel personally and spirituality expressive and unhindered by policy. On the other hand, the participants in this study do feel restricted when the adolescent's RS is overtly

expressed. This paradoxical finding demonstrates the difference between religion and spirituality and in keeping with prior research the participants in this study minimized or avoided RS discussions (Lee et al., 2019; Oxhandler, 2019; Scott, 2018).

As noted above, this study adds to the literature by demonstrating that avoidance is in part due to outstretched restrictions projected onto the adolescent. These self-imposed measures limit cultural resources that might otherwise provide identity and meaning-making coping strategies to the struggling adolescent who identifies with the Christian faith. For example, adolescents in the identity vs. role confusion stage of development who are Christian may want to utilize their church community resources like scripture, theology, fellowship, or prayer to help ground and make sense of their burgeoning spiritual awareness. These resources provide biblical identity and meaning-making narratives for the adolescent that reflect their cultural beliefs and are central to the Christian faith and cannot be separated from spirituality (Hall & Hall, 2021). Identifying these self-imposed restrictions takes research one step closer to developing pedagogy and interventions that link the Christian student with their community culture to assist in the identity and meaning-making process known as identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1968).

## Implications

### Theoretical

Erik Erikson's (1968) lifespan model of development is a seminal work and foundational to identity theory research (Schwartz et al., 2012). In this stage adolescents attempt to answer the big question "Who am I?" Failure to achieve identity can result in role confusion and hinder growth, increase the risk of pathology, and limit interpersonal and professional development (Erikson, 1968). The formation of identity forming systems such as values and beliefs are primarily subconscious and require a more rigorous analysis than solely experientialism, like

questioning or alternative worldviews to deepen awareness and to refine an IWM (Fowler, 1981). Because the formation of identity is hierarchical and value laden, highly regarded values are "more likely to guide our behavior, impact how we see ourselves, and impact our general sense of self" (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021, p. 193).

Limited opportunities and/or abuse thwart explorations beyond one's narrowed sense of self and create an overreliance on humanistic interpretations of reality like emotion, sexuality, or convoluted interpersonal experiences. Conversely, enriched meaning-making learning environments like biblical theology likely offer more opportunities to cultivate a valued identity beyond a grandiose notion of self (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Currently, identity research is primarily on personal and relational factors and little to no attention is given to "sociocultural and structural influences of cultural norms around hegemonic masculinity, religious institutions, workplaces, and parents as socializers of children's gender roles" (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2021, p. 203). Furthermore, there is a "lack of theoretical and empirical understanding of how these adolescents develop their religious identities" (Bruin-Wassinkmaat, 2019, p. 62). Therefore, the importance of alternative meaning-making resources like biblical theology on adolescent identity development is relatively unknown and a primary concern is access to these resources.

In this study public-school counselors who are Christian seem to attribute the restrictions on their own religious expression for apostatizing with that of the adolescent's personal RS. This causes a strict reliance on implicit methods such as relational care and hinders exploration of multicultural RS resources like the church, for the student. RS resources are rich in culture, identity, and meaning-making, and may be valuable resources to a Christian adolescent during the identity vs. role confusion stage of development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Understanding the implications of an ambiguous RS and how public-school counselors

conceptualize and navigate this platform will hopefully lead to clearer policy, roles, and RS

resources that ultimately enhance the well-being of the Christian student. Clear policy, roles, and

expectations from administrators and policy makers may also contribute to a stronger church

affiliate who can offer meaningful narratives to support identity development. The clearly

defined role of the counselor, in conjunction with church ministries, will ensure that the Christian

adolescent has all the RS resources they need to develop a positive sense of self and a

meaningful narrative to support a healthy developmental process. Furthermore, teachers and

parents will gain from this clarification and have additional resources at their disposal.

Collectively, these clearly defined roles may allow theory to develop if these community

resources are taken advantage of.

**Empirical**

The empirical data on adolescent RS and therapeutic health benefits are clear (Frunza et

al., 2019). However, adolescent spirituality is greatly undervalued, rarely assessed, and seldom

expressed ritualistically due to the perceived limitations (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Complicating matters is the separation of church and state which restricts counselor religiosity in

a public-school setting and produces an avoidance of adolescent RS and an overreliance on

implicit methods like spirituality (Alton, 2020).

Hall and Hall (2021) argue that this halving of religion and spirituality is a modern

concept and is not combatable with a historical worldview of Christianity. Hilton (2003)

addresses the central role of values on identity formation and argues their centrality, meaning

that cultural values expressed will ultimately shape identity. Unfortunately, empirically

supported Christian integration remains limited in function (Alton, 2020), largely due to self-

censorship and poor models of integration (Alton, 2020; Rosik et al., 2016). This abandons the

adolescent to an autonomous view of spirituality that is "closely linked to the body, expressed as emotions, feelings, behavior, and relationship, and includes a humanistic view of life related to meaning, values, and coherence" (p. 79).

Religious culture steeped in tradition, biblical narrative, meaning-making, morality, fellowship, and identification are resources that match the developmental need of the struggling adolescent (Erikson, 1968). Little research exists regarding the impact of cultural resources on adolescent identity and meaning-making processes (Alton, 2020). Ensuring access to culturally appropriate resources is an important role of the public-school counselor and will provide a base for further empirical study on the benefits of religion on identity and meaning formation, and empirical tools and methods can perhaps evolve. Also, clear policy and administrative efforts will aid the public-school counselor to work with church ministry to ensure religious resources for identity and meaning-making are being provided. This space will hopefully provide an empirically rich environment regarding culture and value identity formation for future research.

**Practical**

Collective efforts to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the public-school counselor will add cultural resources to an overwhelmed system and position church ministries to counter a self-directed spirituality that "includes a humanistic view of life related to meaning, values, and coherence" (Holmberg et al., 2021, p. 79). Because education is fundamentally religious, other worldviews are necessary to help foster morality and import tolerance (Melouka, 2018; Newman, 2021). Dowd (2021) adds,

> When the curriculum privileges non-religious epistemologies, ideologies, and
> worldviews, such as secularism and scientism, often to the expulsion of religious ways of
> knowing and making meaning, then the schools violate the first amendment of the

constitution as intended by the supreme court. (p. 1)

Gaining access to cultural resources rich in meaning-making and identity will help to strengthen

local community and counter this monopoly.

These cultural resources will provide meaning-making and identity resources steeped in a

biblical worldview that will unite religion and spirituality to better represent a Christian

spirituality that is distinct and one with an augmenting modality that cannot be separated

between the sacred and the secular (Hall & Hall, 2021; Hoffman, 2020). According to Ellens

(2016) Christian spirituality is "the universal, irrepressible, human hunger for meaning" to which

the scriptures answer (p. 44). These answers may provide struggling adolescents in the identity

vs. role confusion stage of development with stability and maturation onto the next stage of

development (Erikson, 1968).

Importantly, counselors in the public-school system will not fear or avoid religious

discussions with adolescents which are not meant to promote the counselor's own denomination

but to assess the need of the student and link potential coping resources (Alton, 2020; Lee et al.,

2019; Oxhandler, 2019; Rosik et al., 2016; Scott, 2018). The safe space to assess and discuss

adolescent RS will bridge the gap to faith-based resources rich in identity and meaning to

exemplify culturally competent care deemed important for healthy adolescent development

(Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

RS is neglected in education and training, and this negligence often results in

incompetence and avoidance (Hodge, 2011; Magaldi & Trub, 2016). However, education and

training increases comfort and engagement and promotes an integrated personal and professional

identity yet universities teaching integration remain inconsistent and largely theoretical

(Williams-Reade et al., 2019). Christian universities rely largely on worldview but emphasis on

RS, cultural resources, and policy will clarify roles and responsibilities of the public-school counselor. This professional clarity may help lawyers, policymakers, and administrators conceptualize clearer boundaries for counselors providing adolescents with cultural resources.

Finally, it is no secret that attempts to integrate psychology and theology are met with near complete distrust not just from governing bodies but the church as well (Santrac, 2016). A bridge in cultural services may mean the development of more sophisticated RS methods and interventions that are done in conjunction with the church as it may rely on their application of them. This will help to foster trust between the church and governing bodies in attempts at well-being. Furthermore, teachers, parents, and the community can work together to ensure that adolescents receive these free resources.

### Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitation of this study is restricting participation to individuals over the age of 22. This was done to ensure that the school counselors had acquired the appropriate credentials and experience to work as a public-school counselor.

Another delimitation of this study is public-school counselors. This was done to exclude private school counselors who do not have the same restrictions imposed on them as public-school counselors. Also, these school counselors required at least one year of experience working with children and adolescents. This restriction was done to ensure that the public-school counselor had a minimum of experience working with and navigating issues with children and adolescents. Finally, the participants had to identify as Chrisitan. This restriction ensured that the public-school counselor was able to consider Chrisian issues in counseling.

One limitation of this study is the sample size as these findings cannot be generalized due to the delimitations of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, geography is a

consideration as the participants were gathered from a rural district that may be distinct from an inner-city school system or from other regions of the United States. Also, race is a limiting factor as all who participated in this study were Caucasian. Finally, another limitation of the study is gender, as all who participated were female.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Further study utilizing a larger sample size to validate reliability is recommended. Also, a more diverse sample is encouraged to help with the generality of these findings. A quantitative study clarifying the ambiguous link between apostatizing and multiculturalism, as it relates to school policy, would help devise teaching and supervision methods to prevent self-imposed restrictions. These teaching methods along with other professional attempts highlighting the legalities and ethics and the impact on the counselor role could then be tested for efficacy. Similarly, quantitative research efforts to distinguish but highlight the interconnectedness of religiosity from spirituality would be helpful. Also, both quantitative and qualitative designs focused on religious identity and meaning-making resources for adolescents should be explored. A focus on multicultural efforts and resources to include the church as a cultural resource for identity and meaning-making narratives should be considered. For example, providing a safe space for adolescents to explore these values as they relate to their school and life experiences can provide integration for meaning-making and identity apart from experientialism.

## Summary

Due to the ambiguous nature of school policy public-school counselors who are Christian seem to attribute the restrictions on their own religious expression for apostatizing with that of the struggling adolescent's RS. This causes an overreliance on implicit methods such as a therapeutic relationship that is deemed spiritual and hinders exploration of multicultural RS

resources for the student. These RS resources which are rich in culture, identity, and meaning-making is a valuable resource to a Christian adolescent during the identity vs. role confusion stage of development. Furthermore, the empirical data on adolescent RS and therapeutic health benefits is clear and yet these resources seldom reach the struggling adolescent. Ensuring access to culturally appropriate resources will provide a base for further empirical study on the benefits of religion on identity and meaning formation, and empirical tools and methods can evolve. Collective efforts to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the public-school counselors will open a spigot of culturally appropriate resources to an overwhelmed system struggling to keep up with the mental health needs of adolescents. Furthermore, it will offer an alternative worldview that counters humanistic ideologies and is more aligned with most world religions without the imposition of values.

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**Appendix A**

**Steps of Data Analysis**

**Step One**

First, review memos of first impressions from the initial interview (Smith et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing is a short reference of key ideas, phrases, or concepts of the researcher during the interviewing process (McFarlane-Morris, 2022). Memoing procedures are outlined in Creswell and Poth (2018) and will be used to document the thinking process of the researcher. This method adds reliability to the study because the procedures of memoing are an attempt to develop higher levels of analytical meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, listen to the recording while imaging the voice of the interviewee to "slowdown" interpretive process of data analysis and to help provide a cultural and personal context (Smith et al., 2022, p. 78). Third, read the transcript and underline seemingly important experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Finally, the data will be organized separately and accordingly, represented by each participant.

**Step 2**

Reread the initial transcript—examining key words, phrases, emotional responses, sentences, etc.—without reflecting on the content (Smith et al., 2022). Use "exploratory noting" to provide a singular account for the underlined material (Smith et al., 2022, p. 85)—a process known as lean coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Saldana (2016) coding is "…a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data…" and is a key process in data analysis and includes many other processes (p.4). In this step the volume of data is increased (Smith et al., 2022).

**Step 3**

Use "experiential statements" to capture the complexity from the exploratory notes, to begin the process of winnowing the data (Smith et al., 2022, p. 86; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2014; McFarlane-Morris, 2022; Saldana, 2016). Experiential statements summarize the critical essence conveyed through the exploratory notetaking to help "polish" the data (Smith et al., 2022, p. 87).

**Step 4**

Map the experiential statements by first copying the transcript (exploratory notes and experiential statements included) and then cutting out the experiential statements and randomize (Smith et al., 2022, p.91). Next, put into "clusters" the experiential statements demonstrating interconnectedness (Smith et al., 2022, p. 91).

**Step 5**

First, assign a title to each cluster thus far (Smith et al., 2022). Next, create "personal experiential themes" or PET's (Smith et al., 2022, p.94). PET's winnow the data further into a theme. It is "…a repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrence of action/data that appear more than twice" (Saldana, 2016, p. 5). These patterns or themes can produce a "thematic map" to help capture the essence of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 97). These PET's will be color coded and "stacked" to help identify and consolidate (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022; p. 97). Memoing will be used to help clarify the consolidating process (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022)—both for devising themes and/or sub-themes and stacking.

**Step 6**

Duplicate the process by repeating the steps with the next data, and so forth until all the data sets are analyzed (Smith et al., 2022).

**Step 7**

Like the previous steps outlined, analyze all data sets, and group the Personal Experiential themes (PET's) into groups known as Group Experiential Themes (GET's) (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) refers to this repetitive process as "scaling up" (p.100). Again, GET's can be grouped into subthemes and consolidated, and memos detailing the rationale for consolidation are important (Smith et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Appendix B**

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions/Guide**

**Central Research Question**

What does integrating adolescent identity mean to Christian public-school counselors?

**Guiding Research Question**

How do Christian school counselors who work in the public school system navigate identity and

meaning making issues with adolescents?

**Guiding Research Question**

What is a Christian school counselor's experience with integrating Christian identification and

meaning making resources into therapy?

**Semi-Structured Interview**

### Ice Breaker Questions

1. What got you interested in the school counseling profession?

2. What do you like to do when you aren't working?

### Central Research Question

3. What does an identity in Jesus Christ mean to you?

4. How do you interpret the mental health benefits of believing in a biblical
   narrative?

5. What does integrating identity and meaning making mean to you as a
   Christian school counselor working with adolescents in the public school
   system?

6. Talk to me about the need among adolescents for faith-based integration
   addressing identity and meaning making in a setting like the public school

system?

7.  How would you define the term integration in the context of counseling

    adolescents?

8.  Talk to me about a situation that you may have had when you believed it was

    necessary to adjust how you counseled a student based upon your own

    Christian identity.

9.  How do you as a Christian school counselor make meaning of identity

    formation outside of Jesus Christ?

**Guiding Question**

10. Talk to me about your understanding of adolescent development with regards

    to identity and meaning making?

11. Talk to me about your experience with adolescent identity and meaning

    making attempts?

12. How do you interpret an adolescent's search for identity and meaning?

13. How do you as a Christian school counselor navigate identity and meaning

    making issues with adolescents in the public school system?


14. How do you feel about addressing identity and meaning making issues as a

    Christian school therapist in a restricted setting like the public school system?

15. How do you as a Christian school counselor interpret conflicting ethical codes

    and treatment recommendations with regards to treating adolescents?

16. Can you talk to me about a situation that you may have had when you

    believed it was necessary to address or avoid identity and meaning making

issues?

**Guiding Question**

17. Talk to me about your experience with learning faith-based models, methods, and/or techniques addressing identity and meaning making issues?

18. What is your experience with regards to integrating religious identity/meaning making resources into therapy?

19. What is your interpretation on the effectiveness of addressing identity and meaning making issues in therapy?

20. What are your feelings about utilizing self-disclosure as a technique to help adolescents with identity and meaning making issues?

21. What is your experience with using an adolescent's rural culture to aid in identity and meaning making?

22. Talk to me about how you believe the subject of religion/spirituality and adolescence impacts the therapeutic relationship?

**Closing Questions**

23. Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end this interview?

Basic active listening skills will be utilized in this process (APA, 2020; Young, 2013), as well as the interview guide from Creswell and Poth (2018) that will be adhered to throughout the interview.

**Appendix C**

**Study Rationale**

This is a phenomenological study describing how Christian counselors who work with adolescence in the public-school system interpret and defend the use of faith-based integration in a setting where integration is restricted. The rationale for this study stems from a general sentiment of caution expressed regarding the separation of church and state, the data reflecting a reluctancy in administrators, teachers, and counselors to address spiritual issues with adolescents, and the lack of andragogy and therapeutic resources for the school counselor. Also, the foundational knowledge of a creator may help adolescents in this stage of development (identity formation) and tribalized culture.

**Appendix D**

**Informed Consent**

A Phenomenological Study Describing How Christian Counselors Who Work with Adolescence in the Public School System Interpret and Defend the use of Faith-Based Integration in a Setting Where Integration is Restricted

Todd Houchin LMFT, Liberty University

**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 22 years of age, have at least 1 year of counseling experience, and identify with the Christian faith (attending services 2-4 times per month). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

**What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe how Christian counselors who work with adolescence in the public school system interpret and defend the use of faith-based integration in a setting where integration is restricted.

**What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Take an assessment gaging your level of spirituality/religiosity (R/S).
2. Participate in an interview approximately 45-minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes.
3. Allow audio recording during the interview.
4. Review transcriptions of your interview to increase reliability (approximately 1 hour).

**How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

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

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous/ Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms/codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Interviews are confidential, however, there are limits. These include researcher audits and

a duty to warn. Limits to confidentiality will be verbalized before the interview.

| **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?** |
| --- |
Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

| **Is study participation voluntary?** |
| --- |
Participation in this study is voluntary.

| **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from this 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 will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

| **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?** |
| --- |
The researcher conducting this study is Todd Houchin LMFT. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Todd Houchin LMFT at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or by email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

| **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?** |
| --- |
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. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

| **Your Consent** |
| --- |
Before agreeing to be a part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the research using the information provided above. By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records.  If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*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.


_____
Printed Subject Name


_____
Signature & Date

**Appendix E**

**IRB Approval Letter**

RB #: IRB-FY22-23-1620

Title: A Phenomenological Study of what Integrating Identity and Meaning Making Means to

Christian Public School Counselors Who Work with Adolescents in a Setting Where Integration

is Restricted

Creation Date: 5-20-2023

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Todd Houchin

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:


Study History

Submission Type Initial Review Type Limited Decision Exempt - Limited IRB


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