

## Virtual School Counselling and Covid-19 as Seen Through an Organizational Learning Lens

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### Abstract

This article examines the shift to virtual school counselling through an organizational learning framework developed by Mary Crossan. This framework links the individual, group, and organization levels of an institution through the social and psychological processes of organizational learning, including intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing. The findings highlight four major challenges of virtual learning—technology, work-life balance, legal ramifications, and virtual counselling skills and abilities—that were partially or fully overcome with solutions that became institutionalized.

### Résumé

Cet article recourt à un cadre d'apprentissage organisationnel développé par Mary Crossan pour examiner la transition récente vers l'orientation scolaire virtuelle. Ce cadre relie les niveaux de l'individu, du groupe et de l'organisation d'une institution par le biais des processus sociaux et psychologiques de l'apprentissage organisationnel, y compris l'intuition, l'interprétation, l'intégration et l'institutionnalisation. Les résultats mettent en évidence quatre défis majeurs de l'apprentissage virtuel—la technologie, l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, les ramifications juridiques et les compétences et aptitudes en matière de conseil virtuel—qui ont été partiellement ou totalement surmontés grâce à des solutions qui par la suite ont pu être institutionnalisées.

Tara Hornor & Lee A Westberry. (2023). Virtual School Counselling and Covid-19 as Seen Through an Organizational Learning Lens. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 19(1). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/1057> doi:10.22230/ijepl.2023v19n1a1233

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The COVID-19 pandemic not only wreaked havoc on Canada's health system and the economy, but also created chaos in work settings with social distancing guidelines and other safety precautions. Educational settings were no exception. Schools delayed opening across the world to curb the spread of the virus (Kim, Kim, Peck, & Jung, 2020; Stage, Shingleton, Ghosh, Scarabel, Pellis, & Finnie, 2020). "Close to 80% of the world's student population is affected by school closures in 138 countries" (Chang & Yano, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, many schools, both K-12 and higher education, across the world resorted to some form of virtual instruction for students to inhibit the infection rates (Black, Ferdig, & Thompson, 2020).

The impact of virtual instruction on student achievement has recently been studied (Black, et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020) as well as the impact on teachers (Barton, 2020; Kaden, 2020). A recent statement by the U.S. Surgeon General Murthy highlights the negative impact of some pandemic policies on the mental health of children (Associated Press, 2022), affirming that school counsellors are going to become more integral in supporting children at school. However, little research exists on the COVID-19 impact on school counsellors amid the pandemic. Numerous research designs and assessment techniques have been utilized to investigate the differences between face-to-face and virtual instructional environments. However, few research studies have focused on school counsellors' perceptions of the differences between traditional face-to-face school counselling and virtual school counselling.

This study examines the impact of COVID-19 on P-12 school counselling, specifically the shift from in-person to virtual counselling practices. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do school counsellors describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on virtual and face-to-face school counselling practices?
2. How do school counsellors describe their virtual counselling professional development needs?

## **Literature review**

The rate of mental health issues among school-aged youth is increasing at an alarming rate (Lambie, Stickl Haugen, Borland, & Campbell, 2019) and was expedited due to COVID-19 (Ahmed & Firdous, 2020). School closures further contributed to social isolation and loneliness due to stay-at-home and quarantine orders (Thakur, 2020; Viner, Russell, Croker, et al., 2022). As a result, school-aged children today face more mental health challenges than ever before (Benton, Njoroge, Warren, & Ng, 2022). Not only have children suffered a learning loss, but they have suffered a counselling loss as well.

School counsellors worked diligently to provide student services during the pandemic. The challenges and successes experienced during the shift to virtual counselling can best be viewed through an organizational learning lens. Crossan et al. (1999) state, "Organizational learning can be conceived as a principal means of

achieving the strategic renewal of an enterprise” (p. 522). The renewal aspect of this organizational learning framework is important to understand, in that organizations must learn new ways while continuing previously learned practices (March, 1991).

This article looks at the shift to virtual counselling through Crossan et al.’s (1999) organizational learning framework. This framework links the three levels (individual, group, and organization) of the organization via social and psychological processes:

1. *Intuiting* occurs at the individual level, as people recognize the work that has been done and see possible new ways of conducting business.
2. *Interpreting* also occurs at the individual level, as those same people refine and further develop the newly discovered ways of conducting business.
3. *Integrating* occurs at the organizational level and “is the process of developing shared understanding among individuals and of taking coordinated action through mutual adjustment” (Crossan et al., 1999, p. 525).
4. *Institutionalizing* occurs at the organizational level and ensures that learning becomes systemically assimilated into the organization (Crossan et al., 1999).

This article highlights four major challenges that were either alleviated or overcome with solutions that became institutionalized: technology, work-life balance, legal ramifications, and virtual counselling skills and abilities.

### **Communication technology**

For the school counsellor, communication is a key tenet of practice (ASCA, 2019; Wilder, 2018). Traditionally, counsellors have relied on face-to-face interaction with their students, and many prefer it that way (Wong, Bonn, Tam, & Wong, 2018). However, the pandemic required a shift to virtual communication in many instances. During the pandemic, students felt a loss of communication from their schools; as such, students experienced heightened educational and emotional difficulties (Karaman, Esici, Tomar, & Aliyev, 2021). Effective communication, however, between parents and educators is fundamental to a student’s academic and social success (Natale & Lubniewski, 2018).

School counsellors *intuited* communication delivery through platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, email, text messaging applications, etc. Counsellors then *interpreted* processes for using that technology based on knowledge and expertise levels. Technology filled some of the gaps that were created when in-person schooling was halted and provided extended “opportunities for communication, connection, and collaboration in counseling work” (Strear, Duffy, & Sunde, 2021, p. 1). However, virtual communication came with the expectation of efficiency in response (Yumurtaci, 2017), and this created additional stress for counsellors, not to mention parents and students.

Bordalba and Bochacha (2019) underscore the fact that effectiveness with the use of technology is partially based on the users’ beliefs about themselves. Sharma and Sharma (2014) stressed the skills needed for effective communication: clarity, empathy, active listening, and conciseness. If students did not feel comfortable sharing hardships via technology, support was not provided. If teachers could not ascertain the non-verbal communication of students via the use of technology, support

was diminished (Natale & Lubniewski, 2018). However, technology use became *integrated* within counselling departments out of necessity. Sharma and Sharma (2014) stated that effective communication allows teams to meet goals. Collaboration was key to integration and mobilizing support for students, regardless of cultural background and socio-economic status (Education Trust, 2003).

The use of communication technology gradually became *institutionalized* in schools. Administrators, teachers, and counsellors alike all utilized technology for educational aims (Pollock, 2020; Supriyanto, Hartini, Irdasari, Miftahul, Oktapiana, & Mumpuni, 2020; Yates, Starkey, Egerton, & Flueggen, 2021). From the use of on-line learning platforms, social media applications, and conferencing software, technology use became a staple of education; consequently, some researchers postulate that the use of communication technology will become permanent, the new normal (Afshan & Ahmed, 2020; Mazzara, Zhdanov, Bahrami et al., 2021; Ray, 2021).

### **Work-life balance**

Crossan et al.'s (1999) organizational learning framework highlighted deficiencies in learning when it came to school counsellors' work-life balance. Poulouse and Sudarsan (2018) state that achieving a work-life balance is imperative for employee well-being as well as productivity. School counsellors *intuited* the need for extended hours of service to support students and families. Again, technology use also created the expectation of immediacy of response by parents and students (Yumurtaci, 2017); therefore, counsellors could no longer stop working at the end of the school day (Eckart, Hermann, & Neale-McFall, 2021; Pincus, Hannor-Walker, Wright, & Justice, 2020), and the work-life balance was interrupted.

Counsellors attempted to *interpret* the processes of communication technology and its impact on their work-life balance, but the return to in-person learning provided the only relief. Counsellors have long been having trouble in fulfilling their roles in the actual counselling realm due to increased non-counselling duties ascribed to them that reduce time spent with students (Blake, 2020; Fye, Bergen, & Baltrinic, 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018). Due to these factors, school counsellors were already at risk of burnout prior to the pandemic (Fye et al., 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen, Chae, Backer, & Niles, 2021). This, combined with the extended school day for counsellors and the blend of home and work environments (Savić, 2020), created more difficulties for school counsellors (Galanti, Guidetti, Mazzei, Zappalà, & Toscano, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021). In addition, school-aged children today face more mental health challenges because of the COVID-19 counselling loss than ever before (Benton et al., 2022). As a result, the work-life balance so sought after has not been *integrated* or *institutionalized* in the world of school counselling.

### **Legal concerns with virtual counselling**

Virtual counselling brought on a whole new concern for school counsellors: legal ramifications. Counsellors concerned with confidentiality were justified in their apprehensions. The National Board for Certified Counselors addresses this same concern in its Policy Regarding the Provision of Distance Professional Services (2016). "Distance pro-

essional services involve the use of electronic or other means (e.g., telephones or computers) to provide services such as counseling, supervision, consultation, or education” (NBCC, 2016, p. 1). This policy outlines some of the criteria that must be met to meet counselling ethical standards and state regulations (NBCC, 2016):

1. All digital services must maintain a secure backup system.
2. All digital technology will employ an encryption security measure.
3. All minors must have legal guardian’s consent for online services.
4. Institutions shall develop written procedures for verifying the identity of the service recipient.
5. Institutions will retain distance service records for a minimum of five years.

School counsellors do not have a distance counselling policy unless they are developed by their school boards. School boards are responsible to interpret the state law and develop policy at the local level (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2012). Superintendents, on the other hand, must work in collaboration with others to develop the administrative rules, or the processes expected for policy implementation (KSBA, 2023). Aside from policy considerations, the technology security measures to include encryption software and backup servers may or may not have been addressed in any school setting.

School counsellors *intuited* the work to be done; however, they were unable to *interpret* ways to virtually counsel considering legal ramifications. Consequently, the school organizations certainly could not *integrate* and *institutionalize* legal virtual counselling. However, with the new normal, virtual services may become a part of the fabric of society (Afshan & Ahmed, 2020; Mazzara et al., 2021; Ray, 2021), and these policies and policy considerations will have to be addressed for true organizational learning to occur (Afshan & Ahmed, 2020; Mazzara et al., 2021; Ray, 2021). School counsellors provided services as best they could, but legal concerns remain an issue.

### **Virtual counselling skills**

Virtual school counselling parallels traditional forms of school counselling in that the same services must be provided: academic planning, liaison between the school and parents, career development, crisis services, social/emotional counselling, etc. Because of the job duties assigned, American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2014) approved a Code of Ethics with a section entitled “Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media”; however, this addition only notes that states must follow their own state laws, and not all states have laws regulating virtual counselling. For example, 19 states have policies that say to practice distance counselling, one must be licensed and follow the regulations of the state. Consequently, 19 other states report an absence of any regulation addressing virtual counselling (ACA, 2022).

Kimbel, Jacokes, and Stone (2015) note that 28 percent of the 771 American Counseling Association (ACA) counsellor survey respondents reported that they used technology to deliver school counselling curricular activities while the ASCA Web and School Counseling Study showed that school counsellor’s use of technology was limited to indirect services, not direct counselling services. “Because counseling is taught within a humanistic and experiential framework, counselor educators have faced challenges

in translating this framework into an online format” (Murdock Williams, Becker, Bruce, & Young, 2012, p. 106). Most counsellors learn skills through modelling and role-play (Hill & Corbett, 1993; Newman & Fuqua, 1988). Just as counsellor educators are concerned about the teaching of interviewing skills via an online platform because of the inability of the instructor to see the student’s non-verbal behaviours or empathy (Baum & Gray, 1992), school counsellors may feel the same way about providing virtual counselling.

School counsellors *intuited* the need for human connection in virtual counselling. Vast research supports the importance of human connection (Cohen & Syme, 1985), but with online counselling, just counsellor educators, school counsellors may not develop the same connection to students. Human connection is a basic human need that is a critical factor in mental health (Hagerty & Williams, 2020), so recognizing the need for a new way to establish connections was important.

Increased ability to read non-verbal cues and accurately assess a student’s affect virtually are also important counselling skills that were *intuited* during COVID-19. Dealing with emotion is as important as the issue itself; however, in virtual counselling, trust is difficult to create, and it is needed for effective counselling to be delivered (Di Bernardo, Grignoli, Marazia, Andreotti, Perren & Malacrida, 2015). Marra, Buonanno, Vargas, Iacovazzo, Ely, & Servillo, (2020) state:

Nonverbal communication is established by eye contact, posture, tone of voice, head nods, gesture, and the postural position. Empathy is of great significance for better healthcare outcomes as part of a warm and friendly communication style ...[counsellors] rate communication skills as just as valuable as clinical skills. (para. 2)

These communication skills were *intuited*, and counsellors attempted to *interpret* them through different strategies. However, none of the communication skills progressed in the learning framework to *integration* or *institutionalization*. For *institutionalization* to occur, professional learning must be provided.

### **Professional learning**

School counsellors have too few opportunities to hone their skills in a normal setting, much less a COVID-19-induced one. Communities of practice, as defined by Wenger (2011) are “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). This type of professional learning requires participants to engage with the material and with one another. For teachers, this type of engagement has been found to positively impact the culture and climate of teaching and learning (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Patton & Parker, 2017). Furthermore, a recent study conducted during the onset of the pandemic found that principals who adjusted well to the digital platform relied on a strong community of practice (Sterrett & Richardson, 2020). School counsellors are no different.

To qualify as a community of practice (CoP), Wenger (2011) states that three elements must exist: domain, community, and practice. Specifically, the domain is a shared interest with a commitment to collective competence, meaning members of this group are committed to growing and learning with and from one another. The

community does not just include members who share the interest, but must include those who engage in joint discussion, collaborative activities, and shared information. Lastly, the practice results in a shared repository of resources, tools, and applications. Time and consistent interaction are necessary to create a CoP (Wenger, 2011).

Providing school counsellors with a CoP to engage in discovery and learn how to *interpret* and *integrate* both verbal and non-verbal communication skills in virtual clinical counselling would be very useful. The progression would then logically move to CoPs becoming *institutionalized*.

Other research perspectives on organizational learning support the value of CoP in fostering innovation. Edge's (2013) study, viewing organizational learning through a knowledge management lens in 100 Canadian schools, demonstrates the importance of considering interconnected committees as well as the role of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing and underscores the potential of professional learning communities. Edge (2013) asserts that when examining organizational learning, integrating knowledge management theory can be particularly helpful in establishing organizational conditions that foster and encourage employee knowledge sharing and that are likely to spark further innovation. Furthermore, Park and Kim's (2018) research advocates for placing more emphasis on transformational leadership support to enhance the knowledge sharing organizational climate and building trust to foster organizational learning advances.

## Methodology

The complexity of the transition to virtual school counselling, as well as the myriad of challenges associated with counselling in a virtual environment, necessitate a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy, 2017). For these reasons, this study employed a basic qualitative research design, including qualitative structured interviews to gain in-depth insight about school counsellors' perceptions about the different knowledge, skills, and abilities required in effective virtual counselling. The design of the study drew upon Leavy (2017) and Merriam and Grenier's (2019) recommendations for basic qualitative research and research ethics.

A basic qualitative design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on school counsellors' perceptions of the differences between traditional face-to-face counselling and virtual counselling, how the shift to virtual school counselling can be seen through an organizational learning theory, and how school counsellors described their professional development needs in virtual counselling. Leavy (2017) asserts that utilizing a basic qualitative research strategy with structured interviews is particularly powerful in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions, which was integral to this study. This research strategy enabled individual school counsellors' rich personal reflections on their own experiences to be compared with other participants in the study (Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Leavy, 2017).

The interviews consisted of structured questions that aligned to one of the study's overarching two research questions and an open-ended question structure to encourage research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions of the differences between traditional face-to-face and virtual school counselling. The interview questions

focused on three important areas including school counsellors' perceptions of the differences between traditional face-to-face counselling and virtual counselling (aligned with Research Question 1), how the shift to virtual school counselling can be seen through an organizational learning theory (aligned with Research Question 1), and how school counsellors described their professional development needs in virtual counselling (aligned with Research Question 2). By purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, informed by research literature, and aligned with one of the study's overarching research questions, the researchers—who are both university faculty members—ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The research interviews were approximately an hour in duration and conducted via video conferencing software over a two-week period.

### Research participants

School counsellors in a southeastern state in the United States were invited by a recruitment email to participate in the study and share their perspective in individual research interviews. Eleven school counsellors agreed to participate in the study. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a small research sample may provide great insight and information on the research topic. The research participants shared one critical characteristic, which was the inclusion criteria for the research study—employment as a school counsellor who transitioned to virtual counselling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study were diverse in years of school counselling experience, school counselling grade level, gender, and race and ethnicity. Additionally, the interview participants geographically spanned the state. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article for the research participants.

**Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics**

Participants (n = 11)	School counselling experience	Setting	Gender	Race
Brenda	10 years	High School	Female	Caucasian
Amy	20 years	High School	Female	Caucasian
Blake	15 years	High School	Male	Caucasian
Emily	22 years	High School	Female	African American
Hanna	17 years	High School	Female	African American
Sabrina	28 years	High School	Female	Caucasian
Sofia	1 year	High School	Female	African American
Sally	25 years	Elementary School	Female	Caucasian
Sam	8 years	Middle School	Male	Caucasian
Scott	2 years	High School	Male	African American
Wendy	20 years	High School	Female	Caucasian



## **Data analysis**

Creswell (2018) states, “The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183). The analytical techniques utilized within the study drew upon Creswell’s (2018) recommendations for data analysis and research ethics. Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and patterns associated with school counsellors’ perceptions of virtual school counselling and associated professional development needs (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researchers frequently revisited the participants’ interview data utilizing a constant comparison analysis technique. This inductive analysis led to four themes emerging from the data that answered the study’s overarching research questions and provided insight into school counsellors’ experiences. While thematic analysis was a critical component, the analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. Previous research literature on virtual school counselling was instrumental in assessing the data collected in the individual interviews and evaluating the research findings. Research literature assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study’s data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

The goals associated with rigour in basic qualitative research are to minimize researcher bias, increase accuracy, and convey the credibility of study findings (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020). Credibility, confirmability, and dependability are important considerations in the assessment of research rigour. The researchers employed several techniques to ensure credibility and guard against bias, including a structured interview protocol where the same questions were posed to all participants, the recording and transcription of interviews to enhance accuracy, and the use of neutral language. Confirmability of the results was ensured by using a well-developed conceptual framework and continuous reflection by the researchers. The study ensured dependability through transparently reporting the methodology, including research participant recruitment and characteristics, geographic location of the study, data collection protocol, and time span of the data collection. Adhering to the foundational principles of qualitative research, the study also includes direct quotations from research participants, which provides robust descriptive language and contextual data that can enhance readers’ ability to assess the credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the study’s findings (Johnson et al., 2020).

## **Results**

Research participants passionately shared the differences they perceived between virtual school counselling and traditional face-to-face school counselling during the individual interviews. Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to gain insight about cat-

egories and patterns associated with school counsellors' perceptions. Interview participants identified four salient categories of how they believed virtual counselling differed from traditional school counselling, including a more pronounced need for the following: 1) strengthening technology skills; 2) maintaining an effective and healthy work/life balance; 3) learning about legal aspects of virtual counselling; and 4) enhancing virtual counselling skills. The following sections present the data gained relating to each of the aforementioned areas to provide insight on school counsellors' perceptions about the difference in knowledge, skills, and abilities required in virtual counselling roles.

### ***Strengthening technology skills***

All participants shared the importance of maintaining a growth mindset in strengthening their technology skills to best serve students in virtual counselling environments. Scott, a second-year high school counsellor, shared the main difference he encountered in the shift to virtual counselling was "making sure that I was more technology savvy." Similarly, Emily, a high school counsellor with 22 years of experience, asserted:

You have to be technology savvy. That's for sure. You have to know how to utilize things like Zoom and Google. You have to be willing to learn and be comfortable in utilizing technology. I feel like that's really the key factor in knowing how to still provide programs to your students. So, I guess at the end of the day, you've got to be willing to think outside of the box, which could be true for brick and mortar and as well as virtual, but you've got to be willing to think outside of the box and find ways to make things work.

Likewise, Hanna, a high school counsellor with 17 years of experience, stated, "I think it goes the back to the use of technology and making it easy and user friendly and easy for students and parents to use."

### ***Maintaining an effective work-life balance***

Most participants asserted virtual counselling required more effort in maintaining an effective and healthy work-life balance. For example, Emily, a high school counsellor with 22 years of experience, confided:

I think one of the main things that we did is we became available after hours, which was very hard on us. And not all the time, but I felt like when we were out, I was answering my emails sometimes eight, nine o'clock. Just trying to be available because people's stress levels were so high and just trying to meet those needs.

These expanded hours and expectations for evening and weekend counselling services impeded an effective work-life balance for many virtual counsellors. This sentiment was reinforced by Emily, who shared:

It impacted my stress, because we were working from home, so I was so glad when we were finally able to come back in the building at one point, even though students weren't here, we were able to

come back in the building because it was hard to separate personal from professional. They were always lumped together. And I felt like I was just always working.

### ***Learning About legal aspects of virtual counselling***

Most of the school counsellors (over 70%) also stressed the requirement for learning more about the legal aspects associated with virtual counselling, especially with regulatory requirements for ensuring confidentiality. Confidentiality in the virtual environment was an additional concern expressed by eight of the eleven participants. For example, Sam, a middle school counsellor with over eight years of experience, stated:

My first concern was confidentiality. Typically, that's such a bedrock of the counselling relationship and to be able to provide confidentiality in an online forum was difficult. Just not knowing that my own children were at home and even though I'm in a separate room, if my nine-year-old was going to walk in and need something. I had a student talk to me about an issue of sensitive nature that required me to seek out DSS. And while having that conversation via Zoom, I was very concerned that that person's parent guardian could come in the back door where they were talking.

Similarly, Amy, a high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, shared:

A lot of times, whereas in a brick-and-mortar building, you'd have the student and have your door closed, and you felt like that conversation was private and you had no idea if it was private or not on Zoom. And I think I felt that more from the students than on my side because I could feel they're like, "No, my mom's right over there." But even me in my house. I have an older son and daughter and a husband. I didn't want them hearing what I was talking about. So, it was a lot of confidentiality issues that were hard to overcome.

### ***Enhancing virtual counselling skills***

All participants in this study emphasized how the virtual environment required enhancements in their counselling skills. Most participants noted the need for strengthening their own active listening skills and awareness in order to accurately assess students, build rapport, and make meaningful connections with students. This sentiment was expressed by Sabrina, a veteran high school counsellor with over 28 years of experience, who shared:

Being a virtual counsellor is a totally different job description than being an in-person counsellor. I think you have to be a lot more aware of those body and personal reactions, because you don't have as much to look at when you're talking to a student. Because a lot of times when you're talking to somebody, it's that body language, it's that disposition that they put out, that you gather information. On Zoom, it could be anything, and you could overreact or underreact. When you're face to face, when you say something, you can

read that reaction a little bit better. So, I think you have to be a skilled counsellor and you have to listen. You have to be able to actually listen to understand, not listen to respond. I mean there's going to be lots of PD needed if we stay virtual, because we're not equipped for that.

Similarly, Brenda, a high school counsellor with over 10 years of experience, stated, "I think it was much more difficult to try to make connections with students when they weren't face to face." Likewise, Sam, a middle school counsellor with over 8 years of experience, stated:

I think it was harder to read people once again with that body language. I'm trying to pay more attention during our conversations or counselling sessions where I'm trying to watch the student, watch the shoulders, watch the eye contact, watch a little bit more. It definitely put a strain and made me double and triple guess myself on whether or not I was effective at reading students' behaviors virtually.

Sally, an experienced elementary school counsellor with over 25 years of experience, reinforced this sentiment by commenting, "I had to work on my comfort level and then being able to just read people. When you're talking to them virtually rather than in person, you have to be able to read them. I mean, you have to really pay attention to a facial expression."

School counsellors also shared the importance of fostering creative thinking in the virtual environment as well as thinking outside of the box. For example, Amy, a high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, shared, "I think virtual counsellors have to be very creative and they have to be able to think outside the box even more so than a regular counsellor, which is already a lot, to get their services to all of their students."

Similarly, Sofia, a first-year high school counsellor, commented:

You have to be a little bit more creative with distant learning. You had to just find creative ways to engage the kids. Usually when you are face to face with a kid you can feel their energy, you can tell. But when they behind that computer screen and so far away, you had to find a way to connect with the kids, although you couldn't be with them one-on-one personally.

## **Professional development needs**

Study participants identified two critical professional development needs reflecting on the different knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for virtual counselling. These needs focused on learning virtual counselling best practices as well as social and emotional virtual counselling.

### ***Virtual counselling best practices***

School counsellors stressed the importance of gaining a better understanding of virtual counselling best practices as well as the opportunity to learn from experts in the field. For example, Sofia, a first-year high school counsellor, shared:

I believe that the virtual might be around for a while. I do believe that an effective workshop would be a workshop training counselors how to be effective virtually, how to still be able to connect with the student, although you're not there with them directly. How to still be able to effectively provide those services to them, even though you're distanced.

Sally, an experienced elementary school counsellor with over 25 years of experience, offered:

We need more information about the legal and ethical parts of it. We need to know what's okay to do. I mean, is this confidential enough or do we need another format to do in that? Does there need to be disclosure? We just need more ... Like, I said, a lot of questions came up with that and I still don't think all of those have been answered. What is your liability in that? What are the ways that we can follow that ASCA model and do it virtually? I think that would be important.

### ***Social and emotional virtual counselling***

Study participants also shared the need for intensive professional development in addressing students' social and emotional needs through virtual counselling. Emily, a high school counsellor with 22 years of experience, asserted:

The social emotional side of it and student social, emotional needs, working with students virtually in terms of actually providing counselling. We cannot do therapy, but let's say when we have to do suicide risk assessments. I've done suicide risk assessments via Google Meet, but practicing that even more and what that looks like or counselling that upset student who is just in crisis mode.

Similarly, Hanna, a high school counsellor with 17 years of experience, stated:

I think in virtual counselling, how to handle the social emotional piece of that counselling through technology. I think a lot of us are afraid of that component of it because you're not there with the child. So, I think a lot of the fear is what if something goes wrong and I don't have the response, the immediate response I need to mitigate a certain situation. I have seen it manifest in so many different ways. A child showing up every morning in the front office asking for you because they're afraid to walk the halls after being on virtual instruction.

This sentiment was reinforced by Sabrina, a veteran high school counsellor with over 28 years of experience, who shared:

I think first we have to figure out an appropriate way for all of us to do the personal social. Quality counselling through virtual and personal social. And the legal ramifications of that, the confidentiality that goes along with that, I think that needs to be covered with

counsellors. Because again, I think personal social is our immediate need in this environment. So just some guidelines on how to do that safely, protecting student confidentiality.

## Discussion

The findings from this study indicate the COVID-19 pandemic had a powerful influence on school counsellor's professional practices, which provides valuable insights from an organizational learning perspective. While ASCA's (2017) position statement on "The School Counselor and Virtual School Counseling" communicates the expectation of providing "counseling with the same standards and adherence to ethics as school counselors working in traditional school settings," school counsellors in this study experienced great difficulty adhering to this expectation due to differences they noted in counselling in the virtual environment (para. 1). Interview participants identified four major ways in which virtual counselling skills differ from traditional school counselling, including a pronounced need for strong technology skills, maintaining work-life balance, acquiring new knowledge about the legal aspects of virtual counselling, and enhancing virtual counselling skills.

Organizational learning theory reinforces the need for providing professional learning opportunities. Though all counsellors were able to sense the need for a change in practice, only one practice became institutionalized, and that was the use of technology. However, changes in virtual counselling skills and ramifications as well as work-life balance were never interpreted or integrated in daily practice. Participants in this study identified two overarching professional development needs to bridge the skills gap and provide the needed knowledge and skills for effective virtual counselling. School counsellors expressed the desire to study and learn virtual counselling best practices as well as specific strategies for facilitating social and emotional counselling sessions in a virtual environment.

Findings from this study support the need for additional leadership and policy support to develop CoP for school counsellors to aid in strengthening virtual counselling knowledge, skills, and abilities. Wenger (2011) defines CoP as "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). School counsellors clearly meet the first aspect of Wenger's definition, as they share a passion for helping students and common concerns about enhancing their effectiveness in providing virtual counselling services. Enhancing leadership and policy support to offer virtual counselling professional development will fulfill the second component of Wenger's definition by providing opportunities for school counsellors to work together to learn virtual counselling best practices.

The development of CoP for school counsellors presents several valuable implications for leadership practice and policy, as Wenger (2011) asserts CoP require three critical elements: domain, community, and practice. Educational leaders can ensure counsellors are able to develop strong communities of practice by providing the following support:

- *Domain* – Foster a strong commitment to collective competence in virtual counselling, encouraging counsellors to learn with and from one another.

- *Community* – Provide time for collaboration with other school counsellors to engage with the material and practice virtual counselling.
- *Practice* – Invest in consistent virtual counselling professional development and the creation of a shared repository of resources and tools for the community.

### **Study limitations and future research recommendations**

While this study found strong consistency in school counsellors' beliefs about the transition to virtual counselling, an analysis of the study's methodology indicates several potential limitations and recommendations for future research. The study was conducted within one southeastern state using a basic qualitative approach. Future research studies incorporating multiple states, a larger and more diverse sample of school counsellors, and different methodological techniques may improve the generalizability of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of school counsellors' perceptions about virtual counselling as well as their professional development needs provide valuable insights for how educational leaders and policy can help foster growth mindsets and support the enhancement of virtual counselling knowledge, skills, and abilities. Examining these perceptions through the lens of organizational learning theory reinforces the importance of professional learning opportunities. Communities of Practice provide a valuable framework for delivering effective and meaningful virtual counselling professional learning opportunities.

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