Virtual School Counseling during COVID-19: Perspectives from School Counselors and Interns

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Abstract
Although virtual school counseling (VSC) has been present since the early 2000s, the COVID-19 pandemic conditions caused mandatory implementation of this modality in K-12 schools. Many school counselor supervisors (SCSs) and school counselors in training (SCITs) had no experience in VSC. Therefore, this interpretative phenomenological analysis research is developed to explore the lived experiences of SCSs and SCITs in VSC during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection was completed using interviews with data analyzed through manual coding and thematic analysis. Three themes emerged showing the challenges and outcomes of VSC. Implications to counselor education, school as a system, professional identity and policies, limitations and future recommendations are discussed.
Keywords: virtual school counseling, school counselors, school counselor in training, COVID-19, qualitative research

1. Introduction

As virtual schooling has become more prevalent in our society, it has simultaneously become part of the evolving school counseling profession (Mariani et al., 2022). In the United States, virtual schools and specialized training for counselors started in the early 2000s (Goss & Anthony, 2009). Beginning with the No Child Left Behind Act, virtual schools were used to supplement the curriculum of local schools by offering classes from remedial to advanced placement (Winograd 2002). Since then, virtual schooling has been on the rise throughout the country. In 2013, data showed that there were 311 fully online K-12 schools with almost 200,000 enrolled students (Molnar et al., 2013).

2. Virtual School Counseling

From the start, many school counselors were tasked with exploring how best to convert their services into this budding modality. For example, Barak, et al. (2009) developed four broad categories of virtual school counseling (VSC) interventions: online counseling and therapy, web-based interventions, internet-operated therapeutic software, and other online activities. Of these four categories, virtual school counselors' services most often fell within creating various web-based interventions and online counseling. This was frequently accomplished through online instant messaging, text messaging, telephone calls, emailing parents and students, or using video chats (Bray, 2014).

A study from Steele et al. (2014) showed that half of non-virtual school counselors state that regular in-person services can be effectively converted to virtual modality. However, we also know that research shows that school counselors are more likely to use virtual tools when they have high self-efficacy (Abdillah et al., 2020). The general description of self-efficacy is a person's belief in their individual ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, low self-efficacy in technology may be a barrier for school counselors utilizing virtual counseling for the first time (Adebowale & Popoola, 2011). Evidence suggests that the self-efficacy of school counselors and SCITs (school counselors in training) is related to their success in serving students and stakeholders (Tang, 2019). In the same study, lower self-efficacy in practicum and interning SCITs caused additional stress in the face of new professional duties (Tang, 2019). Moreover, with proper training counselors' and SCITs' anxiety decreased as self-efficacy increased (Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Overall, VSC has been found to be most successful with ample planning and communication between the school counselor and administrator

(Williams et al., 2018).

2.1 Benefits and Challenges of VSC

One of the leading reasons counselors have perceived VSC to be more effective than brick-and-mortar is due to its anonymity. In VSC, students can "go" to the school counselor, without anyone seeing them walk into the counselor's office. In turn, this could help remove the stigma around being seen with the school counselor (Bray, 2014). The virtual learning environment has been noted by some students, such as English language learners (ELL) students', to foster social emotional learning. Shi et al. (2023) noted that VSC may complement the use of visual tools for social-emotional learning with ELL students. As another advantage, VSC may allow counselors to focus solely on counseling rather than being tasked with random jobs assigned by administration in brick-and-mortar schools (Bray, 2014). Additionally, some counseling activities including college advising are found to be just as effective, if not more, in the online format (Gurantz et al., 2020). Gurantz et al. found that there was a positive and statistically significant impact on SAT scores and enrollment in students taking part in the online college advising for colleges.

On the contrary, some of the obstacles virtual school counselors may face include hindrances of connection and communication. Counselors reported difficulty making connections with students and problems assessing body language or vocal tone over virtual means (Baughman, 2015). VSC can be troublesome when students use the chat function rather than enabling their video cameras during virtual sessions (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). Moreover, counselors have been concerned about whether they can maintain a private and secure environment during VSC. This is a major difference from having an office with a closed door for student confidentiality (Williams et al., 2018). Due to this concern, it is imperative for the school counselor to proactively educate and coordinate with students, their support systems, and school staff about this threatened ethical standard (Ellington, 2022). Further roadblocks to effective counseling within VSC have been reported as lack of motivation, decreased time-management skills, and imminent feelings of displeasure (Currie, 2010).

2.2 Professional Standards and Training

Both advantages and difficulties of VSC services have become apparent in the field through the trial and error of practitioners. Until 2016, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) had not addressed ethical standards related to VSC on relevant issues such as confidentiality, cyberbullying, diversity issues, and appropriate technology (American School Counselor Association, 2016). One year later ASCA released a direct position statement on VSC:

> counseling with the same standards and adherence to ethics as school counselors working in traditional school settings. School counselors work collaboratively with all stakeholders to ensure equity, access, and success of all students whether virtual school counseling is offered synchronously or asynchronously. (American School Counselor Association, 2017, p. 93)

Since the standards of VSC have been vague at times, the 2017 position statement has given limited clarity for tangible best practice. Meanwhile, the ASCA code of ethics remained unchanged until the current 2022 revisions were made. However, the changes had minor impact on the participants of this current study because data was collected in 2021.

At the start of drafting this paper, in 2020, the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) created a worldwide pandemic. With the imminent stress and staggering number of cases, most schools transitioned to a virtual modality. This caused devastating circumstances for students, because 70% of youth access mental healthcare through their in-person school counseling (Merikangas et al., 2011). In a 2020 survey, 83% of youth expressed the pandemic having negative effects on their mental wellness (YoungMinds, 2020). Students can thrive in academic systems only if they feel secure in their learning environment (MacNeil et al., 2009). Without access to school amenities, some students did not have the tools to maintain their own wellness or self-advocacy. This means that vulnerable and marginalized students were and are especially at risk during virtual learning (Ellington, 2022). A UK based study reported that during the pandemic, school counselors spent most of their time troubleshooting technological issues. This meant that students had less undivided attention and access to the care they needed (Hasking, 2021).

Meanwhile, the demand for school counselors to go virtually became a necessity while the training remained minimal. Up to this point, school counseling graduate programs have not thoroughly addressed detailed methods for VSC in fieldwork for SCITs (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). Undoubtedly, discomfort and stress for school counselors was bound to escalate in a suddenly all-virtual world. The impending urgency of the pandemic forced school counselors to process at high speed and alter brick-and-mortar practices instantly. Simultaneously, school counseling supervisors (SCSs) scampered to support their SCITs in meeting graduation and certification requirements while managing their own duties (Gay & Swank, 2021). Overwhelmed, school counselors and SCITs juggled professional practice, mentorship, the code of ethics, crisis response protocols, and district plans while aiming to care for the needs of each unique student (Chibbaro et. al., 2021).

2.3 Purpose of the Study

The researchers of this paper propose that without honoring and analyzing the experiences of school counselors during the VSC period of 2020-2021, the profession may not improve its best practices for the future. Even as professional guidelines continue to be updated, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed catastrophic gaps in the literature surrounding VSC. Therefore, this research study seeks to understand the collective narratives of SCSs and SCITs as they navigated through VSC with minimal training. The research question of this study is:

What lessons can we learn from the virtual and online school counseling modality based on the experiences of SCSs and SCITs during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Eight participants (5 SCSs and 3 SCITs) volunteered in the study. Participants were recruited from school counseling listservs (e.g., Counseling graduate listserv [COUNSGRADS] and the ASCA Scene) using purposeful sampling methods (Sheperis et al., 2017). All eight participants had experiences using hybrid and remote learning during the spring or fall of 2020. The SCSs were required to have experience of counseling K-12 students and supervising SCITs. Additionally, the SCITs had to be enrolled in a field experience course (practicum or internship) in a school counseling program. Table 1 shows the participants' demographics including their roles, identification labels, genders, caseload grade levels, and levels of experience in the field.

Following Institutional Review Board approval, a short Qualtrics survey was posted on the School Counseling listservs (e.g., ASCA Scene and COUNSGRADS). Interested participants were required to complete the survey which provided them with informed consent, and the opportunity for the researchers to collect a short demographic information about the potential participants' availability for recorded Zoom interviews. After two email reminders were sent, we had six participants (4 SCSs and 2 SCITs) who agreed to Zoom interviews. Because we had not reached saturation at that point, we employed snowball sampling to gain two more participants. They completed the survey and agreed to Zoom interviews.

Using a semi-structured interview approach, we created two different sets of interview questions (see appendix A), one for the SCS and the other for the SCITs. These questions were mostly explorative given the meager literature on the topic. The interviews were conducted by the first author within 45–60-minute sessions in spring 2021 when K-12 schools had started face-to-face instructions. After the interview, the third author transcribed the recorded interviews for data analysis.

3.2 Research Design

We used qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as our guide to explore SCSs' and SCITs' deeply personalized experiences and feelings about VSC during the pandemic. The IPA operates under three principles (Smith et al., 2021): idiographic, phenomenology, and interpretative perspectives. Idiographic principles highlight the relevance and focus on each participant's unique experience or story. Applying this we ensured that each participant's reflection was considered in the analysis. Phenomenology also speaks to the rich subjective description of each participant's experience, which we factored in our analysis by using some of the direct quotes of the participants. Lastly, we considered the interpretative principle as we sought to understand the meaning the participants attributed to the experiences they shared. We achieved the interpretative principle by serving as "a co-constructor of meaning;" thereby partnering with the participants to make interpretations of their reported experiences (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). To do this effectively, we were careful to engage in bracketing and reflexivity to ensure that our thoughts and assumptions did not overinterpret the participants' feedback. All three authors are professionally connected to school counseling (One counselor educator, a SCIT, and a recently certified school counselor). However, only one of the three authors (third author) had the experience of VSC during the COVID-19 pandemic but was not part of the data collection or the analysis. The first and second authors independently analyzed the data to form initial codes and themes. After which, they came together to compare their findings to generate the results.

3.3 Data Analysis Process

After reading each transcript, the first and second authors used the inductive manual coding technique to generate themes. Each rater independently coded and formulated categories and themes, after which they met six separate times to confer and agree on the categories and themes. The conferring process involved identifying similarities and differences in the codes for each transcribed interview, which led to arising categories and themes. Expert feedback was sought to increase the reliability of the results. The expert is an Associate Professor with experience in teaching Research Methods and has published qualitative research articles. Their feedback was utilized during the analysis to finetune the categories and themes. Further attempts were made at member checking, but only one of the participants (P8) provided feedback. Overall, about sixty-five initial codes were extracted, with further analysis of similarities and differences leading to seven categories and three themes.

4. Results

The eight participants had common experiences that emerged as themes to explain VSC during the COVID 19 pandemic. The three themes are dissatisfaction with the VSC; SCSs' and SCITs' adapted coping strategies; and promise of VSC for the professional field.

4.1 Theme 1: Dissatisfaction with VSC

This theme emerged from SCSs' and SCITs' statements that described the challenges they encountered as they provided services online. Some challenges were related to professional delivery issues and interpersonal challenges, and others were specific to SCITs' development. Based on the quotes and codes, three categories emerged from this theme: professional delivery concerns, interpersonal and intrapersonal struggles, and counselor trainees and program inhibition.

4.1.1 Category 1: Professional delivery concerns

This category describes participants' concerns related to technological challenges, care limitations, ethical concerns, and role confusion. The participants' shared experiences placed under this category communicate challenges and frustrations that inhibited their direct service delivery to their students.

Technological Challenges. In reference to technological challenges all participants expressed frustrations indicating issues with unreliability of the internet service, computers crashing, having to restart, not having any means of communicating with the students on the other side, or unfamiliarity with the software (such as Zoom, Microsoft teams, and Google teams). Even though technical support was available to some, most of the participants expressed having to do the troubleshooting added to expected counseling services. In some schools, the students did not have computers or internet access regularly, and when they did, they often experienced similar glitches. In a statement that encapsulates these frustrations P3 stated, *"the technical glitches and not knowing if they could hear and needing to ask if they can hear me. Like multiple guidance lessons, there was this class where our WIFI would always be cut off and our class would just shut down.*

Care Limitations. One of the core tenets of school counseling as identified by the participants is that they exist in the schools to provide care and in most cases seen as in loco parentis. However, SCSs and SCITs indicated care limitations with VSC, which they cited as difficulties establishing therapeutic relationships with the students. Specifically, most of them struggled with engaging the students in open dialogues because of distractions at home, fatigue with being online and developmental levels. Two participants, P1 and P6 captured these struggles stating respectively, *"getting the kids' attention... they would be fidgeting; they would be moving around. Umm, we saw that they would be drinking, eating, not really paying attention. Playing with the cameras– a lot liked playing with the virtual backgrounds";* and *"a lot of surface level conversations and not a whole lot of going deeper to explore things. Even if it was a surface level problem, it was still hard to get the kids to talk to you."*

Ethical Concerns. Associated with the care limitations was the issue of ethical concerns. The most common ethical issues expressed by the participants were confidentiality and autonomy. Participants explained that many students were reluctant and intimidated because they did not have a sense of autonomy being at home with the risk of someone potentially overhearing their information. Parents were at times seen in the room when students were supposed to have confidentiality. Highlighting this challenge P1 indicated that, *"We were nervous about someone's mom being in the background and overhearing them...Umm... [citing an example of a situation in a group counseling] one of the girls in our group, her mom would come in, say hi to us, and talk to us and would be in the room. And then would say something if the girl didn't explain something right."*

Role Confusion. Another professional concern was related to role confusion. Although this seemed to be exacerbated by the pandemic, it was significant enough that three out of the five SCSs shared their frustrations with it. Some indicated they were mostly used for non-school counseling-related duties like teacher, teacher assistant, and standby substituting.

> *"Overall, our roles really changed in each building… they would use me as a support to teachers, specifically in the third grade. I would rotate between three third grade teachers everyday… going in between all three of them, hopping onto their Zooms, and help monitor the students."* (P8)

4.1.2 Category 2: Intrapersonal and interpersonal struggles

This category explains the struggles that arose between SCSs and SCITs as they worked in atypical environments and conditions. The participants shared that they had to be innovative and flexible to ensure continued student support as they transitioned to VSC. These atypical conditions led to some unusual occurrences. SCSs shared that they felt as though they had extra work, inconsistent expectations, and pressure to balance K-12 students' care while supervising their SCITs. Some also expressed that they expected SCITs to take greater initiative, and when that did not happen it generated frustration. The frustrations associated with these new conditions and expectations led to some supervisor and trainee relational strain. The following is an example of a quote to buttress this category:

> *"We [supervisor and SCIT] meet on Zoom and talk about what the week is looking like, what kind of assignments are coming up, what needs completed and we can talk about it. But unless you go and actually*

do it, it really makes it difficult. And then we'd have the same conversation three weeks later. And sometimes I feel, this is harsh, but I feel that it is a waste of my time when I am trying to point people in the right direction and they're not taking the initiative to go there." (P6)

4.1.3 Category 3: Counselor trainees and program inhibition

This category emerged from participants' expressed dissatisfactions with the experiences SCITs received while in field placements, and their counselor education programs' shortcomings. They explained that the sudden switch to complete VSC or hybrid education had significant impacts on SCITs' learning. The codes that surfaced were learning barriers, insufficient resources, and unmet field experience requirements.

Learning Barriers for SCITs. All three SCITs expressed similar sentiments of not getting the full experience of school counseling. P1, suggested that helping students in VSC was a challenge for her because of her learning style. *"I'm a hands-on type of person, so virtual was a struggle for me.*" Speaking to the abrupt transition, and their unpreparedness or incompetency, P5 stated *"I was not very prepared because in the spring when everything first started remote, I didn't have any contact with my supervisor because they didn't know what was going on and it was all crazy."* Similarly, when learning to convert typical interventions into a virtual modality P3 added, *"I can totally make a video and make them great but compressing it and those little, tiny details that are hidden, sometimes just got in the way of being able to be effective."*

Insufficient Resources and Unmet Field Experience Requirements for SCITs. Moreover, SCS participants shared that insufficient resources may have contributed to the SCITs' training inhibitions. SCSs explained that counselor education programs were successful in establishing virtual communication systems for their SCITs' internships. However, they expressed dissatisfaction with lacking support to guide their SCITs in VSC. For example, P7 stated, *"I mean there was a very open communication system set up, but we haven't had a ton of contact."* Likewise, P6 indicated *"We needed a support system because we definitely did not have that from a district level or a university level."*

Explaining how the inhibitions affected the overall experience, P7 mentioned, "so, she has been able to hit all of those things [assignments]... but in this setting, it's almost like they are doing them to check the boxes, rather than for the experience the whole time." SCSs agreed that more preparation was needed and necessary to ensure an effective VSC experience. In summary, P8 stated "I do feel badly because I do not think she [SCIT] got some of the experiences that she needed to get."

4.2 Theme 2: SCSs and SCITs Adapted Coping Strategies

Despite the challenges of VSC, the participants reported that they made relevant adjustments, personal intrinsic and skills adjustments. School counselors are known to work in precarious environments– turning and shifting with the tides and waves of events in their schools. Therefore, when the pandemic forced the use of the VSC modality they had to adapt. Two categories that emerged from this theme were personal reflections and adaptive techniques and adaptive skills for VSC.

4.2.1 Category 1: Personal reflections and adaptive techniques

Adapting an Open-Mindset. One motivator for personal growth is developing an open mindset. Most of the participants expressed that being open minded is a prerequisite for the job of a school counselor. However, they realized it was even more applicable when required to work in a novel medium and during a pandemic. For most of the participants, flexibility was a key word that was used to explain being open-minded. Others used phrases such as "going with the flow." Both SCSs and SCITs had to adjust their personal expectations of each other. For instance, to the subject of not being properly oriented to VSC, P1 stated that *"I had to realize that everyone was making the best of the situation. Therefore, I had to be flexible, asked questions, and try to take initiatives to help make the best of my experience.*" P8 explained it as being a team player and making the best of the situation by helping wherever there was a need. P7 remarked that if the need meant serving as a classroom support, they were open to it.

Engaging in Self-reflection. Participants shared that amid the challenges they utilized tools quite familiar to most school counselors: self-reflection. According to the participants, they had to be introspective to identify the successes and limitations of their circumstances. Self-reflection helped the participants in identifying resources within themselves or their school systems. Some of them expressed that it was difficult to be professionally introspective because they grappled with personal challenges simultaneously. However, those who highlighted self-reflection in their work shared that it helped them to determine what students responded well to, and it also fostered growth in themselves. P2 cited an example where they participated in a classroom lesson: *"It kind of gave me a chance to observe my interactions with the students, because I was learning, too… I focused on signals that we don't get when we're not in-person."*

Adapting universality mindset. Based on the therapeutic factors of Yalom, universality is the feeling of being connected and less alone in an experience or event (Hauber, 2019). This code was developed based on participants' expressions and the realization that their experiences were not unique; others are faced with similar challenges. It helped them develop empathy leading to the development of collective hope amongst themselves

and their students. P5 captured this in a statement, *"we know that the feelings we have are similar, that feeling of we're in this together."* Moreover, the universality mindset created collegial reassurance and support which fostered altruistic feelings among SCSs and SCITs. P4 stated that having the support *"showed me that I can, even when not under the most ideal circumstances. So, I want to be able to give back to the field in that way. I want to be able to grow and help impact future school counselors."*

4.2.2 Category 2: Adaptive skills for VSC modality

This category describes participants' changes to their practices, adapting in-person professional skills for VSC, collaborating, consulting, and seeking supervision. Not only were participants able to provide direct services to students via VSC, but they also adapted by engaging in indirect services including consultation, collaboration, and supervision within the same modality.

Altering Interventions for K-12 Students and their Caregivers. In terms of direct services, some of the participants reported that they adjusted by recording videos in advance and sharing them with the teachers or other stakeholders when needed. Some of the participants also shared that they created parent workshops and materials on helping children at home upon the request of families. Individual counseling was also made private by communicating with families, for example telling a mother, "*Okay, can you just go in the kitchen for five more minutes,' and she was very understanding.*" (P1). Regarding classroom lessons, P3 reported that they engaged in activities such as friendship Friday videos, Zoom fatigue videos, and other social emotional learning opportunities. Even though group counseling was not common among the participants, a couple of participants engaged their students. For P5 stated, *"for group, we did a lot of social skills. And those skills specifically reflected on communication, friendship, what should be expected and what you should reciprocate. Kind of knowing the lines of personal privacy and just being respectful*."

Collaboration and Consultation. In some cases, consultation was made possible through VSC, allowing families to provide feedback and responses concerning their students. In times when real-time two-way communication was impossible, they adapted by using phones, emails, or social media to follow up with stakeholders. SCSs and SCITs were also able to engage in consultation easily with each other as the use of the online modality became common and quite familiar. All the participants were willing to use tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other technology to consult with each other. They were able to manage the challenges of VSC because they could do consultation.

Collaboration was a prominent coping strategy mentioned by participants. Despite the stress of using a new modality, P5 stated, *"when you feel like you have a little teamwork behind you, anything is possible."* In a pandemic situation where it was difficult for SCITs to accrue hours, a supervisor shared how they were able to create various experiential opportunities for their SCIT. This was accomplished through the collaboration as other school counselors in the school supported the SCIT's hour requirements. For example, P4 stated, *"we know what each other are working on so I'll be like "oh hey they [SCIT] need this done...so can they come in and sit with you or us?"*

Supervision. One of the coping strategies that helped SCSs and SCITs to function better in this new modality was supervision. SCSs received supervision when possible and provided routine supervision to their SCITs. For example, P7 reported, *"we met the university supervisor three times this year, once at the start to see how this would all work, and twice as a check-up. If I ever had a question I could always email or call him, and he would get right back to me."*

In supervision, SCSs indicated that they used encouragement, modeling, electronic feedback, and follow-up as strategies for supporting their interns. Speaking to observation, follow up, and electronic feedback P2 stated, "*we'd schedule the Zoom sessions for about 20 minutes longer than we were going to see the student, and then we'd have a conversation right after session."* To provide feedback and encouragement, some SCSs indicated that they asked the SCITs to record their lessons for later review and supervision. Others reported conducting check-ins throughout the day over several media platforms. When necessary and possible, some of the SCSs were able to model VSC skills for their SCITs. This is evidenced in an example of a statement from P3, *"Like just having to do it and seeing my supervisor do it helped a lot because he had already been doing it during spring. So, he already 'had it down pat', so I watched him a few times and then jumped into it."* Such modelling activities were helpful in building competence and self-efficacy in SCITs.

4.3 Theme 3: Promise of VSC for the Professional Field

This theme emerged from the hopeful sentiments expressed by the participants. They reported that VSC has advantages that cannot be ignored, and also provided recommendations for counselor education programs for future professional development.

4.3.1 Category 1: Focusing on the Advantages

Some participants reported making an intentional effort to focus on the successes and not the failures or hinderances of their circumstances. Some were able to focus on the protective factors of VSC during the pandemic. One of the cited benefits of VSC is its convenience. The participants appreciated the accessibility of

VSC while the students quarantined and could not attend in-person school. Hinting at convenience and accessibility, P3 stated:

"If you needed to intervene right away, and the kid is in a classroom, you could immediately jump into a Zoom for them... I don't want to completely ex it [VSC] out because the accessibility of it I see working well. But if a kid needed to reach me and they were at home for some reason, or if a student was at home for some reason, and something was going on I would still be like here's a Zoom link, let's talk for five minutes and talk through this. And I also just liked having all our resources online and having kids easily click a video to watch if they missed it in person."

Although VSC may not be for all students, the participants mostly agreed that it was an avenue for students who disliked speaking face-to-face. P1 reported that they noticed changes in certain students who thrived more online than when they were in person. *"Having them feel more confident and being able to talk to us because they were on Zoom and chatting with us. And even though I didn't like it sometimes because some of them had their camera off they spoke so much!*

VSC provided invaluable insight into the students' lives. As much as the participants did not like the invasion of their students' privacy and the lack of confidentiality, some participants appreciated the new perspective gained on students. P8 reported that they were able to get a glimpse into the home life of some students, *"We could see ... hear a lot of things ...e.g., often, too many times, we saw our kids being babysitters for their young kids, as young as second and third grade. I think I have been aware of that occurring in some homes, but I don't think many teachers were aware of that, so this was more eye opening for many of our teachers to see into the lives of our students."*

4.3.2 Category 2: Program Curriculum Adaptation and Resource Management

Despite the arduous and abrupt nature of the transitioning to VSC the participants suggested recommendations to improve the modality. Although they did not appreciate the challenges of their experiences, they recognized that some of the hindrances were propelled by the pandemic. However, most participants still reported the need for further VSC training, webinars, workshops, and faculty responsibility in educating on the modality. Regarding training, P4 stated emphatically, *"I just think the training piece would have helped."* The participants indicated that VSC training should be a necessary part of the counselor education curriculum addressing, *"...utilizing technology, student information systems, such as Schoology, and all these different tools such as Nearpods and Looms... But then also having like a little bit of the other things about virtual school counseling, like how to read or pick up the body language"* (P3). From the SCIT perspective, the participants reported that these trainings can be incorporated into classes that teach micro skills. *"Maybe more situational examples on how to deal with kids who don't have their cameras on...more on classroom management when using [VSC]"* (P1). Finally, the SCITs mentioned the need for improving understanding, flexibility, and empathy skills when utilizing VSC.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study commenced in spring 2021 at the end of 2020-2021 academic year. This was a time when K-12 schools were gradually transitioning from virtual to in-person learning while COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were beginning to ease. With interest in documenting some of the SCSs and SCITs' VSC experiences, we report the results showing dissatisfaction with VSC, coping strategies developed, and advantages and lessons learned from VSC.

Before 2020, VSC was only another modality to reach students. The school counseling field never anticipated that it would become mandatory. In the past, gaps have been exposed in the literature surrounding VSC (The Education Trust, 2019). The results from our study show that SCSs and SCITs who participated in the study are discontented with VSC. Their dissatisfactions were rooted in technological challenges, care limitations, ethical concerns, and role confusion. Some professionals lacked technological competence and were unfamiliar with the VSC modality. Meanwhile, juggling uncharted personal anxieties and professional concerns generates low self-efficacy in their roles. Low self-efficacy in technology and virtual tools have been shown to be a barrier for school counselors utilizing virtual counseling for the first time (Adebowale & Popoola, 2011).

Learning innovative programs and triaging technical issues meant limited and unreliable care. This suggests that students were not given the same access to service as in face-to-face school counseling. ASCA (2019) recommends that a school counselor should measure their efficiency by 80% of direct and indirect services to students. Direct services include advising, counseling, and instruction while indirect services include collaboration and consultation. However, this best practice guideline did not account for services during such an unprecedented event such as a pandemic.

Results from this study show that effective care and services were hindered. SCSs and SCITs were stifled in their professional responsibilities such as establishing rapport with students and stakeholders. In cases when the participants reported success with providing care, they had ethical challenges, including confidentiality and autonomy. Meanwhile, ASCA's Code of Ethics (2022) admonishes that school counselors uphold the same legal and ethical standards in virtual, distance, or hybrid settings as in face-to face settings. ASCA expects counselors

to recognize, acknowledge, and problem-solve the unique challenges and limitations of VSC, which sounds like what the participants in this current study did. However, professional guidelines to accomplish these goals remain insufficient.

Role confusion became another challenge for school counselors. As indicated in this study's results, the SCSs were compelled to take on roles like classroom teachers and teacher assistants during virtual learning. Class observation in cases of behavior analysis is not unusual in the role of the school counselor. Nevertheless, when a school counselor is asked to monitor students while a teacher's instruction is delivered, it can change the school counselor's role into a disciplinarian. The implication is that a student's confusion about the role of the school counselor could damage therapeutic rapport. ASCA (2019) stipulates that school counselors are not expected to cover classrooms in their role. However, school administrators and stakeholders continue to engage school counselors in inappropriate roles (Savitz-Romer et al., 2020).

This study shows that SCITs worried about the unknown of the pandemic while working to support their K-12 students virtually for the first-time. They were concerned about being unprepared with the use of VSC, the limitations to resources, and the overall field experience demands. Gay and Swank (2021) found that a major factor of anxiety for SCITs was the uncertainty of meeting certification requirements and supervision hours. Additionally, many SCS and SCITS lost time learning the virtual modality on the job resulting in less time developing meaningful rapport. Typically, strong supervisor-supervisee relationship yields better field experience outcomes for the SCITs and their supervisors (Gay & Swank, 2021). But due to predicament of the pandemic, SCSs and SCITs had to prioritize learning the virtual modality and accruing hours over their supervisory relationships.

Despite the challenges, SCSs and the SCITs found strategies that helped them to cope. The results show that the participants altered their interventions for their students and utilized self-reflection, collaboration, and consultation while fostering universality and open mindsets. In their role as leaders, consultants, collaborators, and systemic change agents, school counselors are resolved to help students achieve their goals (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Self-reflection is engaged as a novel service delivery model and in times of crisis to assess effectiveness of practice (Mullen et al., 2019). Doing so allows SCSs and SCITs to modify perceptions and interventions, advocate for resources, seek opportunities and build a community of support for the students and themselves.

Although VSC for K-12 students appears rigorous, its advantages of accessibility and convenience cannot be understated. This finding is corroborated by previous studies (Zainudin et al., 2021). Some researchers such as Mtemeri et al. (2021) cited similar advantages but suggested that video counseling is preferred over other VSC methods such as messaging or phone calling. However, given that some of our results indicated that some students felt more comfortable speaking, it may be prudent to maintain flexibility and adjust depending on individual student's preferences (Jaber & Al-Hroub, 2023). We also see promise for further advancement of VSC given that most of the participants suggested additional training for the modality. As an outcome of the pandemic, some schools are now implementing virtual education in situations such as snow days to catch up with students' learning.

6. Implications

Quarantining, school closures, and conversations over screens have infinitely changed the school counselor's work. The pandemic has exposed systemic inequity within school counseling, education and mental healthcare access for students and their communities (Ghosh, 2020). Collectively, this may be due to the lack of training, resources, personal stressors, and the uncertainty of the pandemic. Informed by the results of this study, counseling professionals can continue to advocate for the future of VSC. As leaders in their schools, school counselors regularly champion their profession and the needs of students using the Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Thus, the MTSS framework is implemented to outline tiered recommendations based on participants' feedback and relevant literature. Figure 1 includes a visual assemblage of potential recommendations organized as tiers 1, 2, and 3.

Tier 1 or universal recommendations include creating digital literacy resources, accommodations for SCIT curriculum, VSC training, accessibility for various SCIT learning styles, multi-model best practice guidelines, screen fatigue mitigation strategies, and training for avoiding ethical dilemmas with confidentiality. Additionally, there can be intersectional training for SCSs and SCITs to better reach marginalized students and students experiencing disabilities during VSC (United States Department of Education, n.d.). With evidence suggesting that more than half of students have little to zero internet access while at home (Harvard, 2020), school counselors can help their schools by implementing data surveys for resource allocation to students. Furthermore, the United States Department of Education (2021) recommends enhancing the school community by leveraging school funding and creating realistic workloads for school staff and students. With intentional preparation, school counselors can be equipped for future crises and distance learning.

At the tier 2 level, schools can implement small group VSC training workshops, SCITs preference options

for learning on and offline, and modifying SCITs' assignments and class structures to be more flexible. Tier 2 implementations can emphasize taskforces to generate family support ideas, boundary-work exercises, and ways to better navigate the therapeutic relationship in a virtual context.

Tier 3 or individualized recommendations include refining feedback cycles and debriefing meetings between SCSs and SCITs during distance counseling to prevent interpersonal tension. SCITs and SCSs should have ongoing self-education to maintain interventions with Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in mind and tailor their work to meet the unique needs of each child (United States Department of Education, 2020). Additionally, meetings between SCSs and SCITs should be more consistent with check-ins to increase better collaboration during times of virtual learning. Furthermore, there can be individualized technological support and mental health therapy available to counselors, trainees, and their K-12 students.

Prior to implementing any of these strategies professional school counseling associations should start to address the gaps in best practices for VSC. ASCA updated the ethical standards in 2022 addressing the relationship between the school counselor supervisor and supervisee,

> "Understand there are differences in face-to face and virtual communication (e.g., absence of verbal and nonverbal cues) that may have an impact on virtual supervision. Supervisors educate supervisees on how to communicate electronically to prevent and avoid potential problems and negative outcomes. Provide information about how and when virtual supervisory services will be utilized and provide school counselors with reasonable access to pertinent applications" (American School Counselor Association, 2022, p. 9).

However, even with the latest amendments, further guidance in ethical codes and guidelines for VSC is needed. Even though the differences between face-to-face and virtual communication are addressed in ASCA's update, it does not provide sufficient outlines on how to convert these in-person services to VSC. Also, ASCA's update assumes that supervisors already hold knowledge and expertise in the modality– which the results of this current study and literature reveal are not guaranteed. Education leaders and administrators can offer support to their school counselors with professional development opportunities to refine their practice for VSC and alternative modalities (Hornor & Westberry, 2023). Overall, practitioners need practical and emotional support moving forward to improve their work. This research presents an invitation for school counselors to redefine and resolve the lack of clarity with VSC. Students and their school communities deserve the best and most effective care, no matter the modality.

7. Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

A major limitation of this study was that the interviews were conducted via Zoom. At the time of the Zoom interviews, some counselors were still in the tumultuous cycle of hybrid school counseling. Therefore, the researchers' method of virtual interviews may have influenced the participants' feedback, especially if they were already burnt out from screens. Additionally, the participants were primarily suburban white women from the northeastern region of the United States. This is a narrow view and does not lend room for the experiences of more diverse perspectives. In the same way, the sample size was small, especially from the SCITs' perspective. Therefore, creating a wider network of interviews could provide further information to improve VSC.

This qualitative study is only one approach in gaining evidence on how to improve VSC. Future studies can explore experiences of SCSs and SCITs using mixed methods such as survey and interview data. Continued research studies are necessary to better sculpt this modality to the needs of professional school counselors, trainees, and K-12 students. For example, further interviews with SCSs and SCITs may be crucial qualitative data. This insight could give more varied feedback and personal input from a wider and more diverse pool of practitioners. Research that dives deeper into collecting data on the effects and changes of interventions within school systems since the start of COVID-19 is also recommended. Another research possibility would be to survey K-12 students on their interest and need for in-person school counseling compared to VSC. Since data collection began in 2021, future research should investigate the impact of the pandemic on students' SEL (social emotional learning) and mental wellness. Assembled data on the dissatisfactions and advantages of virtual learning and collaborating with the school counselor from teacher and administrator perspectives is recommended. Lastly, it is imperative that future researchers explore improvements for confidentiality in a VSC context.

8. Conclusion

Schools are the lifelines of students, and it is therefore the responsibility of the school counselor to mitigate potential barriers to their success. Our field must adapt to the needs of our schools and students' communities from a VSC perspective (Mariani et al., 2022). We have noticed significant gaps in the literature and current guidelines for VSC. It is up to future researchers, practitioners, and counselor educators in the field to shape school counseling for the better. The researchers of this study recommend ongoing improvements for graduate school programs and better education access for certified practitioners surrounding VSC.

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Table 1. Participants demographics

Interviewee Classification	Interviewee Identification	Gender	Grade levels	School counseling experience (years)
	SCSs			At data collection
SCSs	P2	Female	Elementary	4
	P4	Female	7-12 grades	8
	P6	Female	Elementary	6
	P7	Female	5-8 grades	5
	P8	Female	Pre-K-8 grades	15
	SCITs			Field experience level
SCITs	P1	Female	K-5 grades	Internship
	P3	Female	Middle School	Internship
	P5	Female	High School	Internship

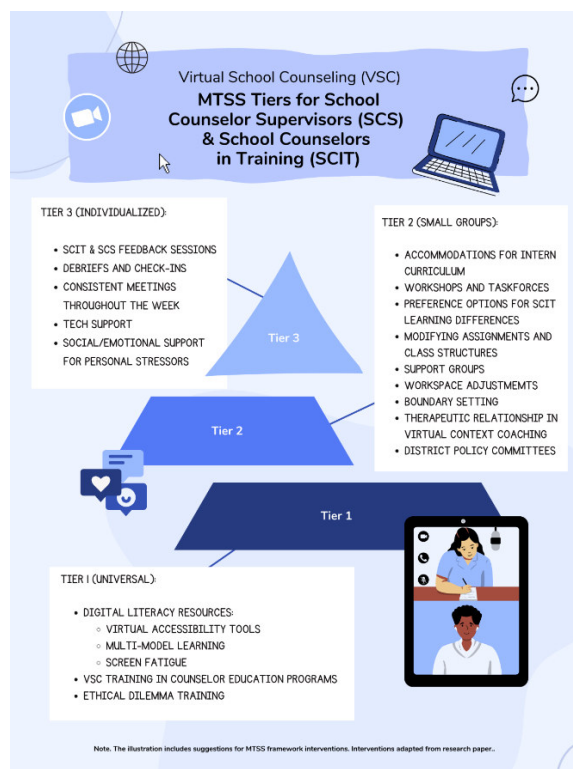The demographics of the five SCSs and SCITs.

Figure 1. Visual assemblage of potential VSC recommendations organized in MTSS framework tiers.

Appendix A: Interview Questions for SCITs & SCSs
SCIT Interview Questions
1. How far along are you in your program?
2. What delivery modality did your school use this semester (in person- partial; remote students, all remote)?
3. How prepared did you feel for virtual school counseling?
4. How well prepared did you feel with your site's modality of delivery?
5. What kinds of school counseling services were you able to provide using this modality?
6. What were the challenges you encountered with providing these services?
a. What lessons did you learn?
7. How well do you feel like you can promote the holistic wellness of students in the virtual environment?
8. What kinds of normal SC (school counseling) activities that you would have provided in a brick-and-mortar setting did you stay away from in the virtual setting and why?
a. If you did provide a typical SC activity, based on what you know now, what would make you feel more

comfortable providing it in a virtual setting?

9. Were you able to work in a preventative or a reactive course of action in the virtual school environment?
10. How supported did you feel during the semester? By faculty, program, SCS?
11. Knowing what you know now, what could your faculty have done to prepare you for virtual school counseling?
12. If you were to provide an argument about the quality of virtual SC, would you be for or against it?
13. If you were to recommend a curriculum change to your program, what would it be?
a. Would you recommend a course? Or recommend embedding VSC in a course?
14. What has been the most effective parts of virtual school counseling?
a. What did you like about the VSC experience?
15. What else have you learned about virtual school counseling?

SCS Interview Questions
1. What delivery modality did your school use this year (in person- partial; remote students, all remote)?
2. How prepared did you feel for virtual school counseling?
3. How well prepared did you feel with your school's modality of delivery?
4. What kinds of school counseling services were you able to provide using this modality?
5. What were the challenges you encountered with providing these services?
a. What lessons did you learn?
6. What were the challenges while having a student intern during the virtual school counseling experience?
7. What processes or practices worked best between your student intern and yourself while working in the virtual environment?
8. How connected/good of a relationship were you able to build up with your school counselor intern?
9. How often were you able to provide the proper amount of supervision for your student intern?
10. What adjustments did you make to your supervision approaches due to being on virtual environment?
11. Were there any experiences you feel like your student intern was unable to have due to the limitations of virtual school counseling?
12. Were there any additional experiences you feel like your student intern was able to experience in being virtual that would not have happened normally?
13. How supported did you feel by the school counseling program?
a. If no, what could the program have done better to support you in your supervision?
14. How did you feel the overall experience was with this supervision experience in comparison to prior supervision experiences you had?