

8-2013

Meaning and Spirituality in Adolescence : Practices and Perspectives of School Counselors

Jill Elizabeth Schwarz
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>



Part of the [Counseling Commons](#), and the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schwarz, Jill Elizabeth, "Meaning and Spirituality in Adolescence : Practices and Perspectives of School Counselors" (2013). *Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects*. 54.
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/54>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

MEANING AND SPIRITUALITY IN ADOLESCENCE: PRACTICES AND
PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

JILL ELIZABETH SCHWARZ

Montclair State University

Upper Montclair, NJ

2013

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Dana Heller Levitt

Copyright © 2013 by *Jill Elizabeth Schwarz*. All rights reserved.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation
MEANING AND SPIRITUALITY IN ADOLESCENCE: PRACTICES AND
PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

of

Jill Elizabeth Schwarz

Candidate for the Degree:

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation Committee:

Department of Counseling &
Educational Leadership

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Dana Heller/Levitt
Dissertation Chair

Certified by:

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Joan C. Ficke
Dean of The Graduate School

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Harriet Glossoff

8/15/13
Date

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Kathryn Herr

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Catherine Roland

ABSTRACT

MEANING AND SPIRITUALITY IN ADOLESCENCE: PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

by Jill Elizabeth Schwarz

Adolescence is a crucial life stage involving aspects of identity development and decision-making that have potential life-long consequences. Researchers have found that a sense of meaning and purpose is related to a number of beneficial factors during adolescence, including resilience, healthy self-esteem, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Spirituality is a main avenue through which many individuals find a sense of meaning and purpose and may be one of the mediating factors between adolescent meaning-making and well-being. Despite this knowledge, there is a lack of research involving the use of meaning-based counseling in the schools. There is also evidence that students are discouraged from exploring or expressing their spiritual beliefs and questions in the school setting. This qualitative interview study was designed to investigate middle school counselors' perspectives and practices in regard to exploring meaning and spirituality with their adolescent students. Analysis of ten individual interviews and a focus group revealed that the school counselor participants did believe it was important to work with students around meaning and did so primarily through the overarching theme of identity. Interviewees described how they supported students with many aspects of meaning and identity exploration through avenues such as their suffering and challenging circumstances, behavior and choices, and connections with others and things they care about. Spirituality, however, was an aspect of students' identities that

participants reported avoiding in their work with adolescents in the schools. Analysis of participants' perspectives suggested that avoidance of this area was due to the participants' own identities as public school employees, fear of perceived repercussions, and connotations with the risk of imposing their own values. Practical implications for both school counselors and counselor educators, as well as directions for future research, are addressed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Seek God’s will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.” The path to my PhD has been a life-changing journey, and it is a path that I believe I was destined to travel. My first acknowledgement needs to be given to God, who planted this seed in my soul and provided me with all of the strength I needed to see it through to the end. As I continue on my personal and professional paths into the future, I am grateful for my relationship with God, who will continue to be there with me for every step of the journey. I also want to recognize the many people who have encouraged and supported me not only during this season of life, but all of those who have been part of my life’s story leading up to this point. There are countless people who have helped to shape my path, and although I will only name a few, I acknowledge the impact of many.

To my parents, Gail and Frank Schwarz, thank you for always believing in me, supporting me, and cheering me on. From the time I was young, you both always pointed out to me that I had the gifts of teaching and helping others. I am so grateful that you nurtured those gifts that I will now be able to use every day in my chosen profession as a counselor educator. Thank you for supporting in me in all of the many adventures, including this one, that I have undertaken in my life!

To my Grandpa Herbert Bieri, thank you for sharing so many wonderful talks, dances, and jokes throughout my life. I am forever changed by the love, wisdom, joy, faith, and passion for life that you shared with me and so many others. This year you went on to your home in Heaven where you are now dancing for eternity. Although you are not here to see me complete this milestone, you are so much a part of it.

To my professors and mentors, I thank you for the many ways you have enriched, challenged, and taught me. To my advisor, chair, and mentor, Dr. Dana Heller Levitt, thank you so much for your consistent, dependable, and wise guidance, support, and encouragement throughout my entire doctoral experience. I have valued your support both personally and professionally and am grateful to have had you to walk with me throughout this journey. We made a great team, and I truly enjoyed working together with you throughout this dissertation experience. Thank you for always being available and believing in me! To my professor and mentor, Dr. Harriet Glossoff, thank you for being a wonderful example of bringing who you are to what you do. I am so very grateful for the opportunities I have had to work with you and appreciate everything you have shared with me and taught me. My passion for this research began in my very first doctoral class with you. I learned so much from you then and continue to learn so much from you now. Thank you for all of your mentorship! To my professor and committee member, Dr. Catherine Roland, thank you for believing in me and encouraging me to pursue this path. I will always be grateful to you for offering me this life-changing opportunity. Thank you for your support and caring, and for the role you played in helping me to fulfill my dreams! To my professor and methodologist, Dr. Kathryn Herr, thank you for helping me to develop my identity as a researcher. You have been a wonderful role model for me. Thank you for sharing your wisdom, guidance, and passion throughout this experience!

To my friends, your support and presence in my life has been invaluable. I am so very blessed to have so many amazing people who enrich my life. Each of you holds a

special place in my heart. Thank you for all of your prayers, encouragement, meaningful discussions, laughter, and caring. Your faith in me has been hugely motivating, and I treasure you all! To my dog, Yankee, you are truly one of a kind. Thank you for being so cooperative during all of my long days of writing and working. You are such an amazingly compassionate animal who will be a blessing to so many as a therapy dog.

And finally, to my students- elementary, middle, and master's level- past, present, and future- you are an inspiration to me! Your resilience, growth, and spirit are the reasons I have loved being a counselor and look forward to continuing my journey as a counselor educator. I am very blessed to find so much meaning and purpose in my life's work. Thank you for all you have taught me and will teach me in the future. I dedicate this dissertation, a labor of my passion, to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background Research.....	2
Problem Statement.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	8
Positionality.....	9
Conclusion.....	10
Definition of Terms.....	10
Adolescence.....	10
Logotherapy.....	11
Meaning.....	11
Purpose.....	11
School counselor.....	11
Spirituality.....	12
CHAPTER 2.....	13
Literature Review.....	13
School Counseling.....	13
Role of the School Counselor.....	13
Preparation of School Counselors.....	15

Preparation in addressing spiritual issues in counseling.....	16
Spirituality in Schools.....	17
Exploring Meaning in Schools.....	18
Developmental Considerations in Adolescence.....	20
Logotherapy and Meaning.....	21
Freedom of Will.....	21
Will to Meaning.....	22
Meaning of Life.....	23
Methods and Techniques.....	24
Meaning and Purpose in Adolescence.....	26
Spirituality in Adolescence.....	29
Adolescent Spiritual Development.....	32
Conclusion.....	34
CHAPTER 3.....	35
Introduction.....	35
Research Paradigm and Design.....	37
Participants.....	37
Methods of Data Gathering.....	40
Data Analysis.....	41
Trustworthiness.....	42
Conclusion.....	44

CHAPTER 4.....	46
Introduction.....	46
School Counselor Preparation and Practice.....	46
Addressing Meaning.....	48
Themes.....	49
Identity.....	50
Subtheme 1: Suffering and Challenging Life Circumstances.....	53
Subtheme 2: Behavior and Choices.....	56
Subtheme 3: Connections.....	60
Spirituality: An Avoided Aspect of Identity.....	64
Subtheme 1: Identity as a Public School Employee.....	65
Subtheme 2: Fear of Perceived Repercussions.....	66
Subtheme 3: Connotation with Imposition of Values.....	68
Conclusion.....	69
CHAPTER 5.....	71
Introduction.....	71
Discussion.....	71
Exploring Meaning through Identity.....	72
Suffering and challenging circumstances.....	72
Connections.....	73
Behavior and choices.....	74
Spirituality: An Avoided Aspect of Identity.....	74

Parallel processing.....	75
Implications for Practice.....	77
School Counselors.....	77
Identity.....	77
Career and community connections.....	79
Mentoring.....	80
Logotherapy in schools.....	80
Counselor Educators.....	81
Bridging preparation and practice.....	81
Broaching diverse aspects of identity.....	86
Limitations.....	89
Future Research.....	91
Conclusion.....	92
References.....	94
Appendix A.....	103
Appendix B.....	105

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Emergent Themes.....50

CHAPTER ONE

Meaning and Spirituality in Adolescence: Practices and Perspectives of School Counselors

What is the meaning of life? This question has been asked countless times within many disciplines throughout history. Viktor Frankl, renowned doctor, psychotherapist, and humanitarian (Langle & Skyes, 2006), purported, however, that people truly desire not just to know the meaning of life in general, but to know specifically the meaning of their own lives. He explained how meaning could be discovered through three avenues: creating something or accomplishing a task, having an experience or encounter with someone, and through the inevitable suffering in our lives (Frankl, 1984). More recently, some researchers have defined meaning in life “as a sense of coherence or understanding of existence, a sense of purpose in one’s life, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010, p. 2).

This search for meaning and purpose often begins in adolescence, a period of life between the ages of 12-18, which is widely recognized as confusing, challenging, and difficult to navigate (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents are not only capable of engaging in independent thought related to meaning and purpose (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), but according to Erikson (1968), the exploration of meaning and purpose during this life stage is an essential task of identity development. Recently, many researchers have advocated that adolescence is an optimal time for counselors to explore issues of meaning and purpose with their clients and students (Blair, 2004; Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill 2010; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Ho et al.,

2010; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). Developmentally, they are ready to begin this exploration, and intervention at this vulnerable life stage could be an important preventative measure. Although this life stage is ripe with changes and negative connotations, adolescents also have many strengths that can be fostered to promote thriving, rather than just surviving their teenage years (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010).

Meaning and Purpose in Adolescence

Researchers have demonstrated that adolescents are capable of engaging in the process of meaning making, and, in fact, engage in searching for meaning and purpose without any prompting from others (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; McLean et al., 2010). Numerous studies have corroborated the relationship between a sense of meaning and purpose and well-being in adolescence (Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Lerner et al., 2010; Ho et al., 2010). Adolescents committed to exploring meaning and purpose during their teenage years tend to be more adaptive, positive, hopeful, and better able to effectively adjust to developmental challenges (Burrow et al., 2010). A sense of meaning of life in adolescence is positively correlated with well-being and life satisfaction, and has an inverse relationship with social issues such as avoidance and rejection (Ho et al., 2010). Adolescents who have a strong sense of meaning in their lives also reported being happier and less stressed in their daily lives (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). As adolescents mature, being able to make meaning of past life events is linked with better physical and psychological health, as well as positive self-esteem (McLean et al., 2010).

Adolescents' sense of meaning also impacts their academic performance, as it is positively correlated with academic adjustment, satisfaction with school, and positive academic goal setting (Ho et al., 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). The presence of meaning and purpose in adolescents' academic endeavors helps to foster intrinsic motivation to learn and prioritize education (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Helping to connect classroom learning to adolescents' aspirations gives greater purpose to their daily work. Having opportunities to seek and discover the meaning and value in education, rather than solely striving for extrinsic rewards is valuable in shaping positive experiences around learning for adolescents (Frankl, 1984).

A meta-analysis of studies of purpose and meaning with adolescents confirmed the importance of a sense of meaning in positive self-development and revealed that the benefits extend into adulthood (Damon et al., 2003). These findings indicate that a sense of meaning during adolescence positively impacts people's contributions to society throughout their lives. Researchers studying adolescents, emerging adults, and adults found that life satisfaction was related to a sense of purpose in all age groups, but recommended that early adolescence is an ideal time for counselors to facilitate searching for meaning and purpose with clients (Bronk et al., 2009). Introducing this exploration of meaning has the potential to be both preventative and therapeutic as younger adolescents encounter challenging transitions.

Lack of Meaning in Adolescence

It is not surprising with the abundance of positive qualities associated with a sense of meaning in adolescence that there are negative aspects correlated with a lack of

meaning or purpose. Frankl (1967) referred to a pervasive sense of meaninglessness as an existential vacuum. Through his research and work with adolescents, Blair (2004) found that this lack of meaning was often the underlying cause of depression in teenagers. Sometimes this depression manifests outwardly as aggression or defiance, and other times it is turned inward, resulting in isolation or even suicidal ideation or attempts (Bjerkeset, Nordahl, Romundstad, & Gunnell, 2010; Khan & Mian, 2010; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). Citing his vast experience as a doctor and psychotherapist, Frankl (1984) reported that “it may well be that an individual’s impulse to take his life would have been overcome had he been aware of some meaning and purpose worth living for” (p. 143).

Researchers have highlighted the importance of counselors exploring meaning with teenagers, as a lack of meaning in adolescence can result in anxiety or engagement in harmful behaviors such as substance abuse (Blair, 2004; Ruffin, 1984). Some adolescents who are seeking a greater meaning or understanding of life may use drugs as a way to experience and connect with life on what they perceive to be a deeper level (Purvis, 1995). A lack of meaning that is not addressed during this pivotal life stage can result in harmful decisions, such as drug abuse, that carry potentially life-altering consequences.

Meaninglessness is also significantly related to boredom in the adolescent population. Boredom resulting from a lack of a sense of purpose may manifest in adolescents’ disengagement from the educational process or in impulsive or inattentive behavior (Melton & Schulenberg, 2007). Students who do not perceive meaning and value in their education are not likely to be motivated or invested in their studies. In an

interview with a Harvard professor, Frankl asserted that a reductionistic approach based on objective knowledge and extrinsic rewards, rather than a meaning and values based approach to education, has resulted in dampened enthusiasm and an increase of apathy and lethargy among students (Divjak, 2010).

Spirituality and Meaning in Adolescence

Meaning and purpose are considered to be primary components of spirituality (Briggs & Shoffner, 2006). Sink and Devlin (2011) suggest that viewing “spirituality as meaning-making values and embraces positive manifestations of spirituality, whether or not they have religious roots or implications” (p. 135). A strong sense of meaning and purpose in life is purported to be an essential and central component of healthy spirituality (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Researchers have suggested that students’ spirituality is an important part of their individual diversity and have reported positive connections between spirituality and resiliency, nonviolent behaviors, and mental health (Sink & Devlin, 2011; Smith-Augustine, 2011). Many students today report that spiritual beliefs are part of the foundation for their meaning making, and often adolescents want to examine what spirituality and religion means to them personally (Briggs et al., 2011).

As adolescents strive and search for the meaning and purpose in their lives, spiritual beliefs and issues often become paramount (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004). Adolescents have cited their spiritual beliefs and religious values as important avenues in making meaning; teenagers who reported higher levels of spirituality and religiosity scored higher on measures of meaning and purpose in life (Damon et al., 2003). In an exploratory study of spirituality and purpose in life, Young, Cashwell, and Woolington

(1998) reported, “spirituality may be somehow related to other important capacities of the individual that are important in the formation of a sense of meaning for one’s life” (p. 67). They went on to conclude, “Results also support ideas presented in the literature that purpose in life (i.e., existential meaning) and morality are closely related to the existence of a personal spirituality” (p. 68).

Spirituality is an important element to consider in the meaning making processes of adolescents and is a potential mediating factor in the link between meaning and well-being (Sink & Richmond, 2004). Adolescents’ healthy spirituality is a key to developmental thriving and can be an influential factor in their overall wellness (Sink & Devlin, 2011). Discovering a sense of meaning through their spiritual beliefs can act as a protective factor for students during the adversity of adolescence, aiding in their ability to cope in healthy ways (Briggs, Akos, Czyszczon, & Eldridge, 2011). Spirituality can also help adolescents to find a sense of meaning in the midst of their suffering and act as a buffer for at-risk behaviors (Yeh, Borreno, & Shea, 2011).

Statement of Problem

Adolescence is widely recognized as a challenging, and often tumultuous, stage of life. Physical, social, and emotional changes combined with issues of bullying, harassment, assault, and isolation leave many adolescents struggling to survive, let alone thrive. Sometimes these struggles are expressed externally through aggressive acts or risky behaviors; other times they are internalized and result in depression, anxiety, or self-harm (Bongers, Koot, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2004). Adolescents who do not have a sense of meaning in their lives are likely more susceptible to suicidal ideation or

attempts (Frankl, 1984). Not only are these issues apparent during adolescence, but there is also a connection between problems in adolescence and adult substance abuse and psychological disorders (D'Amico, Ellickson, Collins, Martino, & Klein, 2005; Hofstra, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2002). It is clear that adolescence is a critical time to provide support, as the issues that manifest during this time period can continue to impact individuals throughout their lives. The question remains: Which avenues will be most effective in reaching these students and providing that much needed assistance?

As Blair (2004) purports, "Despite being able to identify a meaning, adolescents often need assistance in identifying the steps needed to move from their current position to the fulfillment of that meaning" (p. 8). School counselors may be instrumental in helping students in this process. Although there is an abundance of research that expounds the importance of exploring and identifying meaning and purpose during adolescence, there is a scarcity of research on the utilization of meaning-based counseling with this population in the schools. Meaning-based counseling approaches such as logotherapy, which is focused on helping people discover the meaning in all circumstances of their lives, have been studied to some extent in mental health practice, but have been virtually unexplored in school settings. In addition, researchers have found that many school counselors often avoid discussing issues of spirituality, an avenue through which many students search for and find meaning and purpose (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004; Sink, 2004; Toshalis, 2008). There is no clear evidence in the literature as to how, or if, school counselors are assisting adolescents with their search for

meaning, necessitating further exploration of school counseling practice in the areas of meaning-making and spirituality.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors think about and address issues of meaning and spirituality when counseling adolescents in the school setting. The current research study employed a qualitative design and focused on meaning making with adolescents from the perspective of school counselors. The experiences and voices of school counselors working with the adolescent population provided some much needed insight as to *if* and *how* issues of meaning making are being explored in the school setting.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following main research aim and subsequent sub-questions:

- 1) The aim of this study was to elicit the voices of middle school counselors regarding if and how they explore issues of meaning with adolescents in the school setting.
 - a) How prepared do school counselors feel in working with students around issues of meaning-making and spirituality?
 - b) How do counselors approach spiritual issues in their work with adolescents in the school setting?

Significance of Study

Examining how school counselors implement meaning-based counseling, as well as exploring their views about helping students with meaning making, is important not

only because of the reported positive implications of a sense of meaning in adolescence, but also because of the potential negative lifelong consequences of leaving these adolescent issues unexamined (D'Amico, Ellickson, Collins, Martino, & Klein, 2005; Hofstra, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2002). Although adolescents are able to independently explore these issues of meaning, they often need help navigating the process of making meaning of their lives. Existential angst is often characteristic of adolescence, and developmentally this is a key time for intervention around meaning and spirituality (Frankl, 1984). As adolescents spend much of their waking hours in the school setting, it is important to examine the practices and perspectives of school counselors in regard to exploring and discussing these areas with their students. The aim of this study was to provide insight into the factors influencing school counselor practice in regard to meaning-making and spirituality that can inform both counselor preparation and practice.

Positionality

The assumptions, experiences, and beliefs I have as the researcher had the potential to impact the way I conducted the study and interpreted the data. As a school counselor for six years, I often utilized a meaning-based approach to counseling and therefore my experience with the effectiveness of this approach contributed to my belief that addressing meaning and purpose with adolescents can be beneficial. My spiritual identity and the role it plays in my personal sense of meaning and purpose also had the potential to influence my perspective on the importance of addressing this construct in counseling. As the primary instrument of data collection in this study, it was essential

that I recognized, reported, and accounted for my personal and professional biases throughout the research process to minimize biases in the collection or interpretation of data. It is also important to note that my experiences in the field also added to the credibility of the study, aided me in asking follow-up questions, and facilitated in building rapport and connection with my participants.

Conclusion

Exploring one's sense of meaning in the world is a developmental task of adolescence. Researchers have supported the importance of a sense of meaning for this age group, but there is a lack of literature examining how school counselors address meaning with adolescents. Meaning-making is a key component of spirituality, which is an area that school counselors typically avoid discussing with students for a myriad of reasons, including their own beliefs or comfort level, ethical and legal concerns, and level of preparation. This chapter provides a rationale for examining the practices and perspectives of school counselors regarding their exploration of meaning and spirituality with adolescents.

Definition of Terms

Adolescence. Adolescence is defined by Mosby's Medical Dictionary (2009) as "the period in development between the onset of puberty and adulthood. It usually begins between 11 and 13 years of age with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics and spans the teenage years, terminating at 18 to 20 years of age with the completion of the development of the adult form. During this period, the individual undergoes extensive

physical, psychological, emotional, and personality changes.” In this study, early adolescence refers to middle-school aged students (11-14).

Logotherapy. Logotherapy is a theoretical approach to counseling developed by Viktor Frankl (1963). It is based on the philosophical assumption that people’s main concern is to perceive meaning in their lives. The foundation of logotherapy is based on three key constructs: freedom of will; will to meaning; and meaning of life (Frankl, 1967).

Meaning. “Meaning in life is typically referred to as a sense of coherence or understanding of existence, a sense of purpose in one’s life, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (Ho et al., 2010, p. 2).

Victor Frankl (1984), renowned psychotherapist and founder of logotherapy, a meaning-based approach to counseling, explained that meaning could be discovered through three avenues: creating something or accomplishing a task, having an experience or encounter with someone, and through the inevitable suffering in our lives.

Purpose. According to Damon et al. (2003), “Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p.121). In relation to the construct of purpose, “In Frankl’s theory, all these claims apply in the same way to meaning, so Frankl introduces no operational distinction in using the term purpose” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 21). In this study, the terms meaning and purpose are used interchangeably, as Frankl and many other researchers have used them.

School counselor. “Professional school counselors are certified/licensed educators with the minimum of a master’s degree in school counseling and are uniquely qualified to

address the developmental needs of all students through a comprehensive school counseling program addressing the academic, career and personal/social development of all students” (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2009).

Spirituality. Many researchers have attempted to define the terms spirituality and religion as both separate and interrelated constructs. Findings from research studies around these constructs have suggested, “that spirituality tends to denote a more personal and private configuration of feelings and actions in relation to some transcendent entity, whereas religion imputes engagement with an organized faith tradition” (King & Boyatzis, 2004, p. 3). This study will focus on the construct of spirituality. The following definition of spirituality included in the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) standards is well suited to this study: “a sense of a relationship with or belief in a higher power or entity greater than oneself that involves a search for wholeness and harmony” (p. 142). More specifically, this study will focus primarily on the meaning-making component of spirituality (Sink & Devlin, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Exploring meaning and purpose in adolescence is associated with a multitude of positive outcomes and is negatively correlated with a variety of harmful behaviors. Clearly, having a sense of meaning in their lives impacts adolescents both academically and emotionally, yet there is a dearth of research related to the application of meaning-based approaches in school counseling. This chapter includes information on the preparation and practice of school counselors and developmental considerations and challenges of adolescents. A description of Frankl's Logotherapy, an approach to counseling centered on meaning-making, as well as an account of the research on meaning and purpose in adolescence, is highlighted. As spirituality is closely linked to the search for meaning for many people, research related to spirituality in adolescence, adolescents' spiritual development, and spirituality in the schools is also included. Throughout this chapter, the terms student and adolescent will be used interchangeably when discussing adolescents within the context of a school setting.

School Counseling

Role of the School Counselor

Although attempts have been made to present a unified model of school counseling (ASCA 2005; Ed. Trust, 2012), there continues to be a great deal of variation in the role and function of school counselors across school districts. In their description of the role of school counselors, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provided the following definition:

Professional school counselors are certified/licensed educators with the minimum of a master's degree in school counseling and are uniquely qualified to address the developmental needs of all students through a comprehensive school counseling program addressing the academic, career and personal/social development of all students. (ASCA, 2009)

According to the American School Counselor Association, the role of the middle school counselor in particular is to provide counseling and consultation services to individuals, groups, or families in the following areas: “academic skills support; education in understanding self and others; coping strategies; peer relationships and effective social skills; communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution; career awareness, exploration, and planning; substance abuse education; multicultural/diversity awareness; crisis intervention; and transition planning” (ASCA, 2012).

Despite the call for a focus on direct counseling services to students, school counselors often spend much of their time engaged in clerical and administrative duties (Martin, 2002; Moyer, 2011). These competing elements can often lead to role ambiguity or burnout (Moyer, 2011). School counselors often spend a significant amount of time balancing these administrative duties with the direct services they offer students. Further impacting the services school counselors can provide in their role is the fact that although school counselors are prepared in counseling theory and technique, they often have not received specialized instruction on how to apply these approaches with the children and adolescents who form their client base (Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2008; Steen & Rudd, 2009).

Preparation of School Counselors

The gap between school counselor practice and school counselor preparation has been demonstrated through research and recognized in the school counseling and counselor education literature (ASCA, 2005; Branthoover, Desmond, & Bruno, 2010; Ed. Trust, 2012; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Martin, 2002; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Steen et al., 2008; Steen & Rudd, 2009). This disconnect is concerning, as school counselors are often beginning their careers without preparation in some of the key areas necessary to perform their roles and duties successfully. Although the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) calls for a unified vision of school counseling, research has highlighted the variation across counselor preparation programs in terms of school counseling curriculum and preparatory experiences (Branthoover et al., 2010; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Steen & Rudd, 2009). In fact, there seems to be little connection between the actual activities of school counselors and the preparation they receive in their graduate programs (Ed. Trust, 2012; Martin, 2002; Steen & Rudd, 2009). Researchers have pointed out the lack of, and need for, an intentionally designed and consistently constructed counselor education curriculum for preparing school counselors, which is informed by research and practice (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Steen et al., 2008).

The Education Trust made public the discrepancy between school counselor practice and preparation and set forth the Transforming School Counseling initiative to address this disparity and better prepare school counselors, especially in working with underrepresented and low-income youth (Martin, 2002). Although the efforts of the

Educational Trust, ASCA, and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) have brought attention to this issue, there is still a great deal of transformation that needs to happen within counselor education preparatory programs to bridge the gap between preparation and practice for school counselors (Steen & Rudd, 2009). Some counselor education programs are basing aspects of their curricula on any one or combination of standards from these professional organizations, while many others lack a clear foundation for their current school counselor preparatory curricula (Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005). Overall, there is discrepancy between the national initiatives and the counselor education programs that are preparing school counselors (Steen & Rudd, 2009).

Preparation in addressing spiritual issues in counseling. Historically, mental health professions, including counseling, oftentimes pathologized or ignored the spiritual or religious beliefs and behaviors of clients (Burke, Hackney, Hudson, Miranti, Watts, & Epp, 1999). Attention to the need for ethical and competent practice and preparation in this area led to the development of the Association for Religious and Values Issues in Counseling (ARVIC) in 1977, which became the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) in 1993. This division of the American Counseling Association (ACA) is “committed to the infusion of spiritual, ethical, and religious values in counselor preparation and practice” and offers competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling (Miranti, 2009).

Additionally, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the accrediting body for counselor preparation

programs, includes spirituality and religion throughout its standards. Despite the existing standards and competencies, and the fact that many counselor educators report that they believe that addressing spiritual issues in counseling is important, most CACREP-accredited counselor education programs do not include courses on spirituality or religion in counseling (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006; Hagedorn, 2005). A lack of coursework dedicated to this area, along with little opportunity for professional dialogue with colleagues, and potentially a lack of opportunity to explore one's own spirituality, may result in school counselors ignoring or invalidating their students' spiritual or religious beliefs (Hagedorn, 2005). In fact, some counselors specifically report that they avoid discussions of spirituality in the counseling process due to their own lack of training or perceived competence in this area (Hall, Dixon, & Mauzey, 2004).

Spirituality in Schools

It is important for counselors to address the well-being of the whole student: physically, emotionally, and spiritually (Frankl, 1984). Despite the mission of modern education to educate the whole child, school counselors in both public and private schools often avoid issues surrounding students' spiritual development and religious beliefs (Sink, Cleveland, & Stern, 2007). Although countries such as the United Kingdom have recognized the importance of incorporating spiritual and moral development into the educational setting and curriculum, schools across the United States are largely devoid of any mention of these areas of human development (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004). The setting where adolescents spend many of their waking hours is

often not conducive to expressing or exploring this avenue for meaning making. School counselors, concerned about adhering to separation between church and state, will often provide an environment for adolescents to discuss social, emotional, academic, or even physical issues, but stop short of addressing spiritual aspects of development (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004). Stringent misapplications of this “separation” can communicate the message that students’ beliefs, and potentially part of their identity, are not welcomed in the school environment, potentially leading to feelings of isolation or disengagement (Toshalis, 2008). When issues of spirituality are circumvented in schools, a critical component of many students’ lives is ignored (Sink & Richmond, 2004).

Although many school counselors feel that it is inappropriate to discuss spiritual or religious beliefs with students, ethical standards in the counseling profession clearly include spirituality as an important component of multicultural counseling. In fact, “Professional school counselors who disregard the spirituality of students and their families (when students present spiritual concerns) may be practicing inconsistently with the professional goals and competencies established by ASCA, ASERVIC, and AMCD” (Lambie, Davis, & Miller, 2010, p. 212). Researchers have suggested that not addressing or discounting students’ spirituality is equivalent to disregarding other crucial parts of their identity such as their race or gender (Lambie et al., 2010). In their work with students, school counselors “have the right to explore spiritual issues with students when both the counselor and student agree such issues are related to counseling” (Lambie et al., p. 214). Sink (2004) argues that it is critical for school counselors to provide

opportunities for discussions involving spirituality and to demonstrate openness in regard to students' meaning making in this area.

Exploring Meaning in Schools

The use of meaning-based counseling in the schools provides students with the opportunity to develop responsibility and leadership skills, which in turn increase self-confidence, the development of positive values, and acceptance of others (Wirth, 1995). A focus on meaning and purpose may be especially valuable in the school environment, where the emphasis is often on achievement and grades. As Edith Weisskopf-Joelson expressed, “[the] notion that experiencing can be as valuable as achieving is therapeutic because it compensates for our one-sided emphasis on the external world of achievement at the expense of the internal world of experience” (Frankl, 1984, p. 146-147). School counselors can help students to make meaning by assisting them in gaining insight into their life circumstances and exploring what they have learned about themselves through the situations they have encountered (McLean, 2005).

Although they are capable of thinking about and exploring meaning independently, teenagers often need help in navigating the search for meaning (Blair, 2004). School counselors can be instrumental in helping students in this process. Rather than acting as the expert dispensing advice to teens, school counselors utilizing a meaning-based counseling approach, such as logotherapy, would normalize the tension adolescents tend to feel as part of their search for meaning and then challenge students to take the responsibility for assigning and fulfilling meaning in their own lives. Through this process of discovery, healing comes as a result of the adolescent's meaning making,

not through the counselor's teaching or interpreting, as is often the approach in a school setting (Divjak, 2010).

Developmental Considerations in Adolescence

Adolescence is defined as:

The period in development between the onset of puberty and adulthood. It usually begins between 11 and 13 years of age with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics and spans the teenage years, terminating at 18 to 20 years of age with the completion of the development of the adult form. During this period, the individual undergoes extensive physical, psychological, emotional, and personality changes. (Mosbey's Medical Dictionary, 2009)

Adolescence is often characterized by transitions and significant changes across development. Physically, early adolescents enter puberty, which involves not only bodily maturation and hormonal changes, but also accompanying social and emotional implications (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Adolescence is a critical time for intervention, as a sense of self, along with many life long health habits, develops during this life stage (Damon et al., 2003). Cognitively, early adolescents are entering Piaget's formal operational stage, in which they become capable of thinking hypothetically and begin conceptualizing their sense of self, including independent thought about meaning and purpose (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). In regard to social-emotional development, Erikson also purported that adolescents are challenged with identity versus role confusion, in which developing a sense of self is paramount to healthy development. As they begin more intentionally considering their self-concept and developing their unique identities, issues of meaning and spirituality or religion often become paramount, especially in regard to ethnic identity development in students of color (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Existential questioning during this stage of development is important as adolescents form

their unique identities, and an existential counseling approach has the potential to be very helpful during this time (Parrish, Stanard, & Cobia, 2008). The following section details a specific existential approach that could be utilized in working with adolescents.

Logotherapy and Meaning

Logotherapy is an existential approach to counseling based on the philosophical assumption that people's main concern is to perceive meaning in their lives. This theoretical approach, developed by Frankl (1963) shortly after his release from the Nazi death camps, offered a vastly different viewpoint from the widely practiced psychoanalysis, which was based on beliefs that people were motivated by instincts to satisfy urges, experience pleasure, and avoid pain. In contrast, Frankl (1984) found through his personal experiences and professional practice that often people discovered meaning in life through their encounters with painful or difficult circumstances. He concurred with Nietzsche's observation that "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how" (Frankl, 1984, p. 84). A strong opponent of reductionism, Frankl believed that people were much more than the sum of their parts. He advocated that people were not simply the victims of their circumstances, but had choices about how to approach situations in their lives (Langle & Sykes, 2006). These beliefs formed the foundation of logotherapy, which is based on three key constructs: freedom of will, will to meaning, and meaning of life (Frankl, 1967).

Freedom of Will

Frankl (1967) acknowledged that although people cannot choose their circumstances, they have the freedom to choose how they respond to those

circumstances. Citing his first hand experiences in the concentration camps, Frankl noted that under the same appalling conditions, over which prisoners seemingly had no control, each individual had the opportunity to choose his attitude toward those circumstances.

Frankl concluded:

The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. (Frankl, 1984, p. 74)

Frankl (1984) described times of being content and even “happy in spite of everything” (p. 59), the importance of holding onto one’s inner freedom and value, and the devastating consequences when someone lost the will to live. These encounters evolved into a central premise of logotherapy; the importance of helping clients become aware of and understand their responsibility in their own lives (Langle & Skyes, 2006). Owning that responsibility can then lead to the realization that one’s state of affairs does not have to dictate one’s state of mind.

Will to Meaning

In his description of logotherapy, Frankl explained his intentionality about using the terminology “will to meaning:”

...I speak of a will to meaning rather than a need for meaning or a drive to meaning. If man were really driven to meaning he would embark on meaning fulfillment solely for the sake of getting rid of this drive, in order to restore homeostasis within himself. At the same time, however, he would no longer be really concerned with meaning itself but rather with his own equilibrium and thus, in the final analysis, with himself. (Frankl, 1967, p. 8)

Rather than pathologizing disequilibrium, Frankl purported that a state of tension created by the separation between what one has already achieved and the meaning that has yet to

be fulfilled, is optimal for mental health (Frankl, 1984). In fact, Frankl asserted that counselors might be instrumental in helping to create some tension when encouraging clients to discover the meaning in their lives. Logotherapy operates on the ideology that people must look beyond themselves to find meaning. Frankl (1986) advised that when assisting clients with their exploration, the counselor must not only attend to the physical and mental aspects of personhood, but to spirituality as well. “A therapist who ignores man’s spiritual side, and is thus forced to ignore the will-to-meaning, is giving away one of his most valuable assets” (Frankl, 1986, p. xvi). In this way, Frankl envisioned logotherapy acting as a balancing component to be practiced along with other forms of psychotherapy, ensuring that a person’s being would be addressed in its entirety.

Meaning of Life

A main goal of logotherapy is for counselors to support clients in discovering the meaning of their lives in the world (Ruffin, 1984). Counselors should not attempt to assign or create meaning for clients, but should convey the idea that there is, in fact, meaning in each person’s life and in all situations. In logotherapy, clients are responsible to uncover and identify this meaning (Frankl, 1967). Meaning can be represented in the relationship between the demand of a situation and the understanding someone has about who he or she is (Langle, 2005).

In describing the tenets of logotherapy, Frankl (1984) explained that meaning could be discovered through three avenues: creating something or accomplishing a task, having an experience or encounter with someone, and our approach to the inevitable suffering in our lives. People can find meaning in what they bring to the world, what they

receive from the world or other people, and in the choices they make when encountered with various circumstances. Frankl (1967) emphasized that love and suffering were two of the most powerful avenues to discovering meaning in one's life. In logotherapy, questions surrounding meaning related to love, spirituality, frustration, or any life issue are welcomed from clients. Frankl (1984) cautioned that pervasive meaninglessness, experienced by many people in society, could result in what he called an existential vacuum, often manifesting as boredom, anxiety, depression, addiction and potentially suicide (Blair, 2004; Melton & Schulenberg, 2007; Ruffin, 1984). All of these potential consequences of this existential angst are often predominant in the adolescent population. Utilizing a logotherapeutic approach with students in this age group has the potential to be both preventative and curative of these issues (Blair, 2004; Melton & Schulenberg, 2007; Ruffin, 1984).

Methods and Techniques

Researchers have concluded that logotherapeutic techniques have been effective in working with delinquent adolescents, as well as students who are experiencing emotional difficulties such as social phobias (Barber, 1995; Macaruso, 1995). Logotherapy includes a variety of methods and techniques designed to direct clients toward meaning and purpose, responsibility, and freedom. The counselor should be nonjudgmental, helping to expand the client's vision of the potential meaning and values in the world, not imposing his or her own views (Frankl, 1984). Logotherapists challenge individuals to approach life as if they were living the second time around and already had the knowledge of the mistakes they made the first time. Frankl (1984) commented on the

effectiveness of this technique: “It seems to me that there is nothing which would stimulate a man’s sense of responsibility more than this maxim, which invites him to imagine first that the present is past and, second, that the past may yet be changed and amended” (p. 114). As adolescents learn to view life through this lens, they can take an active part in making more responsible and meaningful choices. As was evidenced earlier, adolescents are capable of engaging in meaningful decision-making. In a later section, the impact of adolescent spiritual development on this process will be discussed.

Humor is also valued and utilized in logotherapy. Frankl (1967) found humor and laughter to be uniquely human traits that have great potential to positively contribute to the therapeutic process. Utilizing humor is central in paradoxical intention, one of logotherapy’s most widely used and effective techniques (Frankl, 1984). This approach depends on the unique human ability to detach from oneself. In paradoxical intention, used to treat phobias, obsessions, and anxiety, instead of avoiding what is feared or trying to prevent something from happening, clients or students are directed to engage in the behavior and even exaggerate it. For example, Frankl (1967) directed a client who was obsessive-compulsive and who felt a compulsion to check if the door was locked to challenge himself to see how many times he could check the lock in two minutes. In another example, rather than directing a client who is tense to relax, a counselor using paradoxical intention would tell her or him to try to be as nervous and tense as possible (Frankl, 1978). Macaruso (1995) illustrates an effective use of paradoxical intention in working with a student to overcome a social phobia. The adolescent had been experiencing chronic fainting episodes whenever he went near the school. The counselor,

after working with the student's parents and doctor to rule out any medical reason for the fainting, proceeded to use paradoxical intention as an intervention. Riding in the car with the adolescent and his mother, the counselor instructed the student to faint when they approached the school. The more the counselor insisted that he faint, the less anxious the student became about the possibility of fainting. As he focused on trying to faint (instead of his fears of fainting at school), he found himself rather amused and completely unable to actually faint. He returned to school and did not have another fainting spell. The effective use of this technique can result in students recognizing humor in a previously fearful situation, detaching from their neuroses, and ultimately gaining freedom from the fear or compulsion.

Meaning and Purpose in Adolescence

Many researchers have reported on the significance of exploring and discovering meaning in adolescence (Blair, 2004; Burrow et al., 2010; Damon, et al., 2003; Ho et al., 2010; Kiang, & Fuligni, 2010; Lerner et al., 2010). A meta-analysis of studies of meaning-making in adolescence supported the connection between a sense of meaning and positive self-development and confirmed that the implications continued to be apparent throughout adulthood (Damon et al., 2003). Adolescence is an optimal time for growth during which young people's strengths can be drawn upon to help individuals develop positive goals and the skills necessary to explore and engage in life purpose (Lerner et al., 2010).

The literature reflects a multitude of positive aspects associated with developing a sense of meaning and purpose in adolescence (Burrow et al., 2010; Ho et al., 2010;

McLean et al., 2010). In their study of sense of purpose in youth, Burrow et al. (2010) analyzed self-report scales completed by 318 students and found that adolescents committed to exploring meaning and purpose during their teenage years were also more adaptive, positive, hopeful, and better able to effectively adjust to developmental challenges. Similarly, Ho et al. (2010) used questionnaires to study adolescents' sense of meaning and well-being, but employed a much larger sample (n=1807) across 21 different schools in Hong Kong. Their findings also indicated a positive correlation between sense of purpose in adolescence and well-being and life satisfaction, as well as an inverse relationship of a sense of meaning with social issues such as avoidance and rejection (Ho et al., 2010). In their study of narrative meaning making, McLean et al. (2010) reported that being able to make meaning of past life events is also positively related to self-esteem and physical and psychological health. Although this study further contributes to the literature on the positive impact of meaning making, it was conducted with a limited sample consisting of all males from one private school in a rural area.

The process of searching for meaning and engaging in exploration of purpose is also tied to the task of identity development during adolescence. Several researchers have reported the centrality of identity formation during adolescence and its connection to meaning (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; McLean, 2005). This focus on forming identity often "begins to emerge in adolescence because of the onset of formal operations, physiological maturity, and often the demands for establishing oneself in the world through work, school, and family, demands that tend to allow for or even require meaning making" (McLean, 2005, p. 683). In her study of meaning making using

the *Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire* with 185 adolescents, McLean (2005) concluded that making meaning is vital to identity development and can assist adolescents with challenging transitions. In a study of Latin American, Asian American, and European American adolescents, Kiang and Fuligni (2010) found that a sense of meaning gained from a strong sense of ethnic identity was positively related to overall well-being, self-esteem, and attitude and motivation toward school. Meaning making, as it relates to identity development in adolescence, clearly has personal, social, and academic implications.

Along with the benefits of a sense of meaning during adolescence, consequently lack of meaning or sense of purpose is related to a host of adolescent issues including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and boredom (Blair, 2004; Melton & Schulenberg, 2007; Purvis, 1995; Ruffin, 1984). Practicing counselors have stressed the importance of exploring meaning with students, as a lack of meaning in adolescence can result in anxiety or engagement in harmful behaviors such as substance abuse (Blair, 2004; Ruffin, 1984). Blair (2004) highlighted two case studies involving adolescents he counseled in his own practice to illustrate that a lack of meaning may be an underlying cause of depression in teenagers. He utilized a meaning-based counseling approach with each client, and in both cases the clients' depression diminished as they came to understand the meaning of their suffering, took ownership for their choices, and developed a sense of purpose to strive towards. If left untreated, this depression in young people can manifest outwardly as aggression or defiance, or can be turned inward, resulting in isolation or even suicidal ideation or attempts. Helping adolescents to identify meaning in their lives

can be a preventative measure in combating suicide and depression (Bjerkeset et al., 2010; Khan & Mian, 2010; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008).

In their study of boredom and meaning, Melton and Schulenberg (2007) administered the *Purpose of Life* test and *Boredom Proneness Scale* to 279 university students. The results of their quantitative study revealed a significant negative correlation between boredom and a sense of meaning or purpose. Boredom resulting from meaninglessness may manifest in adolescents' disengagement from the educational process or in impulsive or inattentive behavior in school (Divjak, 2010). This boredom or disengagement from the classroom setting is evident in middle school and high school, as well as at the university level.

It is apparent from the literature that exploring meaning and purpose in adolescence is associated with a multitude of positive outcomes and negatively correlated with a variety of harmful behaviors. Clearly, students are impacted academically and emotionally by a lack of a sense of meaning, but there is a dearth of research related to the application of meaning-based approaches in school counseling.

Spirituality in Adolescence

As adolescents strive and search for the meaning and purpose in their lives, spiritual beliefs and issues often become paramount (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004). Adolescents have cited their spiritual beliefs and religious values as important avenues in making meaning, and teenagers who reported higher levels of spirituality and religiosity scored higher on measures of meaning and purpose in life (Damon et al., 2003). In an exploratory study of spirituality and purpose in life, Young, Cashwell, and Woolington

(1998) reported the integral role that spirituality often plays in the development of a sense of meaning. They went on to conclude, “Results also support ideas presented in the literature that purpose in life (i.e., existential meaning) and morality are closely related to the existence of a personal spirituality” (p. 68).

Spirituality is an important element to consider in the meaning making processes of adolescents and is a potential mediating factor in the link between meaning and well-being (Sink & Richmond, 2004). Adolescents’ healthy spirituality is a key to developmental thriving and can be an influential factor in their overall wellness (Sink & Devlin, 2011). Discovering a sense of meaning through their spiritual beliefs can act as a protective factor for students during the adversity of adolescence, aiding in their ability to cope in healthy ways (Briggs et al., 2011). Spirituality can also help adolescents to find a sense of meaning in the midst of their suffering and act as a buffer for at-risk behaviors (Yeh, Borreno, & Shea, 2011).

Meaning and purpose are considered to be primary components of spirituality (Briggs & Shoffner, 2006). Sink and Devlin (2011) suggest that viewing “spirituality as meaning making values and embraces positive manifestations of spirituality, whether or not they have religious roots or implications” (p. 135). A strong sense of meaning and purpose in life is purported to be an essential and central component of healthy spirituality (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Researchers have suggested that students’ spirituality is an important part of their individual diversity and have reported positive connections between spirituality and resiliency, nonviolent behaviors, and mental health (Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011; Sink & Devlin, 2011; Smith-Augustine, 2011). Many

students today report that spiritual beliefs are part of the foundation for their meaning making, and often adolescents want to examine what spirituality and religion means to them personally (Briggs et al., 2011). In practicing with cultural competence, school counselors are in a unique position to provide students with a safe place for exploration of this aspect of their identities, along with other aspects of their diverse identities.

Adolescents are capable of thinking about these areas on a deeper level and often have a desire to explore the meaning their beliefs have in their lives. Spirituality is a key avenue through which many students discover meaning and purpose and is linked to better physical and psychological health (Sink & Richmond, 2004). Sink, Cleveland, and Stern (2007) described in their comprehensive report on research in the field, “Religious/spirituality-inclined individuals tend to demonstrate less symptoms related to anxiety, substance abuse, depression, as well as experience lower suicide rates, greater feelings of well-being, hope, optimism, purpose and meaning in life...” (p. 40). The positive impact of spirituality in adolescence is evident in students’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

Research conducted by Davis, Kerr, and Kurpius (2003) supports the positive impact of spirituality in adolescence. In a quantitative study designed to investigate the relationship between existential and spiritual well-being with anxiety in at-risk adolescents, Davis et al. (2003) found that existential well-being (or a sense of meaning and purpose) was associated with lower levels of anxiety in both males and females. They administered the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, Spiritual Well-Being Scale, Allport/Ross Religious Orientation Scale, and the Social Provisions Scale to a sample of

45 adolescents (diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender). The meaning and purpose that adolescents were able to glean from their religious beliefs or spiritual faith seemed to be the factor that had the greatest impact on lower levels of trait anxiety, which refers to an enduring and persistent anxiety (as opposed to state anxiety which is more ephemeral and varies across situations). They reported that one of the most important beliefs of adolescents with lower anxiety was, "...that life has innate meaning and their life contains some purpose" (Davis et al., 2003, p. 363). As the literature indicates, spirituality is a key construct to consider in examining the link between meaning and well-being in adolescence.

Adolescent Spiritual Development

Spiritual development is an essential component in understanding holistic human development (Petersen, 2008). A well-known model of spiritual development is Fowler's Faith Development Theory (FDT), which details developmental stages from childhood through older adulthood. Although spiritual development is complex and multifaceted, Fowler's stages offer a framework through which we can conceptualize how people grow in their faiths and beliefs. The seven stages include primal, intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing (Fowler & Dell, 2004). Although the particular stage of faith varies across individuals in any age group, Fowler identifies adolescence as the time when synthetic-conventional faith emerges. As physical, cognitive, and social changes abound, adolescents often begin to explore the beliefs and values inherent in their development of a sense of self (Parker, 2011). During adolescence, students may internalize the religious views of their

parents, while also pursuing their own spiritual beliefs as they form independent identities (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). In the midst of this developmental stage, adolescents often desire guidance and validation from others as they try to understand and confirm their own beliefs, which involves integrating “diverse self-images into a coherent identity” (Fowler & Dell, 2004, p. 31).

Genia’s (as cited in Gold, 2010) model of spiritual development details how individuals can move from an egocentric faith to a transcendent faith. In this model, adolescents are viewed as looking for approval and blessing. As they move toward adulthood and being to explore their individual spirituality, they might feel disconnected from others. Reaching individual meaning consistent with spiritual beliefs reflects what Genia refers to as a transcendent faith (Gold, 2010). Spero explains in his model how adolescence is often a time of exploration and differentiation in regard to an individual’s spiritual beliefs and practices (Gold, 2010). Students are often entertaining questions regarding their spiritual beliefs throughout adolescence. The support they receive in this exploration from significant people in their lives, such as parents, and from significant institutions, such as schools, can impact the progression of their spiritual development (Petersen, 2008).

In addition to the developmental perspective, spiritual growth can also be conceptualized through ecological and strengths-based perspectives (Benson, 2004). An ecological approach includes the influence of social and environmental factors on the spiritual development and beliefs of adolescents. In addition to religious and spiritual leaders and congregations, parents, peers, and schools also often have an impact on the

formation of adolescents' spirituality. Despite this knowledge, there has not been as much research regarding educational factors in this area, perhaps due to misinterpretation or overextension of the separation of church and state (Benson, 2004).

A strengths-based approach to spiritual development highlights the research-supported relationship between spirituality and positive adolescent development. Despite the mental health profession's history of pathologizing religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors, recent research has demonstrated the benefits of exploring and developing this area of meaning-making during adolescence (Benson, 2004; Petersen, 2008). There is not an abundance of research exploring adolescents' spiritual development, and most of the research conducted has been focused on the European American experience (Benson, 2004). More research is needed with underrepresented populations in the United States as well as with people in other countries around the world.

Conclusion

Researchers have demonstrated the importance of providing adolescents with opportunities to explore meaning in their lives, an area that may be strongly linked to spiritual beliefs and values. School counselors are often not prepared to broach these areas or facilitate meaningful therapeutic dialogue with children and adolescents around meaning and spirituality. In fact, they may often avoid or invalidate students' beliefs in this area due to the counselor's own discomfort or lack of preparation. This research study was centered on exploring school counselors' practices and perspectives in this area, in hopes of informing not only practice, but also preparation in counselor education programs.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

In the previous chapter, I highlighted research that demonstrated the importance of exploring issues of meaning and purpose in adolescence. Spirituality was presented as a main avenue through which meaning can be made. As there is a lack of research related to meaning-based counseling in the school setting, this study explored how school counselors think about and address issues of meaning and purpose when counseling adolescent students. In this chapter, I will detail the methodology I used to explore the main research aim and subsequent sub-questions of this study.

- 1) The aim of this study was to elicit the voices of middle school counselors regarding if and how they explore issues of meaning with adolescents in the school setting.
 - a) How prepared do school counselors feel in working with students around issues of meaning-making and spirituality?
 - b) How do counselors approach spiritual issues in their work with adolescents in the school setting?

This section will also include information about the research design, sample selection, methods of data gathering, analysis, trustworthiness, and limitations of the study.

Research Paradigm and Design

As my research inquiry is based on meaning making and meaning-based counseling it is a natural fit with a qualitative design, which is also centered on meaning making and understanding meaning within context (Merriam, 2009). The “how” and

“what” form of my research questions are qualitative in nature as well and therefore this study employed a qualitative interview design focused on school counselors’ experiences and perspectives. My research questions are analogous to the general questions that form the foundation of phenomenological inquires: “What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

Qualitative research is focused on meaning within context and involves studies designed to discover “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). A qualitative approach employs an emic or inductive perspective, where themes emerge from the data based on the words and perceptions of the participants themselves. In qualitative inquiry, research is often conducted in natural settings (i.e., schools) and information is gathered in great detail from participants (Hunt, 2011). The goal in qualitative research is not to generalize the results, but rather provide a rich, thick description of an in-depth inquiry. The nature of qualitative research, which is focused on giving voice to people’s lived experiences, is well suited to the counseling profession (Berrios & Lucca, 2006; Hays & Wood, 2011) and this inquiry. The emic perspective employed in this type of research design lent itself to examining the perspectives and practices of school counselors in regard to exploring issues of meaning-making with their adolescent students. Along with the focus on exploring meaning, the lack of research in this area made it well suited to a qualitative inquiry, which is often recommended when there is a dearth of information and more in-depth inquiry is needed (Hunt, 2011).

This study was focused on describing the perspectives and practices of individuals and highlighting themes and commonalities across their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The goal of this inquiry was to provide detailed descriptions and deep understanding of the meaning of people's conscious experiences in a particular area (Moustakas, 1994). When examining constructs such as meaning and purpose, a qualitative approach allows for deeper exploration and understanding, which would be of benefit for this type of study (Moustakas, 1994). The epistemological perspective underlying this study is an interpretive or constructivist philosophy where the goal is to describe and understand the practices and viewpoints of the participants (i.e., school counselors). As predicted, the school counselor participants seemed to relate and engage easily with the qualitative style of inquiry, as it shares commonalities with the counseling process including establishing rapport, asking open-ended questions, and giving voice to lived experiences (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). The practice of meaning-making is also potentially more apparent in qualitative interviewing, where both the participants and researcher can clarify and build on previous responses, assisting the school counselors in reconstructing their experiences and practice (Seidman, 1998). Talking to a human being rather than responding to a survey might have allowed for more critical thinking and processing, as well as more detailed responses, in this symbiotic process (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

Participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research and is "based on the assumption that the

investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). More specifically, I used convenience sampling, based on the location and availability of the respondents, and snowball sampling, which involves asking participants for references of other counselors who would be eligible to participate in the study. To begin, I asked several directors of school counseling services and school counselors working at various levels to recommend counselors to be interviewed. These referrals were instrumental in developing rapport, as the participant and I were often connected by a mutual acquaintance. I also reached out to the presidents of county counseling associations for referrals. I contacted potential participants either via phone or e-mail, depending on the information provided by the referents. The interviews all took place in a private setting, which was arranged with each individual participant. After interviewing these counselors, I asked them if they wanted to recommend other school counselors for me to consider inviting to participate in the study. Informing the participants that someone thought highly enough of them to recommend them to participate set a positive tone for the interviews.

I interviewed ten certified middle school counselors, who were all working in public schools. All participants were invited to participate in a focus group that was conducted at the completion of the interview process. I specifically targeted middle school counselors as they work with students in early adolescence, the time period when many of the previously described challenges and issues tend to emerge. As detailed in Chapter 1, researchers recommend this stage of life as the optimal time to begin to

address issues of meaning and purpose with students (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). This study focused on practices in public schools, as exploring issues of meaning and spirituality would potentially differ in private, religious-based schools. Efforts were made to obtain a sample that was diversified in terms of years of experience, to determine if this would have any impact on school counselors' perspectives, preparation, or practice in regard to exploring issues of meaning and purpose with students. This subtheme was delineated by school counselors who were tenured (with more than 4 years of experience) and non-tenured (with less than 4 years of experience). This criterion was explored based on the idea that being tenured as well as more experienced might have the potential to impact a school counselor's practice (New Jersey Education Association, 2012). In the current study, five of the participants were tenured and five were non-tenured. The focus group included two tenured and two non-tenured participants.

As part of convenience sampling, my sample was drawn from New Jersey, the state in which I reside. In an effort to increase transferability, I gathered a sample that included participants of varying ages (26-65) who were working in different settings (suburban, urban, rural). There were eight female and two male participants. Eight participants identified as White, one identified as Black, and one identified as Biracial (Black/Latina). The gender and racial makeup of my sample is reflective of the demographics of the counseling profession and is similar to other recent studies of school counselors (Cervoni & Delucia-Waack, 2011; Moyer, 2011). In response to a question about spiritual and religious beliefs, seven of the participants identified as Catholic, one

identified as Buddhist, one identified as Humanist/agnostic, and one participant did not identify with any particular religion or spirituality.

Methods of Data Gathering

The researcher, a human being who is able to analyze and interpret information, is the main instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). In this qualitative study, I conducted in-person, individual interviews with each school counselor participant in a private location of her or his choosing. Before any part of the interview was conducted, each participant was given an informed consent document to review and ask any questions. Only participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study were interviewed. Participants were informed of their right to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

In qualitative interviewing, “Interviewers use, primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 1998, p. 9). This study employed a semi-structured interview format with mostly open-ended questions. The interviews started with general introductions and a demographic questionnaire aimed at gathering factual information. Interview questions were based on research and remained open and general at first, so as not to lead or bias the participants in their responses. I then explored participants’ thoughts, focusing questions around their responses (Kline, 2008). Each participant took part in one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were audio

recorded. See Appendix A for a semi-structured interview guide and demographic questionnaire.

In line with the semi-structured format of the interview, individualized follow-up questions were asked based on participants' responses during the interview. Before the completion of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to share any information they may not have already shared, clarify any responses they wish to clarify, and ask any questions they had. As the primary investigator, I provided my contact information to participants if they had future questions or needed additional clarification.

After the completion of the interviews, participants were invited to participate in a focus group to talk together about the topic under study. This conversational group lasted approximately 90 minutes and the dialogue was recorded and transcribed. This additional layer of data collection provided the opportunity for me to ask clarifying questions, engage in member checking, and give participants the chance to interact with one another. I asked participants follow-up questions based on themes that I constructed from the interview data. During the focus group, participants had the opportunity to ask each other and me questions, as well as expound on their thoughts.

Data Analysis

While exploring participants' experiences, I was intentional about acknowledging my own assumptions and position as a researcher to refrain from unnecessarily biasing the study with my own judgments (epoche; Hays & Wood, 2011). I employed this strategy by documenting my personal experiences, assumptions, and judgments around adolescent meaning making, spirituality, and school counseling practice before and

during data gathering and analysis through reflexive journaling. To assist me with this process, I engaged with peer debriefers who helped me in the ongoing process of becoming aware of my own biases and analyzing the data from a variety of perspectives. These colleagues were all professional counselors who had completed coursework in qualitative research. Each of the three debriefers worked in a different setting (i.e. one in school, one in community, and one at the university level) and were thus able to offer varying viewpoints. I consulted with the peer debriefers throughout the research process during which they offered feedback on the interview guide, participated in continual discussion about emergent themes, and challenged my thinking regarding the findings during the ongoing analysis. One of the debriefers acted as a critical observer during the focus group and offered her observations as we processed after the completion of the group. At each stage, these professional counselors and researchers continually challenged my conceptualization and work with the data and participants. This awareness and accountability allowed me to be more equipped to truly seek an emic perspective based on the participants' perceptions and experiences. Throughout the entirety of the study I kept an audit trail to serve as documentation for how data was collected, interpreted, and analyzed during each stage of the study. My committee members and peer debriefers had access to reviewing this information in an effort to increase the transparency and confirmability of the study.

Data for this study consisted of word for word transcriptions of the audio recorded interviews and focus group. I analyzed the data as I collected it throughout the study, which allowed me to utilize what I learned through analysis of initial interviews to

shape subsequent interviews. Drawing on techniques developed in grounded theory, I utilized open coding and the constant comparative method, making notations on the transcriptions and comparing segments of data with one another throughout analysis to help elicit themes, determine patterns, and highlight relationships across the data (Merriam, 2009). I presented themes from the data as well as rich, thick description including specific quotations from participants as applicable (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, reliability and validity are expressed in terms of trustworthiness using terminology such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Merriam, 2009). Procedural rigor is essential to establish credibility. Efforts to increase the dependability or consistency of this study were taken through use of an audit trail, where I kept a detailed account throughout the research study regarding how data was collected and analyzed and how decisions were made (Merriam, 2009). Selected colleagues chosen as peer debriefers (Kline, 2008), with access to the audit trail, discussed, challenged, and questioned my decisions, further increasing the integrity of the design. My use of reflexive journaling and transparency with my committee members also contributed to the trustworthiness of the study (Choudhuri, Glauser, & Peregoy, 2004). I kept a journal in which I processed thoughts and realizations I had before, during, and after the interviews. Important realizations that informed the research process resulted from this practice. For example, I realized after the first interview that I experienced some hesitancy around asking the participant about her own personal spiritual beliefs. As I reflected and processed this realization, I felt less apprehensive

about broaching this in future interviews. It also provided insight as to my role as the researcher and how my approach could potentially affect the participants' responses.

In qualitative research results are transferable (vs. generalizable); efforts to increase transferability were made through the use of rich, thick description and variation within the sample related to demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience. The report was written in a way that maximized transparency in describing each step of the procedure and how decisions were made. In an effort to increase transferability, I offered a clear, detailed account of each stage of the process as well as the demographics of the participants (Hunt, 2011). I provided as much detail as possible, while being careful to protect the anonymity of the participants. As a strategy to increase credibility, the data from the focus group served as another layer of information that was triangulated with the data from the individual interviews. I used member checks, or respondent validation, to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretations and help ensure accurate interpretation, further contributing to the confirmability of the study.

Conclusion

Ten public middle school counselors participated in this qualitative interview study designed to give voice to school counselors' perspectives and practices regarding their work with adolescent students around meaning and spirituality. Four of these interviewees participated in a focus group designed to gather additional information and add to the credibility of the study. Procedural rigor, established through the use of peer debriefers, reflexive journaling, audit trails, member checks, and triangulation of the data

also contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. Word for word transcriptions of all recorded interviews and the focus group were analyzed and coded to determine themes and patterns across the data. Results from this analysis are presented in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

As stated in the previous chapter, the main aim of this study was to elicit the voices of middle school counselors regarding if and how they explored issues of meaning and spirituality with their students. I interviewed ten middle school counselors currently working in public schools throughout the state of New Jersey. I intentionally sought an equal number of tenured (five) and non-tenured (five) school counselors for comparison purposes. In comparing the data, there were no marked differences evident between the more experienced and less experienced counselors with regard to their work with students around meaning and spirituality. Eight of the counselors were female, and two were male; eight were Caucasian, one was Black, and one was biracial (Latina and Black). Four of the participants (all Caucasian females, 2 tenured and 2 non-tenured) participated in a focus group conducted at the end of the research study. The numerical notations in the participant quotes that follow refer to individual participant statements.

School Counselor Preparation and Practice

The participants shared about their roles in the school and how prepared they felt to do the work of a school counselor. In general, the interviewees reported feeling unprepared for the realities of being a school counselor and performing a counseling role within the school setting specifically. One of the participants explained, “I think in your training you tend to be a little bit more trained I guess like for a community setting. That’s just my experience, that’s just how I feel.” (P₄) The participants shared that it would have been helpful to have more coursework focused on counseling and

development with children and adolescents. When they did receive training specific to working with students in schools, it was generally geared more towards high school, so they did not necessarily feel prepared to work with early adolescents in a middle school setting. The most directly applicable experience of their graduate program to their work as school counselors was the internship experience, although their experiences with that varied as well.

The participants shared that as school counselors, they often had to hold multiple roles, many of which did not involve wearing their “counselor hat.” This discussion was particularly salient, as I was interviewing them during the timeframe of the state standardized testing, in which they were all involved. The unique reality of managing multiple roles, many outside of the scope of counseling, while delivering quality counseling interventions in a time-limited environment was a challenge that many of them did not feel prepared for in their graduate programs. They explained, “There’s definitely more things that happen in the day to day than what you’re prepared for particularly as a school counselor” (P₆) and “We don’t really learn about *school* when we’re in a school counseling program. I think schools are so different. School counseling is a very different beast than what school counseling programs prepare you for.” (P₁₀) The participants admittedly were able to learn a lot “on the job,” but also lamented the lack of relevant professional development to continue to hone their skills, learn relevant interventions, and connect with other school counselors. During the interview process, many of them expressed appreciation about being able to reflect about their practice and talk about what they do with someone in the field. Similarly in the focus group, they

expressed the uniqueness of such an opportunity to meet together with other professionals to discuss school counseling practice. They seemed eager for opportunities to connect, reflect, and learn. These opportunities were rare, if nonexistent, for most of them in their daily practice.

Addressing Meaning

In spite of the disconnect between graduate preparation and school counselor practice as well as a lack of relevant professional development, the participants seemed to be able to navigate their roles and engage in meaningful work with their middle school students. Although they talked a lot about time constraints and the limitations of counseling within a school environment, they also expressed the importance of their role as counselors to help the early adolescents they work with to find meaning in their lives and circumstances. One participant explained her perception of the importance of this work:

I believe students really have a thirst for knowledge. I think they respect individuals that help them think and go to the next level. And parents appreciate that as well, so I think that if you take that approach with their children it gets back to the parents and they feel like they have a relationship with you and they probably speak highly about you to their children and that's contagious and it helps the relationship. (P₃)

Participants explained that meaning could potentially penetrate any presenting issue and overall seemed comfortable and willing to support adolescents in their work around meaning. One school counselor explained, "I feel like anytime I meet with the students that in a way we're addressing that (meaning) because they have so many questions. It's really trying to help them discover who they are. You can't tell them who they are." (P₂) The caveat to this was if that meaning-making involved students'

spirituality or religious beliefs. This avenue of exploration was “off limits” to most of the participants. They expressed, “I guess, try to steer it back to a place where we’re not so much talking about religion, but talking more about morals and beliefs,” (P₄) “In some ways it’s easier not to address it,” (P₈) and “there a way to kind of walk that line where you don’t sort of delve into religion and things like that.” (P₇)

Themes

I probed school counselors about their work around meaning with adolescents, and data analysis of the individual interviews and focus group revealed the subsequent themes and subthemes, which I will develop in the following sections. The overarching emergent theme was one of identity. School counselors were most likely to work with students around meaning-making through exploring their identities. The areas in which they did this work with early adolescents was through the suffering or challenging circumstances in their lives, examination of their behavior and choices, and through helping them to make connections to others and things they care about. Spirituality was an aspect of identity that participants expressed a discomfort and unwillingness to explore with students, primarily because of the participants’ identities as public school employees, their fear of perceived repercussions, and the connotation of imposing values. These themes and subthemes are interdependent and connected to one another, however for the purposes of this narrative, I will explain each one individually in the following sections. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the interdependent themes and subthemes.

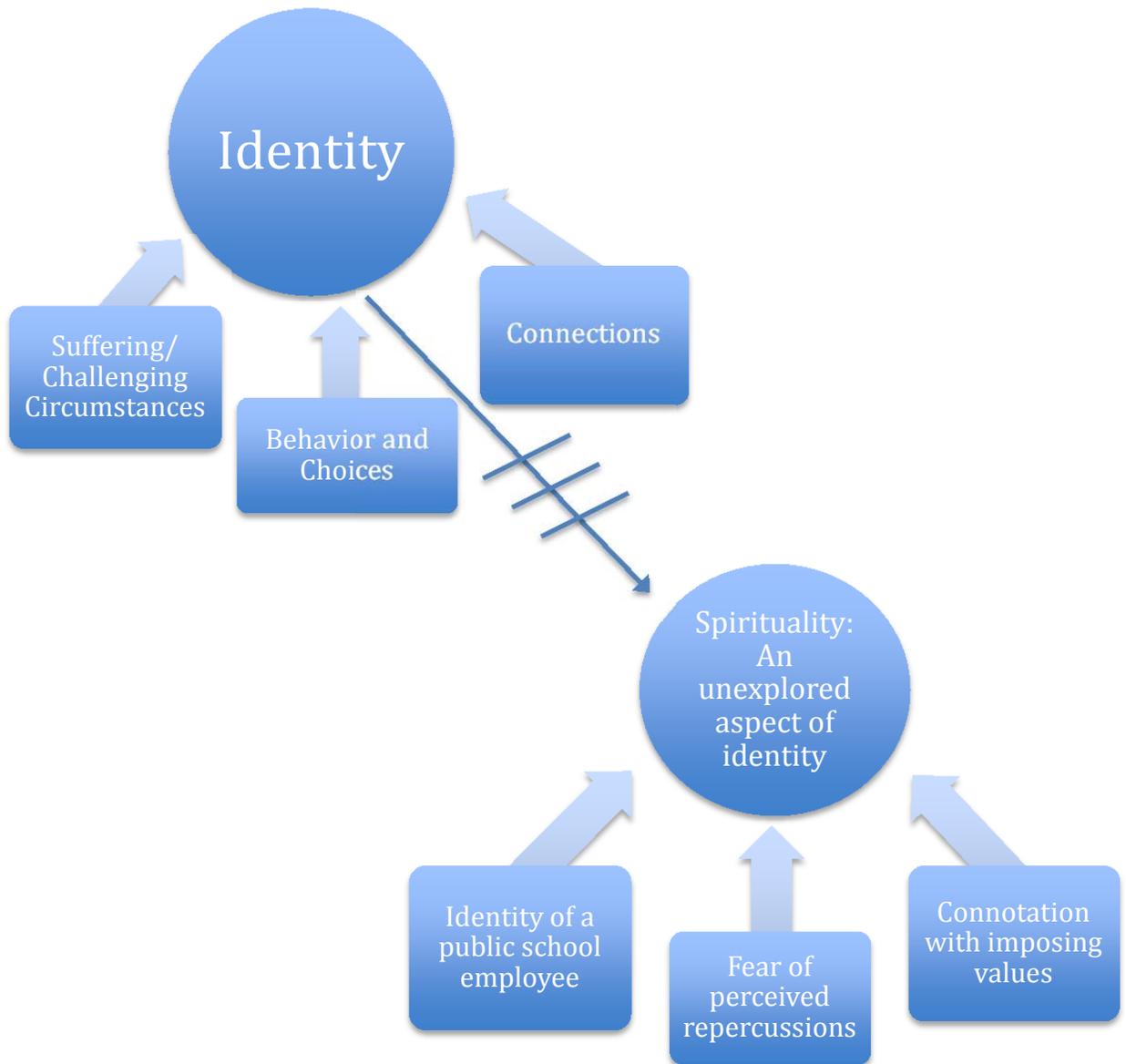


Figure 1. Emergent themes.

Identity

As school counselors discussed their work with early adolescents, it became evident that the major avenue through which they explore meaning with students is

through identity. Interviewees consistently mentioned the importance of exploring meaning through the development of an individualized identity, especially with this age group. They mentioned how early adolescents were in a prime stage of life to explore their own sense of self as they were beginning to individuate from parents and question their own roles in the world. Developmentally, the counselors noticed students' ability at this age to begin to think differently than what others have told them to think. They explained how they work with students to help them find their own personal sense of meaning through helping them to reflect on and explore "who they are" and "who they want to be." This overarching theme was evidenced in every interview. The main work in this area of meaning-making with early adolescents involved helping them to reflect on their present and future identities. Over and over the counselors described instances where they asked students "Is that how you see yourself?" "Is this who you want to be?" The participants believed that students in this age group were becoming more developmentally capable of this kind of reflection. One middle school counselor who had prior experience as an elementary counselor explained the difference between early adolescents and children in this area:

They (adolescents) are starting to think about themselves, and 'what am I going to do for myself?' 'How's my life going to go?' ...but little kids are still so dependent and so unable to think separately from what their family is telling them. (P₁)

Interviewees stated that their middle school students are individuating from parents and family and beginning to try to formulate their own identities. The school counselors talked about coming alongside students to help them in this process. "We need to be consistent and set boundaries, but allow the freedom to kind of be who they are." (P₂)

One participant described this time period during which she works with students around meaning as they form their individual identities:

Adolescence is a time when kids really kind of branch out on their own in terms of what their beliefs are, what their morals are, 'cause a lot of times, as you know it's shaped by the people who are in their lives that are closest to them. So as a younger person you tend to adopt the views of your parents or the immediate people that are around you. Then as you begin to get older, and begin to I guess sort of step out into the world, and, you know, view things from a different perspective... A lot of the times the kids come to school with certain questions about why does this happen? Why do people behave the way that they do? Um, you know, and they begin to question whether or not their beliefs and whether what they've been used to, is it the right thing for them? Is it no? So a lot of times you start to find, it starts to clash with the parents because sometimes they're finding out their beliefs and morals, things are different. (P₄)

The participants talked about the challenges of entering adolescence and how finding meaning through developing a unique sense of self was so crucial during this time. As one interviewee explained, "There are so many things bombarding them. They need that foundation and that core. Who am I?" (P₂) The key to finding this meaning often seemed to be through exploring one's identity. Participants mentioned that middle schoolers are often wrestling with who they are and who they want to be. One counselor described it as, "a struggle, an inner-struggle of wanting to be who they are, but they don't really know who they are." (P₉) The participants described their roles as school counselors in helping students to find meaning through the development of an individualized self.

The counselors shared many examples of working with students to find their own sense of meaning. Through these examples and the school counselors' descriptions of their work in these areas, it was apparent that they were helping students find meaning through exploring their own identities. They did this specifically through working with

students through their suffering or challenging circumstances in their lives, behavior and choices, and connections to others and things they care about.

Subtheme 1: Suffering and Challenging Life Circumstances

In almost all of the interviews, the school counselors said they were likely to do deeper meaning work with students around difficult life circumstances. The students seemed to be questioning why things were happening and what it meant for them in their lives. Counselors saw this an opportune time to delve deeper and help students to explore meaning through developing their own sense of self. They worked with students to make sense of their own worlds. One counselor talked about how students being in a “reflective place” is most conducive to doing work around meaning. Oftentimes, difficult life circumstances seemed to facilitate student reflection and questioning. Questions such as “Why is this happening to me?” or “What does this mean for my life?” gave counselors an opportunity to help students explore meaning in their lives through changing roles and examination of beliefs.

Participants described entering adolescence as a particularly difficult time for many students. None of them seem to be immune to the challenges of this period of life. Questioning seemed to be a natural response of students experiencing difficulties. One school counselor described her perspective on this age group:

There is a lot of pain in middle school kids even the ones who are succeeding. There is a lot of pain. Making meaning is one of the important things in well being. I think we do have to find ways to make it all seem more meaningful to them. There are a lot of kids out there who just are sitting there going, 'is this what it's all about?' At 13 years old it's crazy to be in that place, but there are so many of them. We're seeing tons of cutting. We've sent a lot of kids out to get assessed. That's just the tip of it. For the ones that you see there's how many more? (P₇)

The participants reported that when students experienced difficult times they would try to be a support, someone who could help to center them in the storm. Several of the participants talked about supporting students through suicidal ideation, cutting, and eating disorders through delving into the meaning underlying these challenges and how it connected to their identity. When early adolescents struggled with school, participants described the importance of helping students to find some greater meaning to help them persevere.

Overwhelmingly, as interviewees were asked about situations in which they would be most likely to work with students around meaning, the responses centered on situations where the students were struggling to deal with challenging life circumstances. Many of the counselors mentioned death, divorce, loss, family issues, and self-harm. Difficult family circumstances often left students dealing with role confusion and uncertainty about the meaning of the event to their own lives and identities. This is evidenced in the following example offered by one of the interviewees:

I had a student right now who her parents are going to have a divorce and she is an only child so we've been working on grasping her role within the family, her role outside of the family as a 13-year old girl. Right now she is so confused and so lost because her identity was that family, two parents loving her. Now she's struggling with 'how are they going to love me?' How am I going to move on? Nothing matters anymore. I don't understand what my point is or what my role is. How can I be a daughter to one and not, or used to being a daughter to both at the same time?' It's really conflicting stuff. She's really struggling with identity and a new identity being the only child in two separate homes. (P₈)

Several of the participants talked about helping their middle school students to navigate these types of questions and find meaning as they explored the impact of death, abuse, and loss in general on their sense of self. For many of the middle schoolers, their first experiences with death happen during this stage of life. Participants reported that this often prompts questions about the "meaning of life" and "why are we here?" One beginning counselor described surprise at how serious some of the issues were that middle schoolers were facing. He talked about two 13 year old girls who had been sexually abused. They questioned, "Why did that person do it?" and "Where do I go from here?" He was particularly struck by how they questioned aspects of their own identities. One girl wondered, "Am I still a virgin?" Another decided she did not want to "be pretty anymore" and took great pains to hide any aspect of herself that could be perceived as physically attractive. Through their suffering these students went through a process of redefining themselves and questioning the purpose of their own existence. The participant described his work with these students to help them "find a reason to go on and live." (P₆)

Another interviewee talked about helping an adolescent girl deal with her mother's drug addiction. The student continued to deal with disappointments as her mother repeatedly engaged in substance abuse from the time the girl was seven years old.

As this student entered adolescence, the counselor saw an opportunity to help her explore her own potential for growth and the positive impact on her own identity as the result of dealing with hardship. She explained:

When you see a thirteen year old, a fourteen year old being a better person than their mom or more mature, there's part of that that's kind of sad because this child obviously had to grow up a lot faster than she should have had to. But, on the other hand, she's putting it in a perspective that isn't going to be harmful to her. (P₁)

She went on to describe how as a counselor, she saw it as her role to help the student to grieve and also to be a better person. Participants reported that when adolescents saw their parents or other family members or friends make poor decisions, they question their own identity, asking, "Does that have to be me?" The school counselors often used this as an opportunity to help students define who they wanted to be and how they may be different or similar to those around them. As one interviewee explained, "We talk about how change can be difficult. With change there is growth. You can suffer *from* or you can suffer *through* and persevere." (P₂)

Subtheme 2: Behavior and Choices

Participants saw this as a key time to intervene around behavior and help students to consider the meaning of their choices for their sense of self and future aspirations. Identity seemed to be the avenue through which the school counselors helped students to consider the meaning of their behavior. A participant explained how she works with students experiencing behavioral issues, "I always try to bring them back to, is that who you really want to be? Is that how you see yourself? Would you be proud of this someday? I try to do that without being judgmental." (P₁) One counselor talked about

asking students to think about who they really wanted to be. She explained, “I think it’s a good question to put out there for them... they’re still young and they have a lot of time to change... I believe that they can change and they will change.” (P₈) Most of the counselors discussed helping students to explore the meaning their behavior has in how they identify themselves now, how others see them, and who they want to be in the future. One participant discussed how students often need assistance in the process of making meaning of their behavior for themselves. She talked about,

Trying to really get them to reflect on their behavior and contribution to issues and problems and how they have an opportunity to contribute positively versus negatively. And what’s more important to them. Because they don’t really have that foresight. So I try to develop it for them. (P₉)

The interviewees often referenced their role in helping students to discover the impact of their choices on their own present and future identities as defined not only by themselves, but by others as well. Several of the interviewees talked about helping students to understand the meaning that their behavior holds in the formation of others’ perceptions about their identity. One of the school counselors described how she uses this approach when working with adolescents around bullying issues.

An example is someone was harassing someone on the bus and publicly humiliating someone. Now, not only are they developing a reputation from the victim, but all of the witnesses that are observing them. Sometimes they don’t realize that. I’m like, you just defined yourself to 50 something people and you don’t realize it. Is that what you want? (P₃)

Another participant described similar work with students involved in bullying asking them, “How do you want to be remembered? How do you want to be defined? And how that would be applied to something deeper.” (P₅) Sometimes early adolescents are in the moment and not thinking of the deeper impact of their behaviors on others or the

meaning behind why they are engaging in those behaviors. School counselors involved in this study reported engaging students in reflection, examination, and meaning-making around their behaviors during this life stage.

I try to pull stuff from him a little bit so he's aware of why he's so impulsive or maybe why he's making the choices that he's making and how it could be connected to something else that's itching him, but then also so that he can make that connection how that's not getting him where he wants to go or the direction that makes his mom proud. (P₁₀)

One of the most impactful ways the participants reported working with students was around their choices. They described that for the first time in their lives, early adolescents have the opportunity to make choices that have the potential to impact their lives. Interviewees expressed that this was an avenue through which they often worked with students in examining the meaning of their behaviors, empowering them to choose wisely for themselves. One participant explained, "Strength comes from being in touch with ourselves and being able to make choices from that place." (P₇) School counselors helped students to reflect on who they are and who they want to be, so that they could choose behaviors congruent with that desired identity. An interviewee described, "Sometimes we can steer them and empower them so they know they have the control to determine whom they're going to be and the choices they're going to make. That's really powerful." (P₈) School counselors have the opportunity to assist students in making academic choices that have the potential to impact their high school career and beyond. One participant explained, "The choice plays a big role and it has to because it counts for those kids. To go get a job or go to college they're going to ask, 'what were your high school transcripts?' and ninth grade is going to be right there." (P₆) Another counselor

also talked about the class selection process as an opportunity to delve into choice and meaning, “I can see it (meaning) being tied to picking your classes for next year and what am I going to do after school is over? How am I going to make meaning for my life and know that I picked the right thing?” (P₉) Early adolescents have this opportunity to make choices about things that have the potential to impact their lives, and school counselors can be instrumental in helping them to make meaning in that process.

Interviewees talked often about helping students to develop a future-thinking focus in regard to their behavior and choices. Early adolescence is a time when the interviewees believed that students began to have more awareness around a future that they might want to impact now. They described the importance of assisting middle schoolers in this process:

You really need to develop, create a map with them and try to connect on a smaller scale, meaning and purpose. As far as their academics, but also meaning and purpose on how their behavior will affect them later. (P₃)

Participants talked about the promise of students who were willing to examine poor behavior and make different choices. One interviewee explained, “that is just one example of a boy who I think has probably a bright future because he’s starting to look at what his flaws are.” (P₁) Several of the interviewees also talked about helping students to see how difficult experiences now can help them in the future if they make the choice to learn and grow from them.

One of the primary ways that the participants reported helping students to think about the meaning of their choices for the future is through goal setting. The majority of the school counselors interviewed talked about the importance of helping students with

goal setting at this age to help them understand the potential impact of their current choices and also to find meaning in their academics. Interviewees described starting goal setting with students in sixth grade. This was named as a way to explore the meaning of school with disengaged students. As one participant explained, “So many of them have completely shut down, so it is a matter of helping them find some greater meaning, you know, as a means to a goal for the future.” (P₇) Another described working with a student who was chronically late to school and after many failed interventions finally asked him, “What does this mean for you long term? What is it that you want to do with your life? And what standard of living do you want to have?...And I think I might have him at the point where he’s like wow, I guess I do have to do school, if I want to get there.” (P₅) They explore what students may want for the future, and then help them to realize and examine how meaningful their behaviors and choices are now in working toward those future goals.

Subtheme 3: Connections

Participants also helped students around meaning-making by exploring self-in-context, assisting students in identity development through making connections to others in community and things they care about. One of the initial things almost all of the school counselor participants mentioned as a prerequisite for doing this kind of work with adolescents was a trusting relationship between them and the student. They placed primary importance on the student’s connection with them in order for there to be enough comfort, safety, and willingness to engage on a deeper level around issues of meaning. Establishing trust and being nonjudgmental were mentioned repeatedly as important

elements in creating a working connection conducive to the exploration of meaning as the students explored their own identities. In their own words the participants explained: “I think a lot of times I have a really decent relationship with my students because I think they know I’m respectful of their position and how they feel and what their beliefs are” (P₄); “I think it is valuable to the kids to know that there’s somebody they could actually talk to who wouldn’t judge them” (P₂) ; “She felt comfortable enough to talk to me about that” (P₈) ;

I think one of the reasons he could come to me to talk about something like this is that over time when he’s done something he wasn’t supposed to do. He would get all kinds of grief, if you want to call it that, from teachers or deans – a lot of judgment, but when he would come to me I would just let him be himself, and talk about why this came up and how did he think he might handle it the next time. (P₁)

One school counselor talked in-depth about how she utilizes her connection and trust with students to encourage them when they experience a lack of meaning in their lives. She asks them to believe her about their value and purpose, even if they are having a hard time believing in themselves. In her role as a school counselor, she tries to help students to develop a positive self-identity through pointing out to them the value she sees in them as people.

A number of the counselors referenced groups when asked about their work around meaning. Groups were identified as settings that are naturally conducive to exploring self in relation to others. Some talked about their own group counseling classes in graduate school as a setting where meaning through connection was exemplified. As one participant mentioned, “group counseling probably was the class that focused most upon connecting and creating meaning.” (P₁₀) Several others shared that they are most

likely to explore issues such as meaning and purpose with students in group settings. One of the reasons for this was so that students would not feel alone. Participants explained how connecting students in a safe community provided a forum for going deeper and supporting one another in the quest for individual meaning and identity development. Peers help one another in the process of meaning-making and self-discovery. One school counselor participant explained, “having them all together, they feel it. They know it. I think sometimes that’s more powerful in a way to be a community.” (P₉) Another participant described what she says to encourage students in group, “You’re going through different experiences, but you’re kind of all together...you can understand in some way.” (P₈) One school counselor talked about the value of having students at different ages and stages (6th, 7th, and 8th graders) in one group, as some who are farther along in their journey can help to mentor others. Another described the value of students hearing others’ beliefs and perspectives as they made meaning for themselves. One counselor described how she helps students to feel empowered in who they are by “teaching them how to come together, instead of always been pinned against one another, and supporting one another.” (P₂) Connecting students with peers and helping them to explore themselves in that environment emerged as a commonality across interviews.

Finally, participants discussed working with students around meaning through helping them to make connections to things they care about. One interviewee explained that this is the main avenue through which she works around issues of meaning and purpose with early adolescents. She described, “What’s important to them? I help them explore it. What makes you happy in life?...What is your passion?” (P₈) Participants

shared that knowing what was important to students, what they valued, and what they liked to do was important in getting to know them as well as in helping them to know themselves. As one interviewee shared,

I'll try to go through whatever their passions are. It's usually one of the first things I'll talk about. What do they like to do and kind of connect through that whether it's sports or music. Then I'll build on that. Those are built-in passions, strengths, and some different qualities and character traits you need for those things. (P₉)

School counselors often helped students explore their unique identities through making connections to things they care about as a way to assist them in finding meaning in their academics. As one interviewee stated, "I try to help them connect what they care about now to school and help them see that as a pathway to their future." (P₇) Another participant described her frustration as she tried to help a student who was failing in school. It was not until she found out more about what he cared about and helped him to see how his academics and completing school related to his passion (becoming a barber) that he was able to see a greater purpose in his schoolwork. Throughout the interviews, making connections to career aspirations emerged as an avenue for counselors explore when helping students to discover meaning in relation to their unique selves.

The participants talked about helping students to explore the meaning that was salient to their unique selves, even if it was at odds with their peers. A participant explained, "I just always try to focus on having it come from within, you know, finding your passion. Then once you find your passion, not letting anyone tell you that you're wrong, whether it's big or small." (P₉) Similarly, another participant gave an example of a student who found a lot of meaning and value for herself in community service, but was

mocked by her peers, who devalued her passions. The school counselor helped her to hold on to her own purpose and hold strong in the face of opposition. Early adolescence seems to be a crucial time for school counselors to help students to reflect on and develop their own sense of meaningful identity through connections. As one interviewee described,

That whole idea of fitting in and who my friends are and I have to be a certain way for people to like me. I want to be in this group, but it's not always the best group to be in, that kind of back and forth –they're not always true to themselves. They're almost faking to be a certain way to be with others and then they lose themselves because they haven't found themselves yet. (P₈)

Helping students to make connections to people and things they care about was a consistent practice that participants engaged in as they worked with students around finding meaning and developing their identities.

Spirituality: An Avoided Aspect of Identity

Although the participants reported working with their adolescent students to find meaning through exploration of their identities, spirituality was an aspect of identity that they often avoided. As demonstrated by the hash lines in Figure 1, this area of identity was notably left out of the school counselor participants' exploration of meaning with students. Overall, the interviewees expressed that they do not broach issues of spirituality or religion with students, or attempt to explore that aspect of students' identity. Across almost all of the interviews, participants spoke about the areas of spirituality and religion as somewhat taboo aspects of identity to discuss in school. None of the participants reported ever receiving direct instruction not to address these areas, but as one interviewee explained, "My experience is that it's kind of a known thing. I don't

know how I know it I just know it.” (P₂) Analysis of the interviews revealed that the avoidance of the spiritual and religious aspects of students’ identities is related to the following three factors: the interviewee’s identity as a public school employee, fear of perceived repercussions, and a connotation with imposing values.

Subtheme 1: Identity as a Public School Employee

As previously mentioned, all participants in this study were school counselors working in public schools. In most of the interviews and the focus group, participants mentioned how their roles as a public school employees influenced both their perception and practice around exploring students’ spirituality or religious beliefs. One participant explained,

I do feel that being in a public school with some of the things you hear about, like the Pledge of Allegiance...just the mention of God, it’s like, you can’t do that. It’s a public school. You don’t have to think twice. (P₇)

Other participants were clear that they believed that working in public education precluded them from being able to explore issues of spirituality or religion with students. They explained, “being in a public school is hard” (P₆) and “I do feel like it’s a really fine line in schools what you can talk about and what you can’t talk about, particularly as a non-tenured teacher.” (P₅) Some interviewees were emphatic stating, “Especially in an education setting...no way!” (P₈) One participant noted that he thought it would be very different for private school counselors in regard to addressing these areas.

Most of the participants expressed that the spirituality component of meaning-making or identity is not something they felt comfortable exploring with students in the school setting, even if the student brings it up. They said things such as,

Issues of meaning, if it has anything to do with religion, obviously as someone that works in a public school is sort of frowned upon to do that. So I try not to get into religious discussions with students. Sometimes they may want to go in that direction, but I try not to...I don't approach it in that way at all. I mean being in a public school, I just, you just don't go there. (P₄)

Participants explained that they do not talk much about spirituality because "in my district it would be seen as kind of crossing a line. You know, outside the bounds of church and state." (P₇)

The only exceptions to this taboo seemed to be around death and religious ceremonies coinciding with students' age. One participant explained, "The only time I really talk about spirituality is if there has been a death or even a pet death." (P₈) Another said, "Definitely grief would be one area where, um, when they come in to talk about someone who has passed, usually religion will come up. And for many of them it's a comforting thing." (P₆) Interviewees also described talking with students' about religious ceremonies that coincide with their middle school years such as Bar Mitzvahs or Confirmations. Still though, as one participant described, "I hear a lot about it, but I don't really go in depth with it." (P₁₀)

Subtheme 2: Fear of Perceived Repercussions

Participants' reluctance to address students' spiritual identity seemed to be, in part, caused by a fear of perceived consequences. None of the participants were ever threatened with actual consequences or explicitly told not to talk about spirituality or religion with students, but their perception of *potential* repercussions seemed to have a strong influence on their practice. In explaining why she avoids discussions of spirituality with students, one counselor said, "Whenever you're in a situation where something like

that can cost you your job, anything that is going to cost you your job, you have to think twice about doing.” (P₈) Another counselor explained, “It’s a hot potato that no one wants to deal with.” (P₂) Another said, “We’re just too busy to deal with the backlash. We don’t have room for it.” (P₃)

Fear of parent or administrator backlash was mentioned by many of the participants. One interviewee explained,

You don’t want to be put in that position where some parent says why are you talking about God? We don’t celebrate Christmas. Unfortunately it just takes one. How dare you talk about spirituality? You have no right doing that! It scares you especially when you’re not tenured. It’s the separation of church and state. (P₉)

Other participants echoed similar concerns about the potential implications of parent reactions and shared that those concerns affect their likelihood to encourage or even allow dialogue around spiritual or religious issues. An interviewee explained how he told a student who brought up spiritual concerns to talk to her family “because as your counselor, it’s really not my place.” (P₅) One school counselor explained the concerns of working with younger students, “When you’re dealing with minors you have to be very careful because parents might not look too favorably on that.” (P₄) Overall, participants were concerned about the potential professional consequences although none of them had been warned outwardly.

In the individual interviews and during the focus group, the participants shared how media and societal pressures contribute to their avoidance in this area as well. One school counselor shared in the focus group, “I hate to admit it, but I think the media does play a little on that because you see these teachers or whatever, just their lives being

imploded because they did something or you see some radical parent...” (P₂) Many participants talked about having to “be careful” and some expressed that even though they would like to explore students’ spiritual identities they feel that they “can’t because they really have to watch in a school setting.” (P₈) Focus group participants discussed how the nature of “society today” adds to the pressures and fear. One interviewee said,

I mean it’s kind of a litigious environment so I mean I don’t want to... You know you can get in trouble in that way talking much about that and it has happened to other people so I have it on my radar so I don’t really go too deeply into it. (P₃)

This fear of perceived repercussions directly impacted the school counselors’ work with students. One counselor described a student who was mourning the death of his grandfather and questioning, “It’s so hard to watch a kid suffer like that and not say anything. The whole time I’m thinking I don’t want to get in trouble for this. Can we change the topic?” (P₉) Another participant shared, “If they want to talk to me about it, I’m willing to listen. Um, I really don’t contribute much to it. I’m a little afraid to go there to be honest with you.” (P₅) The perceived consequences resulted in fear strong enough for school counselors to establish this area as off limits with students.

Subtheme 3: Connotation with Imposition of Values

In almost every interview as well as the focus group, participants alluded to the idea that working with students around spirituality created the potential for them to impose their own values. Almost every participant made a statement about imposing values even though there was no question around this or mention of it during the interview. Participants were asked if the spiritual or religious beliefs of their students ever came into play in their discussions around meaning and how they felt about

discussing students' beliefs with them. When responding, whether the school counselors expressed comfort or discomfort, they all made some statement about imposing their own values. They said things such as, "I do my best not to impose my own values" (P₄) and "I try not to let my personal beliefs get into the way I work with students" (P₂) or "I have a very strong faith, but I don't feel I have the right to impose that on other people." (P₇) One participant said, "You mentioned the spirituality part of it. I can't share my spirituality with them. I can't put that on them..." (P₉)

Participants who said they thought it was important to consider students' beliefs often added qualifying statements to their responses such as, "I definitely try to do it without 'brow-beating' anybody with it" (P₁₀) and "I wouldn't try to convert them. That's not my place." (P₆) One participant said she likes to ask students if they are spiritual or religious, but pointed out "even though I am a spiritual person as well, I would never infringe my own religion on them or my own behalf." (P₈) Throughout the interviews participants exhibited a hyperawareness of the potential for imposition of values in this area that was not present in the other parts of the discussion around meaning and other aspects of identity.

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this study was to examine if and how school counselors explore meaning with adolescent students. Analysis of ten individual interviews and a focus group revealed that the school counselor participants do believe it is important to work with students around meaning and purpose and often do so through the overarching theme of identity. Interviewees described how they supported students with many

aspects of meaning and identity exploration through avenues such as suffering and challenging circumstances, behavior and choices, and connections with others and things they care about.

In response to the question of how prepared they felt to address meaning and spirituality in the school setting, in general, the participants reported feeling unprepared by their graduate programs to assume the role of a school counselor. This included addressing issues such as meaning and spirituality with adolescent students. They felt unprepared to work within the time constraints and parameters of the school setting. There also seemed to be a lack of preparation around adolescent development and applying counseling approaches with this age group. Despite this gap between preparation and practice, all of them reported engaging in some kind of work around meaning with their adolescent students, mostly through identity exploration. The spiritual aspects of students' identities, however, were viewed as separate and were not included in the participants' work with their counselees.

In analyzing the data in response to the question of how school counselors approach spiritual issues in their work with adolescents students, it became apparent that they clearly avoid spiritual issues in their work in the schools. Discussions involving the spirituality or religious beliefs of students were essentially avoided and shut down. Participants expressed perspectives that dialogue around that aspect of students' identities would be at odds with their own identities as public school employees and carried risk of imposition of their own values as well as potential professional consequences.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Implications

This inquiry was designed to elicit the voices of middle school counselors regarding if and how they explore issues of meaning with adolescents in the middle school setting. After interviewing ten middle school counselors working in public schools throughout New Jersey and conducting a follow-up focus group, it is evident that school counselors are helping students to explore meaning, primarily through identity work. Participants described how they assisted students in the process of finding meaning through self-discovery as they questioned difficult experiences, examined behavior and choices, and made connections with other people and things in their lives. Although participants explained a discrepancy between their graduate education and the realities of school counseling practice, they seemed to be able to adapt and expressed relative comfort and competence in working with students around certain aspects of meaning and identity development. It is of note, however, that in regard to the spiritual or religious aspects of students' identities, participants expressed feeling unprepared, and even afraid, of broaching or even actively participating in any dialogue around these areas. In this chapter I will discuss some interpretations of the results and make connections to the literature, offer practical implications for school counselors and counselor educators, as well as include limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Discussion

When responding to questions around exploring meaning with students, participants were able to easily provide examples of this work in their practice, indicating

that this is something they do as part of their roles or identities as school counselors. This is important, as prior research supports the value of exploring meaning with adolescents because of the numerous benefits as well as potential consequences associated with a lack of meaning (Blair, 2004; Bronk, et al., 2009; Burrow et al., 2010; Damon, et al., 2003; Ho, et al., 2010; McLean et al., 2010). The participants echoed Inhelder and Piaget's (1958) assertion that students at this age are capable of beginning to think about and reflect on issues such as meaning and purpose.

Exploring Meaning through Identity

It is also of note that the school counselors' practices around exploring meaning with their students were centered on identity development, which Erikson (1968) asserted is an essential task of adolescence. This was particularly salient and showed up in all of the interviews. The work of meaning-making in early adolescence seemed to be directly tied to the work of identity development. Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion was also evident as participants discussed students questioning their roles in their families, with peers, and in the world, especially when dealing with challenging circumstances. The school counselors seemed to work with students primarily on finding meaning in an individualized identity that could hold firm amidst the trials of adolescence and outside pressures.

Suffering and challenging circumstances. Similar to Frankl (1984), school counselor participants identified suffering or challenging circumstances as a main avenue through which they help students to discover meaning for themselves, who they are, and who they want to be. Interviewees seemed to see the value in helping adolescents to

identify a sense of meaning as a way of persevering through difficult life circumstances, much in the way that researchers described (Blair, 2004; Bjerkeset et al., 2010; Khan & Mian, 2010; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008).

Connections. Another way that participants identified assisting students in the search for meaning was through making connections, which also coincides with Frankl's (1984) assertion that meaning is often found through an encounter with someone else. The school counselors I interviewed discussed their own relationship with students as a precursor for this work, demonstrating that they valued the importance of the counseling connection. It was particularly interesting to me how the participants talked about group work as the most conducive to adolescents finding meaning and developing sense of self. This connection to others in community as a way of exploring meaning is compatible with Purvis' (1995) assertion that adolescents in particular can most effectively find meaning in their lives through interactions with peers in small group settings. He explained:

If a young person is to find answers to his problems, he will do so most quickly and genuinely through a community of 'logos'. He is not likely to find self-fulfillment in isolation, nor in the vague crowd called the 'mass,' nor in groups that escape to essence or existence. The young person can best 'find himself' in his relationship to an accountable community. (p. 209)

These school counselors seemed to understand the value of providing group settings for adolescents to explore their purpose with their peers in safe and supportive environments. These group experiences can be invaluable in assisting adolescents in finding and exploring meaning in their lives.

Behavior and choices. There is often a great deal of focus in school settings on behavior, although mostly it involves rewards and consequences. In this study, as we discussed meaning, the participants often talked about how they help adolescents' academic experiences to be more meaningful through making connections with things they cared about. Instead of simply delivering rewards or threatening consequences, these school counselors helped students to examine their behavior and choices at a deeper level of meaning. This is congruent with existential, meaning-based approaches to counseling such as logotherapy, which help people to understand the responsibility and choices they have in their lives (Frankl, 1967; Langle & Skyes, 2006).

Although most of the participants said that they were not familiar with logotherapy, they were essentially practicing its tenets as they helped adolescents to make meaning. It was evident that they found value in this work, but did not always know how to most effectively apply it in a school setting. In subsequent sections I will address practical implications for school counselors and counselor educators in this area.

Spirituality: An Avoided Aspect of Identity

Frankl (1984), along with many current researchers, have advocated for a holistic approach to counseling where all aspects of someone's identity, including spirituality, would be addressed regardless of the setting (Lambie et al., 2010; Sink et al., 2007). It is of note that although participants in this study continually highlighted the centrality of identity work in their exploration of meaning with students, they expressed avoidance, discomfort, and even fear when asked about addressing spiritual or religious aspects of students' identities. They conveyed perspectives that addressing these areas were in

opposition to their roles as public school employees. They also attached a connotation of imposing values that was not mentioned as a concern in other aspects of their work with students. This has significant implications as was highlighted in the research in previous chapters. Not welcoming students' spiritual selves into the school environment may result in adolescents feeling disconnected and disengaged from school as well as rejected or devalued by adults they look to for support (Toshalis, 2008). Participants seemed very concerned about the potential of being unethical in regard *to* addressing spirituality, but did not acknowledge the ethical implications of *not* addressing this aspect of a student's identity. As was cited in Chapter 2, "Professional school counselors who disregard the spirituality of students and their families (when students present spiritual concerns) may be practicing inconsistently with the professional goals and competencies established by ASCA, ASERVIC, and AMCD" (Lambie et al., 2010, p. 212). Even when prompted in the focus group, participants focused on justifying their reasoning for not addressing it saying things such as, "I think we can pretty much do what we need to do without really having to go there" (P₇) and "Yeah. I don't really feel like I need to go there" (P₂) or as another participant elaborated,

We're talking about some of those things and the qualities of being trustworthy or being what it takes to be a good friend. I think that in those kinds of ways I talk about things that are related without bringing up spirituality or religion. (P₃)

Parallel processing. During the interviews, several participants expressed feeling as if they could not bring their own spiritual identities to school either, so I questioned them in the focus group about the idea of parallel processing. Was it possible that they did not feel as if all aspects of *their* identities were welcome at school, therefore they did

not provide an environment that welcomed all aspects of the *students'* identities? Some of them talked about their own hesitation in bringing their "spiritual selves" to work. They shared things such as, "I wish I could talk more openly about spirituality, but unfortunately I feel like you can't" (P₂) ; "It depends on the environment you're in. Some people get really angry if they hear you mention anything about religion" (P₈) ; "I remember right before our first game I wanted to pray and wasn't able to" (P₉) ; "I can't seem to find a place where the deeper sense of spirituality part that I believe in is the part that I can talk about without it being an issue for someone." (P₇) None of the participants had ever experienced consequences for talking about their beliefs, but one participant shared about others in her district being addressed,

It hasn't happened to me because I'm extra careful about it; however, there are teachers that have shared their values about something as benign as their favorite political candidate. It gets back to administration and they get a little slap on the hand. It can run deeper... (P₃)

Interviewees did not identify it themselves, but through analysis and interpretation of their responses, it seems as if an element of parallel processing is potentially impacting their perspectives and practice in this area. They discussed the importance of being tolerant of others' beliefs, but tolerance seemed to equate to avoidance in this area in public schools. There seemed to be a sense of, if I do not know what you believe and you do not know what I believe than we cannot be involved in or accused of not respecting each other's beliefs.

Implications for Practice

School Counselors

Identity. The results of this study suggest that school counselors recognize the importance of helping students to develop a sense of meaning through exploring their sense of self. The participants offered many poignant examples of working with students individually and in groups. Classroom lessons are another potential way that school counselors can explore and explain finding meaning through identity development. Developmental guidance lessons could be a precursor to smaller groups, or a way to teach and discuss the overarching concepts to more students. Programs such as Challenge Day, which helps to connect people in the school with one another and give them an opportunity to express aspects of themselves and their diverse identities in a safe and supportive environment, can be very impactful.

Although school counselor participants referenced exploring identity a great deal with students, they did not talk about multicultural aspects of identity. They did not seem to broach other aspects of students' diversified identities including spirituality, which was a specific focus of this study, or race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and other relevant aspects. This has implications for all students and has the potential to have even greater impact on students from underrepresented populations. Kiang and Fuligni (2010) found that ethnic identity development is typically of primary importance for students of color during adolescence. The absence of addressing or broaching these aspects of students' identities may communicate to them that these are things they cannot talk to their counselors about and potentially are aspects of themselves that are not welcome in

the school environment (Day-Vines, Wood, Grothaus, Craigen, Holman, Dotson-Blake, & Douglass, 2007; Sink, 2004). Not only were participants not broaching this with students, they would sometimes even “close the door” on the conversation if students broached their beliefs. If they did allow the dialogue to continue they would often only participate passively and disengage. Many participants mentioned that they are doing school counseling and not “therapy” so they do not need to address certain areas. However, school is a space that all students have access to and potentially the only counselors some students will ever encounter; therefore if schools don’t address this, we concede ground and leave adolescents on their own and potentially reinforces oppression by invalidating the importance of salient parts of students’ identities. It is vital for school counselors to be reflective about their own practice in this area and explore aspects of their own identities to see how their beliefs and experiences can be influencing their practice and ultimately impacting the students with whom they work. As they become more aware, they can seek out knowledge by reading current research and seeking relevant professional development to increase cultural literacy and competence in these areas. As they become more comfortable and competent themselves, they can become more reflective about the policies and practices of their school district, advocating for school counseling services and a welcoming environment for all aspects of students’ identities. School counselors can include questions about “Who Am I?” in their initial meetings with students, offering categories of spirituality, race, and other areas of identity to signal to students that discussion around these things is welcome. This will also help school counselors to gain a better understanding about the aspects of identity that are

most salient for the student. Environmental cues such as a “Safe Zone” sign hung on the door stating that the counseling office is a safe space for students of all races, religions, sexual orientations, and other relevant aspects can also communicate a welcome environment for students to explore meaning through all aspects of their diverse identities.

Career and community connections. Many of the participants discussed how meaningful their own internship experiences were in preparing them for their future careers. As part of helping their adolescent students meaningfully engage in school and prepare for the future, school counselors could be instrumental in helping to connect their middle school students with internship opportunities. Meaningful academic and vocational experiences can add purpose to education and also be helpful in motivating students (Barber, 1995). As many of the participants mentioned, career goals and aspirations were an avenue through which they effectively explored meaning and identity with students. Engaging in career counseling through the use of interest inventories and connecting students with resources such as the *Young Person’s Occupational Outlook Handbook* (2010), which highlights connections between school subjects and careers, can help students to become more meaningfully engaged in their academics and form goals for the future. School counselors can also assist adolescents in getting connected with their own passions, resources, internship experiences, and job shadowing opportunities.

Frankl (1984) asserted that people could find meaning “by creating a work or doing a deed” or “by experiencing something or encountering someone” (p.115). Community service opportunities provide a forum for both of these avenues for

discovering meaning. School counselors can be instrumental in providing these opportunities within the school, supporting a service learning component of the academic program, or connecting students with meaningful volunteer opportunities in the community. Engaging adolescents in these types of helping experiences, where they interact with others and feel a sense of purpose, is extremely impactful during this influential life stage.

Mentoring. Mentoring experiences also give students opportunities to encounter others and discover meaning. School counselors are often involved in implementing programs where adult mentors from outside of the school volunteer their time to mentor students. While these programs can certainly be very valuable, school counselors may consider their own students as mentors themselves. Seniors mentoring freshmen, eighth graders mentoring sixth graders, and adolescents travelling to elementary schools to bring positive messages to younger students, are all valuable leadership opportunities and potentially meaningful experiences for everyone involved. When students are given the responsibility to be positive role models and encouragers for others, it has the potential to increase their sense of purpose as well as their connection to the school environment (Karcher, Davis, & Powell, 2002).

Logotherapy in schools. Several of the participants discussed time constraints as a major barrier to being able to provide quality counseling services to students. They explained that limited time with students made it difficult, “We can’t get into the specifics of, why are you doing that most of the time. It’s really hard to get into meaning and purpose with an adolescent (because) it takes time.” (P₅) School counselors may

have the perception that exploring meaning and purpose requires “too much time,” but in actuality, the literature suggests a meaning-based counseling approach such as logotherapy is compatible with school counseling as it is preventative in nature and does not require counselors to know the root cause of a problem. Since school counselors are not providing traditional “therapy” being able to help students without having to know their entire history or spending a lot of time uncovering the psychological roots of an issue makes it an efficient approach. School counselors can use logotherapeutic techniques such as paradoxical intention when working with students around anxieties and phobias. They can also practice exercises such as challenging students to approach life “as if” they were living the second time around and already had the knowledge of the mistakes they made the first time. These logotherapeutic techniques, along with humor, which is also greatly valued in this approach, have the potential to be very effective with early adolescents. School counselors are in a unique position to provide volunteer and mentoring opportunities, peer support groups, and individual counseling environments to assist adolescents in making meaning out of their experiences and developing a sense of purpose that will potentially fuel them throughout their lives.

Counselor Educators

Bridging preparation and practice. One of the questions explored in this inquiry was how prepared participants felt to address meaning and spirituality in their roles as school counselors. Overall, the participants reported not feeling prepared for these aspects, and also reported a disconnect between preparation and practice as school counselors in general. As counselor educators, who prepare graduate students to become

counselors, we need to join with our students in advocating for the role of school counselors as well as making connections between our programs and K-12 school districts to facilitate the exchange of information and increase uniformity and effective preparation and practice in the school counseling profession. We need to be intentional and active in bridging the current disconnect between preparation and practice by establishing these partnerships, infusing professional standards into all coursework and curriculum, and building programs based on what we have learned from research and practice. Theory and research support the essential work of exploration of meaning and identity development, so our graduate programs need to reflect teaching around how to explore these concepts with children and adolescents. Most of the participants in the study had never heard of logotherapy and reported that existential theories were not emphasized in their graduate preparatory programs. Counselor educators might be more cognizant of incorporating existential approaches, not only in theory class, but also across the curriculum, as a way to prepare school counselors to explore meaning with students. School counselors who are alumni of programs could be involved in this process, reporting what they felt was missing in their preparation and providing recommendations to better prepare school counselors for their roles.

Participants reported, “wearing many hats” in the school not related to counseling. This was mentioned often as a barrier to providing effective counseling services and exploring deeper issues such as meaning and identity. Although preparing school counseling students to advocate for their roles is important, counselor education programs also need to form partnerships with K-12 school districts to facilitate reciprocal

information exchange and advocacy in this area (Steen & Rudd, 2009). School principals, supervisors, and counselors could provide valuable information about the practical realities and practices of school counselors that would be influential in informing counselor preparation curriculum, while counselor educators could utilize these partnerships in advocating for the role and functions of school counselors as well. More clearly defining the roles of school counselors may allow for more time for them to provide more meaningful counseling services as they work with students to develop healthy, unique identities.

ASCA defines three domains for school counseling: academic, career, and social/personal. Research in school counseling preparation reveals that overall, school counseling preparatory programs are lacking in preparing school counseling students in two (academic and career) of these three domains (Martin, 2002). These are two of the domains in which participants reported exploring meaning with students, so it is especially important for meaning and identity, as well as many other areas, that school counselors be adequately prepared to counsel adolescents in academics and career in developmentally appropriate ways. One major disconnect between a goal of counselors in the school and their preparation relates to student achievement, which is a main focus of school counselors, but receives little to no emphasis in school counseling curriculum (Educational Trust, 2012; Martin, 2002). In the school setting, counselors must show how their services help to promote student achievement. Previous research, as well as the current study, support the idea that helping students to make meaningful connections to their own passions and goals help to fuel their academic engagement and achievement

(Frankl, 1984; Melton & Schulenberg, 2007). Counselor educators can incorporate strategies relevant to working with adolescents in these areas through Career Counseling, Human Development, Theories, and Techniques courses.

Participants explained that most of their coursework was geared toward counseling in a community setting, not a school, and that often they felt unprepared for many of the roles and realities of counseling in a school setting. As participants expressed, “We don’t really learn about *school* when we’re in a school counseling program. I think schools are so different. School counseling is a very different beast than what school counseling programs prepare you for.” (P₁₀) Counselor Education programs need to include relevant school counseling coursework taught by faculty with experience in school counseling. Recent research in the counselor education field has revealed that currently only 52% of school counseling courses are being taught by instructors who have experience as counselors in the schools (Steen & Rudd, 2009), which may account for some of the disconnect participants expressed regarding their graduate preparation and the realities of counseling within a school. In addition to school-specific coursework, core classes also need to be revised to include a more specific focus on exploring meaning and identity development with children and adolescents, as well as school-related recommendations and concerns in each area. School counseling students need to not only be prepared in counseling theory, but also learning theory and child and adolescent development. Core counseling classes are often more focused on adults and may have little or no connection to working with children or adolescents or to the school setting (Martin, 2002). This sentiment was echoed by the participants in this study, one

of whom expressed, “I think if I were to design a program I would probably do more for school counselors. I would do more with kids’ development.” (P₁) In this study, participants expressed that the school counseling courses they did have were focused more on high school counseling. Early adolescence is a crucial time for prevention and intervention, and as counselor educators, we need to make sure we are preparing our students to work with this age group.

As previously mentioned, participants noted the internship experience as being the most vital aspect of their preparation in their graduate programs. Counselor education programs could be modified for graduate students to have more direct and practical interaction with schools throughout their programs, not just at the end when completing their practicum and internship experiences. This increased experience would likely result in an increased comfort level and greater opportunity to develop competency in counseling around more sensitive and deeper issues such as spirituality and meaning. Increased collaboration and intentional formation of partnerships between counselor education programs and surrounding K-12 school districts would likely be helpful in creating these opportunities for students. When it is time for practicum and internship placements, more program involvement in approving and visiting the proposed sites is recommended, as well as providing increased support for site supervisors working with students (Steen & Rudd, 2009). Site supervisors need to be current in their training and practice in a way that is congruent with the profession and program’s view of school counseling. Counselor educators need to clearly communicate with site supervisors about what interns need, then be prepared to support them in providing that. Supervision is an

important arena for conversation around discomfort, uncertainty, and questions about professional identity, all of which emerged in this study as barriers to addressing meaning through aspects of identity such as spirituality. As counselor educators, we need to be intentional about making sure that all levels of supervision and practical experience during internship are meaningful and relevant.

Almost all participants mentioned time constraints as a barrier to providing effective counseling services, especially regarding delving deeper in to issues of meaning. Counselor education programs need to include instruction to help school counselors to learn how to apply interventions and work around issues such as meaning within the limited periods of time they have, rather than avoiding any deeper issues or exploration or engaging in simplistic problem solving because of a lack of time. Most of the participants said their graduate programs were geared much more toward clinical mental health and they did not feel prepared to apply the interventions and approaches in their roles as school counselors. Every class needs to include relevant application to school counseling and practical strategies for school counselors, so that counseling and not simply problem solving remains the focus of the school counseling profession.

Broaching diverse aspects of identity. Clearly one of the most concerning findings of this study is the disregard of aspects of students' diverse identities. Participants discussed not feeling prepared to address areas such as spirituality and religion in the school setting. Many shared that it was not included in their graduate counseling preparation. It is imperative that counselor educators teach school counselors-in-training how to ethically broach all aspects of their students' identities in the school

setting, including spirituality. As counselor educators, we send clear messages to our graduate students by the things we omit from curriculum as well as by the things we include. It is important to give counselors-in-training practical ways to invite clients' spiritual identities into the counseling process. Spiritual identity development models, such as the ones outlined in Chapter 2, could be presented and explored in Human Development and Lifespan courses, as well as included in Multicultural Counseling curriculum. Instruction around how to use exercises such as developing spiritual life maps when counseling with adolescents could also be helpful to school counseling students. Practicum or internship classes could include exercises such as analyzing intake forms and procedures in terms of how invited clients may feel to discuss their spiritual beliefs. Counselor educators teaching Skills or Techniques courses could provide students with role plays depicting clients dealing with spiritual or religious concerns in which the graduate students would have the opportunity to experience playing both the client and the counselor. Counselors-in-training should also be informed about consulting with spiritual or religious leaders in the community.

It would be beneficial to provide opportunities for graduate counseling students to practice and develop cultural literacy. In counselor education, we need to move from discussing the importance of diversity, to providing our students with opportunities to demonstrate competency in these areas. If spirituality and religion is not part of our counselor education curriculum, we convey the message to our students that it is not important. If we do include and emphasize it throughout coursework, our graduate students are more likely to view it as part of their roles as school counselors and

consequently acknowledge this aspect of their students' identities. Counselor educators need to intentionally work with graduate students around self-awareness and better prepare them to address areas with which they feel uncomfortable, such as spirituality. We need to work to demystify the idea of spirituality as a taboo topic and help counseling students to understand that one's spirituality can be a reflection of one's identity. Opportunities to practice broaching aspects of clients' and students' diverse identities in the counselor process need to be provided starting with beginning role plays in introductory Techniques courses and continued through Group, Practicum, and Internship coursework and practical experiences. As graduate students have opportunities to not only talk about, but also practice broaching these areas, they become more equipped to provide ethical and effective counseling services to diverse populations of students and clients (Day-Vines, et al., 2007). Not only do we need to equip students to competently and ethically practice in all areas of multiculturalism, including spirituality, sexuality, race, and other relevant aspects of identity, but we need to prepare school counseling students to navigate these vital areas within the public school environment. Many of the participants expressed uncertainty about the ethical or legal implications of addressing aspects of students' spiritual identities or religious beliefs in the school setting. As counselor educators we need to help students to become familiar with professional ethical codes (i.e. ACA, ASCA, ASERVIC) and prepare them to practice ethically in the unique environment of public schools. Class discussions, research projects, and case studies around legal and ethical issues in this area could all help to increase understanding and

ensure a greater likelihood of ethical practice around exploring meaning through diverse aspects of identity.

Finally, many participants expressed the lack of relevant professional development for school counselors. Many of them seemed eager to further develop their skills, but were either placed in in-service workshops about teaching or attending mental health workshops geared toward community counselors. Counselor educators can be instrumental in providing relevant professional development workshops and conferences to local school districts. Professional development may be one of the key strategies to bridging the gap between graduate training and school counselor practice with adolescents. Many of the participants asked if there could be a follow-up workshop made available to them regarding practicing logotherapy or counseling approaches emphasizing meaning. Professional development opportunities aimed at helping counselors to explore and develop cultural competence around ethical ways to welcome and acknowledge students' spiritual identities in the school setting would also be beneficial.

Limitations

Although this research inquiry is well suited for a qualitative design, there are some inherent limitations. One of the most apparent limitations is that the findings of the study will not be generalizable to other populations. The findings of this study may, however, be transferrable to other settings. The small sample size with this type of in-depth inquiry is also a limitation and provides little opportunity for a diversified sample; however, it affords a more in-depth examination at how school counselors look at these issues.

One of the most significant limitations of the study is that the majority of the participants identified as Roman Catholic. This commonality in religious affiliation may have accounted for some of the similar viewpoints or responses regarding religion and spirituality. Similarly, only two of the participants were counselors of color. A more ethnically diverse sample could offer a greater, more inclusive picture of middle school counselors' work with students. This research was conducted in New Jersey, so the findings might not be applicable to other geographic areas. For example, school counselors in southern states in the "Bible Belt," might have much different perspectives on addressing spirituality or religion in schools.

Since I interviewed participants face-to-face rather than them filling out an anonymous survey, they may have been more inclined to give socially desirable responses to the questions. When participants realized that I was interested in exploring issues of meaning and purpose and spirituality in school counseling they may have assumed that I think these constructs are important in the counseling process and attempted to tailor their answers accordingly. I also noticed that the less experienced school counselors were not as vocal during the focus group, especially when it involved expressing a potentially divergent view from a more experienced counselor, so there is potential that their voices were not represented as strongly in that piece of the data.

Despite these limitations, the careful attention to procedural rigor in this qualitative inquiry lends to the potential for it to expand on the dearth of knowledge in this area, as well as potentially provide groundwork for future research inquiries.

Future Research

In future studies, a more diversified sample in terms of spiritual identity or religious affiliation would be more representative and could potentially result in more comprehensive understanding of school counselor perspectives and practice in this area. Future researchers could potentially examine school counselor practice throughout different regions in the country and compare findings, as well as intentionally put together focus groups with participants who expressed divergent viewpoints in the individual interviews to allow for more dynamic dialogue.

For this study, I had an equal number of tenured and non-tenured school counselor participants. Although no significant differences were evident between the more and less experienced counselors of this study, future studies with greater numbers of non-tenured participants, with perhaps a homogenous focus group for them to discuss their perspectives might provide more insight into their practice. Examining the specific graduate programs that the participants were prepared in could also provide additional perspective. Surveying faculty from programs regarding the personal and institutional obstacles to including instruction around spirituality in the curriculum could help to provide more insight as well.

In this study, I was specifically examining how school counselors approach spiritual issues in their work with students. It is possible that this is only one area of identity that school counselors are not broaching, probing, or exploring with students. Participants did not talk much about addressing others aspects of diverse identity such as race or ethnicity; it could be beneficial to explore these areas in future studies. It is

possible that spirituality is one of a number of important areas of cultural identity with which school counselors feel uncomfortable and potentially avoid addressing.

Participants' lack of discussion around other aspects of diverse identity indicates that this could be an important avenue for future research.

While school counselors' perspectives were the focus of this study, researchers of future studies could interview adolescent students to gain their perspectives on exploring meaning, developing their identity, and expressing their spiritual selves in the school setting. Exploring the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the students themselves would likely provide important information to understanding as to what school counselors and counselor educators need to do to best facilitate meaningful counseling practice in these areas.

Finally, future studies could include survey research based on these qualitative findings that could include larger sample sizes and more generalizable results. School counselors, adolescents, and counselor educators could be surveyed regarding their perspectives in these areas. Combined results from additional qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies could inform and influence both practice and preparation regarding the ethical and effective practice of counseling work around meaning and spirituality with adolescent students.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore and elicit the voices of school counselors in regard to their perspectives and practices around meaning and spirituality with adolescent students. Greater insight was developed into how school counselors are doing this work

and why they are avoiding other aspects of this work, specifically in regard to spirituality. There are many practical implications for school counselors to increase competence and awareness in their work, as well as for counselor educators to provide more meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for their school counseling students. There is limited generalizability due to the nature of the research, but the suggested applications are likely relevant for most school counselors and counselor educators to consider. Future research can continue to explore these areas through both qualitative and quantitative inquiries.

References

- Adolescence. (2009). In *Mosby's Medical Dictionary (8th ed.)*. Retrieved from <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/adolescence>
- American School Counselor Association. (2005). *The ASCA National Model: A framework for school counseling programs* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- American School Counselor Association. (2009). The role of the professional school counselor. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=327&sl=341&contentid=341>
- American School Counselor Association. (2012). Why middle school counselors? Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=231>
- Benson, P. L. (2004). Emerging themes in research on adolescent spiritual and religious development. *Applied Developmental Science, 8*(1), 47-50.
- Berrios, R., & Lucca, N. (2006). Qualitative methodology in counseling research: Recent contributions and challenges for a new century. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 84*(2), 174-186.
- Bjerkeset, O., Nordahl, H., Romundstad, P., & Gunnell, D. (2010). Personality traits, self-esteem, and sense of meaning in life as predictors for suicide: The Norwegian hunt cohort. *European Psychiatry, 25*, 1681.
- Blair, R. G. (2004). Helping older adolescents search for meaning in depression. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 26*(4), 333-347.

- Bongers, I. L., Koot, H. M., Van der Ende, J., & Verhulst, F. C. (2004). Developmental trajectories of externalizing behaviors in childhood and adolescence. *Child Development, 75*(5), 1523-1537.
- Branthoover, H., Desmond, K. J., & Bruno, M. L. (2010). Strategies to operationalize CACREP standards in school counselor education. *Journal of Counselor Preparation & Supervision, 2*(1), 37-47.
- Briggs, M. K., Akos, P., Czyszczon, G., Eldridge, A. (2011). Assessing and promoting spiritual wellness as a protective factor in secondary schools. *Counseling and Values, 55*(2), 171-184.
- Briggs, M.K., & Shoffner, M.F. (2006). Spiritual wellness and depression: Testing a theoretical model with older adolescents and midlife adults. *Counseling and Values, 51*, 5-20.
- Bronk, K. C., Hill, P. L., Lapsley, D. K., Talib, T. L., & Finch, H. (2009). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(6), 500-510.
- Bruce, M., & Cockreham, D. (2004). Enhancing the spiritual development of adolescent girls. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(5), 334-342.
- Burke, M. T., Hackney, H., Hudson, P., Miranti, J., Watts, G.A., & Epp, L. (1999). Spirituality, religion, and CACREP curriculum standards. *Journal of Counseling & Development 77*(3), 251-257.

Burrow, A. L., O'Dell, A. C., & Hill, P. L. (2010). Profiles of a developmental asset:

Youth purpose as a context for hope and well-being. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 39*, 1265-1273.

Cervoni, A., & DeLucia-Waack, J. (2011). Role conflict and ambiguity as predictors of

job satisfaction in high school counselors. *Journal Of School Counseling, 9*(1), 1-30.

Choudhuri, D., Glauser, A., & Peregoy, J. (2004). Guidelines for writing a qualitative

manuscript for the *Journal of Counseling & Development. Journal of Counseling and Development, 82*, 443-446.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

(2009). 2009 standards. Retrieved from

<http://www.cacrep.org/2009Standards.html>

Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five*

approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

D'Amico, E. I., Ellickson, P. L., Collins, R. L., Martino, S., & Klein, D. J. (2005).

Processes linking adolescent problems to substance-use problems in late young adulthood. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 66*(6), 766-775.

Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during

adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(3), 119-128.

Day-Vines, N. L., Wood, S. M., Grothaus, T., Craigen, L., Holman, A., Dotson-Blake,

K., and Douglass, M. J. (2007). Broaching the subjects of race, ethnicity, and

- culture during the counseling process. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 85, 401-409.
- Divjak, Z. Z. (2010). The perspectives of modern upbringing from the viewpoint of Frankl's logotherapy. *Journal of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences*, (2), 60-66.
- Education Trust (2012). *Transforming school counseling*. Retrieved from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/tsc>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Frankl, V. E. (1967). *Psychotherapy and existentialism: Selected papers on logotherapy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Gold, J. M. (2010). *Counseling and spirituality: Integrating spiritual and clinical orientations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Hage, S.M., Hopson, A., Siegel, M., Payton, G., & DeFanti, E. (2006). Multicultural training in spirituality: An interdisciplinary review. *Counseling and Values* 50(3), 217-234.
- Hagedorn, W. B. (2005). Counselor self-awareness and self-exploration of religious and spiritual beliefs: Know thyself. In C.S. Cashwell & J.S. Young (Eds.), *Integrating spirituality and religion into counseling: A guide to competent practice*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Hayes, R. L., & Paisley, P. O. (2002). Transforming school counselor preparation programs. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(3), 169-176.

- Hays, D. G., & Wood, C. (2011). Infusing qualitative traditions in counseling research designs. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 89*(3), 288-295.
- Ho, M. Y., Cheung, F. M., & Cheung, S. F. (2010). The role of meaning in life and optimism in promoting well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences, 48*(5), 658-663.
- Hofstra, M. B., Van der Ende, J., & Verhulst, F. C. (2002). Pathways of self-reported problem behaviors from adolescence into adulthood. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 159*(3), 401-407.
- Hunt, B. (2011). Publishing qualitative research in counseling journals. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 89*(3), 296-300.
- Inhelder, B., & Piaget, J. (1958). *The growth of logical thinking from childhood to adolescence*. New York: Basic Books.
- Khan, M., & Mian, A. (2010). 'The one truly serious philosophical problem': Ethical aspects of suicide. *International Review of Psychiatry, 22*(3), 288-293.
- Kiang, L., & Fuligni, A. J. (2010). Meaning in life as a mediator of ethnic identity and adjustment among adolescents from Latin, Asian, and European American backgrounds. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 39*, 1253-1264.
- King, P. E., Boyatzis, C. J. (2004). Exploring adolescent spiritual and religious development: Current and future theoretical and empirical perspectives. *Applied Developmental Science, 8*(1), 2-6.
- Kline, W. B. (2008). Developing and submitting credible qualitative manuscripts. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 47*, 210-217.

- Langle, A., & Skyes, B-M. (2006). Viktor Frankl- Advocate for humanity: On his 100th birthday. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 46*(1), 36-47.
- Lerner, R. M., von Eye, A., Lerner, J. V., Lewin-Bizan, S., & Bowers, E. P. (2010). Special issue introduction: The meaning and measurement of thriving: A view of the issues. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 39*, 707-719.
- Martin, P. J. (2002). Transforming school counseling: A national perspective. *Theory Into Practice, 41*(3), 148-153.
- McLean, K. C., Breen, A. V., & Fournier, M. A. (2010). Constructing the self in early, middle, and late adolescent boys: Narrative identity, individuation, and well-being. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 20*(1), 166-187.
- Melton, A. M. A., & Schulenberg, S. E. (2007). On the relationship between meaning in life and boredom proneness: Examining a logotherapy postulate. *Psychological Reports, 101*, 1016-1022.
- Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miranti, J. G. (2009). Historical development of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC). Retrieved from <http://aservic.org/about/history>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moyer, M. (2011). Effects of non-guidance activities, supervision, and student-to-counselor ratios on school counselor burnout. *Journal of School Counseling, 9*(5), 1-31.

- New Jersey Education Association (2012). The new tenure law. Retrieved from http://www.njea.org/njea-media/pdf/TenureLawQ-A_2012.pdf?1362592268595.
- Ozawa-de Silva, C. (2008). Too lonely to die alone: Internet suicide pacts and existential suffering in Japan. *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry*, 32(4), 516-551.
- Parrish, M. S., Stanard, R. P., & Cobia, D. C. (2008). Using existential-humanistic approaches in counseling adolescents with inappropriate sexual behaviors. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development*, 47(1), 26-41.
- Pérusse, R., & Goodnough, G. E. (2005). Elementary and secondary school counselors' perceptions of graduate preparation programs: A national study. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 45(2), 109-118.
- Petersen, A. C. (2008). Spiritual development in adolescence: Toward enriching theories, research, and professional practice. *New Directions For Youth Development*, 118, 119-130. doi: 10.1002/yd.266
- Purvis, G. C., Jr. (1995). A philosophy of youth. In J. Fary, R. Bulka, & W. Sahakian (Eds.), *Finding meaning in life: Logotherapy* (pp. 203-212). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.
- Ruffin, J. E. (1984). The anxiety of meaninglessness. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 63, 40-42.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sigelman, C. K., & Rider, E. A. (2012). *Life-span: Human development* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

- Sink, C. A. (2004). Spirituality and comprehensive school counseling programs. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(5), 309-315.
- Sink, C. A., & Devlin, J. M. (2011). Student spirituality and school counseling: Issues, opportunities, and challenges. *Counseling and Values, 55*(2), 130-148.
- Sink, C. A., & Richmond, L. (2004). Introducing spirituality to professional school counseling. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(5), 291-292.
- Smith-Augustine, S. (2011). School counselors' comfort and competence with spirituality issues. *Counseling and Values, 55*(2), 149-156.
- Steen, S., Bauman, S., & Smith, J. (2008). The preparation of professional school counselors for group work. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 33*(3), 253-269.
- Steen, S., & Rudd, T. (2009). Preparing the 21st century school counselor: Alternatives and implications for counselor educators. *Counseling & Human Development, 42*(2), 1-12.
- Toshalis, E. (2008). A question of "faith": Adolescent spirituality in the public schools. In M. Sadowski (Ed.), *Adolescents at school: Perspectives on youth, identity and education* (pp.189-205). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.
- United States Department of Labor and JIST Works. (2010). *Young person's occupational outlook handbook* (7th ed.). Indianapolis, Indiana : JIST Pub.
- Witmer, J. M., & Sweeney, T. J. (1992). A holistic model for wellness and prevention over the life span. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 72*, 140-148.

Yeh, C. J., Borrero, N. E., Shea, M. (2011). Spirituality as a cultural asset for culturally diverse youth in urban schools. *Counseling and Values, 55*(2), 185-198.

Young, J., Cashwell, C. S., & Woolington, V. (1998). The relationship of spirituality to cognitive and moral development and purpose in life: An exploratory investigation. *Counseling and Values, 43*(1), 63-70.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introduction to the interview: I am not interested in your specific work place or organization, but rather about your experiences with meaning in your work life. Please do not identify your work site or organization by name when you discuss your work experiences.

Interview Questions:

- Adolescence is seen as a time when youth explore issues of meaning and purpose. I am interested in exploring how school counselors think about and address issues of meaning and purpose when counseling adolescent students.
 - Have these kinds of issues come up in your work with students?
 - Could you give me an example?
- Research has demonstrated that spirituality and/or religion is a main avenue through which many people discover a sense of meaning and purpose. Did spirituality or religious beliefs of the students come into play in these discussions?
- What is your own sense of spirituality or religious beliefs?
- As a school counselor, how do you feel about discussing meaning-making with students? Spiritual and religious beliefs?
- What factors do you think contribute to your viewpoint in this area?
- How prepared do you feel to do this kind of work? Do you consider it a part of the counseling process?
- Are there certain situations or presenting issues where you would be more likely to use a meaning-based approach to counseling students? Less likely?

- How did you self-identify on the demographic sheet? Can you talk about where spirituality or religious beliefs fit into your own life and sense of purpose?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Focus Group:

Questions will be emergent based on individual interviews and findings. The group is designed to be discussion oriented and generative. I anticipate that I might ask questions such as the following:

- I am interested in how you as school counselors think about supporting teens in their own search for meaning. Could you talk about that?
- What prepared you as a school counselor to handle the kinds of questions adolescents ask about meaning and purpose in life?
- What would you like to tell me about working with youth around meaning or spirituality from your experience that I may not have thought to ask?

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

1) Please state your age.

2) How many years have you been working as a school counselor?

a. How many of those years have you worked at a middle school?

b. If you have worked at another level, please specify the number of years you have worked in each setting (e.g. high school, elementary school).

c. What geographic setting are you currently working in (suburban, urban, rural, etc.)?

d. What settings have you worked in in the past?

3) What race or ethnicity do you identify yourself with?

4) What, if any, religious or spiritual beliefs do you subscribe to?

