AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS ON
VIRTUAL COUNSELING IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN THE
BEIRUT REGION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by
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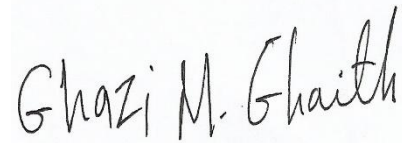

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ABSTRACT
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Fatimeh Bassam Jaber   for   Master of Arts

Major: School Guidance and Counseling

Title: The Perceptions of School Counselors on Virtual Counseling in Private Schools in the Beirut Region

Virtual counseling has become an increased necessity as a result of the current pandemic as well as the need for methods that comply with the continuous changes and advancements. Studies conducted have shown that the perceptions of counselors of the benefits and barriers reflect whether or not the counseling service will be successful. This study is a descriptive research design following a qualitative approach. The purpose of this study is threefold: (a) to explore the school counselor's perceptions of the benefits and barriers they encounter when using virtual counseling, (b) to explore the perceived differences between conducting virtual counseling and in-person counseling, (c) to determine if students' characteristics differ in their participation in virtual counseling from the school counselors' perspective. Five schools in the Beirut region were contacted as they were known to have virtual counseling programs. Both the schools and counselors were purposively chosen. Eleven counselors were chosen using a non-probability sampling across all cycles. The study included individual semi-structured interviews and a focus carried out with the specified counselors, both of which entailed open-ended questions. Four themes were derived from the interviews conducted: (1) Environmental Adaptation, (2) Working with Technology, (3) Counselor's Approach, and (4) Preparation and Training for Virtual Counseling. Subthemes were then discussed in detail, and based on these findings the interview questions for the focus group were guided. Being that it is qualitative research, the interpretational analysis was carried out to assess the obtained data. The results showed that the main benefits have to do with time and method flexibility, the main barriers were issues of privacy and change of work dynamics. The results showed that the new changes, the counselor's experience, along with personal attributes of counselors and students all influenced the efficiency of the counseling sessions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background Information

A primitive internet tool known as a modem was created in the early 1950s, this tool enhanced communication and popularized network technology. Throughout the 1960s and 1990s, the internet grew and enabled communication links to exist transnationally (Abbate, 2017). Such tools weren't only relevant to "technology exclusive" aspects rather they crossed into various domains including counseling. Various initiatives took place however David Sommer's invention is amongst the most recognized since he is considered the pioneer of "e-therapy" which reflects what virtual counseling is today. Sommers initiated this practice mean to facilitate accessibility to counseling services for people all around the globe. He relied on the use of emails as well as video conferencing and part of his practice was working with over 300 individuals from the year 1995 to 1998 (Ainsworth, 2002). Technology is evolving, therefore the interactions between information technology and the health professions continue to grow. Granello (2000) found that as the relationship between technology and health care has existed for years, counselors in the United States took an interest in integrating computer technology into counseling in the 1990s and within the same timeline, such practice was introduced in schools.

School counseling is a practice where the practitioner utilizes different tools to support students in overcoming barriers towards academic achievement as well as supporting social-emotional development (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). The inception of school counseling as a specialty has emerged in the early 1900s. Lambia and

Williamson (2004) found that the focus of counseling services was on character development, socially appropriate behaviors, and vocational planning. These aspects have shifted over time, moving from vocational and educational decision-making to personal growth, then to responsive services "at-risk" populations and ultimately focusing on developmental programs available for all students.

While counseling has been established as a core aspect of school programs globally, this has not been the same case in Lebanon. It is essential to identify the achievements in counseling corresponding to a timeline to identify domain gaps. The counseling area's advancements were slow to develop, and the developments that took place were mainly observed in the career guidance (Ayyash-Abdo et al., 2010). There were early mentions and projects coordinated including the Career Guidance Center at the American University of Beirut in 1985 as a response to the needs of counselors in educational institutes, this nevertheless was not enough to develop further improvements in this domain (Ayyash-Abdo et al., 2010). This was not the only effort promoted, even local organizations including that of the Hariri Foundation initiated a Career Guidance Department that eventually did not yield much more results than the American University of Beirut initiative. The surge in the need for counseling was instigated by the unstable situation including the external and civil war that influenced scholars and educators to implement the school counseling project in the educational establishment. While this should have been enough to force change, the financial means only allowed private schools the luxury of having a counseling program.

As aforementioned counseling programs are exclusive to private initiatives, there was no official documentation of what a counselor's role entails in Lebanon's context. Khansa (2015) found that in a study conducted with 11 counselors, there were

various inconsistencies observed in what was expected of a counselor to carry this further influenced the lack of a coherent description of a counselor's role and function. Although there were various discrepancies in the counselors' role, there were common reward feelings amongst the participants (counselors). One of the most common rewards was "being able to be part of students' lives" (Ayyash-Abdo et al., p.15). Such discrepancies and issues can also be reflected in different mediums of counseling. It is nevertheless essential to explore what the medium is, and how it functions initially.

Virtual learning and counseling have evolved over the years and have become established aspects of schools and educational institutions, locally and worldwide. One of the reasons why virtual counseling has become universal is how accessible it is now (Baker & Ray, 2011). Virtual counseling is not limited to synchronous methods (video chatting and calling), but also asynchronous tools (emails and texting). Such practices are not necessarily used exclusively in various counseling processes, a combination of both instruments is being utilized (Richards & Vigano, 2013). To put it simply, Richards and Vigano (2013) developed the following definition of what virtual counseling is and what it entails "defining virtual counseling as the delivery of therapeutic interventions in cyberspace where the communication between a trained professional counselor and client(s) is facilitated using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, provided as a stand-alone service or as an adjunct to other therapeutic interventions" (Richards & Vigano, 2013, p.994). The integration of internet and counseling is a new phenomenon which can be labeled as "cyber-therapy, "e-therapy", "virtual coach therapy", and "cyber- counseling" to present virtual counseling (Smith & Reynolds, 2002).

Counseling constitutes initially building rapport, creating a safe environment, and mainly having reciprocal trust between the counselor and the counselee (Corey, 2008). Such aspects are equally essential in virtual counseling being that the purpose of such methods is ontologically the same. Hence, it is only likely that the barriers counselors face in accomplishing the aforementioned are also translated into virtual counseling. However, there are other barriers placed by this novice method, which are essential to explore to ensure that proper counseling is being provided. Various studies have broached barriers that both counselors and counselees might struggle with. Such obstacles can vary from technical issues to psychological discomfort placed by the unusual method dictated by circumstance (Dunn, 2012). Since counseling is mainly concerned with the counselor and the counselee, their perceptions of the barriers must be examined to understand the most contributing challenges and be able to overcome them.

Various researchers have examined these issues across different groups. One of the studies conducted by Bambling et al. (2008) found that young people tend to be more comfortable using such technological tools than older groups being that the tool comes almost second nature to them. Within the same research, both advantages and disadvantages were tested, with the following findings being the highlight of the study. As an advantage, counselors can better enhance their counseling by returning to full records of sessions. On the other hand, the highlighted disadvantage was that the tools used in virtual counseling might impede the process, which results in clarification problems rather than focusing on the counselee's goals. Written communication can allow the counselee to revise their statements without worrying about it coming out wrong (Baker & Ray, 2011).

On the other hand, another aspect has been discussed by Bambling et al. (2008) which was a disadvantage of the very same tool. Non-verbal cues, tone of voice, and as slow-paced communication all act as an integral part of communication and a mean of establishing a therapeutic relationship (Bambling et al., 2008). Failing to perceive that will likely influence the message being conveyed.

Various other researchers have shared ground on what might be the advantages and disadvantages of these tools. Some of which have added the notion of anonymity and disclosure including Baker and Ray (2011) who stated that communicating through computers or other technological devices can enhance the perception of anonymity and create more comfort for the counselee to open up and share. A new discussed aspect concerning virtual counseling has been examined by Glasheen et al. (2013); such elements include the knowledge of the tools, the acceptability of the tools, and how both factors influence the counseling process. Both the counselor and the student can have a better experience in the session when such factors are addressed. It is more likely for a student to benefit from a counseling session if he/she is familiar with the tools rather than one that is not (Glasheen et al., 2013). Glasheen et al. (2013) further discussed the notion of ethical and legal implications and how they are supposed to be integrated into the school counseling curriculum to ensure safety and efficacy.

Researchers suggest that counselors must evolve their practice to meet the needs of the population. Accordingly, various researches were developing and are still developing to ensure that the methods by which counseling is being carried out still serve their purpose.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is threefold: (a) to explore the school counselor's perceptions of the benefits and barriers they encounter when using virtual counseling, (b) to explore the perceived differences between conducting virtual counseling and in-person counseling, (c) and to determine if students' characteristics differ in their participation in virtual counseling from the school counselors' perspective.

Research Questions

Qualitative data were gathered to provide answers to the research questions mentioned below:

1. From the counselors' perceptions, what are the perceived differences between conducting virtual counseling and in-person counseling?

2. From the counselors' perceptions, what are the most contributing benefits and barriers that school counselors encounter during virtual counseling in private schools in the Beirut region?

3. Does participation in virtual counseling differ as a result of students' characteristics in the perception of school counselors?

Rationale

Schools allow for a structured environment where students can express or address their personal and academic concerns. School counselors have been using the internet and continue to integrate computer technology into their practice and counseling programs (Refven et al., 2000). There is slight information on using virtual counseling in the school setting. Counseling programs should take into consideration how frequently students feel like contacting a counselor online, or whether or not they would prefer face-to-face counseling? Youth might experience different challenges;

however, they might not seek help for different reasons (Glasheen et al., 2016). Such information would be necessary for the counseling community to be able to serve the students in the school.

Various milestones, as well as events in history, have ignited the need for virtual methods, one of which is the outbreak of COVID-19. The onset of COVID-19 had major effects on various aspects of people's lives, especially where students are concerned. Educational systems all around the world had to adapt in very little time to new means of education in order to ensure that students are provided with the education necessary (Aucejo et al., 2020). Educational institutions had to rely on Zoom, WebEx, and other applications to carry out their meetings. There was a wave of alternative options for every activity that required physical presence, accordingly it is only fit that aspects related to student's well-being especially in such critical times were developed.

As aforementioned, virtual learning's use was forced recently as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, virtual teaching is completely new in Lebanon, and it is not integrated into the school curriculum (Rouadi & Anouti, 2020). The novelty of virtual education poses further challenges not only for education means but can also be transferred into virtual counseling. Research has shown that students' mental health is being affected negatively by the sole use of virtual education. It is important to note that prior to the use of virtual teaching, the research did stress teaching students non-academic soft skills such as empathy, determination, and self-care. The need for such focus amid the current challenging situation further increased (Halupa, 2016).

Being an educator in Lebanon and witnessing these challenges firsthand, further instigated my interest to carry out my research where I work and know most. As an educator, I've been working in a school that lacked a counseling program but had a

part-time counselor. I am one of the teachers who understand how important mental health is and how much it might affect a student's academic achievement; however, I would not always refer the students to the counselor and I would prefer to deal with arising issues on my own. The counselor is a part-timer; accordingly, she is not always accessible. Such an issue further increased with virtual teaching. In the virtual environment teachers including myself had to deal with all students more or less equally regardless of their struggles, this is why schools should focus on the emotional side of learning including establishing a virtual counseling program.

During my counseling practicum, I was able to experience how counseling sessions took place and the impact they had on students' academic achievement and mental health. I was able to discuss with the Middle school counselor the positive changes students underwent through counseling, how virtual counseling took place as well as the block sessions where students discussed lessons that had to do with social and emotional learning. Hence; a school counselor should be there to provide the teacher with the support he/she needs to address the students' educational goals and needs (Khansa, 2015).

As aforementioned virtual counseling is quite new and skeptical within this practice sheds light on how little information we have concerning this medium of counseling. There is not a lot of research carried out in this domain to determine efficacy, however, researchers, such as Rochlen et al. (2004) have provided an extensive summary of the challenges and benefits of this mean, which can be referred to. Some of the barriers expected were also presented in a study conducted in Malaysia. While the initial research focused on the counselor and the technological tools, the

focus here was on the communication hinges (e.g. non-verbal cues) that might exist in the absence of physical and face-to-face interaction (Zamani et al., 2010).

A research carried out in Singapore combined both barriers mentioned in the earlier researches, however children at the concrete operational stage of cognitive development as indicated by Piaget were the focus of the study, and the results suggested several issues. With regards to Piaget's notion, the results stressed stated that because the learning aids which Piaget stresses for this age will be absent this will likely create barriers for the counseling process (Kit et al., 2017). Students of different ages and grade levels tend to express themselves in different ways however this is why virtual counseling might hinder their process of development with the absence of learning aids. Apart from the issues related to Piaget's stage, good written language, technological knowledge, as well as counselor's qualifications all, play a major role in decreasing the barriers or intensifying them (Kit et al., 2017). Technological barriers have been highlighted in several studies including one carried out in Kenya. The virtual aimed to be able to connect with as many people as possible from remote areas. The most barrier focused on in this issue, is providing an effective technological medium by redesigning the pre-existing tools (Pattison et al., 2012).

While such researches exist in various countries, there's a gap for such research in Lebanon. Addressing the barriers that counselors might face in virtual counseling can yield results that would enhance the virtual counseling experience as a whole and set a footing for further research to develop. The study will also provide the distinct role of school counselors, what their job entails as well as how they are perceived by their students. School counselors should enhance their methods to be able to provide quality counseling. They should not only be aware of the barriers of virtual counseling but also

identify methods or tools to overcome these barriers, this study will create a ground for methods to be guided from.

There are several aspects of research that can be conducted, however, the choice to focus on perceptions relied on previously acquired knowledge. Given (2008) expressed that perceptions are essential in determining human behavior, therefore people behave on the basis of their perception then their behaviors can be predicted. People's s perceptions are influenced by their needs, accordingly learning students' perceptions can indicate their needs allowing the proper enhancement of virtual counseling.

Virtual counseling aims to focus on students' well-being and mental health. Therefore, it's important to consider their perceptions when implementing or establishing a virtual counseling program in the curriculum in educational institutions. Being that the focus is on the interaction taking place between counselors and students, both perceptions must be taken into consideration in order to facilitate and improve the process of virtual counseling. Excluding either perception will result in a biased and incomplete judgment. Students are in a sense the benefactors of this process, not taking into account their perceptions will not allow for the formation of a plan for virtual counseling improvement.

Significance

The study's purpose was to contribute to both theory and practice, in order to assist in filling a gap in research that's rooted in the lack of in-depth studies carried out within the domain of virtual counseling. Studying counselors' perceptions with regards to virtual counseling can help provide reasons as to why there are only a handful of counselors that offer virtual counseling. (Hoffman et al., 2000). Mallen and Vogel

(2005) found that virtual counseling allows counselors to access populations in rural areas across the country, hence such findings can provide further information for the preparation and training necessary for effective services to be provided to students.

The study also provided the training and coursework participating virtual counselors underwent, this also acted as a guide for counselors new to the domain of virtual counseling (Lee, 2000). Open-ended questions were carried out with a number of counselors, to provide an in-depth perspective on the right approaches to providing virtual counseling. observing and sharing counselors' perspectives on barriers related to virtual counseling can also assist educational institutes in preparing for virtual counselor training. Learning through data collection tools about the most appropriate virtual technologies can offer facilitated and ongoing communication between the school counselors and the students of different cycles (Steele et al., 2015).

Successful virtual counseling will allow counselors to provide students of all cycles (K-12) with individualized data and direct feedback tailored to the students' interests and values (Savitz et al., 2020). Conclusively, this study will be valuable and effective for the practice and preparation for future virtual counselors as well as the procedures used by different counseling organizations about ethics and legislation. Schools can use the study findings to provide supplementary information concerning the preparation of the virtual counselor's skill training to ensure the effectiveness of the counseling service in school.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to summarize the initiation of school counseling, its conversion over time into a domain of its own. The importance of school counseling across different cycles was shed light on post to delving into a section on technology integrated educational means. Technology integration and counseling evolution allowed the production of virtual counseling. The chapter focused on the perceptions of counselors and students as it plays a significant role in the successful implementation of the counseling process. Studies were included to reflect the most significant variables, which turned out to be age and gender. Implications for practice that will enhance the virtual counseling program were then discussed. Finally, the American school counseling association (ASCA) was established as a root for the research's path.

School Counseling

School counseling was initiated as a result of continuous changing needs, that varied across the social, political, and economic change. Lambie and Williamson (2004) found that the surge for school counseling is considered progressive, however various studies maintain that the initial perception of this need and its molding into existence was shaped during the social reform movement in the 19th century.

During such prevailing years, counselors held educational positions, and their roles were not defined as separate from that of educators. Their roles weren't exclusive to guidance, counseling as well as dealing with mental health issues that students might undergo. A balanced method to counseling was adopted by the American School Counselor Association, and this approach served as the root for various counseling

programs and methods to be developed up till now (Dahir, 2004). The approach had eclectic domains including small group counseling, classroom interventions, consultation with students' parents, and external agencies. Such variety facilitated the adoption of such a methodology. Such a notion nevertheless, does not mean that the approaches are complete, they are continuously required to be examined for reformation (Kaffenberger & O'Rorke-Trigiani, 2013). With the development of counseling across time, various challenges arose including (changing demographics, cultural aspects as well as technological advancements). These are amongst the major aspects that required changes in counseling processes. Lebanon's initiatives were not far date-wise from the initial startup of counseling efforts, however, the steps that were meant to continue were ignored.

Various initiatives were carried out in Lebanon to initiate and develop counseling services; however, such efforts' success was exclusive to the American University of Beirut's center in the late 1980's- the early 1990's, counseling was focused on career guidance. The center was relocated to Rafic Harriri hospital and was adopted as part of the administration. Ayyash-Abdo et al. (2010) found that it is essential to note that while these advancements occurred then, the scope of counseling wasn't widened beyond the information mentioned. Further efforts carried out were all exclusive to private initiatives, mainly in elite schools and universities.

Private initiatives carried out stressed different aspects regarding the importance of counseling and the counselor's role in different cycles. Khansa (2014) discussed the importance of counseling in schools because students evolve across different cycles and stages. In elementary, students might have developmental problems such as trying to understand themselves, their peers, and their school. In such stages, students start

identifying what they value. The school counselor in this particular situation would entail guiding the students and planning strategically the steps that would enable them to resolve their issues. The role of the counselor would also include aiding students in promoting their self-image and confidence along with their peer's family interaction.

In the intermediate cycle, students will start recognizing their personalities and would follow their friends' rules rather than their family. The counselor will guide as well as improve the students' skills in proper self-perception. The students will assess their skills and potential and start preparing for their future. The counselor will then be there to develop their decision-making process concerning their future. Khansa (2014) also elaborated on the role of a Counselor which is to provide guidance, support, and professional assistance. The counselor's role in the school is viewed differently by the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators. The perceptions of teachers, administration, and parents should be taken into consideration when setting a counseling plan.

Understanding perceptions and expectations enable counselors to provide what is required and continue enhancing the counseling process. In terms of Lebanon, studies have shown contradictory information to other studies carried out abroad. Studies have shed light on the issue that the longer the teachers' experience, the less likely they will be willing to refer a student to a counselor, rather than interfering and intending to resolve the issue on their own. Teachers play a major role in the student's view of perceptions and education. If an essential person like the teacher view consultancy negatively, this will likely impede the process of counseling by either affecting student's decision to participate in counseling while also leaving various issues unsolved.

A study was carried out across the Arab world, the study showed that there was a positive perception of counselors in schools in the mentioned Arab countries, excluding Lebanon. In Lebanon, the study showed that teachers had a negative view of counseling in schools. This does not necessarily mean that counseling is not efficient in Lebanon, rather there is a gap in terms of teachers' perceptions which can impede the enhancement and acceptance of counseling in schools (Khansa, 2014). This also influences the presence of counselors in Lebanon where the post itself will only be filled out by foreigners for several reasons. One of the reasons includes negative perceptions of such a domain and which ultimately hinder universities' choice of creating as many needed options of counseling. This ultimately influences the other reason mentioned which is "options of counseling", it is only logical that with such a negative view of this domain and lack of opportunities, to have counseling perceived as an external material that is only associated with foreigners rather than something that can become natural to us and learn from it.-

The Integration of Technology in Education

Tanrikulu (2009) claimed that technology in the past few decades has emerged and evolved from a primitive innovation to a tool utilized in every aspect of people's modern life. Another aspect discussed by Tanrikulu is that in such an emergence, technology has paved its way into education as a tool of facilitated communication and learning improvement.

Gibson and Oberg (2004) stated that In the mid-1990s, public schools across North America, have reformed their curriculum by adopting technology use. The use of technology wasn't only aimed at enhancing the use of "teaching methods" for students alone but as a facilitating tool for professional development. Internet's use has clearly

shifted according to the need, needless to mention though the use of technology continued on the high spectrum and eventually became utilized not only in North America but transnationally.

Research in the 1990s showed that the implementation of new technologies' success relied on: attitudes of the teacher's towards innovation, adoption of novel models of instruction and learning, the progression of teacher's technological skills as well as the availability of technological tools.

Internet and technological advancements have shifted into different mediums, such shift was influenced by different factors. The situational changes specifically the outbreak of COVID-19 have forged a greater necessity for it to become the main tool for carrying out educational processes. Schools were forced to rely solely on internet-based methods to carry out the curriculum. While virtual communication methods existed prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 the need for teachers to rely solely on these methods, enabled researchers to delve into the barriers that might exist when using technological methods for education.

The television and the radio were the only two foremost tools that have been used when teaching virtual emerged during the 60s in Great Britain. The National Council for Education had been founded during that time and was renovated to the International Council for Distance International Development in 1982 to allow financial funding from the Internal Development Bank (Atallah & Bou Melhem, 2020). In this modern era, virtual learning has been integrated into education due to the rapid advancement of technology.

On the third of March 2020, the coronavirus prevented students from regularly attending their daily classes in schools and universities. Schools were closed in more

than 177 countries worldwide, therefore solutions were required to save the school year (Anouti & Rouadin, 2020). It is known that university degrees attained by students through distance learning are rejected and not recognized in Lebanon. Therefore, virtual teaching and learning, especially in schools have never been examined and mostly rely on the traditional teaching methods where students are taught by teachers in class (Atallah & Bou Melhem, 2020). Teachers used social media platforms and internet sites as a teaching alternative in their classrooms. Muller (2016) found that several educational institutions failed to understand that integrating these platforms in teaching can reform education.

Virtual learning is an eclectic approach that utilizes a range of information, teaching methods as well as both internet and intranet as a means to educate students. Some of these tools *include* but are not exclusive to blogs, chat, e-mail, web-based resources, and video chats.

Virtual learning is described as a learning experience that utilizes both synchronous and asynchronous methods. Basilia et al. (2020) explored the different devices generally utilized including phones, laptops, tablets; devices that generally have internet access. Being that virtual education has become the sole method for education, various suggestions were provided on ensuring the right education tools. The following results were compiled amongst various sample groups: the video conference should not comprise of more than 40 to 50 students, the internet connection should be acceptable, lectures should be accessible on all devices, discussions with students should be carried out, as well as the provision of instant feedback and assignments from students.

Types of Virtual Learning

Finkelstein (2006) discussed three main types of virtual learning that involve the use of different tools discussed above. Synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning, the three types of virtual learning have been used independently or have been merged. Synchronous virtual learning is real-time learning and resembles a virtual classroom where learners and their teachers are virtual and are able to interact from different locations at the same time. Learners can ask questions and receive immediate feedback and clarification from their teachers through chat, videoconferencing, and teleconferencing. It provides learners to interact with their classmates and lectures throughout the session.

Another type of virtual learning is asynchronous learning which is known as self-paced learning and to be learner-directed. Learning is delivered through the web, discussion forums, email, as well as eBook's CDS and DVDs. The learner can take the virtual classes at their preferable time and finish the program at their own pace. The internet is a medium of support where the learner downloads different course documents and has chats with the instructor or even co-learners (Hiltz & Goldman, 2004).

The third type of virtual counseling is known as hybrid learning. Wainwright (2011) emphasized that hybrid learning was known as blended learning which is a combination of virtual and face-to-face education. It allows classroom interaction and live instruction which personalizes learning, differentiates instruction from one student to another, and permits thoughtful reflections. This approach extends education through the novel use of information and communication tools. This will enhance engagement

and learning through virtual activities to the course curriculum, and increase effectiveness by lessening the lecture period

There are three core challenges identified for virtual teaching which are personalized instruction and learning, scale, and distance. Such core challenges act as an umbrella where various other challenges are associated with each aspect. In terms of distance, technological tools need to be considered. Internet issues including speed, installation process all act as factors that can impede the educational experience as a whole.

The Effects of Virtual Education on Mental Health

Other aspects including boredom and disengagement discourage students from being attentive. The flexibility and free time that Virtual learning can provide, allow procrastination and in a sense lack of commitment to the class. Personal attention is also a major issue that students within virtual learning face. Two-way interactions are necessary for both teachers and students, and they are generally hard to implement using virtual tools.

Songs et al. (2004) mention that the goal of a learning process is to have students reach their full learning potential, this is very difficult to attain with processes that are quite mediocre and lack any practical grounds. Students struggle mostly with difficulties in understanding objectives, technical problems, and the feeling of community. In a study conducted, students were found to not be adequately prepared in terms of balancing family and social lives along with the demands of the virtual requirement. Students were also not prepared in terms of using systems utilized in virtual learning (Parkes et al., 2014). Such results indicate the profound effect such issues can have on students' learning experience as a whole.

Efforts should be carried out to humanize the learning process to the best possible extent. Providing personal attention is essential for students to adapt to the new methods and the new environment created. Group forums, as well as social media, can all be used as means to enhance communication with and amongst students. Partlow and Gibbs (2003) state that communication is the key as it is difficult to try to reach students via emails, different messaging applications, video calls, etc. Materials should be such that it encourages students to practice and also enhance their abilities. Virtual programs should be creative, interactive, student-centered, relevant, and group-based to provide maximum efficiency.

Such unmet demands and continuous strenuous changes placed a heavier burden on students' shoulders. The burden mentioned along with the effects of the outbreak of COVID-19 on people's mental health further necessitated access to counselors. Internet tools allowed such a process to be carried out.

The Integration of Technology in Counseling

Amongst aspects of technology, the internet can be regarded as one of the most influential and necessary innovations. Internet in tandem with other technological advancements has become an essential tool in all sectors, whether educational institutes., business enterprises, or even medical centers.

The integration of computer technology and counseling was initiated in the 1960s with a program called "Eliza" (Binik et al., 1997). It was software that was created even before a large population used the internet. It acted as a person-centered counselor that responded to the counselee's statements, selecting among several statements it had in its memory. Sekerler (2008) mentions that although this software

was the first example of how individuals receive a counselor's help through technology, however, it did not gain practical or commercial use.

Within some decades, Cornell University had established a computer-mediated program called "Ask Uncle Ezra" in1986. This program was created to support its student population. With the developments of internet technology, individuals can access novel mental health services that will help overcome personal barriers (Derrig-Palumbo & Zeine, 2005).

Defining Virtual Counseling

Youth are a susceptible population with different needs as they regularly experience an extensive range of challenges and issues that have to do with growth and development as well as mental health concerns (King et al., 2006). There are a plethora of emotional and social needs therefore, virtual schools must offer counseling services virtually to address the areas of counseling such as academic, careers, personal, and social services (Currie, 2010). Virtual counseling is defined as counseling where a qualified counselor uses tools of technology to provide behavioral and mental health services to counselees in different locations (Mallen & Vogel, 2005). The integration of the internet and counseling is a new occurrence known as virtual counseling. It has been given different labels such as "cyber-therapy, "e-therapy", "virtual coach therapy", and "cyber- counseling" to present virtual counseling (Smith & Reynolds, 2002).

Components of Virtual School Counseling

Maples and Han (2008) state that virtual counseling includes synchronous (video chatting and calling) and asynchronous (emails and texting) tools to address an individual's needs. Each method of communication is used in a certain way. Videoconferencing conveys both audio and video interaction in counseling sessions.

Email counseling is another way where students can send their concerns and have the counselor respond via e-mail. One-on-one or group chat rooms can be organized with the students and counselor to have an in-depth conversation with the counselor however, it's important to address confidentiality issues before engaging in group conversations. Writing can be integrated into virtual counseling which can help improve students' self-reflection. For middle and high school students, career guidance is important therefore, therapeutic software can be used to address students' concerns. Virtual job shadowing, videos, and career software can be used for career exploration and advancement (Currie, 2010).

Steele (2015) suggests that virtual counseling interactions can also be with parents. The counselor would work with parents to address the personal/social, academic, and career domains along with their children on a scheduled basis. Information delivery and interactions through different mediums are integral components of virtual counseling and in 21st- century schooling. The American School Counselor Association and the American Association enforce school counselors to enhance the student's safe and conscientious use of technology to facilitate their career, academic, social, and personal achievement. The counselors themselves should feel competent and confident with these virtual communication technologies.

Perceptions of Counselors and Counselees

Perceptions create insight for researchers to understand multiple realities that are socially constructed. In terms of virtual counseling, perceptions of both counselors and counselees (students in this case) must be looked into, being that they are the main actors within this study. Various studies were conducted focusing on various aspects of perceptions. A study was conducted to examine the acceptability of a proposed "web-

based mental health service". The proposal was situated in a school context while reflecting on barriers, facilitators, and implementation in the views of counselors. The sample covered 145 school counselors to complete the survey. Overall, 82.1% viewed the proposal as a beneficial service for students. Knowledge, personal beliefs, internet accessibility, confidentiality, and privacy were shown to have an effect both positive and negative. The experience was the only background factor that was significantly associated with greater comfort with the proposed service. The study's findings confirmed that there was a greater percentage supporting the proposal however with various suggestions need to be implemented for the proposal to be useful (O'Dea et al., 2017).

Other studies were carried out to test students' mental health post-COVID-19 outbreak and whether virtual counseling can have positive effects. A study carried out, had the objective mentioned, the study adopted snowball sampling and a virtual survey to fit the social distancing measures. The research involved three hundred secondary schools, where participation was voluntary, and 64% of the participants were females. The results showed that one-third of the participating students were classified as having mental distress. Students that had to sit for public exams showed higher levels of distress. The study showed that 40% of the student participant had the intention of using virtual counseling. Various factors influenced students' interests. In this particular study, notions of anonymity that were found in other studies did not serve as influencing factors. Distressed students were more likely to choose virtual counseling as a good method if they had previous positive counseling experience. Distressed students were more concerned about the effectiveness of the counseling rather than the methods and

tools that are needed to carry out a successful virtual counseling session. (Li & Leung, 2020)

Students' Perceptions of Benefits of Virtual Counseling

Paterson et al. (2017) mention in the article a study that was carried out across Scotland and Finland researchers wanted to gain an insight into students' perception of virtual counseling. The study aimed at understanding not only whether students find it beneficial but students were asked to share what they know about virtual counseling. This assisted the researchers in better understanding students' perceptions and where these views are rooted. King et al.(2006) discussed that students conveyed that they felt safer and less emotionally visible engaging in virtual counseling sessions. Some students also mentioned feeling secure in the text setting from the negative emotions the counselor my show. Students were able to post messages on asynchronous discussion boards which permitted thinking and response time. Students had time to reflect on their responses and situations.

According to Paterson et al. (2017), in the study, it was shown that the students had a polarized view on virtual counseling which were technical and counseling stances. With few students choosing a middle ground. "Technical" oriented students viewed virtual counseling as a tool for communication, whereas "counseling" oriented students stated that it was a means to help students communicate without any inhibition. The counseling students also perceived it as an integral part of counseling.

There were various advantages reported by the respondents in the study. A large number of respondents thought that virtual counseling improved the efficiency of their work. They reported that they could carry out work more quickly and more effectively virtual with less repetition in group counseling situations. It was added that respondents

reported that virtual counseling increased flexibility and independence, this in particular with regards to setting a schedule where one sees fit. There was a major emphasis on how "online" counseling can release both counselors and students from restrictions of time, distances, and space. Such advantages also influenced students' decision in seeking counselors' help, and that was exhibited in the student's lower threshold in seeking help.

Student's Perception of Barriers of Virtual Counseling

As for the obstacles or barriers, counselor students considered the major barriers in the counseling process stemmed from the students' lack of knowledge about these devices, as well as the technical equipment. Lack of confidence in these technological tools was also a barrier that students shared. Other than the technical issues that students found as barriers, many students also reported that they did not perceive this way as something that fits the description of virtual counseling. For that reason, Paterson et al. mention that researchers in this study shed light on how important it is for them to redefine their role with regards to technological tools and adapting such methods as part of the counselor's basic functions.

Such students who regarded technical-oriented virtual counseling appeared to see it as a tool to be used either for entire counseling activities or as a virtual complement to face-to-face counseling sessions. They linked their responses to having 'dabbled' previously in its use. Therefore, some fundamental hands-on experience through the use of a number of the delivery modes described and outlined in the above literature can be inferred from their responses.

Glasheen, Campbell, and Shochet (2013) suggested that their results are consistent with Richards and Vigano (2012), who described virtual counseling as the use of technology

to provide cyberspace therapeutic interventions. This stance is also supported by work done by Ellerman-Bull (2003), where findings were recorded from a national survey on the use of resources such as tele-web and email counseling services.

In the research mentioned, the students noticed a lack of trust in their abilities and mentioned not only their own concerns in some cases but also their concerns about the lack of virtual access of the young people with whom they worked. For example, Barnett (2005) noted that historically underserved communities may have the least access to desirable technologies. Glasheen et al. (2015) also noticed a lack of confidence in the use of virtual counseling by school advisors.

Virtual counseling also encouraged independence and anonymity, and such anonymity and equality of power may contribute to a faster focus on the issues raised, especially where explanations of asynchronous text were involved.

Counselor's Perception of the Benefits of Virtual Counseling

Studies in Scotland and Finland highlight counselors' perceptions about the benefits of virtual counseling. Virtual counseling made counseling flexible, providing independent time and space to meet students' perceived needs. Virtual counseling has also allowed students to anonymously enter discussions which enables disclosure for students who are timid about their personal matters. School counselors believe that virtual counseling also strengthened the bonding and counseling relationship (Paterson et al., 2017).

Studies in Kenya show that high-quality counseling services can stretch to areas that have insufficient resources to obtain trained counselors. Due to the financial status of families and their geographical locations, virtual counseling services could provide services for the Kenyan students and take advantage of these school contexts and situate the tools that enable access to virtual school counseling (Pattison et al., 2012).

Counselor's Perceptions of the Barriers of Virtual Counseling

Paterson et al. (2017) explores other aims that researchers mentioned and that was to examine perspectives on virtual counseling held by CPD student counselors. Furthermore, they were asked to bring their strengths to the fore in this region. Four different orientations for virtual counseling arose from their responses: technical organizational-centered, counseling-ethical, and developmental orientations. The guidelines offer a valuable viewpoint to look at ways in which student counselors view and construct their inner conceptions of virtual therapy. This provides a helpful framework for the discussion and creation of virtual counseling activities and the preparation and design of virtual counseling training. In addition, the joint relationship between Scotland and Finland has stated that the study's results are not inherently country-specific. This yet again shows how such views can be similar or compatible in other countries.

The results of this study support the goals of the baseline study and the research questions raised, not only emphasizing the need to understand how students build concepts from beliefs developed internally, but also how to address virtual counseling training.

The Role of Age and Gender Differences

While in the aforementioned studies age and gender were not regarded as perception indicators variables, other studies conducted focused almost exclusively on the mentioned variables. In the "kids' helpline" study age played a major role in what tools were preferred by the counselee according to their age. It was shown that adolescents were more likely to use internet-based services, which they viewed as more private than the phone. These results show how age can act as an important factor. Even

though the study was conducted solely with a sample of minors, results did show that even within this scope different perceptions can be obtained (King et al., 2007).

As for gender, a study carried out by Tsan & Day (2007), was conducted to focus solely on the role of gender in determining students' perception of counseling. The study found a robust positive relationship between one being male and their likeliness to choose virtual counseling. This was connected with the issue of masculinity. With the external pressure society places on men and sharing feelings, they surely will find it easier to share their feelings in a setting that provides a feeling of anonymity.Studies mentioned earlier shed light on how knowledge of the tools can encourage both counselors and counselees to utilize this new method.

Implications of Virtual School Counseling

While the trend of virtual counseling continues to grow, there are several suggestions and implications for practice that will enhance the virtual counseling program. School counselors are needed to cooperate with teachers regarding their roles and responsibilities in order to improve the counseling program in schools. Khansa (2014) claims that it would be beneficial for counselors to engage parents and teachers in workshops and seminars. The author also adds that the Ministry of Education should state the purposes and procedures regarding the applications, rules, and authorization of the school counselor. School counseling and guidance should be a free service that will urge parents to take the counselor's help if their children face problems.

Understanding the factors that encourage and hinder students' motivation to use the internet can increase access to resources for this vulnerable group (King et al.,2019). Non-verbal cues are difficult for students to understand at times; therefore the counselor could describe them using different punctuations and capitalize various words to show

empathy and affection when needed. If necessary, an initial face-to-face meeting or telephone calls with the students should take place prior to virtual counseling. In this meeting, the counselor collects demographic details about the student, administers informed consent, addresses limitations on virtual counseling (such as lack of verbal prompts, the slower transmission of conversations, technological problems), and informs students on confidentiality and privacy matters (Currie, 2010).

Counselors should resolve ethical issues about the confidentiality of virtual counseling by notifying the students of confidentiality restrictions, technical limitations, and procedures to maintain confidentiality and emergency assistance (Kit et al., 2017). Another way to address confidentiality and privacy is by submitting a letter of consent within the scope of confidentiality of counseling services. Procedures can include how frequently a counselor responds, the risks and support of virtual counseling, and emergency backup methods (Currie, 2010). School counselors should clearly mention their hours of availability and leave an in-depth resource that guides students in need of urgent assistance (Steele, 2015). In addition, virtual counselors need to ensure that virtual counseling is adequate and necessary to meet the mental health of their students. When virtual counseling cannot meet their needs, the onus is on the virtual counselors to make appropriate referrals to local external agencies that are capable of helping the students (Kit et al., 2017).

To develop the virtual counseling service, the challenge is to create constructive activities for young people when waiting for the counselor. The improvement of information gathering and self-help modules can not only make waiting more bearable but may also help both the counselor and the student to make more efficient use of the available virtual counseling time. At the training level, counselors need to build skills

that allow them to quickly focus on key issues without giving the student an impression of impatience or indifference (King et al., 2019).

Steele (2015) mentions that school counselors can make use of accessible virtual resources to assist students. To name a few, such resources could include providing career webinars of potential interest, virtual lessons on internet security or cyberbullying, or dynamic plans that are essential for the students' information system. The advantage of virtual technologies is that it provides individualized information and instant feedback through K-12 students tailored to their stated preferences and values. In addition, school counselors' have ongoing communications and are facilitated through the use of different virtual technologies, rather than separated at specific times selected by student appointments.

Future researchers may also explore ideal virtual counseling session times for students of different ages. It will also be beneficial for future researchers and practitioners to research different ways to motivate students to seek follow-up virtual counseling sessions. Additional virtual sessions were linked to a higher level of improvement and depth, and students reported a greater decrease in psychological distress after each of these sessions (Kit et al., 2017).

Virtual counseling will eventually become an accepted approach of counseling, counselor educators should recommend training student counselors who have gained some level of experience in traditional face-to-face counseling approaches in virtual counseling (Kit et al., 2017). The integration of virtual technology in curricula (counseling field) is a clever and inexpensive method. Students in the counseling field need to take advantage of such virtual learning exercises, which would have a positive impact on the motivation for their counseling careers (Currie, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

The American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) model is an inclusive framework set for carrying out and evaluating school counseling programs. The criteria set includes programs that are equitable, data-driven, and respond to a diverse student population. The model includes four components that are the foundation, management, delivery system, and accountability to define how counselors and schools, whether on their own or collaboratively, support and work with students and their families (Bowers & Hatch, 2005).

The first component of the model is the foundation, which gives an overview of the overall mission of the ASCA. The component that outlines the advancements is the implementation of an applicable school counseling program. It focuses on 3 main scopes which are student competencies, professional competencies, and program focus. It focuses on developing an inclusive school counseling program depending on the student outcomes.

As for the second component, it generally encompasses how counseling programs comprehensively outline how tools can be integrated to fit the school's needs. This occurs through the school counselor's proficiencies and program assessments. The third component, the delivery system, serves as the focal point of the program, being that it sets the core guidelines for meeting students' needs. The fourth and final component is accountability, which is used to evaluate the effectiveness of school counselors and the counseling program based on students' achievements as well as their behavior and attendance.

According to Goodrich et al. (2020), the ASCA program has served as a reliable tool for school counseling nationwide and has recently delved into virtual counseling,

providing guidelines for working in a virtual counseling environment. The ASCA program shed light on various aspects that were highlighted as barriers in the studies above. The program focuses on how counselors should simplify the methods of communication in order to avoid any misunderstandings that can take place in virtual counseling sessions. Students should also be proficient in using these tools to further facilitate the counseling program. The study also focuses on how the program should constantly be updated in order to provide the most efficient counseling. The most important point that was reiterated throughout the program is a collaboration with different departments as well as administration in order to provide comprehensive counseling to both students and parents.

The ASCA National model focuses on the usage of tools and highlights several benefits of virtual school counseling. Virtual school counseling has a great impact on school-aged students and adolescents. With the increased use of technology, school counselors can play a vital role in increasing awareness of the benefits and the problems of using these tools of communication. These tools can affect the well-being of students because they can be a source of social support. School counselors who are confident in using the tools might also offer small or group technology interventions, model appropriate technology use, and address ethical considerations.The quadrant of the delivery system which is an element of the ASCA model would benefit from the increased use of technology to facilitate coordination, engagement, and communication. Virtual counseling can allow school counselors to provide individual as well as group counseling services by surpassing the time or space limitations found in traditional counseling. The use of asynchronous tools can allow school counselors to respond to

students' concerns throughout the day and allow them to have their regular sessions for academic and career-related purposes.

Despite the benefits of virtual school counseling, there were several drawbacks to it. A barrier to successful technology integration or usage is the spectrum of experiences and comfort levels using these tools which might exist between different generations. Virtual counselors should understand the problems or challenges resulting from virtual counseling such as virtual aggression, concerns for privacy and safety, cyberbullying as well as harassment. Internet anonymity and lack of reduced auditory and visual cues can make it harder for students to feel comfortable in communicating with the counselor during face-to-face sessions.

Such measures apart from the organization being renowned in the domain of school counseling serve as enough reason as to why this model should be followed in order to provide quality counseling. The ASCA National model can be used in the Lebanese context because the elements that make up the model have relevance wherever the school or school counselors operate. With the worldwide reach of digital technology, the applications to technology usage of this model can be used among school counselors globally.

School counseling as aforementioned was initiated as a result of combined social, economic, and political changes. The school counseling role has also evolved and initially became a role of a "school counselor" rather than being carried out by different school personnel. Initiatives in Lebanon were not far behind with regards to implementing counseling services; however, such efforts were not very long-lasting, rather the only area where school counseling continued to develop was in private schools. Efforts exerted in creating proper school counseling services also found that

different aspects need to be considered across different cycles and age groups. As school counseling developed different tools were integrated, including technology. Technology became a core tool in every domain; it was initially utilized in the education milieu, with current changes and the current outbreak of COVID-19, its use in the counseling domain was instigated. Accordingly, technology became an important aspect of school counseling and facilitated the provision of virtual school counseling. Virtual counseling has also evolved since its initiation and adopted both synchronous and asynchronous methods. In order to ensure that quality virtual counseling was conducted, various researches were conducted to focus on the perception of both school counselors and students on the benefits and barriers in order to come up with practical solutions for such issues. Two indicator variables were also obtained across different studies, which were age and gender. Looking out for such indicators ensures that the research is reliable. Suggestions and implications are still looked into to further enhance the virtual counseling process as it is considered a novel domain.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method research design explored the school counselor's perceptions of the benefits and barriers they encounter when using virtual counseling in private schools in the Beirut region. This study also explored the counselors' perceptions on the differences between conducting virtual counseling and in-person counseling. These perceptions were discussed in the light of the research conducted on the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) national model. The chapter will begin by presenting the study's research questions, which influenced the study's methodology. The perspectives used to investigate and understand the phenomenon under investigation are then explained. The instruments for collecting the data were then outlined, along with the instruments utilized and the data sources. The processes utilized to verify that the research study is trustworthy, transportable, dependable, and confirmable were detailed in the next section. Finally, the study's limitations were discussed.

Research Questions

The aim is to gather quantitative and qualitative data to provide answers to the following research questions: (a) From the counselors' perceptions, what are the perceived differences between conducting virtual counseling and in-person counseling? (b) From the counselors' perceptions, what are the most contributing benefits and barriers that school counselors encounter during virtual counseling in private schools in the Beirut region? (c) Does participation in virtual counseling differ as a result of students' characteristics in the perception of school counselors?

Research Design

This study is a descriptive research design where qualitative research designs were utilized to explore and identify perceptions of school counselors in regards to the barriers they encounter when using virtual counseling. The qualitative research design is essential in educational research because it enables a deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context. It allows the researcher to understand human experiences through questions that cannot be easily put into numbers. The qualitative research gives comprehensive narratives of the circumstances that lead to participants' focus on their perspectives towards an issue. This shows how qualitative research can show layers and provide a comprehensive understanding number cannot encompass (Al-Hroub,2015). As previously mentioned, there is little research done regarding the barriers and the practices of virtual counseling in Lebanon. The qualitative part of the research study addressed mainly the barriers counselors face in virtual counseling by conducting semi-structured interviews including open-ended questions with counselors in private schools to provide an insight into the obstacles counselors need to overcome to provide effective counseling sessions. A focus group discussion was also designed to explore participants' opinions, ideas, and beliefs on a certain topic within a group. The study was conducted across different regions in Beirut with school counselors from different backgrounds to limit bias as much as possible and ensure validity. The study also took into account the necessary sample count to allow the research to be reliable.

Study Site and Participants

The schools where the research was conducted are located in the Beirut region. Four of these schools score as some of the top schools in Lebanon. The same 3 schools

follow the Lebanese Curriculum, but also provide foreigners an alternative (American program) which starts in Grade 9. The 4th school is a good performing school but it is not a top listing school and follows the Lebanese program. As for the 5th school, it is an average school and only provides a Lebanese curriculum. All the schools included using English as the language of instruction. The aim is to contact five schools that are known to have virtual counseling programs in order to carry out the study there.

Eleven counselors were chosen using a non-probability sampling across all cycles (elementary, middle, and high school). There were 11 counselors with whom the study was carried out. Seven of the counselors took part in the semi-structured interviews, and six of them took part in the focus group. All of the participants were females and they all had similar educational backgrounds being that they all held a master's degree. The counselors had different years of experience ranging from one year of experience to fifteen. Two of the counselor's counsel all cycles, two counsel kindergarten and cycle 1, three are in charge of only cycle 1, two counsel 1 &2, and three counsel 2 & 3.

The participant's privacy was protected by giving each one of them a code. The codes for the participants participating in the semi-structured interview were named counselor 1, counselor 2, … whereas, the participants being part of the focus group discussion started from the beginning of the Alphabetical order with the first letter of their name.

Table 1

Semi – Structured Interview Participants Demographic Information

Participant Assigned Numbers	Counseling Experience	Grade Level	Education Level	Gender
1	1 year	Cycles 1&2	Masters	Female
2	5 years	Cycle 2&3	Masters	Female
3	3 years	KG &Cycle 1	Masters	Female
4	4 years	Cycle 2&3	Masters	Female
5	3 years	Cycle 1	Masters	Female
6	12 years	Cycle 2	Masters	Female
7	2 years	All cycles	Masters	Female

Table 2

Demographic Information of School Participants in Focus Group Discussion

Participant Assigned Numbers	Counseling Experience	Grade Level	Education Level	Gender
A.S	2 years	All cycles	Masters	Female
B.R	3 years	Cycle 1	Masters	Female
C.F	4 years	KG & Cycle 1	Masters	Female
D.R	2 years	Cycle 2&3	Masters	Female
E.N	15 years	Cycle 1	Masters	Female
F.N	3 years	Cycles 1 & 2	Masters	Female

Both the schools and counselors were purposively chosen. Purposeful sampling is a technique used largely in qualitative research for recognizing and collecting the most effective information with the utilization of limited resources. The process includes identifying and choosing individuals or groups of participants that are specifically well-informed on the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, 2013). The purposive study also includes "criterion sampling", which is used to identify and choose the sample that meets some of the preset criteria of importance (Palinkas, 2013). The counselors were chosen based on them carrying out virtual counseling sessions; the schools were also chosen based on them having a virtual counseling program, such choices are the reason yet again why purposive criterion sampling is carried out.

Data Collection Instruments

This research is qualitative, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group discussion to create an abundant description of the counselors' perceptions on the barriers and benefits of virtual counseling. The focus group discussion was an extended way of the interview method, it provided a more natural setting that likely lead to more reflection of the participants answers and they triggered each other with new ideas as well. The conversational setting lead to a more elaborated analysis and exploration of thoughts.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on 7 counselors from different cycles and schools (the same schools where the student population will be obtained) and one focus group discussion included six counselors interviewed for 45-90 minutes through Zoom due to the current pandemic. Semi-structured interviews are an effective strategy when collecting qualitative data specially to explore individuals' thoughts and feelings and sometimes delve into their matters (Newcomer et al., 2015). The interview

(Appendix I) contains ten questions that target the counselor's experience, their use of technology, and their perception of virtual counseling. The focus group discussion (Appendix 2) contains 9 questions following the themes provided from the semi-structured interview questions. Probing questions were added to both sets of questions in order to attain the objectives of the study, which focus on the barriers perceived by the counselor for themselves and on behalf of the students. The interviews will be conducted at the counselor's convenience, and each interview lasted for approximately an hour via Zoom if the lockdown persists.

Data Collection

Since the study is qualitative, provided an abundant description to assist in filling a gap in research that's rooted in the lack of in-depth studies carried out within the domain of virtual counseling. Studying counselors' perceptions with regards to virtual counseling can improve virtual counseling for both students and counselors. To gather such data, the researcher conducted semi-structured individual interviews that included open-ended questions, and also conducted a focus group interview that provided in-depth discussion.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Prospective interviewees were approached individually, and the purpose and the procedures of the study were explained in-depth to the school counselors. The semi-structured interview took place over approximately an hour. Interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the participant and it occurred through Zoom because lockdown continued. The participants were provided with ample time to inquire about the study and its purpose. The participants were asked for permission to have their interviews recorded, and transcribed verbatim. They were offered to check both their transcribed

and recorded interviews to ensure intention and accuracy. The researcher left their

contact information to be sent out with the invitations through the school's usual

announcement process. Those who are interested were consented to participate.

Focus Group Interview

Focus group discussion (FGD) is a qualitative research strategy and a data

collection technique in which a chosen group of participants discuss a given topic or

issue in-depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator (Nyumba et al., 2018).

This strategy helps to implore participants' attitudes and perceptions, knowledge,

experiences, and practices shared in the course of interaction with different people. The

focus group discussion allows the researcher to solicit both the participants' shared

narrative as well as their differences when it comes to experiences, attitudes, and

worldwide views during an open discussion round. The participants involved in the

focus group discussion are persons acting in a social situation. The group discussion

included six counselors and it will be 45-90 minutes through Zoom due to the current

pandemic. The group was heterogeneous, where different counselors of different

divisions discussed their perceptions and experiences on the barriers and benefits of

virtual counseling.

Data Analysis

The information collected through the interviews was analyzed using

interpretational analysis. The Interpretational analysis is a qualitative technique that

aims to provide a detailed analysis of personal experiences. This method is generally

useful for topics that are complex and vague (Willig, 2017). The participant's and the

focus group discussion's recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the

researcher. There was a first reading of the interviews where the researcher came up

with the codes. The aspect of the examination was taken as one sentence. The transcripts were coded using an open coding method to identify the common themes that appeared in those transcriptions. The data of the different interviews were compared through using the constant comparative method, where the similarities and differences of the data were derived. A second reading was performed after coding all the sentences to group the codes into categories. After that, a third reading was done to organize the categories under general themes, and ensure that a proper assessment takes place.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven school counselors across different private schools and one focus group including five counselors. These counselors have presented various common initial reactions to the experience of virtual counseling. Virtual counseling was explained in different ways. There were different themes initiated after the semi-structured interview and the focus group discussion based on the interviewee's responses. Within each theme, subthemes were indicated by subheadings. The following are the four main themes: (1) Environmental Adaptation, (2) Working with Technology, (3) Counselor's Approach, and (4) Preparation and Training for Virtual Counseling. Several subthemes describe each specific main theme. The following discussion presents the virtual counseling experiences of the participants according to these four virtual counseling themes.

Environmental Adaptation

Covid 19 and the Revolution were the Main Instigators to Virtual Counseling

In all of the interviews, environmental adaptability in virtual counseling appeared as a major subject. All eleven participants said that various aspects of the virtual counseling environment influenced their practice, which is detailed in the subsections below. Two main instigators that led to this overall needed change in the first place. The revolution that took place on October 17th caused the first wave of instability with regards to the beginning of a new movement, which ultimately meant that schools had to find new remote methods for teaching as well as counseling. There was discontinuity with regards to school attendance, the first wave of Covid-19 that followed set a more fixed distance learning. One of the counselors summed up the mentioned in their

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statement: "This move was gradual, of course, however when corona struck it was then we started coming up with our own model for virtual counseling based on what professionals were doing around the world" (Counselor 3).

The time needed for the counseling program to resume and in what form it did relied highly on the school's perception of the need for counseling. Counselor 7 shared that "due to the pandemic, there was a need for immediate counseling", this sentiment represented all of the schools' perceptions; however, the frequency of counseling sessions differed amongst schools and their priorities. There was also a shift in the counseling program, being that some counselors saw that there were new issues at hand. Two counselors discussed that they tried to have tailored programs for the current issues students were now facing. Counselor 2 mentioned that "When the pandemic started, I thought of giving only one session per week which were coping strategies and mental health [..] we discussed topics that would help them cope with their daily lives". The counselor, in this case, shared how the counseling sessions were tailored to fit what the students needed in the face of unexpected changes. Counseling revolves around the student, and F.N also shared that "It is important for students to feel they have a choice and a voice even if I had a certain topic, I wanted to discuss with them." For students to be able to adapt to the changes of the environment, they should be able to voice their feelings and thoughts. These notions were also agreed on by four other counselors.

Change of Work and School Dynamics

As previously mentioned, some changes occurred in terms of content provided to better suit the occurring issues. Such changes extended to include work dynamics. With regards to the counselor's schedules, there were clear shifts in the time they were expected to be available. While shifts occurred in all situations, counselors had different

views on whether such shifts were better for them and the students. Counselor 2 stated that "The benefits of virtual counseling are that I have my time, I can do it even after their classes". Another counselor also shared: "I was able to reach a bigger number of students at the same time, and I was literally able to be in two places at once, and students were happy about it" (Counselor 3). The mentioned counselors had a positive experience; however, this was not the case for all. Counselor 6 stated, for example, "I have family issues I have to attend to while I'm at home, which I wouldn't have to do if I were at school [..] I have my children working at home." Carrying one's job around even at home becomes harder for counselors to carry out their tasks effectively, being that they cannot divide their work and responsibilities at home.

In the focus group, B.R shared that "With the change of schedules, counselors were expected to be there for students and their parents at any time even if that meant at 10 p.m." These new expectations were exhausting for the counselor's well-being and work efficiency. "Students come to my office to have their lunch, play board games and have quick talks, when I'm on recess duty they come to me and talk to me" (Counselor 5). While counseling in school was more structured and limited to school hours, being in school, however, facilitated students' ability to approach counselors physically, even for a brief interaction. This facilitation ensures that the students do not hold in their emotions for too long and that even perceived trivial issues are shared with the counselor.

There was an agreement amongst all eleven counselors concerning work changes and "over-time" work. C.F mentioned that "We had to go to school during the day, and in the afternoon after the student's classes, we had to give distance counseling, so it was a full-time job." This was agreed upon by another counselor who shared that

sometimes it was after sessions, but the sessions used to end early. Sometimes classes would end at 11, sometimes 1, so it was still within "reasonable" working hours" (A.S). The time specified for late sessions differed from one school to the other even if both or more had extra "work hours".

Counselors who did not have to stretch out their work hours acknowledged previous statements on how it was, in fact, easier to do their work efficiently if specific hours were placed for work. "It was a bit easier for me to get the students involved because the counseling sessions were embedded in the program during the day, not in the afternoon as the case of other counselors" (D.R). Two counselors also shared that the extension of work hours did not have to cater only to the needs of students, but also that of the parents. "We could have meetings with parents, but most of them couldn't during the day, so we gave them meeting times at 6 or 7. I had this three times per week" (D.R). The counselor's work dynamics were affected by multiple factors, including their personal commitments, students' schedules as well as parents.

Lack of Safe Environment and Space

Space was also an issue if they have their siblings in the same place or if they do not have comfortable space to sit and be focused. "At home is different; there is the couch, the smell of the food from the kitchen, the doorbell ringing and sounds from the street. The whole setting is not inducive for learning"(Counselor 6). Students struggle not only to focus during the class due to the mentioned issues but also feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive information when there are so many distractions. Home is not set up for an academic environment; when the students are in a classroom, they have bulletin boards and words around them. The setting of the classroom is ready for learning. This isn't exclusive to studies; this also applies to counseling sessions.

Students do not have a closed mortar space for them to feel comfortable and free in their expression.

The family being around students, as mentioned earlier, breaches the privacy they need. "Students are feeling a little invaded because they're in their personal space, and suddenly everyone can access you" (Counselor 4). The mentioned was one of the specific examples a counselor encountered. "One case I had couldn't speak about what was going on because it was related to something happening within his family even in his room; he was afraid of his family hearing him, and even when having earphones on. I gave him the option to type out what he wanted to say, and I would verbally respond to him" (C.F).

There are solutions mentioned that were carried out on the part of the students: "Some students went to the cars of their parents to talk" (F.N). The idea that they cannot set borders makes them feel uncomfortable to carry out the session, and even when they do, the multiple invasions of privacy or distractions as mentioned inhibits them from continuing the session properly, albeit counselors trying alternative solutions as in the mentioned case. They wouldn't feel comfortable anymore to express truly how they're feeling. "They want to see the counselor without their parents knowing; I can't approach students without the consent of the parents" (Counselor 5). At school, students can generally drop by the counselor's office whenever they feel like it; however, at home, such activities are monitored being that the parents are around, not wanting the parents to know of the counseling session, students avoid it altogether.

Preparation and Training for Virtual Counseling

Experience with Virtual Counseling and Technology

Counselors had differing experiences with technology. Counselor 2 stated, "I used to be a teacher for ten years, and during this period, I took a lot of courses having to do with ICT and technology [..] Using virtual technology as a tool was not hard for me." Nevertheless, other counselors shared a differing opinion: "Prior to lockdown, I was not much exposed to virtual technology" (Counselor 3). Counselors' differing experiences also had to do with their personal education and distinctive work experience. "I was familiar with the zoom during my masters; however, the seesaw outlook and google chat are all new" (Counselor 5). As can be seen here, the counselor's familiarity and ease of using some of these platforms had to do not only with the schools they were counseling with but also with what they had experienced prior to this issue.

Furthermore, although some of the interviewed counselors had a wide experience in counseling prior to this issue, they still shared some discomfort in switching to virtual methods. Counselor 6 said, "This anxiety for the virtual counseling was meeting right after the first virtual meeting. The first virtual session was as if it was my first time counseling a student; it felt like being on stage and being observed. It wasn't as bad as I thought, and now it has become natural." As agreed by all participants, counselors had to get accustomed to this new way of counseling, even if they had a long experience this was a new way which they had to adapt to not only in terms of preparation but also on a personal level. Counselor 3 explained, "From a professional level, I thought that I am glad we had these options to stay connected. But on a personal

level, as an individual, I don't like using technology that much". Personal choices and preferences influence a counselor's overall experience.

While there were struggles mentioned by counselors dominantly, they all shared a positive side for having such tools available. Counselor 7 explained, "It was difficult at first, but I adapted and kept an open mind because I was determined to make things work with whatever resources I could find". In line with the mentioned statement, another counselor added "I find it a good thing, and it is effective in such a situation. We do need virtual counseling so that students will not be without the counseling, since they are not able to do this in person" (Counselor 1). This shows that although a lot have stated obstacles and issues in the shift, the positives and necessity of virtual counseling were inevitable.

Practice Enhancement and Motivation

Working in a virtual counseling environment has improved all of the participants' counseling abilities and practice. The types of skills obtained and the situations that led to the development of new skills and the refinement of existing ones were discussed by participants. All counselors shared a keen interest in learning to use different technology platforms and attending more training aimed at enhancing their virtual counseling skills. Counselor 7 shared that the following websites where she underwent different training and workshops aimed solely at virtual counseling with regards to student's well-being."I think for the past year and a half, I've attended a large number of workshops and webinars not only related to virtual counseling, but also student life in general. I attended a workshop addressing students' well-being during virtual counseling." Another counselor added, "I started looking up ways to apply teletherapy and virtual counseling" (Counselor 3).

Counselor's Approach

Methods Used by Counselors During Virtual Counseling Sessions

Counselors shared different methods and approaches that they utilized in their virtual counseling. Some of them shared that the methods they used did not differ but only included more technology. This did not apply to other counselors. While most of them shared that they were trying to connect with the students the way they did in school, they shared alternative methods they utilized to engage and connect with students virtually. "I would hang out with students that have never come to my office. I tried to maintain that virtually by sending PDFs that I have made about how to manage stress and general things about anxiety" (Counselor 4). Counselor 4 also added that when discussing the methods, she used to maintain students' engagement since no physical contact was present. This connectedness assisted in decreasing the stigma around seeing a counselor, which is an issue they faced even when counseling sessions were conducted physically.

Another method that was shared by Counselor 1 was that "I use humor and even personal experience at times to establish a comfortable environment for the students". Using this method is essential in such tough times; it releases the tension and creates a comfortable space for students to engage and express themselves comfortably. Counselor 2 also mentioned that she also asked what the students would like to talk about; this attracts them and engages them more. This is a strategy for her to get students involved by allowing them to research or get any video related to the topic they chose. The counselor also stated that she uses a lot of polls for interaction, who might be against or with a certain topic.

The same method was voiced by Counselor 5 who allowed students not to choose contemporary topics, but she focused on relational skills students at their age would need. "I asked them what makes a good friendship and what are examples of a bad friend and a good friend, always taking their perspectives" (Counselor 5). This was one of the specific examples of how the counselor engaged students in understanding one of the relationship skills. As aforementioned, some counselors shared that the only difference they had in their methods is the added involvement of technology, stating that their previous methods were by core the same. some specific activities had to be changed, for example, "What might have changed is having a student very anxious, I would walk with them around the school may be towards the courtyard." Some other activities were the same but included tools that were different. Sometimes I start by playing a virtual game like Kahoot (It is a game-based learning platform for teachers and students, it is used to generate multiple quizzes) just to break the ice. Sometimes it would be "guess who". These games are available online. I've had students draw things on the whiteboard to express emotions" (Counselor 6). Such games were carried out in the physical classrooms; however, now they were done using platforms. The mentioned shows how the core of counseling sessions was mainly preserved even in virtual counseling; however, different tools were utilized to convey them.

Roles and Responsibilities of Counselors

"As a counselor, my role is to support my students, socially, emotionally, psychologically, and academically. I support my students with career guidance (secondary level) by leading, advocating, consulting, and counseling; this was my role before, during, and after the pandemic" (Counselor 2). These were amongst the tasks the counselors emphasized that they carried out. This is neither inclusive nor exclusive of

all tasks each counselor had to carry out; however, they had a close representation. Some counselors shared that it was overwhelming even though some tasks did not increase, but the role itself was more demanding. Counselors were not dealing with a far detached issue; rather, it was something that they also had to deal with in their personal life.

The provision of tasks and specificity of each had to do with the school's administration and philosophy. Schools that had a better understanding of counseling created a fixed and clear set of tasks for their counselors. "I didn't feel I had to come to the institution and teach them what a counselor is. They already know from the international standards what a counselor is supposed to do" (Counselor 6). In other schools, however, it was hard to draw the line between the requirements of the counselors and the requirements of educators. "A lot of times I requested discipline or behavior issues, this is completely out of my round because I can't be associated with punishment or behavior issues when I am supposed to be the person where they can share everything without judgment" (B.R). These lines were important to be drawn in order to ensure proper counseling takes place.

It is important to note that the roles were not only confused on the school's part, being those counselors, themselves had these faced the same confusion in telling when they should get involved and when they should draw the line. This confusion and misunderstanding had to do with the shift that occurred. Counselors faced a dilemma, not knowing whether collaborating with others was the right action or setting boundaries would be a better decision. "I can imagine why it's hard to define because we are in the middle. We are not teachers, and we are not in the administration. A lot of times, I find myself where I don't have much work, so I think the counselor has to

support teachers' parents and students" (Counselor 5). Such confusion, as reiterated in the quote mentioned, had to do mainly with this novel issue the whole world had to face. The communication with parents and presentation to students about who the counselor was and their roles allowed counselors to abide by their tasks and set required fine lines. Some of the tasks counselors continued to do even in virtual counseling was the meeting with parents and new applicants in order to establish a connection with them, and as mentioned, setting a fixed frame for the counselors' roles.

Another continued activity was the orientation day counselors would usually carry out, within the pandemic counselors committed to conducting them however virtually. In addition, a method that was transferred from the physical to the virtual was the advisory session. The advisory session was a weekly meeting that involved teachers, supervisors, and all school staff. The goal of the session was to provide a comprehensive counseling program in the school where all staff's work is aligned with the counseling's objectives and values. "Each topic would revolve around a specific relevant topic be it conflict and resolution, cooperation, bullying, goal settings, or even internet safety" (Counselor 6).

It is important to add that the counselor's roles were not bound solely by what the school provided; counselors would extend their search beyond the school parameters to ensure that the students' needs are provided. "Sometimes students require a referral to a psychiatrist outside school because sometimes a child might have learning needs such as ADHD, dyslexia. I would coordinate with the therapist that accesses the students and coordinate with the teachers to help them adjust about the accommodations and modifications" (Counselor 6). Counselors worked internally and externally to ensure that students' needs were provided.

Working with Technology

Types of Technological Platforms Used in Counseling

Having to conduct most sessions virtual required that the counselors find facilitating tools. Some of these tools were used before, and updated versions were utilized, and in several cases, completely novel platforms and tools were used to facilitate virtual classes. Counselors utilized a variety of tools; some found some platforms better than others, the choice relied on personal preference. The counselors also shared they sometimes changed the platforms they used to fit that of the student's preference. There were various issues to consider when choosing a specific platform; what was agreed upon, however, is that every counselor was exposed to at least one new technological tool, which ultimately enhanced their technological knowledge. "The benefits related to the counselors is the usage of a variety of tools on how to deliver the sessions. PowerPoints, videos, and more made it interactive for students. Emails, Skype, and WhatsApp were beneficial" (Counselor 2).

Choosing effective tools will let the session be more efficient and engaging. "I think each student has their own preference; one student preferred to send me messages via seesaw, another on email to connect via zoom, another one on google classroom via private assignment" (B.R). This notion was agreed upon. However, another point that was discussed was one specific to the elementary students. " I don't think elementary students knew how to reach out virtually via email or via seesaw" (E.N). This was another matter that counselors agreed on; while in general, there were specific personal preferences, platforms that were more complex than a phone call were generally difficult for elementary students.

Ultimately counselors had two differing views on whether technology was beneficial. "They seem to be already connected to such technology which was causing problems for the students, and here we are trying to solve the problem using the same tool that caused the problem" (Counselor 2). The first group agreed with this notion stating that using technology is only increasing issues they initially had with students. On the other hand, other counselors saw the use of technology as a way to connect better with the students "It is a great way bond and build rapport with children in their own language "technology" (Counselor 3). These opposing views had to do also with counselors' experiences with the students and how they viewed these tools to be reflected in students' behavior, performance, and responsiveness to counseling.

Limitations of a Virtual Counseling Session

There were various limitations discussed by counselors regarding virtual counseling. The issues outlined by counselors were many but had a similar theme, which is that virtual counseling cannot replace in-person counseling. "I can't guarantee that this virtual counseling is authentic; it will never replace an in-person counselor. This field should have feelings, emotions, and passion; it's so hard to show this behind the screen" [..] Some students preferred typing so that the counselor would not know what they are actually feeling from the tone of their voices. (Counselor 5). Counselors discussed how difficult it was for them to identify the students' emotions, especially since the cues they relied on, like facial expressions, voice tone, and physical gestures were absent.

Even when counselors tried to resolve these issues, with regards to virtual counseling, some students preferred typing instead of communicating via skype or other platforms, which made it even harder for counselors to correctly identify students'

feelings. "Some students might prefer lying down when talking or even walking. I did not give them restrictions on what they can or can not do" (D.R). It is different when talking to students face to face because you can read their body language and see their facial expressions. In the light of these issues, counselors tried to develop other tactics to identify the student's feelings, "If they go quiet, you would notice that they might be thinking of something or thinking of something that you said" (A.S). The counselors shared these amongst their tips to identify students feeling, but even with that, they still agreed that virtual counseling can not replace in-person counseling.

Students who could not communicate privately with the counselor either omitted part of the information or had to use other methods (texting) for privacy matters which yet again made it difficult for the counselor to understand what the students were going through. Issues included time delay as well as a breach of their privacy. "When working remotely, you email the student, sometimes it takes them a minute to reply, but sometimes it takes them a few days to reply. Some don't even reply to the emails" (Counselor 7). Certainly, there is a lag in catching up with the students. When counselors see a student at school, they look for them and catch up with them, particularly in the hallway. If they need to contact the parents about something important, the best option is to call them because parents don't always check their emails. It's time-consuming, and counselors will have to put in a lot of work into the email because counselors can express a word with physical gestures in person, but it's not that easy to do it virtually. It's difficult for counselors to tell whether their message was conveyed to students or even the parents with the intended message.

Finally, one of the most "specific" issues was related to the Internet and electricity. "Internet and electricity were a barrier; even several siblings having a Zoom

meeting at the same time might break the connection. The access to computers and devices at our school was also an issue" (Counselor 1). These issues placed major hurdles in communication, there were issues with regards to time, and students would also get frustrated when having to communicate their feelings over and over again when their voice glitches, especially since they would be sharing at times sensitive information.

There are different views on privacy and confidentiality about virtual counseling. Some students do not like to be seen in the counselor's office. For most, virtual counseling offers students privacy to say what they want without being seen by their friends or teachers (Counselor 6). This is amongst the positives of virtual counseling; students are able to receive the counseling they need without their peers finding out. This, however, does not eliminate limitations that counselors shared they faced "one of the students would always delete the emails he would send to make sure that his parents do not read the emails. Having virtual counseling prevented some students from being able to communicate with the counselors comfortably because even if they had a private space (which is not present for everyone), parents still have access to their digital devices. As can be seen in the example provided, breaching students' privacy will not let them express themselves as they should, which yet again inhibits counselors' ability to identify how students are feeling and what approaches to utilize with them.

Students Profile (attitudes, gender, age)

Various factors influence students' responsiveness to the sessions and their interest in them. With regards to society and the pressure placed on males with regards to emotions, it is expected that this affects male students' likeliness to reach out for help when needed. "Females approach me more than males, however, females tend to open

up more" (Counselor 1). The placed social constructions give the space for women to be in touch with their feelings which is reflected in how females are more likely to reach out for help than males."Usually, females approach more often; however, males commit to the sessions more" (Counselor 3). This shows that it is not that women are more emotional or are inherently more expressive; it is more than males are generally not provided that "accepting" space, and it is shown how when the door is open, they commit to it.

In a year-long data study undertaken in some of the schools, it was discovered that girls were more likely to approach in some cycles, while boys were more likely to approach in others. There were also referrals from teachers and division directors from other divisions, indicating that there were males in the middle school because they were referred. The females were more inclined to approach the males in the elementary division, while the males were more referred. The themes discussed in higher school differed between the males and the females. The females were more willing to discuss their mental health and challenges, but the boys were cautious about discussing their mental health. Even if they are hesitant to open up during counseling sessions, students contact counselors more in person because there is no need to send emails or schedule appointments.

Some counselors explained that students' approach to counseling relies more on personal traits and preferences rather than gender. B.R mentioned, "Students who are shy communicate and share more in virtual counseling, although some were anxious to open the camera, this yet again made the virtual counselor closer to an in-person session." always worked with learners with difficulties. "When we went online, and we went into classes, it was a great experience because the learners knew who the

counselor was, and this year when we went back, the relation is quite well. They are coming to the office and asking more than ever" (E.N). This point was agreed upon by other counselors on how virtual counseling has assisted in specific issues. The distance approach reduced some of the stress they felt when communicating in person with students. This did not include all students; students with dyslexia struggled in virtual counseling because most of the platforms used require typing, which would be more difficult for them.

Interest in attending counseling sessions had to do with the schools' approach to it. Students that were grade-oriented found counseling sessions useless since they could not obtain grades from attending. Such issues limited students' "proactive" participation in some schools. Students in Cycle 2 (Grade 4-6) were more likely to attend counseling sessions than those in Cycle 3 (Grade 7-9) due to several factors. To begin with, students in cycle 2 are more likely to be referred than those in Cycle 3. Students in Cycle 3 also have a tougher attitude towards counselors since they are at an age where they are trying to fit in, and attending counseling still has a bit of a stigma to it in schools. "Students ignore me, I send them messages, and not everyone replied. Some students do not notice my messages, and some on purpose ignore me. It might be the age group that they don't have the time, or they just don't feel like giving time to the counselor from their day" (Counselor 7). The attitudes of students in Cycle 3 are shown here, especially in how such attitude toughens over the years in schools rather than having students become more accepting of "counseling" and its importance.

During the focus group discussion, counselors discussed an important matter concerning students that were maturing and becoming self-aware of their physical appearance. A.S said that "Many students are hesitant to expose their faces in front of

the camera, especially in larger groups than in one-on-one sessions." Students might avoid being seen in larger groups or even come up with different excuses. Some students have their cameras turned off from the outset, while others do not. E.N supported A.S's statement, the latter said, "They have the impression that they are being watched, and seeing themselves in the camera makes them feel uneasy." The hormones and physical appearance of students of this age, and students start reflecting and judging themselves. This is also something that is not as present when you are in-person at school. A student who is self-conscious about their appearance, cannot hide their face and, at some point, may forget how they appear or may be able to ignore what worries them about their appearance. On Zoom, on the other hand, they are focused on whatever is upsetting them.

Summary of the Key Findings

There were important results that have answered question number 1. According to the counselors, the difference in virtual counseling challenged the initial environment by having them and students adapt a novel experience, specifically with regards their work schedule and spaces they shared with student that they no longer did. As for question 2 which targets the (benefits and barriers from the counselor's perspectives), the counselors have stated benefits across different issues, while a lack of privacy was present with regards to this new "environment", counselor shared that were able to develop new methods that are both related to technology and counseling practices. With regards to question 3 (the student's characteristics), counselors have shared that student's characteristics have played a role in determining student's responsiveness to counseling. Students that were older were more capable to obtain privacy and access to different means of technology, in a way or another than those younger. The methods of

counseling students preferred also relied on their personal preference, and the seek for counseling was ultimately influenced by gender where females were more likely to ask for sessions than males.

In all of the interviews, environmental adaptability in virtual counseling appeared as a major subject. Within this issue, the time the counseling programs needed to resume post the initial lockdown relied on the school's perception of the need for counseling. The programs were adapted in all the mentioned schools to fit the changes occurring. Such changes also influenced the counselor's roles and their availability. The counselors had more roles to carry out and in most cases were required to be available out of expected work hours. For certain counselors, their roles did change however the work hours shortened, either way, the new changes influenced both the time and roles expected. Virtual counseling made it more difficult to communicate with the counselors due to lack of privacy at home along with electricity and internet connection issues which impeded proper communication from taking place. Various solutions were created on both ends and over the year counselors and students found new ways to facilitate communication. Counselors had different years of experience with regards to technology and that facilitated the use of technology for some counselors over the ones with less experience. Nevertheless, they all had a positive experience with the tools they had to use. Counselors utilize different methods and counseling approaches according to the needs of both the students and parents. The counselor's roles were not bound solely by what the school provided; counselors would extend their search beyond the school parameters to ensure that the students' needs are provided. All counselors agreed that the virtual counseling experience improved their counseling abilities and practices. Counselors did agree that certain attributes influenced students' readiness to reach out

to counselors and engage with them, the attributes included age and gender. Such issues all played a role in the results obtained.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This final chapter provides a brief description of the research dissertation. It presents an integrative summary of the major results with a discussion, conclusion, recommendations, and limitations.

Discussion

The main objective was to investigate virtual counseling and the barriers and benefits of this new method. The following three research questions were considered in order to address the objectives of this research:

1. From the counselors' perceptions, what are the most contributing benefits and barriers that school counselors encounter during virtual counseling in private schools in the Beirut region?

2. From the counselors' perceptions, what are the perceived differences between conducting virtual counseling and in-person counseling?

3. Does participation in virtual counseling differ as a result of students' characteristics in the perception of school counselors?

The research emphasized how virtual creates a more flexible space for both counselors and students. This was further seen with what counselors shared. Some counselors shared that they were more flexible with having the counseling sessions done whenever they could, even after school schedule. They were comfortable with being in their own space outside their office. Counselors were able to reach a bigger number of students at the same time, and that helped counselors be at two places at once. Students also felt that the counselor was always available, especially since the hustle

and crowdedness of the counselor's office are no longer visible. The contact with the counselor is being conducted "one on one" which ultimately makes the students feel that they have the counselor's full attention.

In the initial period of transference to "virtual counseling". Counselors had not been exposed to virtual technology. It was not only about the counselors' experience, it also had to do with their counseling education. Counselors were not exposed to the various platforms that were suggested by schools. Such issues however were taken as challenges by the counselors and not threats. Counselors discussed the development of new skills and the refinement of existing ones. They were also eager to learn the usage of different technological platforms used when counseling virtually and were willing to attend workshops and training that would enhance their virtual counseling skills. Furthermore, Counselors shared that they were searching for specific seminars about virtual counseling that they can attend to improve their skills throughout the process. The importance of technology integration as had been experienced first hand by the counselors' is supported by Paterson et, al. (2017) where they stated that there should be an increased focus on the integration of technology with regards to counselors' roles because ultimately adapting well to these tools facilitates and improves their function as counselors

Counselors' understanding what tools students are most comfortable with and choosing methods that would facilitate communication would not only encourage students to approach counselors but push them to come back a second time. Each student has their preferences; one student chose to send notes using a seesaw, another preferred to connect via zoom via email, and still, another preferred to connect via private assignment on Google Classroom. This also aligns with (King et al., 2019) views where they shared that choosing effective tools will let the session be more efficient and engaging. Understanding the tools and students' preferences with regards to these tools will make the session more efficient. Furthermore, Understanding the

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factors that would encourage and hinder students' motivation to use the internet can increase access to resources for this vulnerable group.

Counselors' perspectives of the benefits of virtual counseling have been highlighted in studies conducted in Scotland and Finland. Virtual counseling made counseling more flexible, allowing students to fulfill their own needs in their own time and space. Virtual counseling has also allowed students to participate in talks anonymously, allowing those who are shy about sharing personal information to do so. Virtual therapy, according to school counselors, increased the bonding and counseling relationship (Paterson et al., 2017). While the research was conducted in a different location, the benefits expressed were very similar. Not only were the benefits the same but also the aims. The aim of counseling is cross-cultural and they were also the same aims counselors wanted to adhere to in physical counseling and virtual counseling. One of these aims was the establishment of a bond between the counselor and the students. Counselors utilized the same games used initially in physical classrooms; however, now they were done using platforms. The mentioned shows how the core of counseling sessions was mainly preserved even in virtual counseling; however, different tools were utilized to convey them.

In the "kids' helpline" study, the counselee's age played a significant effect in which tools they chose (King et al., 2007). Some counselors shared that students in the elementary division did not know how to reach the counselors virtually through the school's suggested platforms. Generally, they had similar issues that the counselors had to work on. Counselors did agree that there were specific personal preferences among students, however, there were common issues that they could work on according to age groups. Not only was the topic of interest common according to the age group, but there were also similar technical issues that were experienced by specific age groups e.g., platforms were more complex than a phone call for elementary students. There were also issues to look into, hormones and physical appearance played a role as well. As

students grew older, they start becoming more self-conscious about their appearance. They preferred to hide their faces on camera and just use the phone or send the counselor messages. Such issues were also related to specific age groups since middle schoolers are the ones most likely to undergo hormonal changes, so ultimately such issues are all connected.

The majority of the counselors agreed that females approached more than males and tend to open up more. There is a social construction that allowed females to be in touch or open about their feelings than males. It was agreed on by different counselors that males were not given the accepting space, therefore when provided by the counselor, they attended and were committed to it. Males were more referred by teachers or counselors in the elementary division, whereas females tended to approach the counselor proactively more. In the high school divisions, females were more likely to express and talk about their mental health challenge, but the males were more cautious in discussing it. Such differences are yet again rooted in societal constructions and gender roles, which will ultimately make females more comfortable to reach out for help with regard to "emotional" matters. In terms of gender, Tsan (2007) conducted a study that focused entirely on the influence of gender in shaping students' perceptions of counseling. The study discovered a strong link between being a male and the likelihood of seeking virtual counseling. This has something to do with masculinity. With the external pressures that society throws on males when it comes to discussing their emotions, they will certainly find it easier to do so in an environment that affords a sense of anonymity (Tsan & Day, 2007). The studies stated previously shed light on how having a basic understanding of the tools can motivate both counselors and counselees to use this new approach.

Counselors were actively aware and engaged in ethical matters. In fact, ethical issues with regards to confidentiality were amongst the most reported issues.

Counselors shared that they tried to find different methods to ensure confidentiality and privacy, especially with students facing issues with their parents and having no "private" means of communication. One of the examples shared by the counselors is how she had to accommodate with time to have a session with one of the students in a time where they would be alone, hence having the privacy they need. These notions were supported by Kit et al.,(2017) when stating that counselors should address ethical concerns about virtual counseling privacy by informing students of confidentiality restrictions, technical limitations, and methods for maintaining confidentiality and providing emergency support.

Counselors shared that they used both synchronous and asynchronous methods in order to cater for students' needs. Virtual counseling was not a single method rather a combination of the mentioned tools to ensure that efficient and suitable counseling takes place. Virtual counseling, according to Maples and Han (2008), ultimately comprises both synchronous (video chatting and calling) and asynchronous (emails and texting) techniques for addressing an individual's needs. This was utilized in the same way by counselors who all shared that they engaged in different methods of counseling which are involved video chatting, regular calls, and other used emails as well as texting.

Career guidance is vital for middle and high school children, therapeutic software can be utilized to address their concerns. This was yet again expressed in the methods used by counselors with middle and high school students. The counselors for the mentioned cycles tried to focus on "career guidance" as well discussions of social issues which aligned with the issues students at this age face. The tools did differ across counselor's however dominantly they all shared that they provided different themes in group sessions to address relevant social issues. The counselors also agreed that these tools were efficient for this particular age group.

Counselors addressed that several issues faced by students had to do with the parents. In fact, certain issues with parents prevent students from sharing openly with counselors. Accordingly, sessions with parents were also viewed as crucial in carrying out counseling. Counselors aimed to do so to provide the students with a comprehensive plan. Such a call to action is also backed up by Steele (2015), who shared that virtual counseling exchanges with parents are possible. Regularly, the counselor would engage with parents and their children to address personal/social, academic, and career areas. It was further stressed by Khansa (2014) who claims that it would be beneficial for counselors to engage parents and teachers in workshops and seminars

Counselors who had no previous virtual counseling experience shared that in the first virtual sessions they felt as if it is the first time, they were counseling albeit them having several years of experience. This initial discomfort influenced their ability to carry out their work efficiently. Counselors also added that becoming more confident in their use of virtual tools, assisted them in providing better counseling and allowed them to be more attentive to the student's needs. Steele (2015) stressed that by sharing that counselors should be comfortable and confident in their use of virtual communication tools.

According to research primarily obtained knowledge, personal opinions, internet accessibility, secrecy, and privacy all had a positive and negative impact. The only background characteristic that was significantly linked to higher comfort with the proposed service was experience. Internet accessibility was one of the issues that may have influenced "virtual counseling to be a negative experience". Having no access to private spaces and not being able to watch students' body language for assessment may have all contributed to this process negative, however, how the counselors adapted and obtained new methods turned the issue around. Counselors were ultimately all able to agree that this was a positive experience because they were able to take the negative and turn in an opportunity to learn more, hence a positive experience.

Students that proactively asked for sessions tried different methods to ensure a session with the counselor would take place. Even with regards to privacy, different students would find different methods to contact the counselors, one of the examples provided by the counselor is how students would have the session in the car in order to have a video call with the counselor to follow up issue. It was also seen as an important aspect of counseling by the counseling students (Paterson et al., 2017). As mentioned, there were different programs followed in schools. Students who had the option of "counseling" as an option and pursued it didn't focus on the mean or tool rather just on being able to follow up with counselors. Distressed students were more concerned about the counseling's effectiveness than the skills and instruments required to conduct a successful virtual counseling session. (2020, Li & Leung). This sentiment that was expressed by researchers was as mentioned seen to a certain extent with students.

According to counselors, students were more likely to seek counseling services that were easy to obtain, especially in teenage groups where students were less likely willing to approach counselors for help. Counselors seek to provide "easily accessible services" by yet again providing asynchronous ad synchronous methods. This yet again is supported by research obtained, where a lot of focus was on how "online" counseling may free counselors and students from time, location, and space constraints. Such benefits also influenced students' decisions to seek counseling, as seen by the students' decreased threshold for seeking help.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several aspects were discussed and common ideas were obtained. There should be a greater emphasis on technology integration in counselor jobs because, in the end, being able to adapt well to these tools helps and improves their function as counselors. Such changes would rely on students' ages since such criteria dictate what tools and methods work. Virtual counseling uses both synchronous (video conferencing and calling) and asynchronous (emails and texting) strategies to meet a

person's requirements, the flexibility with regards to meeting time and even the method serve as the main methods. Confidentiality and privacy are the major barriers and challenges counselors would face, however having no alternative option pushed counselors to come up with solutions to deal with such issues. Counselors should be comfortable and confident in their use of virtual communication platforms, and provide the same comfort for students for such sessions to be efficient. was found to be strongly associated with better levels of comfort with the proposed service. The Age group played a major role in identifying the type of counseling students would respond to. Mainly, middle schoolers responded best to the tackling of social issues as a group, since they were issues, they would be dealing with. Gender was also an essential factor since it was asserted by counselors that females were more likely to approach counselors than males because of gender norms and social constructions attached to them. Ultimately, creating facilitated means for reaching out to counselors be it in technology or even addressing issues students would identify with would push students to approach counselors, commit to the session and ultimately assist in the counseling being more efficient.

Implications for Further Research

The shift to remote schooling left school counselors very much in the dark about their role and responsibilities and it restricted their capabilities to deliver school counseling services in some schools. The interviews conducted on school counselors showed that they did their absolute best to uphold their relationships with the students and continue to find ways to carry out their duties, getting creative on the process. There are certain recommendations for support and district leaders who are willing to sustain their commitment to students' well-being and postsecondary readiness when schools shift

remotely. It is important to establish a clear plan for virtual counseling services and supports and communicate it widely, especially to families and other members of the school community. School counselors' input can help identify counseling-related policies and practices that are translated to virtual or hybrid contexts. From the conducted interviews, counselors found ways to integrate their services into virtual. Structured time should be created for counselors to meet with students and even their families. School leaders should call on all school members and staff to track down students, interfere and monitor students' attendance which will leave school counselors to use their time to check in with students, deliver resources for managing their well-being, and conduct other counseling-specific activities. Solutions should be pursued to enhance virtual counseling whilst considering confidentiality and privacy issues. It should be ensured that counselors have access to resources, training, and support. It is also important to inquire what kind of assistance counselors need to interact with students and deliver counseling via virtual platforms. Furthermore, counselors should be provided with the training throughout the academic year, especially in times of rapid change, and make sure counselors are given time to recharge.

One aspect of the virtual school counselor's challenge is that there was not a lot of knowledge and information on virtual counseling in counselor education. Much of the research done on this topic concentrated on ethical issues and whether schools should implement them or not. There was little practical assistance for the school counselors who had no choice but to practice in a virtual setting especially, for first-year counselors. Counselors had minimal outside resources to turn to for advice on how to practice or improve their skills. Universities should acknowledge their existence and give the field of virtual school counseling the same thoughtful, critical research as it

does to all the other relevant subjects. Counselor educators in the field of virtual counseling should acknowledge the growing impact communications technology has when it comes to supporting and communication between one another.

Limitations

The usefulness of this study and its conclusions has constraints and boundaries as an early investigation. Although every effort was made to gather a wide diversity of experiences within the limited reach, the sampling for this study was ultimately based on convenience. It's very likely that virtual school counselors in other geographic areas, as well as counselors in schools that declined to participate in the study, would have significantly different experiences in systemic ways, which would have shaped the existing model differently. Focus groups are excellent in highlighting crucial issues that need to be investigated further because these are exploratory studies, however, the nature of focus groups means that the information gathered is limited to a small number of people who may have been swayed by the opinions of others. Furthermore, there were no male counselors in the sample, and there was little diversity across racial and ethnic lines, this study may be lacking nuance and experiences that participants of greater diversity could provide. Counselors who have knowledge of both contexts and a strong sense of role-based on real-world experience may have very different viewpoints on the evolution of their position and practice.

There were also certain limitations in the study's implementation. The methodology was created with a knowledge of the counselor-school interaction in brick-and-mortar schools; the existence of counselors and their roles in virtual counseling was an emergent discovery. It is important to note that several counselors declined to participate due to time and work pressure especially with several staff

members leaving and having new counselors for training. The schools refused for students to participate in the research accordingly, the student's part (quantitative part of the research had to be removed). Furthermore, data was acquired through virtual interviews, with little opportunities to see school counselors practice in the field or meet with participants in person. Without the typical signs of face-to-face engagement, the researcher may have missed nuance and experiences that could have improved the data. An added limitation was the presence of a few large schools which can dominate the discourse shared in this study.

APPENDIX 1

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you worked as a school counselor and for what cycles?

2. What experiences have you had with virtual technology?

3. What are your perceptions of using technological tools to provide virtual counseling?

   a. Indicate some of the benefits directly related to students (What are the benefits most related to students? What are the benefits least related to students?).

   b. Indicate some of the benefits directly related to counselors (What are the benefits that are most related to counselors? What are the benefits least related to counselors?).

   c. Indicate some of the barriers directly related to students (What are the barriers most related to students? What are the barriers least related to students?).

   d. Indicate some of the barriers directly related to counselors (What are the barriers that are most related to counselors? What are the barriers least related to counselors?)

4. How would you describe your students' response to the increasing presence of virtual counseling at your school?

   a. Share one most positive experience you had while carrying out a virtual counseling session. (When did it occur? In what grade level? Was it your initiative or the students? Is this something that occurs frequently?)

   b. Share one most negative experiences you had while carrying out a virtual counseling session. (When did it occur? In what grade level? How was the issue resolved? Is it something that occurs frequently?)

5. What methods have you used or think are fit to resolve the barriers during the virtual counseling sessions? (Have you used any of these methods? What do you think makes these methods successful?)

6. How would you define your role as a school counselor? (Did your role as a counselor change? Did you have to take on or let go of tasks you did not have before?)

7. In your opinion, what situations brought on the need for virtual counseling services at your school? (How was it decided for a virtual program to be implemented? Was the virtual program approved by all the school personnel?)

8. From experience, do you think students are more likely to approach you to discuss their mental health virtual or in-person? (why do you think so? Do males or females approach you more often in either method? (virtual or in-person)

9. In what way are the connections developed with students different than those developed in virtual counseling? (Did you feel that you knew the students in the virtual counseling session less than when you met in-person?)

10. How likely are you to get involved in training aimed at enhancing virtual counseling skills? (How was virtual counseling introduced? Was the training useful? Were you able to understand the purpose and ideas of virtual counseling?)

APPENDIX 2

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When did virtual counseling first come about in your school?

   a. When did you start your sessions exactly?

   b. Was it of an immediate response?

   c. What steps/processes did you follow to carry it out?

2. How did the new schedule and the expected accessibility affect your well-being and work efficiency?

   a. Did you have to provide boundaries to students and their parents?

   b. How did you cater for your own well-being?

3. How comfortable were students when contacting you virtually from their homes?

   a. Would the students have trusted you more if it was in-person?

4. What kind of technological platforms did you use? Which ones were preferred by you and the students?

   a. Did you change or switch to other platforms suggested by students?

   b. Have you asked students to change their way of communication?

5. What are some limitations faced during virtual counseling sessions?

   a. Were there any solutions for such limitations?

6. How were students' attitudes towards virtual counseling and were their particular traits that influenced this attitude (gender & age)?

7. How did your roles change from in-person to virtual counseling?

   a. Were there any new roles added to your jobs?

   b. Is it about the quantity of work or about the effort you put into your job?

8. Did you receive any training in Virtual counseling?

   a. Are you willing to disseminate what you've learned to other counselors?

   b. In what ways would you enhance your practice by the end of the year?

9. What were the most efficient strategies you utilized in your virtual sessions?

   a. Are these strategies effective for counseling in-person?

   b. Have you used strategies of in-person during virtual counseling sessions?

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