

**A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLORS AMIDST A PANDEMIC**

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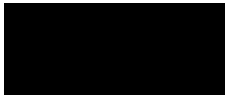
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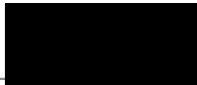
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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my parents,

Mary and John

Who always pushed me to achieve and exceed.

Thank you for all your love and support and for believing in me.

**με αγάπη mom and dad**

## **Abstract**

According to Youth Mental Health Canada (2019), approximately 1.2 million Canadian children and adolescents are experiencing mental health issues. Yet less than 20% of Canadian students will receive or have access to adequate mental health care and treatment for their illness. As the demand for mental health support continues to grow amidst a pandemic, schools will be assigned the daunting task of addressing mental health issues with students. With the overwhelming demand for services, school-based counsellors will be stretched, exhausted and at risk for burnout. This narrative inquiry aims to attend to the experiences of school-based counsellors amidst a pandemic as they strive to support the mental health needs of children and families in schools. As a school-based counsellor, I narratively inquire into my experiences while also attending to the experiences of two other school-based counsellor participants. This research offers insight into how administrators, policymakers, school districts, communities, and governments can better support school-based counsellors in schools, particularly during a pandemic. By attending to the lived experiences of school-based counsellors, this, in turn, supports students, families, staff, and communities who rely on school-based counsellors as essential front-line professionals.

*Keywords:* narrative inquiry, experiences, school-based counsellor, mental health, pandemic, elementary school, supporters

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To all those who asked me “why,” .... I reply, “why not.”

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## **Narrative Beginnings**

Sliding from past to present and, at times, peeking into the future enables me to understand others' stories and, in many ways, preserve these memories. As we listen with purpose and walk alongside the narrative of others, we are awakened to inequities of the times and their people, to hardships, to "multiple layers of good and bad, all shared widely" (Battiste, 2013, p.15). Clandinin (2013) suggests that to genuinely appreciate and cultivate meaning from the storied experiences of others, we must first seek to understand our own. With this new understanding, I wanted to delve deeper into my experiences as a school-based counsellor alongside others' experiences. I realized that this research needed to be "with" people rather than "on" people (Clandinin, 2012, 1:58). I am awakened to my own story, experience a transformation from the story of others, and seek to understand how these narratives may shape the future; I consider the variety of ways life may unfold. I was, and am, "a part of the storied landscape" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 82).

As I position myself alongside this research, I share narrative beginnings where I slide backwards and forwards temporally. I recall stories as a child who was a newcomer to Canada, as a once beginning teacher, as an assistant principal and school-based counsellor who supports children and families in an elementary school, as a daughter and caregiver to two elderly parents; explored are the personal, practical, and social justifications.

### **As a Child and Newcomer to Canada**

Sliding back to my early years of schooling, I was left with lasting impressions, some good and some not so good. My parents were immigrants learning a new way of

life when they arrived in the early 1960s. They first settled in Saskatoon and then moved to Edmonton to find new opportunities.

When I was two years old, my family returned to their native country, Greece. Spending two years in Greece is a distant memory, although I remember pieces of those adventures. At the age of four, my family returned to Canada and settled in the town of Hinton, about three hours east of Edmonton. They operated their first small business, a restaurant nestled in the Timberland Hotel. I spent many hours there observing, drawing, and using my imagination to pass the time.

I do not recall much of my elementary learning experiences before grade three. I started grade one in Hinton as I did not attend kindergarten. Much of my early memories in Hinton are piecemealed together. My mother took me to school the first day, and I remember holding onto her tightly and hoping she would stay. I understood nothing as Greek was my first language and the only language we spoke at home. Scared and painfully shy, I accepted the teacher's hand and invitation to accompany her into the classroom. Grade one was difficult, so I kept to myself and followed what I could of the instructions. My parents spoke some English, but they too were learning the language. My grandmother lived with us and was the primary caregiver. She only spoke Greek, and I remember her trying to teach me math, which helped me grasp the concepts but impeded how I represented the learning to the teacher.

I completed grade one in Hinton, and on the last day of school, my mom walked me over to the gift shop and permitted me to choose anything as a momentum of completing my first year of school. Overwhelmed by the choices and numerous options available, I was immediately drawn to a beautiful blue glittery jewelry box where the lid



was lined with shells. The shells took me back to the sandy beaches of Greece and memories of shell hunting with my grandma along their shores, a cherished memory! I left the store with this momentum and a bright, wide grin. I felt such pride and accomplishment as I strolled out of the store and excitedly ran to show my dad what I had selected. I still have this jewelry box as a frequent reminder of my journey and my parents. They were in their twenties at the time, unimaginable from where I stand today as I share this story. I suppose you could say my parents and I grew up alongside each other.

Grade two was in Edson. I spent a great deal of time at the Edson Motor Inn as my uncle owned it and would often watch over me when my parents worked at The Blue Jay Restaurant. Again, my memories fail to draw upon any school experiences, except for the forest behind the school where I used to play and explore. Soon after grade two, we moved to the city and spent the first part of grade three attending an elementary school downtown and the latter part of the school year attending a west end school. Again, I was painfully shy, anxious (I did not know what that feeling was at the time) and worried I would be called upon to read or answer questions. I preferred to be on my own, diverting any attention whatsoever. I sometimes wonder if my schooling were in Greece, would my personality have been shaped differently as I would feel accepted, normalized, and less invisible and isolated?

As a learner/student, I needed to attach my learning to what was familiar to me, my lived experiences, as I now refer to them. Nothing made sense unless I could connect it to my background knowledge. Hands-on experiences were most effective and offered opportunities for clarification and observation of others; the more independent I could be

in representing my learning, the better. I developed strategies to help me understand when I was at a loss and grew more comfortable approaching some teachers.

Grade five was a pivotal year for me, and not in a good way. My teacher was a larger woman who used her voice and proximity to control and intimidate. I was terrified of her and sat in the third seat of the second row from the window; the things we remember during our pivotal moments often leave me in awe. One morning, she was yelling at the student behind me, and so I turned to see whom she was directing her vulgarity at when I heard my name called out; she said, “You don’t know what side your bread is buttered on!” I crumbled that day, she crushed my soul, and the emotional scars that marked her words have never left me, and for that, I despise her. Could this moment have contributed to the path I have taken? My career choices? My heightened awareness of the necessity of that one important, trusted individual for students to access when in doubt or need.

Though I did not know precisely what my grade five teacher meant, I often reflected on her words to benchmark my learning ability, intelligence, success, and behaviour. Grade six came along, and I sat in the back. My teacher tried to build my confidence, was gentle and caring and spoke kind words that linger to this day. Perhaps I was the subject of staffroom conversation between him and the grade five teacher. I often wonder if he, too, had in some way noted or experienced her vulgarity and dislike for students. Maybe he was mindful of her practices of ridicule and humility within her classroom context.

Nonetheless, I remember grade six vividly. I built friendships, formed attachments, and looked to the teacher for guidance in academics and social situations.

My personality began to surface, to take shape, to develop. It felt safe and comfortable to have someone there to reassure me. Here is where my interest in counselling began though I did not know it at the time. The impact a teacher has on their students is profound and lasting. That teacher became the benchmark for humanitarian teaching practices later in my career.

At times, I hear those words resonating within me from the grade five teacher, and at times they become such a strong force to be reckoned with that they impair my strength and self-belief. Why do we choose to hear those voices when so many others serve us better?

My path as a learner was highly influenced and guided by the words of teachers and as they saw me as a student. I looked for moments of affirmation within their responses, gazes, and words to help guide and direct me and find my place and purpose. The two walked hand in hand while one shaped the other. Their perceptions of me as a student did shape my self-perception as a learner. My quiet, shy nature and immigrant status left me feeling treated like I had a “disability” and no one took the time to see where the “disability” ended and the ability began. It was not until years later that my personality emerged through the care and attention of a handful of teachers who somehow saw my potential where I struggled to see it for myself. These are the moments that I often revisit as a teacher, leader, and counsellor.

My grade five experience was where I lost what little faith I had in myself. I ceded control of myself, of future aspirations. I revisit that moment often, and the intensity of emotion it marks within me; it drives and steers the work I do and the direction of my career.

Finally, the blending and overlapping of these landscapes prompted me to study psychology to deepen my understanding of human behaviour. I reflected on my experiences as a student and a learner and tried to understand the teachers who impacted me most. During my career, my students had a significant impact on my pursuit of helping others. The need to be that bright light, shining star for a child who may feel unseen, irrelevant, or lost within a system that rewards the precarious seemed the most important work to be done. There must be others who feel alone, lonely and need a cheerleader.

### **As a Once Beginning Teacher**

My career as a teacher began in an unconventional setting. My first position was at a private school. Many students had a wide range of physical, medical, and emotional disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, fine motor challenges, communication disorders, and social-emotional learning deficits. My day consisted of tending to the physical needs of the class, such as feeding, diapering and physical therapy. A small portion of the day included reading a book to the students, singing songs, and play time.

A year later, I took a position in a school with a more formal, clinical setting that addressed students' mental, emotional, and physical needs. Classes were no larger than six students, and teachers worked with a multidisciplinary team to support students and their families. I taught there for one school year. The following school year, I took a position in a regular kindergarten classroom; the school was primarily drawing from a population of low-income housing in the area. As a young, new teacher, the work was exciting, and I enjoyed teaching early education.

I worked as a classroom teacher for the next 15 years in various schools and grades. I did not give much consideration to leadership and was not looking to advance my career to assistant principal. However, a pivotal incident later in my career shifted my perspective and brought me to where I am now, an assistant principal and elementary school counsellor.

This story has left an indelible impression on my heart, and it continues to give me pause as I write about it. I experienced this memory through the lens of a mother, educator, sister, and leader when I needed to anchor myself to the importance of my work. As I travelled alongside this child and her narrative, I became more aware of the “co-construction of our stories” (Lessard, 2015, p. 5). Here, in the three-dimensional space, I acknowledge that I “meet [myself] in the past, present and future” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004, p. 60).

My student was the youngest of three children and had attended our school since kindergarten; she was now in grade two. Her family had refugee status and worked hard to learn the language and provide for the family. Her two older brothers struggled with learning. Making and maintaining friendships was difficult for the boys, and they were often cast as outliers amongst their peer groups. Despite the difficulties her brothers experienced, my student always appeared enthusiastic, joyful, excited to learn, and always eager to please those around her. She was acquiring language skills and progressing very well. At recess, we would frequently walk together and talk about her family, her experiences at home and school, and what she aspired to be. These were precious, magical moments for us, and I likely treasured them more than she did. I recognized aspects of myself in her, such as the cultural differences, language obstacles,

social nuances, and that strong desire to belong. We developed a deep bond, and she was comfortable with our relationship as it was rooted in mutual trust and respect.

I knew life at home was difficult. Her parents spoke little English and worked more than one job. Homework was often left behind or incomplete. When necessary, the school supported the family with clothing, lunches, food, and school supplies. It reached out to the family to maintain the school connection and keep the lines of communication open despite the language barrier. One day, she came to me distraught. She confided that one of her siblings had done something wrong the previous evening, and when that happened, her parents would use a wooden spoon as a form of discipline. The children would often be spanked as a reminder to comply with family expectations. One evening, something had gone terribly wrong, and she reported to me that the children were all lined up in the “prisoner of war” position (she demonstrated how this looked), stripped naked and spanked with the wooden spoon and her father’s belt. The boys were crying, but she confessed she tried hard not to. I was crushed, sick to my core.

I was apprehensive about reporting the situation to the authorities out of concern for the children and the enduring consequences of reporting. She was absent the next day, but I waited for her to approach me during recess upon her return. Respecting her space and the passage of time required for her to process these events, I quietly lingered in the background until she needed me. A shift had occurred, and her enthusiasm and thirst for life seemed dampened.

I offered to meet with her daily in a familiar and safe space. Our conversations revolved around future endeavours, acquainting her with my personal life (my dogs, my children, my own story as a young girl with a language barrier), and the difficulties I

encountered. Our relationship flourished. The confidence was poking through again, not just in my presence but in the classroom and at recess. Friendships were made and maintained, and she emerged like a butterfly from its cocoon. The investment of time and interest was rearing itself, and her gift to me became her freedom to once again be her authentic self in the classroom environment.

The district's cultural liaison contacted me and informed me that social services had visited the family. The family received materials and resources via a cultural intake worker who would follow and assist the family. Despite my outrage at what had occurred, I could not help but wonder how this family was coping, how challenging the transition to Canada had been for them. The children needed mental health support to cope with the many changes and shifts they were experiencing; these services are tough to obtain at the best of times. There was no pediatrician to help, the parents' language barrier was an issue, the boys had learning impairments, and the school did what they could to help, but this family was effectively left to their own devices.

Soon after that, the family left our school. Our final goodbyes were abrupt and hurried as this decision to leave was made quickly by her parents. I asked how she felt about leaving, and a sadness came over her. Here, she felt safe, cared for, and acknowledged. Perhaps she felt a slight bit of normalcy amongst her peers. Maybe school gave her the safe space to leave her familial landscape behind and engage and travel to the world she so longingly wanted to be a part of.

Nonetheless, her absence was felt, and her presence was greatly missed. I am not sure where she is today, but I know this experience left me grateful to have been a small

part of her journey. I took this opportunity and held it tightly with great care and respect, for I know what I really hold is the hearts of all our students.

### **As An Assistant Principal**

These stories and experiences have brought me to my research. The importance of at least having one trusted adult for every child, the value of believing in a child when they struggle to see their self-worth, and the stories of inclusion (or ostracization) all came together and channelled my desire to be at least that one caring and attending adult. Sliding to the present, my experiences as an assistant principal and a school-based counsellor have been robust. I have worked as a school counsellor for nine years and an assistant principal for seven years; they are dual roles within the school. My role as a school counsellor has grown to practically full-time status, as I work with students and families who are coping with various social and emotional issues. During COVID-19, there was a noticeable rise in the need for help at our school. This translates to a considerable increase in workload and less time for administrative responsibilities. My work is often prolonged into lunch and recess, leaving little time to address my own needs.

As I struggled to adjust to the increased demands of my job, I realized the teaching staff and educational assistances were also struggling to adapt. Due to Alberta Health Services (AHS) provincial guidelines, teaching staff, educational assistants and administrators were all isolated from colleagues during recess and lunchtime; staff meetings and professional development were conducted via Google Meets. Masking, physical distancing and cohorting teachers and grade groups started to take its toll on staff. Some staff members came into my office to discuss how the pandemic affected



their jobs, families, and friends. Stories about loved ones were exchanged discretely. I could identify with their stories and pondered how they dealt with these challenges, which led me to examine what coping mechanisms I was employing. I recall having a conversation with a member of staff who voiced their rising anxiety, particularly about their children's mental health. They confided that they had accessed personal therapy to cope with work and family pressures.

### **As a Caregiver and Daughter**

I was fighting a completely different battle on my personal landscape. During the past two years of COVID-19, I have supported my parents as their primary caregiver. Navigating senior citizens through a pandemic was difficult, leaving me exhausted and overwhelmed. Their physical needs had increased significantly during the last two years and required medical attention. Accessing medical treatments necessitated a lot of campaigning on my behalf, which left me feeling tired and alone. Also, during this time, I opted to pursue a long-time dream of completing my graduate studies. In fairness, my parent's declining health was not evident at the time. Though the pandemic was wreaking havoc on just about every aspect of our lives, I chose to use this as an opportunity to self-indulge and fulfill my dream.

I slide back to one day that is vividly etched in my memory. My parents were both living at home during the early winter months of 2020. My graduate studies were well underway. Every Saturday afternoon, some students in my cohort had decided to meet to discuss readings and share their thoughts and ideas. One Saturday, before the Google Meet began, I received a call from my mother's health care worker, who travelled to their home daily and assisted with morning routines. She informed me that my mom

was struggling to breathe. I instructed her to call 911 and I would be there shortly. Once I arrived at my parent's home, I joined the Google Meet with my cohort. Keeping the audio and video off, I cared for my parents while waiting for EMS. I recall sitting on their staircase, watching EMS tend to my mother, listening to the conversation on my phone, and wondering how I would manage all this responsibility. This incident foreshadowed the following two years and the remainder of my graduate program, affecting my work, school, family, and overall wellness.

My responsibility as a daughter was to prioritize my parents' health and safety. My parents were aware of my growing responsibilities as caregiver and daughter, and they frequently voiced their guilt for the time I invested in their care, as well as their continued concern for my wellness. My overdeveloped sense of responsibility left little room to negotiate these dual roles. I started to consider how others were impacted by the pandemic's mounting changes and uncertainties.

### **Present Day**

The pandemic caused a dramatic transformation in the world, with its effects reaching all corners of the globe. Job loss, health issues, the loss of loved ones, and uncertainty about the future were our new realities to navigate and accept. When looking back on the first year of the pandemic, it was clear that the educational landscape was not immune to change, and school administrators faced enormous challenges. Our school faced outbreaks and shifted students from in-person to online learning numerous times. Physical distancing, variants, vaccination passports, sanitizing and masking mandates became part of a lexicon that was foreign to educators only 24 months prior.

These rapid changes impacted our school's availability of mental health services and support. Students were experiencing fear of the unknown and loss of the predictability of the future, increased anxiety, family changes such as job loss, separations and even death. The need for my assistance increased dramatically. Families eagerly reached out for help; the school became the center of support and a trusted ally in the fight against COVID-19 and the desperate need for mental health support.

### **Coming to the Research**

During the pandemic, mental health support delivery shifted from in-person counselling to online or teletherapy with limited resources provided to counsellors. Feeling overwhelmed, I spent less time engaging in those things that brought me joy, balance, and self-confidence. I wondered if, and how, I could sustain the demands of all the various aspects of my life. I wondered if other school counsellors recognized the need for and significance of striking a balance between their personal and professional lives. If so, how were they addressing their needs? This study aimed to inquire into the lived experiences of school-based counsellors amidst a pandemic. I autobiographically inquired into my experiences as a school-based counsellor in an elementary school alongside the participants' experiences.

With numerous and growing responsibilities as an assistant principal and school counsellor, and being the primary caregiver and advocate for both parents, a graduate student, mother, and wife, I began to realize that I needed to take care of myself before I could serve others; this awakening led me to puzzle around the experiences of other school-based counsellors. I wondered what supports they had and how they were sustaining themselves. In my experience, the "helping professions" are notorious for

neglecting or setting aside their own needs. We enter these roles to help others, create relationships, guide, support, and facilitate those in need, providing us with a sense of fulfillment. One can only surmise whether this desire for help stems from our prior traumas, injustices, or inequities. However, interventions are only as good as the people who administer them, particularly during a pandemic. With the threat of burnout lurking in the shadows for our mental health supporters, the time has come to discuss how increased demands impact mental health professionals.

### **Purpose of Study**

There is a scarcity of research on elementary school counsellors' and mental health supporters' experiences and how they navigate their roles within a school setting, particularly through a pandemic. According to Shen et al. (2020) the pandemic may have significant long-term negative repercussions for children and adolescents. New research reported by SickKids (2021) found "that the mental health impacts of the pandemic were greater for school-aged children during the first lockdown, underscoring the importance of in-class learning and extracurricular activities for children" (para. 3). However, as the need for services continues to grow, the risk of burnout for school-based counsellors increases.

This research aimed to inquire into the lived experiences of school-based counsellors/mental health supporters amidst a pandemic. I engaged in an autobiographical narrative inquiry into my experiences as a school-based counsellor in an elementary school alongside two participants. Clandinin (2013) stated that these preliminary inquiries into who I am and who I am becoming, when combined with my narrative inquiry and those of other professionals, will allow us to unpack the question of

“personal, practical, and social justification...” (p. 82). As we continue to develop high-quality, responsive environments during unprecedented times, I wish to illuminate the challenges and stories of other school-based counsellors/supporters of children to understand how these professionals can be better supported by the administration, staff, and the community. The data will be compiled along with my shared narrative to reveal resonant themes across our experiences.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review examines the body of evidence pertaining to the benefits of a school-based counsellor. It will also explore school counsellor burnout and self-care and wellness practices implemented by mental health professionals.

#### **The Importance of School Counsellors During a Pandemic**

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2021) one in five Canadians will experience a mental health issue or some form of addiction before the age of 40. The onset of mental health concerns begins in early childhood and adolescence. “Most mental health issues can be detected before the age of 24, and 50% of these difficulties surface before the age of 14” (Kessler et al., 2005, p. 593). These problems contribute to declining student achievement, social and emotional wellness, substance abuse, truancy, and overall student success. Without early interventions, students will continue to experience challenges along their educational journey and are less likely to access appropriate services due to the social stigma associated with mental health.

With these staggering numbers continuing to grow, we have reached a critical juncture. According to research, school-based counsellors’ have a positive impact on student wellness, mental health, and learning and achievement. Collins (2014) found that

school counsellors who supported children and adolescents noted improved mental health, resulting in benefits that included overall functioning, emotional and social development, and academic success. The inclusion of site-based full-time counsellors facilitates identifying and supporting students experiencing mental health issues. To have this resource in schools is paramount in addressing trauma in our students and their families.

School-based counsellors support students, staff, and families by providing individualized and group therapies, in-class support and wrap-around services when needed, all within the familiarity and comfort of the school environment. Kourkoutas & Giovazonias (2015) highlighted the importance of including a school-based counsellor working with children and families rather than professionals in a clinical setting. With the increase in wait times for mental health interventions, the demand and caseload of school-based counsellors are rising more than ever before. Research supports the inclusion of school-based counsellors on leadership teams, particularly in elementary schools. As Donohue et al. (2018) noted, “the early detection and intervention of mental health issues in elementary school-aged children have a higher likelihood of resulting in positive student outcomes” (p. 140). Schools need to approach mental health issues with the same rigour and urgency used to identify academic gaps and deficits. Implementing mental health supports that are preventative and proactive requires a strong, collaborative team that works in tandem to support students’ mental health issues. The importance of collaboration between the school counsellor and all stakeholders is indisputable.

In addition, school-based counselling in elementary schools is the most natural setting for early detection and intervention for our most vulnerable student population.

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2013) “[g]iven that children and youth spend a substantial part of each day within the school setting, these communities become a natural and important venue for mental health service delivery” (p. 1). Meyers (2020) stated that “[b]ecause safeguarding the mental, emotional, and physical welfare of students is the essence of what school counsellors do, these professionals have typically been at the center of the problem-solving process since the arrival of coronavirus” (para. 9). As a result, given the global crisis and the uncertainty of the pandemic’s future impact, school administrators must allocate funds for in-school services and early detection and support of our students and counsellors and promote positive mental health strategies in collaboration with school staff.

During the pandemic, school counsellors have become the common thread that connects all stakeholders, with a range of tasks that include assisting and guiding families, schools, and staff. School counsellors have adapted their roles and responsibilities to include teletherapy to recreate the structure and stability provided within the school before the pandemic, particularly for those highly vulnerable students. Faced with multiple obstacles, school counsellors continued to assist to the best of their abilities with the resources available at the time. Unfortunately, counsellor burnout rises as demands soar, budgets decline, and academics take precedence over mental health.

### **School Counsellors and Burnout**

Researchers in the 1970s first acknowledged an increase in school counsellors’ burnout rate and have since created a plethora of definitions for burnout. Herbert J. Freudenberger, a German-born American psychologist, pioneered research on burnout and pushed it to the forefront of the literature. Freudenberger had been experiencing

burnout himself, prompting him to investigate the indications, symptoms, and demographics associated with it. Freudenberger (1975) identified symptoms of burnout that included fatigue, irritation, feelings of anger and frustration, inflexibility and what appeared to be depression. Freudenberger collaborated with a colleague to develop the *12 Stages of Burnout* model used today to identify burnout among professionals. The 12 stages include the compulsion to prove oneself, working harder, neglecting needs, displacement of conflicts, revision of values, denial of emerging problems, withdrawal, odd behavioural changes, depersonalization, inner emptiness, depression, and burnout syndrome.

As Freudenberger's research evolved, others began to take an interest and explore the concept of burnout. Maslach (1982) defined burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people-work" of some kind" (p. 2).

Burnout has dire consequences for both the professionals and the people they serve. According to Maslach (2017) "[b]asically, workers who are experiencing burnout are overwhelmed, unable to cope, and unmotivated, and they display negative attitudes and poor performance" (p. 144). Montero-Marin (2009) identified burnout as including feelings of depersonalization, emotional fatigue, and a lack of personal success in the workplace. According to Mullen (2018) school counsellors who reported high levels of stress and burnout showed decreased work satisfaction. Morse et al. (2012) found that between 21% to 67% of mental health practitioners reported high degrees of burnout.

School counsellors operate in the "people-work" category and are in danger of burnout, especially in the face of increased demands from a pandemic. Harrichand et al.



(2021) found that school counsellors experiencing stress related to the pandemic may find it challenging to balance work as educators and counsellors, causing them to ignore their self-care. According to the American School Counselor Association (2016) school counsellors have a responsibility to “[m]onitor their emotional and physical health and practice wellness to ensure optimal professional effectiveness. School counselors seek physical or mental health support when needed to ensure professional competence” (section B.3, para. F). Furthermore, school counsellors are usually separated from other counsellors who work in private practice, hospitals, and other therapeutic settings. As a result, school counsellors are left with a gaping hole in their support network. To provide the best services to students and preserve professional efficacy, school counsellors must attend to their mental health and wellness and seek to connect to professional networks that can support them.

### **Self-Care and Wellness In School Counsellors**

School counsellors continue to face unique and unprecedented hurdles in delivering essential services and support while being mindful of attending to their needs and mapping self-care practices that are sustainable and effective and continue to evolve alongside the pandemic. According to the American School Counselor Association: ASCA Research Report (2020) there is a ratio of one school counsellor for every 455 students in kindergarten to grade 12. Yet, the recommended ratio is no more than 250 students per school counsellor. In Canada, a report compiled by the People of Education reported that “Ontario secondary schools with school counsellors, [found that] the average student-to-counsellor ratio is 396:1” (p. 3). In 10 percent of the schools, the

average is 826:1” (Collie, 2019). This overwhelming demand for social and emotional support is taking its toll on our mental health professionals.

According to Bickley (1998) self-care practices are behaviours that the individual implements to promote personal health and well-being. Very little is taught to counselling students concerning self-care and wellness activities, although institutions’ need for a specific curriculum is becoming more widely recognized. School counsellors are obliged to self-monitor their welfare and participate in self-care activities under the American School Counselor Association’s Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) in order to give optimal, impartial help to the people they serve. Mental health professionals must continue to focus on their mental health and practice long-term self-care techniques to ensure professional effectiveness and optimal delivery of support services to students.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to attend to the personal narratives and lived experiences of two mental health supporters during a pandemic while inquiring into my experiences as a school-based counsellor. I was first drawn to narrative inquiry when I explored the work of Clandinin and Connelly in a masters’ course, EDUC 626 Leadership in Curriculum and Instruction, with Dr. Chung. The purpose of narrative inquiry is to honour and construct meaning from the storied experiences of others. What resonated with me was that this methodology was framed within the “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). As a researcher, I could position myself and collaborate with the participants, walk alongside their storied experiences, “where our stories become more alive between us” (Lugones, 1987, p. 4). Clandinin (2013) claimed that “[narrative inquiry] is collaboration between researcher and participants,

over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 17). Narrative inquiry is relational and interactive.

The process began with getting approval from the Research Ethics Board at Concordia University of Edmonton. Once approval for this research was granted, a poster was designed and shared on various social media platforms to recruit participants. I selected the first two individuals who contacted me and expressed interest and willingness to share their experiences. Consent forms were presented and reviewed with each participant, with the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. I scheduled separate inquiry conversations for each participant outside of school hours at a mutually agreed-upon time and location once participants decided to take part in the study. There was a total of three one-on-one conversations held with each participant. They were offered a choice to meet in person or meet via a digital platform such as Google Meets, based on COVID-19 requirements and their degree of comfort.

Individual conversations were recorded and transcribed with the participants’ permission using voice-to-text software and myself as the transcriptionist. Each conversation lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. Two of the discussions took place in person, while the third took place virtually through Google Meet. There were follow-up conversations over pseudonyms, and the text’s veracity were discussed with participants. Throughout the findings, quotes and dialogue from our conversations were utilized to support emergent themes and acknowledge each participant’s perspective and words.

My role as facilitator, participant, and data collector was addressed, and an opportunity to ask further questions was made available before each conversation. The anonymity of participants and their stories was assured. Participants were reminded

before each conversation that the sessions would be recorded for accuracy and later transcribed for the study. Anecdotal notetaking was another data collection method used during the conversations. I was mindful of the participants' mood, the direction of the questioning, and my personal bias. Below are some questions used as springboards for the conversation:

1. How long have you been a school counsellor?
2. What brought you to become a school counsellor?
3. Tell me about your current role?
4. What have been some of your most significant challenges or barriers as a school-based counsellor?
5. How do you balance your mental health? What support(s) do you have?
6. How do you see your role evolving or changing as we continue to navigate the pandemic and after the pandemic?

As I looked across the text and the recorded interviews, I revisited their storied landscape from the lens of a researcher. I could identify with the “co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). I was struck by the intensity and emotion of the two participants as they shared their stories. Narrating the previous two years, I could see and hear the energy and emotion in their voices.

Reflecting on my experiences, I sought to find connections to theirs, perhaps in context and time. I circled back to Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) statement, “here, in three-dimensional space, I acknowledge that I “meet [myself] in the past, present, and future” (p. 60). I considered how my lived experiences flow into the present and offer

hope for the future; understanding my context paved the way to understanding those of the participants. The art of storytelling and conversation is where we live, and through the telling and retelling of our stories, we reveal more of ourselves.

### **Coming to the Participants**

#### **Participant 1 - Kim**

Kim<sup>1</sup> has a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education with a Special Education minor. Her first year of teaching was spent working as a substitute teacher at several schools. Soon after, Kim was given a temporary contract as a kindergarten teacher, which she accepted. From here, her career blossomed, culminating in a six-year permanent contract teaching grade three. Kim is now in her tenth year of teaching as an early childhood educator in a third-grade classroom.

Kim was always drawn to opportunities and passionate about providing mental health support to students and families. "I was always the representative of the school, and it is a kindergarten to grade nine school, so it is a big group. And I have just been really drawn to it" (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021). With the commencement of the pandemic, her passion and enthusiasm in the field were soon recognized and utilized.

The epidemic heightened the demand for mental health services in her district, prompting the creation of jobs explicitly dedicated to assisting students, teachers, administrators, and families, as needed. For a portion of the pandemic, Kim found herself in the role of mental health supporter in this inaugural position.

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<sup>1</sup>To protect the participants' anonymity, Kim is a pseudonym.

Unfortunately, funding often dedicates the sustainability of such specialized positions, and because of budgetary constraints, Kim returned to the classroom after just a year in that role. Nonetheless, her work and support for students transcend beyond the four walls of her classroom, continuing to impact students daily.

### **Participant 2 - Cindy**

Cindy<sup>2</sup> began her career as a teacher in a rural K-12 school with less than one hundred students. During her employment at this school, her teaching assignment was in division two<sup>3</sup>, shifting from grade four to grade six. Cindy reflects that she would often have her students seek her out for support concerning domestic issues or personal matters or situations that made them unhappy; “they just needed to talk” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). After spending some years teaching, Cindy realized that her passion for teaching had developed into an interest and passion in counselling.

Returning to graduate school while teaching full time, Cindy received her master’s degree in school counselling. “It was probably one of the best choices I ever made, to do the masters program in school counselling in the Ed Psych area” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021).

Returning to her rural roots as the newly appointed school counsellor, Cindy found herself focusing more on the junior high-level population. However, with budgetary constraints, her time would fluctuate, and her role expanded to include all students from K-12, group counselling, and guidance counselling. Having spent six years at this school and with her administration’s support, she left to pursue a position as a

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<sup>2</sup> To protect the participants' anonymity, Cindy is a pseudonym.

<sup>3</sup> Division two includes grades four, five and six.

school counsellor and teacher at another school in rural Alberta. While there, she realized she wanted to gain more expertise in her field and expand her credentials. Cindy avidly pursued post-graduate courses and assessment courses, and she accredited herself as a licensed psychologist.

Once registered as a psychologist, she returned to work at the same rural school where she did assessments, counselling, teaching, and was a special education coordinator. There briefly, she then moved to a larger school district within the province as an assessment consultant. While spending 14 years in this role, Cindy also worked part-time in private practice, providing therapy for children and adults, pursuing her passion for counselling. Cindy returned full-time to the education system in a newly developed role as a mental health consultant.

Today, Cindy supports a wide range of students at numerous locations. COVID-19 has exacerbated the demand for mental health supporters, and Cindy can often feel how the increased caseload can take its toll.

### **Emerging Themes**

As the themes of our talks unfolded, I used the lens of the three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) to inquire into the stories lived and told by participants while also attending to my narratives of experience. I thought back to my early years as a student and the significant impact my teachers had on my self-image. I embraced those recollections as part of my narrative collection to help me understand who I am now. I noted discussion of the “familial intergenerational stories... institutional stories...and the personal stories” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 22), the passions with which they were communicated, and how “intertwined” they were when I read through the data

again. These stories had become part of Kim and Cindy's fabric and would contribute to their transformation as they continue to acquire new stories upon diverse landscapes throughout their lifetimes. Throughout the study, quotes and dialogue from the participants were used to portray and express the essence of their experiences. Participants' emotions and ideas and their general mood and tone were observed and noted in field notes of our conversations.

### **Theme #1 -Barriers: The Last Two Years With COVID-19**

Kim and I had our first conversation in person in my home office. With a comfortable blanket, candles, and a hot cup of tea to set the tone, the environment was ideal for a leisurely discussion. Kim plunged right into her work as a mental health supporter and reflected on the past year. She noted the increasing need for mental health services during the pandemic and how that led to the development of additional roles in the upcoming year to help support students, staff, administration, and families across the district. Though she was out of the classroom and in her new role for the 2020/21 year, she did observe difficulties and challenges that both teachers and students were facing.

One such challenge was with assessment. Despite the pandemic, administrators expected teachers to prioritize assessments and curriculum. Kim noted, "social interaction and the social-emotional needs of students is far more important than knowing that I can tell you how far kids are right now" (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021). She reflected, "I could tell you right now that kids are behind because it is a year of online learning that no one was prepared for. So, everyone is behind, including the teachers. We probably did not get through the whole curriculum either because it is online" (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021).



As I think about Kim's experiences in the first year of COVID-19, I remember feeling unsure of myself and losing my footing as the benchmarks and deadlines for assessments, applying for funding and accessing consulting services were rapidly changing. Even though adaptations to the curriculum had been made to reflect the swing between in-person and online, most division deadlines remained set and/or pushed ahead by a few weeks.

Apart from provincial testing, the division continued with most large-scale assessments. As the assistant principal, I observed teachers were also trying to find their footing with the new and growing limits of the pandemic as they continued to teach curriculum and implement assessment practices with professional efficacy. As a result, the principal and I agreed to prioritize which assessments needed to be implemented while also acknowledging the mental health needs of our students, teaching staff, and educational assistants.

Kim's role and others like hers were disbanded shortly after a year due to budgetary constraints, leaving students and staff to access resources on their own. "I know just speaking to colleagues in terms of staff wellness; there is not much support" (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021)

Cindy echoed similar sentiments. Our conversation consisted of a lengthy Google Meet in the comfort of our homes that felt like a discussion amongst friends and colleagues, sharing and reflecting upon an unprecedented two years.

We began our conversation by sliding back to her days in the classroom as a teacher. Cindy reflects that even then, "I did feel a bit lost at times and underappreciated, to be honest" (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021).

Concerning the pandemic, Cindy exclaimed, “So last year I was really feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and honestly, I did not know if I could get through the year because I was just so... it was just all over the place” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). Being new to the role, she found herself reaching out to colleagues during these times, which “was one of the best things” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021).

Cindy reflected on the pandemic and highlighted those administrative changes at the district level exposed teams to new protocols and processes, which had to be taught and learned during the outbreak and alongside the work. These changes impacted administrative and mental health positions and how schools seek their support. With different branches of mental health disciplines on the teams, meshing the styles and developing clear expectations to meet the needs of all disciplines was challenging.

During the pandemic, the most challenging thing for Cindy was the uncertainty, the unknown of what she might encounter moving forward with students due to the crisis. New to her role, she found her foundation a bit shaky as she, too, was learning the system, meeting new colleagues, and managing a robust caseload. Cindy took added professional development to polish her understanding in certain areas of mental health and to be prepared and most effective and knowledgeable when faced with a variety of issues that may not have been part of her service repertoire prior to the pandemic.

As an assistant principal and a school counsellor, I experienced these changes and their impact at the school level. The process for students to receive mental health services was being revised, and many team members had changed. Acquainting myself with new staff, procedures, and expectations added another layer to my responsibilities. What was

once second nature to me had now become a test of patience and perseverance. Moreover, a sense of urgency for increased mental health care could be sensed radiating across classrooms, leaving me feeling anxious and helpless. With no end to the sudden surge of services in sight, I had to trust the process and the system to address the schools expanding mental health requirements in a timely manner. Because I had the skills and resources to temporarily meet the students' needs, I spent considerable time supporting students and their families, which resulted in extended workdays to fulfill my administrative responsibilities.

Cindy identified lines of communication as one of the barriers or challenges experienced during COVID-19. She is concerned that referrals are primarily made for disruptive students. She is afraid that students with more clinical difficulties may be neglected since they tend to fade into the background and therefore are not brought to the administration's attention by the teacher as requiring mental health support. As the demand for support continues to grow, she worries that there may not be enough service to meet demand, particularly as families realize that mental health supports can be accessed through the school. Cindy noted there is a call to hire more mental health therapists in private and public practice, though finding qualified professionals is challenging. With private practice caseloads on the rise, registered psychologists and trained regulated therapists are far and few between. Pivoting between online learning and in-person learning has increased the intensity of anxiety, stress, and other things for both parents and students, with professionals seeing overwhelming numbers of people seeking services.

Though the last two years have been fraught with change and uncertainty, Cindy reported that she is grateful for and loves how efficient things are running this year. She appreciates the support from her colleagues, team, and school-based people and feels more confident in her role now that it has been established and processes are in place. Even though COVID-19 has made many things more complex, Cindy believes it is “bringing to the forefront the need for and importance of mental health. It used to be that thing on the side, that extra” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021).

Both participants underlined how the pandemic has brought mental health to the forefront, prompted conversations, and helped people recognize to take action, particularly considering the impact of lockdowns, online learning, and social isolation. Kim and Cindy shared how teachers are integral partners in supporting students and advocating for mental health.

My experiences these past two years have seen unexpected layers of challenges, such as unforeseen protocols and processes. The pandemic has potentially been the antecedent to a mental health crisis whose impact may not be fully understood or realized for years to come. Administrators, educators, students, and families must work collaboratively to minimize the mental health effects as best they can with what is available during a pandemic.

## **Theme #2 – The Importance of Self-Care Practices**

Both participants discussed the importance of wellness and self-care routines during our dialogue. The overwhelming requirement to meet the job demands necessitated the purposeful adoption of strategies to see them through a pandemic while also allowing for continued professional efficacy. Three practices emerged from our

conversations: accessing personal therapy, physical activity, and other self-care techniques in general.

Kim spoke openly about the retention of a therapist to support her through these times and help her achieve a healthy balance between professional and personal life. “I regularly see a psychologist. I take full advantage of my benefits, even if I am feeling okay, I still check in with him and say, hey, I think I am having a good week or some days he is like, look [come] a little sooner. I will see you next week” (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021).

“Know yourself before you help others” has become Cindy’s mantra, particularly during these difficult times. Cindy shared openly that she too seeks the assistance of a psychologist from time to time and feels “better equipped to help kids.” Adding, “we have to be healthy to be able to carry whatever the student [brings]... to carry that in a way that is not bringing my baggage in” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). The literature supports Cindy’s notion of self-care. Coaston (2017) stated that self-care is an essential aspect of a counsellor’s responsibility to clients and oneself (p. 288). Cindy also emphasized that talking about our feelings or mental health is more widely accepted because of the pandemic. She added:

Being supported in my wellness is a big thing. [I] have a doctor for [my] physical ailments [and] a psychologist to work with me on my own issues because they are going to come up...it is not like being a psychologist makes me immune to mental and emotional vulnerability. (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021)

Cindy went on to say that more of her coworkers were similarly growing more comfortable having mental health conversations, allowing for relationship building and a growing support network.

Cindy's experiences reminded me of my school experiences with staff throughout COVID-19. Some staff were growing more comfortable talking about their feelings and experiences with mental health, asked for resources, and took mental health days. Cindy's admission of receiving therapy also struck a chord with me since I, too, have sought personal counselling, especially when the responsibilities of work and caring for my elderly parents have tipped the scales and when I feel as though I am drowning in self-doubt and exhaustion. Therapy provided a level of insight that was difficult for me to obtain in the middle of life's responsibilities.

Though both Kim and Cindy agreed that we are moving away from stigmatizing mental health, Kim shared another perspective:

I think many people are still embarrassed, like, oh, it is becoming a lot more normal in terms of yes, we are ending the stigma, but I still know a lot of old school people like my mom's age or older, borderline retiring. They would never admit they are struggling, or they are depressed or anything there, and it is just not the way, and again, unfortunately, that is just not the way they were raised. And so that also needs to change. (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021)

Kim's thoughts are supported by the World Health Organization (2017) which reported that more than 20% of adults over the age of 60 would experience a mental health disorder that will be overlooked or under-identified by the medical profession and underreported by the elderly themselves due to the perceived stigma surrounding mental

health. Kim's statement resonated with me as I have witnessed firsthand the mental health struggle my elderly parents faced. My parents were hesitant to admit they required mental and emotional support, particularly as they transitioned from their home to an assisted living facility and faced isolation and lockdowns. Instead, they suffered in silence; I reassured them that it was acceptable to feel this way and seek assistance.

Physical activity was another prevalent practice implemented across both participants. Kim is an avid yoga participant and found it immensely supported her mental health. She reflects, "[During the pandemic], I found an app, and I made an effort always to do my yoga" (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021). Before COVID-19, Kim set personal goals around her yoga practice to complete 100 yoga classes that year. She would reward herself by placing a star on her tracker after completing a class. Once COVID-19 hit and the yoga studios closed, she had to improvise and thus used technology to continue her classes. Kim also mentioned that she enjoyed walking her dog daily and, at times, would hurry home during her lunch break to do so.

Cindy enjoyed physical activity and its benefits, but because of the pandemic, her job duties changed, and she found herself letting exercise go by the wayside. Cindy did note, however, that this year has brought her more clarity and structure in her position, enabling her to incorporate more time to exercise, eat properly and even schedule a much-needed massage from time to time. Cindy added that the inclusion of these simple practices left her feeling more self-value and less self-critical, which she admits she has struggled with in the past. Cindy reports that she now feels enough self-value to prioritize her self-care and reach out to those people who "fill up your cup and cut out those who take and take and take" (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021).

Both participants' focus on exercise resonated with me. Physical literacy and exercise have always been staples to my wellness and offer mental and physical benefits that allow for a balanced professional and personal lifestyle.

Years ago, I worked for an administrator who also valued the importance of physical activity, particularly as a stress management technique. He gave me advice that I have since passed on to numerous other friends and educators. He suggested, "schedule your exercise into your day like an important appointment you cannot miss. Honor this appointment as you would any other." (Personal communications with a former administrator, November 2009). I have followed this advice for the last 15 years, and it has served me exceptionally well!

Other self-care practices were highlighted by both participants as aiding in the establishment of balance, even though they used different approaches and activities.

Kim revealed that alongside her yoga, she journaled daily. She described that she takes roughly 30 minutes to engage in journaling and other self-care activities at the end of her workday. During this time, feelings, emotions, and events were still fresh in her mind allowing her to reflect more clearly. Kim notes, "[journaling] gets my feet back on the ground, think about the day, spill it on a piece of paper, whatever it is, right?" (Transcript with Kim, November 23, 2021). Kim also referenced other self-care tools she incorporated into her daily routine. A "brain dump" was a tool she often turned to clear her thoughts and let them rest. This activity entailed her recording a "thought of the day" and revisiting it during the year. She stated that this gave her peace of mind and allowed her to reflect on her year periodically.



Cindy noted that she uses many techniques she has learned, such as self-compassion and meditation, and practices them daily. She added that “continued [personal development] practices such as reading and learning more about stress and anxiety expanded her repertoire of skills; she “feels better equipped to handle things.” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). The importance of self-care practices is supported in the research as Coaston (2017) shared that to retain involvement, interest, and satisfaction in any pursuit, it is necessary to engage in intellectual stimulation. Additionally, Kim and Cindy identified higher engagement in their work by engaging in professional reading about the impacts of the pandemic, professional development around supporting mental health, research, and the development of presentations for future reference by their school districts.

Another way Cindy coped with the strenuous demands of her profession was to know she was helping others. “What makes me feel really good is if I feel like I am empowering the student(s) or the child whatever age they are, or the parents...mak[ing] their lives in any way better” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). She continued by clarifying that when she “holds” whatever they may be dealing with, it gives the student the space to solve their problem, see a different perspective, and empower them when she helps them find a solution; therein lie the fruits of her labour. She continued by reflecting that self-care is built into the work if you are primarily happy with your work. “If you are doing the thing for you, it just makes you feel good... I do not view it as a giving thing because it is not a personal member of the family or a friend” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). However, Cindy reflected that she must consciously

remember to implement self-care practices through routine, as it impacts her mental health when absent.

What resonated with me was Cindy's passion for helping students and families. When reviewing the stories we shared during our conversation, Cindy was excited and passionate about her work with others and could not see herself in any other role. Her enthusiasm and love for those she supported were contagious and caused me to slide back to my earlier days of counselling younger students. The satisfaction of helping others was immeasurable, and indeed, to use Cindy's words, "filled my bucket."

Similarly, the deliberate and continuous inclusion of self-care practices increased my general well-being. I am committed to including regular physical activity, a healthy diet, and stress-relieving techniques into my routine. As Kim and Cindy have noted, self-care is continual, connected to well-being, and extends beyond a person's physiological needs. According to Carney (2011) physical self-care is the most implemented practice, overlooking the importance of mind and spirit interventions. Both participants engaged in practices of the mind which included reading, professional development, journaling, and mindfulness. Kim and Cindy also incorporated "interventions for the body" (Coaston, 2017, p. 290), including exercise, yoga, nutrition, and support networks. There was no mention during the conversations of spirituality as a self-care practice by Kim. However, Cindy noted that meditation and yoga were indeed spiritual practices she implemented for both her body and mind.

### **Theme #3 - Administrative Support is Essential**

From reading across the transcripts, it was evident that both participants had comparable viewpoints on administrative support and how it impacted their respective roles.

Kim stated that she felt more welcome in some schools than in others. Most administrators invited her to attend a staff meeting to introduce herself and her role, while other administrators did not respond to her emails and were reluctant to reach out. Kim recounts that “[what] stands out for me is really having to grow a thicker skin” (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021). Even though Kim made it a standard practice to regularly check in with her schools, she believed that administrators were under pressure to prioritize assessment practices and collect evidence of learning. In contrast, students’ and staff’s mental health and social-emotional learning were less considered. As a result, administrators were underestimating or overlooking the potential of her expertise in the classroom and how it could positively impact student learning and achievement, opting to spend the additional money and time elsewhere. This notion is supported by Dahir et al. (2010) who noted that “principals who value school counseling recognize the connection the counselor provides between home and school and among teachers, administrators, and students” (p.330).

Kim also found that administrators often blurred her role and were coming to her looking for ways to “build a culture around staff”:

I was there to support the staff and their caseload in terms of the social-emotional needs of their students, and of their classroom. So that might be something like

supporting them, so they feel better, but it was not a role created *for* staff.

(Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021)

Administrators who supported Kim's work had more teachers who readily sought her expertise and utilized her skillset. Kim summed it up beautifully by saying:

Mental health is not adding to the plate; it *is* the plate. I always say it is the plate because once you have that, the learning can start because if they [the students] feel comfortable, if they feel loved, if they feel appreciated, if they feel like they have friends, then they are going to want to learn, they are going to want to come to school. (Transcript with Kim, November 17, 2021)

According to Cindy, many school administrators embraced and prioritized mental well-being and mental health, making her feel welcomed and valued when working in those buildings. Small things like being greeted by office staff when you visit the school or having a pre-arranged, dedicated room contributed to her job being validated and students being supported. Cindy reflected that schools and their administrators grew more comfortable and familiar with the system when following the newly established protocols. As a result, she became more efficient, mainly because she felt her work was valued. "People are getting to know me, and I feel more comfortable." Cindy expressed that, at times, administrators would seek her professional advice regarding matters of personal interest:

Reaching out to colleagues was one of the best things. I know that a lot of times, even coming into the schools, I am a bit of a support system for administration because they know it is confidential and if I have a bit of time... and because I

have a school background, I really quite like that piece. (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021)

Cindy admits that some schools do not necessarily share the same enthusiasm or climate as other schools. When confronted with a school that is not as familiar with her or her role and is not as welcoming, she relied on the process and focused on the student and what she was there to accomplish. Even the more resistant schools are starting to see the importance of supporting students in their mental health and are growing more open to it.

The research suggests that a positive working relationship between school administrators and counsellors is essential to attaining positive student outcomes. A study conducted by Dahir et al. (2010) concluded that collaboration between the principal and the school counsellor promotes student success. “Collaborative success is grounded in the assurance that the beliefs and priorities of principals and school counselors are focused on a common goal, which is a passion for improving student outcomes” (Dahir et al., 2010, p. 299).

Working with supportive administrators has caused her to feel she can reach out and share openly with other school staff members, particularly teachers. Cindy reported, “I am more confident. I am more supported. I am much healthier, emotionally, mentally, all those things. Yes, it is incredible” (Transcript with Cindy, November 22, 2021). Cindy circles back to how the pandemic has brought mental health to the forefront, prompted conversations, and helped people recognize how they can assist, particularly considering the impact of lockdowns, online learning, and social isolation.

Kim and Cindy acknowledged the necessity of reaching out to support networks and openly discussing mental health with coworkers in a respectful, trusting environment.

I reflected on my practice of reaching out to others and realized it is not readily employed. When I dig deeper into the mystery of its absence, it relates to feelings of inadequacy. Why do I need to be supported when my job is to support others?

### **Returning to the Justifications**

I circle back to the purpose of my research and consider the wonders I had before the study. I return to the personal, practical, and social justifications related to the research.

#### **Personal Justification**

This research study illuminated the many challenges school-based counsellors/mental health supporters face and has provoked shifts for me personally.

After listening to the storied experiences of both the participants, Kim and Cindy provided valuable insight into what they needed to maintain balance in their professional and personal lives; the issue was to designate time for self-care routines. We all agreed that to care for others, we must first learn to care for ourselves. Caring for others requires being aware of one's mental health and implementing strategies that link you to your feelings and awareness of what is necessary for health and wellness.

I slide back to my own experiences over the past two years and consider the challenges, obstacles, and immense responsibilities I carried in my multiple roles. Caring for aging parents, graduate school, counselling, work, and family left me feeling exhausted and overwhelmed and, at times, with little opportunity for self-care and wellness practices. I consider where I am now. With the recent passing of my mother during my studies, resilience has become my ally.

As a daughter, wife, mother, school-based counsellor, and assistant principal, the learnings and awakenings of the participant's storied experiences are manifold and have created a shift in perspective. Attending to my mental health is crucial. Like so many other mental health professionals, we are often the first to help those in distress, and it is all too easy to disregard or neglect our own mental health.

Recalling the conversations with participants, I am reminded of the "why" in what we do. The "why" are the students, our desire to help, our passion for helping them be successful. Staff and students look to people in leadership to set the tone in practices, attitudes, and behaviours; I am reminded of my responsibility as an assistant principal and the necessity of leading by example. I recognize the value of having a school counsellor for students, staff, and families. Integrating wellness techniques to attain balance has benefits that transcend beyond the job and into one's personal life.

I am reminded of my role as a school counsellor and the many people who seek my assistance. My wellness is the pillar that supports me and allows me to continue to do the work I do with professional efficacy. The shift is difficult for me as I learn to attend and prioritize myself. I feel a sense of guilt reaching for those branches of support, whether they are personal therapy, a massage, or a quiet space to eat my lunch. There is that sense that I must always be available and accessible.

As a mother, I consider the value I place on my wellness for those around me that I love and care about. At times, these practices may go by the wayside to attend to what I perceive as more pressing matters. I reflect on the impact that has on family and relationships. Again, I need to lead by example as my children watch and learn from me.

Understanding my context helps me understand others and position myself alongside their landscape.

### **Practical Justification**

Thinking back to the conversations with Kim and Cindy, I have gained a deeper understanding of the challenges and successes they have faced during the pandemic and how these experiences reach and take root in their personal landscapes. However, I see the need for mental health services continuing to grow both inside and outside of our schools. As such, more emphasis must be placed on supporting the professionals who attend to our students directly.

As an assistant principal, I am mindful of the gift of having a school counsellor to support the vast and growing needs of the students. But I am also cognizant of the toll this can take on our professionals and consider how I can advocate for more support to lessen the burden. Increased caseloads, inadequate resources and funding, and a maze of obligations and expectations continue to grow. As an administrator and leader, it is my responsibility to support and care for school counsellors as they care for others.

Moving forward with these awakenings, I plan to be more vocal about my self-care practices alongside colleagues and lead by example. Hopefully, this will send the message that accessing and practicing the wellness strategies we offer to others should be our first line of defence for continued professional efficacy.

I am hopeful that if the research shows a link between school-based counselling in elementary schools and a decline in the need for future mental health resources, it may encourage school districts and divisions, as well as school administrators, to allocate



more funds to counselling services to help reduce the overwhelming caseloads in our schools, as well as to attend to burnout, stress, and anxiety in our school counsellors.

### **Social Justification**

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on our institutions, with the mental health crisis brought to the forefront. By attending to the lived and told experiences of school-based counsellors, I hope this research will offer greater insight into how administrators, policymakers, school divisions and districts, communities, and governments can better support school-based counsellors and mental health supporters in our schools. Moreover, I hope that Kim and Cindy's experiences have illuminated the desperate need to allocate resources to support mental health within our schools for both students and staff. Hopefully, this study will draw attention to the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being requirements and self-care practices necessary to sustain the work with integrity and professional efficacy.

It is vital to attend to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of school counsellors. My hope is that school principals will exert their influence on policymakers to continue increasing the number of school counsellors in their divisions or districts.

As an assistant principal, I have seen firsthand the impact school counsellors make on our student population, but I am also aware of the toll the demand of the work takes over time. Without the necessary support and resources for school counsellors, their capacity to continue to help others will deplete as they struggle to find balance. This will have a devastating impact on all stakeholders, particularly as the effects of the pandemic begin to surface.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Storytelling was ingrained in my home and culture. For as far back as I can remember, uncles, aunts and grandparents shared detailed stories of their past, of the family's past and how these came to shape who they are today. I vividly remember my grandmother, an exceptional storyteller, sharing our family's history and traditions via story. Bedtime consisted of stories about my ancestors, religion and herself as a wife, sister, daughter, and mother during the German invasion of 1941. She created an innate curiosity about people and how they lived, their experiences during different periods and different countries. Because of these stories, I felt connected to my past, to those who came before me, and I began to look forward to these priceless moments of oral history. Her gift of storytelling was passed on to my mother, whose skilled approach to the story often ended with an intentional lesson meant to be learned and pondered. I made some life choices around my mother's narratives. I chuckle as I remember the numerous times her stories left me dazed and confused!

My mother's wisdom and ability to constantly connect stories to learnings and teachings was a gift that her children, grandchildren, friends, and family readily sought and solicited (and sometimes was unsolicited!). As a child, I embraced these storytelling moments, the teleporting into the past and the excitement of new adventures always lurking around the corner. As an adult, I wish I would have documented more of these stories, captured them somehow, archived them as such, and asked more questions. Both my grandmother and mother allowed me to walk alongside my family's history, connect to it, and experience pride and a strong sense of belonging to my heritage. Perhaps this is what drew me to narrative inquiry in the first place, or maybe it is the gift of storytelling

passed on to me now. Though I have not mastered the intricate storytelling skills like those before me, it is a part of my fibre and most authentic means of sharing lived experiences.

Kim and Cindy's stories inspired me, and the strength, devotion, and compassion they unwittingly expressed during our conversations were humbling. I recall the words of Lessard (2015), "we learn by telling our stories in the relational spaces of narrative inquiry" (p. 4). Both Kim and Cindy brought their stories to life through emotion, intonation, and expression, capturing the passion for their work. This led me back to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) concept of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which reminds us to attend to temporality, sociality, and milieu to construct meaning of, live within and be surrounded by our storied experiences. It also echoes the need to appreciate and reflect on others' stories as we listen and walk alongside them. I became aware of how these participants' stories may be revealing a piece of their personal landscape and how it has shaped and inspired who they are and the work they have chosen to do. I link and reflect on my own experiences as a student, a teacher, and a leader and overlay that knowledge into different landscapes to fully appreciate why this work has been my calling.

Through this narrative inquiry, I am awakened to the links we make to our stories and the storyteller; we may embody their experience and connect it to ourselves. Stories are more than just words; they are the emotion in the voice, the exhilaration and sorrow that can only be understood and appreciated if you have conveyed your own journey. Working alongside Kim and Cindy, we faced the tension of these times together. We created new stories to share, some personal and some professional, but more importantly,

we recognized that the telling and retelling of stories is perpetual. It is human nature to relate and connect through the sharing of narrative.

Throughout our conversations, one thing became abundantly clear: we must hold not only our students' hearts but also the hearts of our mental health partners if we want them to continue to provide highly responsive environments in our schools. While therapists, psychologists, wellness coaches, and mental health partners continue to zealously support students, we must not overlook their needs. All stakeholders will benefit from collaborative efforts to offer preventative and proactive mental health assistance for both students and professionals. To quote Kim, "mental health is not adding *to* the plate, it *is* the plate."

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