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Meaning-Making in Early Adolescence: Practices and Perspectives of School Counselors

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Meaning-Making in Early Adolescence: Practices and Perspectives of School Counselors

Abstract

Adolescence is a crucial life stage involving aspects of identity development and decision-making that have potential life-long consequences. A sense of meaning is related to many beneficial factors during adolescence, including psychological health, academic engagement, and overall well-being. This qualitative interview study was designed to investigate middle school counselors' perspectives and practices regarding exploring meaning with their early adolescent students. Analysis of ten individual interviews and a focus group revealed that the school counselor participants did engage in work with middle school students around meaning-making. They primarily helped students to find meaning through identity exploration, specifically focusing on navigating challenging life circumstances, reflecting on behavior, and making meaningful connections. Practical implications for both school counselors and counselor educators are detailed.

Author's Notes

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What is the meaning of life? This question has been asked countless times within many disciplines throughout history. Viktor Frankl purported, however, that people truly desire not just to know the meaning of life in general, but to know specifically the meaning of their own lives (Langle & Skyes, 2006). He explained how meaning could be discovered in three ways: (1) creating something or accomplishing a task; (2) having an experience or encounter with someone; and, (3) through the inevitable suffering in our lives (Frankl, 1984). More recently, researchers have defined meaning in life "as a sense of coherence or understanding of existence, a sense of purpose in one's life, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment" (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010, p. 2).

This search for meaning and purpose often begins in adolescence, a period of life between the ages of 12-18, which is widely recognized as confusing, challenging, and difficult to navigate (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents are not only capable of engaging in independent thought related to meaning and purpose (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), but according to Erikson (1968), the exploration of meaning and purpose during this life stage is an essential task of identity development. Recently, researchers have advocated that adolescence is an optimal time for counselors to explore issues of meaning and purpose with their clients and students (Blair, 2004; Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill 2010; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Ho et al., 2010; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). Developmentally, as suggested by Erikson (1968) and Piaget (1958), adolescents are ready to begin this exploration, and interventions at this vulnerable life stage could be an important measure. Although this life stage is ripe with changes and negative connotations, adolescents possess strengths that can be fostered to promote thriving, rather than just surviving their teenage years (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010). The following sections highlight the importance of

meaning-making in adolescence; explain gaps between school counselor training and practice; and present results of a study that examined school counselors' preparation, perspectives, and practices regarding their work with adolescent students with meaning-making.

Importance of Meaning-Making in Adolescence

Research has demonstrated that adolescents are capable of engaging in the process of meaning making and engage in searching for meaning and purpose without prompting from others (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; McLean et al., 2010). Numerous studies have documented the relationship between a sense of meaning and purpose and well-being in adolescence (Burrow, et al., 2010; Ho et al., 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Lerner et al., 2010;). In their study of sense of purpose in youth, Burrow et al. (2010) analyzed self-report scales of 318 students and found that adolescents committed to exploring meaning and purpose during their teenage years were also more adaptive, positive, hopeful, and better able to effectively adjust to developmental challenges. Similarly, Ho et al. (2010) used questionnaires to study adolescents' sense of meaning and well being, but sampled a much larger group (n=1807) across 21 different schools in Hong Kong. Results suggested a positive correlation between sense of purpose in adolescence and well-being and life satisfaction, as well as an inverse relationship of a sense of meaning with social issues such as avoidance and rejection. In their study of meaning making, McLean et al. (2010) reported that being able to make meaning of past life events is also positively related to self-esteem and physical and psychological health.

The process of searching for meaning and engaging in exploration of purpose is also related to the task of identity development during adolescence. Several researchers have reported the centrality of identity formation during adolescence and its connection to meaning

(Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; McLean, 2005). McLean (2005) articulated that this focus on forming identity:

> begins to emerge in adolescence because of the onset of formal operations, physiological maturity, and often the demands for establishing oneself in the world through work, school, and family, demands that tend to allow for or even require meaning making (p. 683).

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

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

It is not surprising with the abundance of positive qualities associated with a sense of meaning in adolescence that there are negative aspects correlated with a lack of meaning or purpose. Frankl (1967) referred to a pervasive sense of meaninglessness as an existential vacuum. Blair (2004) found that a lack of meaning among adolescents was often the underlying cause of depression in teenagers. Sometimes this depression manifests outwardly as aggression or defiance, and other times it is turned inward, resulting in isolation or even suicidal ideation or attempts (Bjerkeset, Nordahl, Romundstad, & Gunnell, 2010; Khan & Mian, 2010; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). Citing his vast experience as a doctor and psychotherapist, Frankl (1984) reported that "it may well be that an individual's impulse to take his life would have been overcome had he been aware of some meaning and purpose worth living for" (p. 143).

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

A lack of meaning among adolescents can also influence the educational process. In their study of boredom and meaning, Melton and Schulenberg (2007) found a significant negative correlation between boredom and a sense of meaning or purpose. Boredom resulting from meaninglessness may manifest in adolescents' disengagement from the educational process or in impulsive or inattentive behavior in school (Divjak, 2010). Considering how influential research has documented meaning and purpose in adolescents to be, school counselor educators can

leverage these findings to assist in the preparation of school counselors who serve adolescent students.

Preparation of School Counselors

While multiple studies cited in the previous section have demonstrated support for the importance of exploring meaning in adolescence, there is little to no research specifically examining how school counselors are prepared to help their students with this task. More research is needed to address the gap between school counselor practice and school counselor preparation, which has been recognized in school counseling and counselor education literature (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Branthoover, Desmond, & Bruno, 2010; Education Trust, 2012; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Martin, 2002; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Steen et al., 2008; Steen & Rudd, 2009).

This gap is concerning, as school counselors often begin their careers with limited preparation in key areas necessary to perform their duties successfully. Although the ASCA calls for a unified vision of school counseling, research has highlighted the variation across counselor preparation programs regarding school counseling curriculum and preparatory experiences (Branthoover et al., 2010; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Steen & Rudd, 2009). In fact, in some cases there seems to be little connection between the actual activities of school counselors and the preparation they receive in their graduate programs (Ed. Trust, 2012; Martin, 2002; Steen & Rudd, 2009). Researchers have pointed out the lack of, and need for, an intentionally designed and consistently constructed curriculum for preparing school counselors that is informed by research and practice (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Steen et al., 2008).

Purpose of Study

Because adolescence is recognized as an important and, at times, challenging life stage, examining school counselors' preparation, perspectives, and practices to help students with meaning making is important for a number of reasons. It is important because of the reported positive implications of a sense of meaning in adolescence. It is also important because of the potential negative lifelong consequences of leaving these adolescent issues unexamined (D'Amico, Ellickson, Collins, Martino, & Klein, 2005; Hofstra, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2002). Although adolescents are able to independently explore these issues of meaning, they often need help navigating the process of making meaning of their lives (Blair, 2004). School counselors can help students to make meaning by assisting them in gaining insight about life circumstances and exploring what they have learned about themselves through the situations they encounter (McLean, 2005). Unfortunately, there is a lack of research that examines the extent of school counselor preparation for this task and what their practices are, if any, in this area. The aim of this study was to elicit the voices of middle school counselors regarding if and how they explore issues of meaning with adolescents in the school setting, as well as how prepared they feel to do this work.

Methods

A qualitative research design is a natural fit with this research study because of its inquiry about meaning-making and understanding meaning within context (Merriam, 2009). This study employed a phenomenological research design focused on school counselors' experiences and perspectives about meaning-making with early adolescents. Interview questions were analogous to the general questions that form the foundation of phenomenological inquires. Questions were created to elicit voices of school counselors, asking them if and how they incorporate meaning-

making techniques in their counseling with students and the extent to which they felt prepared to do so. In phenomenological inquires, perceptions, such as the ones gathered from school counselors in this study, are regarded as a foundational component of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). The epistemological perspective underlying this study is an interpretive or constructivist philosophy in which the goal is to describe and understand the practices and viewpoints of the participants (i.e., school counselors). The school counselor participants seemed to relate and engage easily with the qualitative style of inquiry, as it shares commonalities with the counseling process including establishing rapport, asking open-ended questions, and giving voice to lived experiences (Berrios & Lucca, 2006).

Participants

Participants included ten (N = 10) certified middle school counselors with two to 23 years experience. All participants, at the time of the study, were working in public schools. Middle school counselors were specifically sampled because they serve with students in early adolescence. Additional demographic information about participants included eight female and two male, between 26 and 65 years old. Eight participants identified as White, one as Black, and one as Biracial (Black/Latina). The participants' spiritual and religious beliefs included Catholic (7), Buddhist (1), Humanist/agnostic (1), and one participant did not identify with any particular religion or spirituality.

Data Collection

The researcher, a human being who is able to analyze and interpret information, is the main instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). As such, I engaged in the process of epoche, identified as a critical function of any phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). This required I recognize, report, and account for personal and professional

biases before the start of and during data collection and analysis. Additionally, I utilized reflexive journaling and critical dialogue with peer debriefers.

After obtaining approval from the institutional review board, participants were recruited through specific purposive sampling methods, in order to "discover, understand, and gain insight" from a targeted population (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Specifically, I used convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. Convenience sampling was used based on the location and availability of the respondents. Snowball sampling, which requires asking participants for references of other potentially eligible participants, was also used. I gathered a diverse sample that included participants of varying ages (i.e., 26-65), years of experience (i.e. 2-23), and tenure status (i.e., 5 tenured and 5 non-tenured), working in a variety of settings (suburban, urban, rural).

Sampling began by asking several directors of school counseling services and school counselors to recommend counselors to be interviewed. I also contacted presidents of county counseling associations for referrals. Those referrals led to my contacting potential participants by phone or e-mail. Participants also had the opportunity to recommend another school counselor for consideration to participate in the study.

I conducted in-person, one-time individual interviews with each school counselor participant in a private location of her or his choosing. A semi-structured interview protocol was used (see Appendix A) that lasted approximately 60 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Following individual interviews, participants were invited to participate in an additional focus group interview; five participants attended. The focus group interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. This additional data collection method provided the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, engage in member checking, and

give participants the chance to interact with one another. Composite textural descriptions of emergent themes (Moustakas, 1994) from individual interviews were presented at the focus group interview. Respondents were asked to share their perspectives on the accuracy of the information. This provided for increased clarity and authenticity in reporting the results. I asked participants follow-up questions based on the interview data, and invited them to ask each other and me questions, as well as expound on their thoughts. Participants who did not attend the focus group were also invited to provide clarification or follow-up information after their initial interview.

Data Analysis

Data consisted of word for word transcriptions of the audio recorded individual and focus group interviews. Data were analyzed as it was collected throughout the study, which allowed me to utilize discoveries through analysis of initial interviews to shape subsequent interviews and the focus group. I analyzed the transcriptions through the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), or carefully reading through the interviews multiple times, highlighting significant statements from participants and making notations. As commonalities emerged across the interviews, I grouped these statements from participants to begin identifying meaning and themes across the data and combined them into a textural description (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). As a strategy to increase credibility, the data from the focus group served as another layer of information that was triangulated with the data from the individual interviews. Finally, I integrated themes identified across all of the data as well as rich, thick description including specific quotations from participants as applicable in a composite description (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

I employed several methods to enhance the study's trustworthiness. I was intentional about acknowledging my own assumptions and position as a researcher to refrain from unnecessarily biasing the study with my own judgments before engaging in any fieldwork, data collection, or analysis (Moustakas, 1994). I intentionally documented my personal experiences, assumptions, and judgments about adolescent meaning-making and school counseling practice both before and during data gathering and analysis through reflexive journaling (Choudhuri, Glauser, & Peregoy, 2004). To assist me with this process, selected colleagues with doctoral level research training and experience served as peer debriefers (Kline, 2008). I engaged with them during the process of epoche to help me become aware of my own biases. This awareness and accountability allowed me to be more equipped to truly seek an emic perspective based on the participants' perceptions and experiences.

Efforts to increase the dependability or consistency of this study were taken through use of an audit trail, which required the maintenance of a detailed account of data collection and analysis procedures and decision-making processes (Merriam, 2009). Peer debriefers also had access to the audit trail. They discussed, challenged, and questioned my decisions throughout the process allowing for analysis of the data from a variety of perspectives and further increasing the integrity of the research process.

Efforts to increase transferability were made through the use of rich, thick description and variation within the sample related to demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience. As a strategy to increase credibility, the data from the focus group served as another layer of information that was triangulated with the data from the individual interviews. I

used member checks, or respondent validation, to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretations and help ensure accurate interpretation, further contributing to the confirmability of the study.

Results

School counselors were probed about their work with adolescents about meaning-making, and data analysis of the individual interviews and focus group revealed the subsequent overarching theme and subthemes shared in the following sections. The overarching emergent theme was one of identity. School counselors were most likely to work with students about meaning-making when engaged in activities that yielded them exploring their identities. The areas in which they did this work with early adolescents was through the suffering or challenging circumstances in their lives, examination of their behavior and choices, and through helping them make connections to others and things they care about.
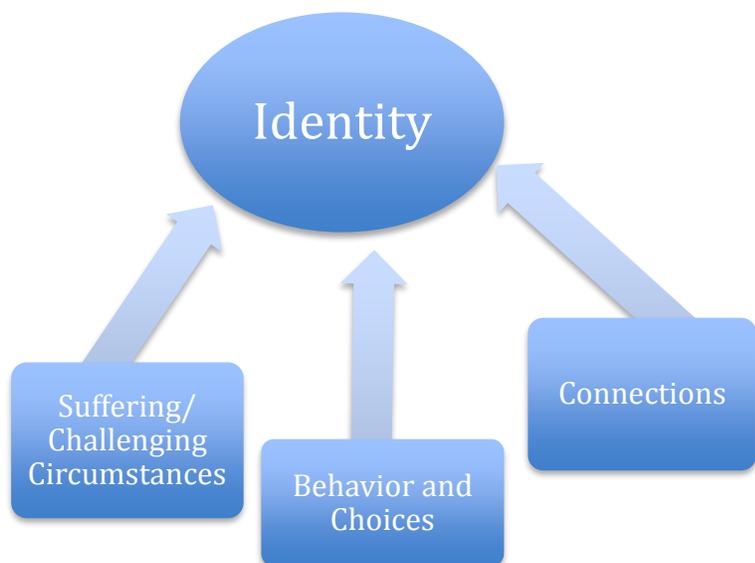

Figure 1. Exploring Meaning with Adolescents: Emergent Themes

Overarching Theme: Identity

As school counselors discussed their work with early adolescents, it became evident the major avenue through which they explore meaning with students is through identity. Participants consistently mentioned the importance of exploring meaning through the development of an individualized identity. They explained how they work with students to help them find their own personal sense of meaning through helping them to reflect on and explore who they are and who they want to be. This overarching theme was evidenced in every interview. The main work in this area of meaning-making involved helping them reflect on their present and future identities. Participants consistently described instances when they asked students reflective questions like, "Is that how you see yourself?" and "Is this who you want to be?" The participants believed that students in this age group were becoming more developmentally capable of this kind of reflection.

The counselors shared many examples of working with students to find their own sense of meaning. Through these examples and the school counselors' descriptions of their work in these areas, it was apparent they were helping students find meaning through exploration of their identities, specifically related to navigating challenging life circumstances, reflecting on behavior, and making meaningful connections.

Subtheme 1: Suffering and challenging life circumstances. During interviews, the school counselors said they were likely to do deeper meaning work with students in response to difficult life circumstances. They explained that students in a reflective place (e.g., because of challenging life circumstances) were most receptive to doing work about meaning-making. Difficult life circumstances seemed to facilitate student reflection and questioning. Questions such as "Why is this happening to me?" or "What does this mean for my life?" gave counselors

opportunities to help students explore meaning in their lives through changing roles and examination of beliefs.

Participants described entering adolescence as a particularly difficult time for many students. One school counselor described her perspective on this age group:

There is a lot of pain in middle school kids, even the ones who are succeeding. Making meaning is one of the important things in well-being. I think we do have to find ways to make it all seem more meaningful to them. There are a lot of kids out there who just are sitting there going, 'Is this what it's all about?'

Several participants talked about supporting students through suicidal ideation, cutting, and eating disorders by exploring the meaning that triggered these challenges and how that meaning is connected to their identities. Participants described the importance of helping students find some greater meaning to help them persevere. Many middle school students have their first experiences with death and other forms of loss during this stage of life. Participants reported that this often prompts questions about life's meaning. This is evidenced in the example one school counselor gave about a 13 year-old student dealing with her parents' divorce. The participant reported the student was conflicted and "really struggling with a new identity being the only child in two separate homes."

One participant described two 13 year-old female sexual assault victims. They subsequently questioned aspects of their own identities and the purpose of their own existence. The school counselor described his work with these students to help them "find a reason to go on and live." As one participant explained, "We talk about how change can be difficult. With change there is growth. You can suffer *from* or you can suffer *through* and persevere."

Subtheme 2: Behavior and choices. School counselors reported engaging students in reflection, examination, and meaning-making about their behaviors during this life stage. Exploring ideas about their identity seemed to facilitate how school counselors helped students to consider the meaning of their behavior. A participant explained how she works with students experiencing behavioral issues, "I always try to bring them back to, 'is that who you really want to be? Is that how you see yourself? Would you be proud of this someday?' I try to do that without being judgmental.' " One counselor talked about asking students to think about who they really wanted to be. She explained, "I think it's a good question to put out there for them…they're still young and they have a lot of time to change." Most participants discussed helping students explore the meaning their behavior has in how they identify themselves now, how others see them, and who they want to be in the future. One participant discussed how students often need assistance in making meaning of their behavior for themselves. She talked about trying "to really get them to reflect on their behavior and contribution to issues and problems and how they have an opportunity to contribute positively versus negatively."

The interviewees often referenced their role in helping students discover the impact of their choices on their own present and future identities, defined by themselves and others. Several of the interviewees talked about helping students understand the meaning their behavior has in forming others' perceptions about their identity. One school counselor described how she uses this approach when working with early adolescents on bullying issues:

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

Participants reported working with students on choices and decision making, helping them examine the meaning of their behaviors, and empowering them to choose wisely for themselves. A participant explained, "Strength comes from being in touch with ourselves and being able to make choices from that place." School counselors helped students reflect on who they are and who they want to be, so they could choose behaviors congruent with that desired identity. An interviewee described, "Sometimes we can steer them and empower them so they know they have the control to determine whom they're going to be and the choices they're going to make. That's really powerful."

Early adolescence is a time when interviewees believed students began to have more awareness about a future they might want to influence in the present. School counselors described the importance of assisting middle school students in this process. As one participant stated, "You really need to develop, create a map with them, and try to connect on a smaller scale, meaning and purpose. As far as their academics, but also meaning and purpose on how their behavior will affect them later." Several of the interviewees talked about helping students to see how difficult experiences now can help them in the future if they make the choice to learn and grow from them.

One participant explained how the class selection process is an opportunity to explore choice and meaning, "I can see it (meaning) being tied to picking your classes for next year and what am I going to do after school is over? How am I going to make meaning for my life and know that I picked the right thing?" Early adolescents have opportunities to make important and influential choices that will potentially affect their lives, and school counselors can be instrumental in helping them make meaning in that process. As one participant explained, "So

many of them have completely shut down, so it is a matter of helping them find some greater meaning, you know, as a means to a goal for the future."

Subtheme 3: Connections. Participants also helped students with meaning-making by exploring self-in-context and assisting students in identity development by making connections to others in community and things they care about. They placed primary importance on the student's connection with them in order for there to be enough comfort and safety to engage deeply with issues of meaning. Establishing trust and being nonjudgmental were mentioned repeatedly as important elements in creating a connection conducive to exploration of meaning and identity. In their own words participants explained: "I think a lot of times I have a really decent relationship with my students because I think they know I'm respectful of their position and how they feel and what their beliefs are" and "I think it is valuable to the kids to know that there's somebody they could actually talk to who wouldn't judge them."

Groups were identified as naturally conductive settings to exploring self in relation to others. Several participants shared they are most likely to explore issues of meaning and purpose with students in group settings. One participant described what she says to encourage students in groups, "You're going through different experiences, but you're kind of all together…you can understand in some way." One counselor described how she helps students feel empowered in groups by "teaching them how to come together, instead of always being pinned against one another, and supporting one another." Connecting students with peers and helping them to explore meaning for themselves in group environments emerged as a commonality across interviews.

Finally, participants discussed working with students on meaning by helping them to make connections to things about which they care. One interviewee explained this is the primary

way she addresses issues of meaning and purpose with early adolescents. She asks reported typically asking students, "What's important to them? What makes you happy in life? What is your passion?" Participants shared that knowing what was important to students, what they valued, and what they liked to do was important in getting to know them and helping them to know themselves. As one interviewee shared:

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

School counselors often helped students explore their unique identities through making connections to things they care about as a way to assist them in finding meaning in their academics. Throughout the interviews, making connections to career aspirations emerged as a way for counselors to explore when helping students to discover meaning in relation to their unique selves. Overall, helping students to make connections to people and things they care about was a consistent practice in which participants engaged as they worked with students.

Discussion

When responding to questions about exploring meaning with students, participants were easily able to provide examples of this work in their practice, suggesting this is typical in their roles as school counselors. This is important, as prior research supports the value of exploring meaning with adolescents because of the numerous benefits as well as potential consequences associated with a lack of meaning (Blair, 2004; Bronk, et al., 2009; Burrow et al., 2010; Damon, et al., 2003; Ho, et al., 2010; McLean et al., 2010).

The participants echoed Inhelder and Piaget's (1958) assertion that students at this age are capable of beginning to think about and reflect on issues such as meaning and purpose.

It is also of note that the school counselors' practices to explore meaning with students were centered on identity development, which Erikson (1968) asserted is an essential task of adolescence and Kiang and Fuligni (2010) found was important across groups of ethnically diverse adolescents. Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion seemed applicable as participants discussed students questioning their roles in their families, with peers, and in the world, especially when dealing with challenging circumstances. The school counselors seemed to work with students primarily on finding meaning in an individualized identity that could hold firm amidst the trials of adolescence and outside pressures.

Similar to Frankl (1984), school counselor participants identified suffering or challenging circumstances as a main catalyst to help students discover meaning for themselves. Interviewees expressed value in helping adolescents to identify a sense of meaning as a way of persevering through difficult life circumstances, much in the way that prior researchers have described (Blair, 2004; Bjerkeset et al., 2010; Khan & Mian, 2010; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). Participants talked about group work as most conducive to adolescents finding meaning and developing sense of self. This connection to others in community as a way of exploring meaning is compatible with Purvis' (1995) assertion that adolescents, in particular, can most effectively find meaning through interactions with peers in small group settings. These school counselors seemed to understand how valuable group settings are for adolescents to explore meaning with their peers in safe environments.

The participants in this study often talked about how they help adolescents' academic experiences be more meaningful by making connections with things about which they cared. The

counselors reported helping students examine their behavior and choices at a deeper level of meaning instead of solely focusing on providing rewards or threatening consequences. This is congruent with existential, meaning-based approaches to counseling such as logotherapy, which helps people to understand responsibility and choices they have in their lives (Frankl, 1967; Langle & Skyes, 2006). It was evident that the school counselors found value in this work, but did not always know how to most effectively apply it in a school setting. In the subsequent section I offer practical recommendations for school counselors and counselor educators in this area.

Recommendations for School Counselors and School Counselor Educators

School Counselors

The results of this study suggest these school counselors recognized the importance of helping students develop a sense of meaning, as evidenced by their working with students individually and in small groups. There are large group activities that can support this timely work in the lives of middle school students, as well. Classroom lessons are one way school counselors can help students explore meaning through identity development. Developmental guidance lessons could serve as a precursor to smaller groups or a way to teach and discuss these important concepts to students. School-wide programs such as *Challenge Day*, which helps to connect school community members with one another and provides opportunities to disclose personal experiences in a safe and supportive environment, can also be very meaningful.

Assisting students with meaning-making and identity development can also be fostered through career and community connections**.** Meaningful academic and vocational experiences can add purpose to education and also be helpful in motivating students (Purvis, 1995). As many of the participants mentioned, inquiring about career goals and aspirations were effective in

helping students explore meaning and identity. Career counseling activities such as introducing interest inventories resources like the *Young Person's Occupational Outlook Handbook* (2010) can help students become more academically engaged, set future goals, and connect students with their passions, resources, and potential job shadowing opportunities.

Frankl (1984) asserted people could find meaning "by creating a work or doing a deed" (p.115). Community service provides opportunities for discovering meaning. School counselors can be instrumental in providing these opportunities within school, supporting a service learning component of the academic program, or connecting students with meaningful volunteer opportunities. Engaging early adolescents in these types of helping experiences that require they interact with others in acts of service can be extremely impactful during this influential life stage.

One specific form of community service is mentoring. Mentoring provides students opportunities to encounter others and discover meaning. School counselors and students can develop and implement school-based peer-mentoring programs to provide valuable leadership opportunities and meaningful experiences for everyone involved. When students are given the responsibility to be positive role models, it can increase their sense of purpose and connection to the school community (Karcher, Davis, & Powell, 2002).

School Counselor Educators

One question explored in this study was how prepared participants felt to address meaning in their roles as school counselors with students. Overall, participants reported not feeling prepared for this work and reported a general disconnect between preparation and practice as school counselors. It is important for school counselor educators to be intentional in connecting preparation and practice by infusing professional standards into curricula, and improve programs based on counselor education program outcome and evaluation data.

There is still a great deal of transformation necessary within counselor education programs to effectively prepare school counselors for the field, although efforts by the Education Trust, the American School Counselor Association, and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) have brought attention to this issue (Steen & Rudd, 2009). Some programs are basing parts of their curricula on any one or combination of standards from these professional organizations, while others lack a clear foundation for their school counseling curriculum (Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005).

The American School Counselor Association (2012) defines three domains for school counseling services: academic development, career development, and personal /social development. Past research on school counseling preparation has suggested that school counselor preparation programs were inadequately preparing students in two (i.e., academic and career) of these three domains (Martin, 2002). Since these were the two domains in which participants reported exploring meaning with students, it is important that school counselors feel prepared to counsel this population on academic and career issues in developmentally appropriate ways. Previous research and this study suggest that helping students make meaningful connections to their passions and goals supports academic engagement and achievement (Melton & Schulenberg, 2007), although research has indicated how little school counseling programs prepare its students to directly influence student achievement (Education Trust, 2012; Martin 2002).

These preparation challenges can influence the quality of course instruction, course availability, and faculty with relevant experiences to inform their teaching of school counseling courses. Research in the counselor education field has revealed that as little as 52% of school counseling courses are taught by instructors who have experience as counselors in the schools

(Steen & Rudd, 2009. Further, this study revealed many participants' school counseling courses were focused primarily on high school counseling, which inherently limits students' knowledge and skills in effectively supporting younger students.

Limitations

Although this in-depth research inquiry was fitting for a qualitative design, there are inherent limitations. The number of participants is a limitation because it provided little opportunity for a diverse sample. A more diverse sample (e.g., ethnicity, geography, spiritual/religious beliefs) could provide a more representative sample of middle school counselors.

Another limitation was in data collection. Since participants were interviewed face-to-face, they may have been inclined to give socially desirable responses to interview questions. It is worth noting that the less experienced school counselors were less vocal during the focus group interview, so their voices were potentially not represented as strongly in that portion of the data. Additionally, only half of the school counselors participated in the focus group. Despite these limitations, the careful attention to procedural rigor in this qualitative inquiry lends to the potential for it to expand the dearth of knowledge in this area and provide rationale for future research inquiries.

Future Research Recommendations

While school counselors' perspectives were the focus of this study, researchers of future studies could interview early adolescent students to gain their perspectives on exploring meaning and developing their identities in the school setting. Exploring the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of students themselves can provide important information about how school counselors and counselor educators can better facilitate effective counseling practice in these

areas. Researchers can also investigate the experiences and perspectives of school counseling interns about their comfort level in working with adolescents about meaning-making while having their first experiences in the field.

Future studies could include survey research based on these findings that include larger sample sizes and yield potentially more generalizable results. Analyses of counselor education curricula can provide important information about the preparation of school counselors to deliver meaning-based counseling in the school setting. Results from additional qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies can be helpful in providing a more comprehensive account of school counselor preparation and practice and inform effective practice of school counseling for meaning-making with adolescent students.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

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

Interview Questions:

- Adolescence is seen as a time when youth explore issues of meaning and purpose. I am interested in exploring how school counselors think about and address issues of meaning and purpose when counseling adolescent students.

  - Have these kinds of issues come up in your work with students?

  - Could you give me an example?

- As a school counselor, how do you feel about discussing meaning-making with students?

  - What factors do you think contribute to your viewpoint in this area?

- How prepared do you feel to do this kind of work? Do you consider it a part of the counseling process?

- Are there certain situations or presenting issues where you would be more likely to use a meaning-based approach to counseling students? Less likely?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me?