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Reclaiming Flow: A Phenomenological Study of Secondary School Counselors

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RECLAIMING FLOW: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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ABSTRACT

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Contemporary research pertaining to the experiences of flow in education is scarce and that which does exist in the literature often focused on the teacher-student relationship. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in one school district. Through the lenses of occupational and team flow, the developing rate of work-related burnout and overall job satisfaction were addressed by examining the lived experiences of five counselors across four Student Service departments. An IPA approach was implemented to approach the research questions. Data were collected via 15 in-depth phenomenological interviews along with one focus group during the fall 2023 academic semester. To reach the essence of the experience of occupational and team flow in one school district, categories of themes emerged from the research data: Occupational Flow, Team Flow, and Lived Experiences. Additionally, a new category of optimal experience related to flow, termed Meaningful Flow, emerged from the data. Meaningful flow is a state of mind where one is immersed in the fulfillment of purposeful tasks of personal and professional significance—an emotional mindset of role satisfaction. The findings have implications for secondary school counselors, administrators, and future flow research in one Rocky Mountain region school district.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was once told that completing a dissertation is a test of perseverance, standing up to failure, and embracing your village. Based on my journey, this language of wisdom holds truth. I could not have become an academic researcher without the help of others.

First, I thank my parents for raising me with unending love, a deep appreciation for good music, and instilling in me a bold work ethic. They continue to teach their sons that if you want something, put your head down and go get it. Thanks to Geri Barber and Matthew Bernard for instilling in me the power of human services. I was not given a reason to enjoy education until I walked into your classrooms. Your lectures and stories changed the trajectory of my life. Thanks to Dr. Jennifer Barna and Dr. Brad Janey. You allowed me to be human and vulnerable, and your guidance turned me into a professional school counselor. Thank you to Gerry Wierbowski for molding me into the school counselor I am today. To be an impactful counselor is to be human. I thank my committee members: Dr. Matthew Farber, Dr. Christine McConnell, Dr. Randy Larkins, and Dr. Michelle Holmes for taking a chance on me and providing supportive guidance through a global pandemic. I am forever in awe of the dedication to your students and your craft.

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DEDICATION

For my three rocks, Joanna, Linda, and Bill

For my father, your spirit lives in me. I know you're proud. This one's for you.

"No retreat, baby, no surrender."
-Bruce Springsteen

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The essence of flow, or achieving the optimal human sense, has long been underestimated in its influence on school counselor burnout. Inattention to role clarity, disengagement from routine tasks, and feelings of work-related boredom and anxiety have resulted in one of the most impactful school counselor turnover cycles to date. Contemporary professional school counselors have reported burnout rates reaching 67%, while recent studies have documented compounded challenges faced by school counselors during the Coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 pandemic. This included the capacity to provide academic and social-emotional support (Kee, 2020; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Site-based independence and occupational ambiguity, immune to set standards and universal rubrics for evaluation as recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019), have led to detrimental ramifications including role confusion and a continuous outcry for change in the profession.

Constructs of flow theory in the workforce might serve as a coveted agent of change. Finding happiness in intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of activities, Csikszentmihalyi (as cited in Emerson, 1998) spent decades reexamining the question, "What makes some action patterns worth pursuing for their own sake, even without any rational compensation?" (p. 2). When a person is in occupational flow, "a positive affective state, high motivation, and high cognitive activation are experienced" (Emerson, 1998, p. 39).

The subjective study of flow is no stranger to the benefits of student-teacher engagement, cultivation of classroom culture, and mindfulness in school systems; however, gaps existed in the literature. While research has been conducted on flow in education (Kefor, 2015; Kemats, 2020; Shernoff et al., 2014; Wang & Huang, 2022) and school counselor burnout (Akgul et al., 2021; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen et al., 2020), no studies were reported interconnecting the benefits of occupational flow to the lived experiences of burnout amongst professional school counselors. The present study attempted to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in one school district. A focus was placed on aspects of burnout and job satisfaction. Findings might be beneficial in attempts to inform stakeholders, including educational leaders, of avenues to counter occupational burnout, generating a healthy environment, and increasing job satisfaction for school counselors.

Background Context and Theoretical Framework

Occupational burnout and job-related strain are not unfamiliar concepts in the field of school counseling. With historical roots in vocational guidance dating back to the 1800s, the role of the American school counselor continues to be fluid, ever evolving based on site demands, and unclear to primary stakeholders involved. This lack of transparency commonly results in school counselors being recognized as generalists of a school. The American School Counselor Association (2019), established in 1952, served as an identity designer for the field, aligning standards based on career, academic, and social emotional guidance. While appropriate and inappropriate counseling tasks were depicted in the national model, there continues to be increased ambiguity in the job description of school counselors. Uncertainty in individual and organizational roles, combined with expanding caseloads and impractical expectations, has resulted in staggering rates of burnout and turnover in the field. In March of 2020, COVID-19

pandemic occupational hardships only reaffirmed the maturing crisis, resulting in what *The New York Times* called America's Great Resignation (Walton & Pollock, 2022). Shortly after the onset of online schooling and hybrid programming, research (Akgul et al., 2021; Alexander et al., 2022; Limberg et al., 2022) began on ways to improve the mental and physical health of American school counselors and their delegated caseloads.

While the phenomenon of flow has been applied to fields ranging from leisure to extreme sports, the basic concept of optimal human performance is gaining attention in the value of work satisfaction, including those employed in schools. Flow has been connected to occupational self-determination (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017), job satisfaction (Maeran & Cangiano, 2013), and work-related self-efficacy (Sánchez et al., 2011). As American school counselors continue to express feelings of burnout including emotional depletion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 402), the benefits of occupational flow might serve as an approach to self-care.

The framework of flow theory, introduced by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975, describes a "subjective psychological state which occurs when one is totally involved in an activity" (Emerson, 1998, p. 37). A phenomenon known to take place more frequently during work than leisure activities, "research shows that most employees spend approximately 5% of work-life in flow without even knowing it" (Kotler; as cited in Lakhiani, 2018, 10:36). Contradictory to misconceptions of macro flow, as associated with adrenaline-fueled athletic feats, micro flow is most experienced in everyday activities, resulting in a heightened sense of focus and an elongated span of attention (Kotler; as cited in Lakhiani, 2018, 12:05). The manufacturing of microflow in the school counseling profession might include increased productivity and creativity during task engagement.

This study attempted to provide an in-depth, phenomenological view of the lived experiences of school counselors in one Rocky Mountain region school district. As evidence of burnout persists in the field of education, it was advantageous to equip primary stakeholders with the benefits of experiencing occupational flow.

Statement of the Problem

The problem explored in this study was the lack of understanding and awareness pertaining to flow in the lived experiences of secondary school counselors. This problem was examined through the lenses of occupational flow, team flow, and burnout. School counselor burnout is being experienced at alarming rates throughout the field of education. Current research depicted symptoms of burnout in the vocation including emotional exhaustion, low self-esteem, and lack of professional identity (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021; Sylvester-Nwosu, 2020). Studies examined predictors of this epidemic, not limited to work-related rumination, role ambiguity, and extreme amounts of non-counseling duties (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen et al., 2020). It is common to hear the statement, "counselors work in a one-way caring culture"; this one-directional process is affiliated with lower workload management, lower satisfaction with school health care, and a reoccurrence of providing care outside of school hours (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021, pp. 296-297).

While the onset of COVID-19 has underscored efforts to support professional school counselors, suggested self-care strategies and organizational support continue to lack success. It is not enough to simply address decreasing counselor caseloads and providing mental healthcare support. Occupational satisfaction is a heavily researched art and a science with burnout serving as a subjective model of workplace disturbance. It is not yet known how the phenomenon of flow

might benefit initiatives to resist school counselor burnout. Absent from the literature were the catalogued lived experiences of secondary school counselors.

Rationale and Significance of the Research

To date, there has been no inquiry into the benefits of occupational flow on American school counselors. Literature searches disclosed peer-reviewed articles and studies on burnout in school counseling along with factors that contributed to flow on-the-job; however, flow research in education has been restricted to teacher-student-classroom "studies of correlations between flow characteristics and activities, potential factors influencing flow, and flow's effect on performance or personal affect" (Rogatko, 2007, p. 134). Quantitative in breadth, studies enforced updated versions of the Counselor Burnout Inventory (Lee et al., 2007) or Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1987) experience sampling method. While results might provide the field of school counseling with statistical data essential for professional advocacy, the job description and duties of this occupation remained highly site dependent.

It is vital to address the benefits of flow experiences in a healthcare field with mounting turnover and rates of burnout. The subjective phenomenon of flow has been linked to focused attention, enjoyment, and happiness on-the-job, all characteristics of constructive educators. Addressing this framework, using lived experiences of individual school counselors might further efforts to create a more engaging work environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in one school district. By utilizing the perspectives of current field professionals, the research was able to reflect aspects of burnout and job satisfaction. While feelings of

occupational exhaustion are resulting in heightened turnover rates in the profession, flow theory might serve as an agent of change in job satisfaction and improved experience. An IPA enabled me to take an in-depth, intimate look at the lived experiences of a small but expressive sample of secondary school counselors in one district.

This study took place in a public school district in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The district has 52 established K-12 schools, with a student population of 29,907 students. Six comprehensive high schools accommodate 1,600-2,200 students each with demographic makeup conforming to the surrounding populations. Each high school deviates in counseling department scale with an average student-to-counselor ratio of 330:1. District student service support includes certified assigned caseload counselors, a social worker, mental health specialists, and a career counselor for select sites.

Flow is a subjective, interpretive phenomenon introduced by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975. The benefits of the flow experience in the workforce have proven beneficial on those looking to obtain the feeling of 'right here, right now' without the search for extrinsic motivators. This phenomenon has been applied to fields ranging from action sports to work-related satisfaction, to the simple pleasure of reading a book. With this state of presence ranging from micro- to macroflow, it is no coincidence why more employers look to capitalize on the benefits of improved personal experiences for subordinates.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to help the reader understand the context of each term in this study.

Burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) defined burnout as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 397). The primary consistent aspect of burnout is it is a psychological phenomenon associated with job-related stress.

Depersonalization. A negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job; the development of negative attitudes and feelings towards persons for whom work is done, to the point where they are blamed for the subject's own problems (Maslach, 2015; Montero-Martin et al., 2009).

Emotional Exhaustion. The feeling of being overextended and having one's emotional and physical resources depleted. "Emotional exhaustion reduces the ability of employees to cope with and meet their emotional demands at work" (Nikolova et al., 2019, p. 2).

Flow. The phenomenology of this experience was initially called the autotelic experience, a term used interchangeably with optimal experience. Flow is described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as "a state of seemingly effortless concentration wherein one is completely absorbed in what they are doing" (p. 11). Flow is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for their own sake—the phenomenological state of deep enjoyment and absorption (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Occupational Flow. Bakker and van Woerkom (2017) defined flow in the workplace as "a short-lasting peak experience, characterized by involvement, pleasure of working, and intrinsic work motivation" (p. 47).

Perceived Job Satisfaction. "The degree of affective or attitudinal reactions one experiences relative to their job" (Spector, 1985, p. 693).

Reduced Personal Accomplishment. A tendency in professionals to negatively value their own

    capacity to carry out tasks and to interact with persons for whom they are performed,

    feeling unhappy or dissatisfied with the results obtained (Montero-Martin et al., 2009).

Role Ambiguity. "The lack of clarity in understanding the actions to be taken to achieve

    proposed individual goals" (Mañas et al., 2018, p. 2).

Role Stress. "The pressure that individuals face when they are unable to learn or understand the

    relevant rights and obligations related to their work and to perform their roles well"

    (Kahn et al., 1964, p. 591).

Work Motivation. The psychological strength of a certain individual, which determines their

    behavior in an organization, the level of persistence in overcoming problems, and the

    self-determination towards the dimensions of their job (Vo et al., 2022).

Work-Related Rumination. Thinking persistently about work-related issues "outside of work

    or when these thoughts are not necessary" (Smith & Alloy, 2009, p. 2).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations of the Study

Assumptions

    I, as the primary researcher, held the following statements to be true as I engaged in this study. The following assumptions were present in this interpretative phenomenological study:

1. It was assumed that interview participants in this study were not deceptive with their answers and the participants would answer questions with honesty, integrity, and to the best of their ability.

2. It was assumed this study was an accurate representation of the current situation amongst secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain region school district.

3. It was assumed that similar job hardships were faced during the COVID-19 pandemic including access to work-related services and heightened role ambiguity.

4. It was assumed that interview participants in this study had previously advocated for occupational support to school and district leadership and planned on remaining in the field of secondary school counseling.

Delimitations

This research design allowed for elements of control based on my decision of what to include and what to exclude. For instance, I could control the location of the study: one school district in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. This allowed for the generalization of results into the district in which I was employed. The target population was also controlled, consisting of five secondary school counselors in one school district. This decision allowed for unrestricted access to peers in attempts to research their lived experiences on the job. Decisively, I could control the theoretical objective of the study including an in-depth analysis of the power of flow in school counseling. I chose these delimitations to allow for improved access to interviewees and occupational experiences, further targeting intended stakeholders.

Limitations

There were limitations in this research study over which I had no control. I could not control participant bias or acting in a way in which one thought I wanted them to act. Examples of biases might have included self-reported data or having to take what peers said at face value. Participants of the same school district knew the purpose of the phenomenological study beforehand, opening the window for selective memory or exaggeration. There was also a lack of previous research conducted on the topic. While occupational burnout and flow theory have been

analyzed since the 1970s, no previous study had connected these two subjective concepts. Finally, presenting the findings of this research would be difficult. While the results of a phenomenological study would prove to be highly qualitative, it would make it hard to present the findings in a timely and impactful fashion to primary stakeholders who would consider it to be useful.

Research Questions

Research questions for qualitative studies driven by phenomenological analysis should explore and capture the meaning participants assign to a participant experience (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) indicated that interviewers must design research questions that explore participant experiences, understandings, perceptions, and view of a phenomenon (pp. 110-111). This study was designed to reveal participants' views regarding work-related flow.

Q1   What is the experience of occupational flow for secondary school counselors?

Q2   What are secondary school counselors' perceptions of the relation between occupational flow and team flow?

Q3   What are the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in terms of occupational and team flow in the workplace?

Each research question allowed for interview procedures that collected relatively open data sets from participants, allowing me to pinpoint themes of an interpretive, lived experience. The interpretive approach "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

Summary and Organizing the Purpose of the Study

The phenomenon of flow has been researched through both qualitative and quantitative lenses since the mid-1970s. It has been applied across fields ranging from neuroscience to optimal athletic performance. Pop culture references have included Warren Miller's (2012) ski

film titled *Flow State* along with Kotler's (2014) *The Rise of Superman*. While Bakker (2008) expanded flow into the realms of occupational performance and satisfaction, no study has examined the lived experiences of professional school counselors in the United States.

Chapter II presents a review of current research on the centrality of school counselor burnout and Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Chapter III describes my chosen methodology, design of the study, and procedures for conducting such an investigation. Chapter IV details how the data were analyzed, providing the reader with a written summary of the results. Chapter V, the conclusion, serves as an interpretation and discussion of the results as related to the existing body of research on occupational flow, team flow, and burnout.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The profession of school counseling in American public schools, an evolving vocation dating back to the 1930s, has experienced high levels of occupational burnout. Impacts on an individual include compromised physical health, unsatisfactory job performance, attrition, and decreased self-esteem (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Contemporary school counselors are specifically at risk for experiencing feelings of burnout because of compounded job demands. Work-related burnout, which could result in elevated levels of displeasure, depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and impaired family relationships, is a significant bodily and psychological problem (Bardhoshi et al., 2014). Occupational flow, stemming from Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow theory, is characterized in relation to vocational engagement as absorption and enjoyment. This phenomenon results in complete concentration and immersion in an activity carried out (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017). Bakker and van Woerkom (2017) defined flow in the workplace as "a short-lasting peak experience, characterized by involvement, pleasure of working, and intrinsic work motivation" (p. 47). The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in one school district.

This chapter presents an overview of professional literature and research on school counselor burnout, occupational flow, and team flow in educational settings. The chapter also includes background information on the ever-evolving role of professional school counseling, the effects of COVID-19 in relation to school counselor work-related burnout, and covers the

theoretical framework of flow theory across fields. The conclusion summarizes the significance

of fostering occupational flow in efforts to combat school counselor work-related burnout.

<div align="center">**School Counselor Occupational Engagement**</div>

Transformative Role of the Professional
School Counselor

The role of the American school counselor arose from the work of Frank Parsons, the

'Father of Vocational Guidance,' in the late 1800s. With an emphasis on purposeful career

exploration, Parsons maintained that education must relate to life-long success for students (Herr,

2013, p. 278). Apprehensive about the entrance of young adults into the work world, Parsons

viewed vocational guidance as a response to the economic, educational, and social problems of

those times. While Jesse B. Davis implemented the initial school guidance program in 1889 to

help students with career choices, classroom teachers served as American public schools' initial

vocational counselors (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009, pp. 3-5). *Vocational guidance* was first used by

Parsons in 1908 to describe this methodical scientific approach to choosing a career (Gysbers &

Lapan, 2009). In the decades that followed, education guidance and personal-social counseling

were implemented as additional pillars of service. It was not until the 1930s that social-

emotional, career, and academic pillars of service were combined to form the pupil personnel

position called the 'school counselor' (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009, pp. 2-3).

The 1930s era also established a pivotal mental health movement in American schools. A

clinical model of guidance, concentrating on personal and social issues within the education

context, placed emphasis on social-emotional struggles of students. During the same decade,

attention was also focused on education as guidance. An essential source of federal funding for

state support of vocational guidance in schools, known as the Vocational Education Act of 1946,

was passed before the National Defense Education of 1958, which established educational
guidance as a priority in American schools (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009, p. 8).

From 1950 to 1990, comprehensive counseling programs in schools continued to be
established as both a progressing labor force and globalization of industry revived interest in
vocational guidance in high schools (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009). Social problems included the war
on drugs and substance abuse, violence in schools, mental health issues, and changing family
patterns. While the American School Counseling Association was established in 1952, the first
national model of comprehensive services was not implemented until 2003. In the United States,
the alignment of individual and departmental Student Services standards consists of four
program elements: content; organizational framework; resources; and development,
management, and accountability (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009, p. 13). Since its inception, the ASCA
(2019) national model has helped move school counseling from a responsive service provided
for some students, to an active program for every student (p. 10) and continues to provide a
framework for direct and indirect service delivery of the professional school counselor.

With a recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 (ASCA, 2019), the
contemporary school counselor's role should consist of offering support services to all students.
The national model (ASCA, 2019) recommends that 80% of school-based time be spent in
activities ranging from instruction, appraisal, and counseling (known as direct services) to that of
consultation, collaboration, and referrals (indirect services). Direct services are in-person
interactions between school counselors and students. Indirect services are provided on behalf of
students because of the school counselor's interactions with others. It is advised that no more
than 20% of a school counselor's time be spent in program planning and school support activities
(ASCA, 2019). Professional school counselors help all caseload students by applying academic

performance strategies, controlling emotions and practicing interpersonal skills, and planning for postsecondary options (ASCA, 2023c).

As the 2021-2022 academic year concluded, the national ratio for students-to-counselors was 408:1, well above the recommended 250:1 proportion (ASCA, 2023b). The pertinent and improper roles and responsibilities of school counselors are outlined in the framework; however, school leads might not have training related to, or exposure to, the ASCA national model (Geesa et al., 2019). Amatea and Clark (2005) found that administrators held four distinct perceptions of school counselors: innovative leaders, collaborative case consultants, responsive direct service providers, and administrative team players (Geesa et al., 2019, pp. 27-28). This lack of role identity has resulted in the increased performance of non-counseling duties including standardized test coordination, discipline, and substitute teaching. Recent studies confirmed the association amongst role identity, role stress, and burnout among contemporary school counselors (Maor & Hemi, 2021, p. 1598).

Burnout, Decreased Self-Esteem, and Challenges

Numerous definitions of burnout exist (Hamelin et al., 2022; Montero-Martin et al., 2009) across occupational fields. Maslach et al. (2001) defined burnout as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 397). The uniform element of burnout is it is a psychological phenomenon associated with job-related strain. This occurs when employees are unable to fulfill their own needs, as well as the needs of clients, in an intense environment (Hamelin et al., 2022). Maslach et al. expressed this phenomenon by three primary responses: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (p. 402). Nikolova et al. (2019) defined emotional exhaustion as "the feeling of being overextended and having one's emotional and physical resources depleted" (p. 3). Consequently, employees

lose the ability to meet and cope with emotional demands in the workplace. Depersonalization, as defined in *Psychology of Burnout* (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) refers to "a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job" (p. 399). This entails "the development of negative attitudes and feelings towards persons for whom work is done, to the point where they are blamed for the subject's own problems" (Montero-Martin et al., 2009, p. 1). The final primary response to burnout, reduced personal accomplishment, implies "a tendency in professionals to negatively value their own capacity to carry out tasks and to interact with persons for whom they are performed, and feeling unhappy or dissatisfied with the results obtained" (Montero-Martin et al., 2009, p. 2). Occupational burnout is frequently associated with health care or people-oriented fields. This includes mental health workers and agents of public service. Employees have reported negative changes in performance not limited to attitudes and decision-making, physiological states, mental and behavioral health, and decreased job motivation (Freudenberger, 1990; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

American school counselors and those serving in non-western countries, professionals in the field of mental health, are especially prone to experience job-related burnout (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Fye et al., 2020; Rangka et al., 2022). Research studies, primarily quantitative-based in scope, implemented Lee et al.'s (2007) Counselor Burnout Inventory to consider characteristics of behavior that would denote various degrees of burnout. Professional school counselors are specifically at risk for experiencing feelings of burnout because of compounded job demands such as administrative paperwork, parent and guardian meetings, standardized test coordination, inflated student caseloads, and requests from district leaders (McCarthy et al., 2009). Young and Lambie (2007) have classified this division of support into concepts of role ambiguity and role stress (p. 277). Rogalsky et al. (2016) defined the first concept by stating:

Role ambiguity is the lack of clarity in understanding the actions to be taken to achieve proposed individual goals. The existence of ambiguity with respect to occupational objectives affects employees' understanding of what they are expected to do and creates uncertainty as to how their performance with be assessed. (p. 453)

Hardy and Conway (1988) outlined role stress by noting,

Role stress refers to the pressure that individuals face when they are unable to learn or understand the relevant rights and obligations related to their work and to perform their roles well. Role stress is an imbalance of status caused by external factors which disturb internal stability. (p. 169)

The ASCA (2023a) ethical standards require that professional school counselors maintain their health, both emotionally and physically, and care for their wellness to ensure effective practices. School counselors have an ethical responsibility to monitor their feelings of burnout, and therefore understand the symptoms to prevent it from happening. When compared with other mental health professionals, school counselors reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Wilkerson, 2009). To provide quality services to all stakeholders, school counselors must maintain their psychological well-being (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Recent studies (Aydin & Odaci, 2020; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Mullen et al., 2020) on school counselors linked psychological well-being to work-related rumination, trait anxiety, and decreased self-esteem. Martin and Tesser (1996) defined work-related rumination as "thinking persistently about work-related issues outside of work or when these thoughts are not necessary. This includes actively thinking about stressors, the thoughts and feelings those stressors evoke, and the future implications for one's work" (pp. 1-2). In the context of school counseling, trait anxiety is "an individual difference in the tendency to feel anxiety – a personality trait that determines how

individuals usually react to stressful situations and how much state anxiety reactions will be given to circumstantial danger" (Aydin & Odaci, 2020, p. 204). Occupational distress, in the face of unpleasant educational job conditions, might evoke thoughts of rumination and trait anxiety for American professional school counselors.

As a result of professional roles and increasing workloads, decreased self-esteem has also been examined at the individual and collective level of occupational burnout. Individual self-esteem has been defined as "a person's subjective evaluation of their work as a person" (Trzesniewski et al., 2013, p. 60). Collective self-esteem refers to "the individual's perceptions of themselves as members of a social group, along with the value and emotional significance of membership of this group" (Bettencourt & Dorr, 1997, p. 55). In the school counseling setting, although identified roles have been more clearly defined than they were 30 years ago, expectations regarding communal roles might vary considerably by institution (Schmidt, 1999). By and large, American school counselors represent an important social group by virtue of their strong professional identification and their unique array of skills and roles within educational settings (Butler & Constantine, 2005).

The present-day American school counselor assumes an extensive range of academic, career, and social-emotional responsibilities. It is customary, depending on the assigned grade level of services, for counselors to provide individual and group counseling, standardized testing and academic advising, and large amounts of administrative and clerical tasks. Outreach efforts might include marketing of programs and services available through the school. Amatea and Clark (2005) affirmed that professional associations, school administrators, teachers, students, and school counselors continue to have different perceptions of what the congruent counselor roles in school are. While the ASCA (2019) national model recommended caseload standards of

250:1 and appropriate counselor roles and duties, the widening performance of non-counseling duties has significantly indicated burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014, p. 427). Non-counseling or inappropriate activities included building the master schedule, coordinating paperwork and data entry for all new students, performing disciplinary actions, and supervising classrooms or common areas (ASCA, 2019, p. 22). These non-counseling tasks and obligations interfere with the roles of school counselors, serve as a source of job stress and dissatisfaction, and generate role conflict within the educational system (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). For instance, studies (Wilkerson, 2009; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006) reported that counselor-to-student ratios and role conflict were particularly associated with burnout. Furthermore, time spent on administrative duties and away from established counseling roles was considered the most demanding part of one's job (McCarthy et al., 2010, p. 146). In recent times, the first wave of COVID-19 research on school counseling assistance and supports for school counselors was published (Akgul et al., 2021; Alexander et al., 2022; Rangka et al., 2022). Studies verified that school counselors were frustrated with their effectiveness as counselors, burdened by days filled with administrative tasks and other non-counseling duties.

Job Satisfaction, Occupational Engagement,
and Motivation

Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as "a desired or positive mood formed due to assessment of work or work-related experiences by a person" (p. 1300). It is an essential condition to perform job duties well. As occupational satisfaction begins to diminish, it is not uncommon to witness employee symptoms of burnout, stress, and the desire to quit (Lu & Gursoy, 2016). From this aspect, low job satisfaction might cause undesired outcomes at both individual and collective levels of an organization. Pyne (2011) found that school counselors who reported increased engagement in counseling-related duties and implemented the ASCA

(2019) national model reported elevated levels of job satisfaction. Research demonstrated that factors contributing to job satisfaction of school counselors included (a) having administrative support, (b) establishing good communication with other staff, and (c) having clearly written and directive roles (Clemens et al., 2009; Pyne, 2011).

Together with job satisfaction experienced, principles of perceived job satisfaction and work motivation have been researched within the educational framework. Spector (1985) referred to perceived job satisfaction as "the degree of affective or attitudinal reactions one experiences relative to their job" (p. 693). As a safeguard to the impacts of work-related stress and burnout, perceived job satisfaction has been shown to predict overall life satisfaction for American school counselors (Bryant & Constantine, 2006, p. 268; Mullen et al., 2020). Increased attention has also been directed toward the association of engagement in fitting roles and overall commitment to school counseling careers (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Vo et al. (2022) summarized work motivation as "the psychological strength of a certain individual, which determines their behavior in an organization, the level of persistence in overcoming problems, and the self-determination towards the dimensions of their job" (p. 1). It is important to shed light on how school counselors remain motivated—one of the central constructs used to understand human behavior. Defined using many subconstructs, work motivation impacts reasoning, sentiments, and one's ability to affectively respond to issues. For this literature review, a focus was placed on intrinsic and extrinsic work motivations. Individuals are extrinsically motivated to do things because one gets something from it (e.g., a reward or praise). A school counselor might find motivation in receiving a distinguished educator award from an administrator. Individuals are intrinsically motivated to do things simply because we enjoy doing them without external factors influencing our decisions to act. Although there was limited

literature associated with the relationship between motivation and school counselor job

satisfaction, recent studies connected overall self-care experiences of school counselors

(Alexander et al., 2022; Gokalp, 2022). In coping with the impacts of COVID-19 on personal

and professional lives, American school counselors continue to solicit sources of motivation and

satisfaction.

Introduction of Flow Theory

Historical Roots

The phenomenon of flow—subjectively interpreting why individuals perform activities

for no reason but the activity itself in the absence of extrinsic rewards—was first introduced

during the positive psychology movement by Csikszentmihalyi (1975). Seligman, often

mentioned as the 'Father of Positive Psychology,' claimed the aim of his movement at the

subjective level "is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and

satisfaction in the past; hope and optimism for the future; and flow and happiness in the present"

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Flow, with formative roots in research on creativity

and enjoyment in the 1960s and 1970s, has been characterized by the process of 'total

involvement with life' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Soderman, 2021). Csikszentmihalyi (1990), in

the landmark publication *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, claimed: "The best

moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary

effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something

we make happen" (p. 3). Flow, however, is not simply a subjective theory of academia.

Considerable amounts of research on the optimal human experience have centered on pleasurable

leisure and sporting activities. Within a few years of its establishment, Csikszentmihalyi's theory

began to be applied to a variety of practical issues ranging from the pursuit of happiness, to life satisfaction, to intrinsic motivation (Soderman, 2021).

This phenomenon was initially labeled the *autotelic experience*, a term used interchangeably with *optimal experience*. Until 1975, flow was used to describe an experience of 'getting into the zone, or being swept away in one's desired activity' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Soderman, 2021). This term has been used to describe situations ranging from the perfect summer wave for a surfer to the feeling of losing track of time during a chess match. Kotler's (2014) *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance* was pivotal in bringing flow into the mainstream of high-performance ventures, while Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) *Flow in Sports: The Keys to Optimal Experiences and Performances* offered opportunities to increase the knowledge-base and commonness of the flow experience in sports. In *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject,* Soderman (2021) argued that flow is a game design strategy used to extend the duration of playful consumption, while Bakker's (2013) *A Day in the Life of a Happy Worker* attempted to understand what makes us flourish and be happy in our occupation. The autotelic experience continues to span fields of being, ranging from the addicted gamer to the mid-range blue collar worker to the professional athlete.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) was the first to systematically research the subjective phenomenology of flow in his seminal work *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. He interviewed rock climbers, chess players, surgeons, and many others, and found that the psychological state associated with engaged activity was remarkably similar across all domains of performance (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2013, p. 41). Although professionals in fields ranging from neuroscience to work-related performance have made advances in this complex nature, measuring,

understanding, and describing flow was by no means straightforward. Progressive research on achieving the state of flow has brought together performers, athletes, scientists, and everyday employees in search of the optimal experience.

Definition of Flow

While a myriad of definitions exists (Gold & Ciorciari, 2020; Peifer et al., 2022), the phenomenon of flow was most commonly described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as "a state of seemingly effortless concentration wherein one is completely absorbed in what they are doing" (p. 29). Flow is the way people define their state of mind when consciousness is in organized unison and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for their own well-being and self-interest. It's a state of deep enjoyment and absorption where thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses are focused on the same destination (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990; Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). While the past 45 years brought disputes regarding how flow could and should be measured and evaluated, it is notable that there is a heightened level of agreement on the definition of flow itself (Engeser & Schiepe-Tiska, 2012, pp. 2-3). Widening studies have identified this flow experience in the lives of people from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Massimini et al., 2011).

Flow Theory Framework

Preliminary research efforts began with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow channel model of challenge-skills balance. This harmony in balance was known as "the golden rule" in efforts to enter the flow state (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 7). Subjective perceptiveness predicts flow—what a person thinks of their available opportunities and their capacity to act. Four channels of active experience exist: flow (high challenge and high skill), boredom or relaxation (low challenge and high skill), apathy (low challenge and low skills), and anxiety (high challenge

and low skill) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Deitcher, 2011). If an activity is either very easy or very difficult in comparison to one's skill level, the experience will be weak. For a state of flow to be achieved, "one must feel optimally challenged and confident" (Fong et al., 2015, pp. 426-427).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) described six components of the initial flow experience, illustrating why individuals are highly engaged in activities without extrinsic rewards.

- A union of action and awareness. One is conscious of their actions but not of the understanding itself, not viewing themselves as separate from action. Alignment takes place (p. 39).

- Attention enters a focal point. Heightened concentration in a situation with restricted stimulation (p. 40).

- Disappearance of self-consciousness. Deliberations about oneself become inconsequential, manifesting in a loss of ego (p. 44).

- Sense of control. An intense command of one's actions and the demands of the setting (p. 44).

- Orderly, noncontradictory demand. Transparent feedback is conveyed, with goals and means of achieving them arranged sensibly. One's actions become automatic (p. 46).

- Autotelic nature. There is absolutely no need for external goals or incentives (p. 47).

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) experience fluctuation model later expanded dimensions of the flow experience beyond the unison of challenges and skills. His updated framework included nine antecedents and components all together with the most noticeable addition as the

transformation of time. Researchers (Fong et al., 2015; Kawabata & Mallett, 2016; Payne et al., 2011) expressed the speeding up or slowing down of one's time where seconds might seem like hours. This distorted interval of time occurs as one is entirely engaged in the moment, or task at-hand.

Fong et al. (2015) synthesized the nine contemporary components:

Able matched or balanced with one's ability. Action-awareness merging is involvement in the flow activity to a point of spontaneity or automaticity, while clear goals refer to one's perception of the goals of the activity before or during the activity. Unambiguous feedback indicates the monitoring of one's behavior that provides immediate and clear feedback concerning the activity. Concentration is the complete and intense sense of focus on the activity at hand, and a sense of control describes the perception that one can respond to any challenge while engaged in the activity. Loss of self-consciousness pertains to the lack of concern about the perception of others. The transformation of time involves a sense that time has passed either faster or slower than normal. Finally, the autotelic experience alludes to the activity being intrinsically rewarding and enjoyable, or that the task has a purpose in and of itself. (pp. 426-427)

Since the inception of Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow in 1975, researchers (Keller & Landhauber, 2012; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) have appraised and periodically scrutinized overarching concepts, preconditions, and consequences of optimal human experiences. While it is widely recognized that flow states begin with a high degree of concentration, the most recent literature, as conceptualized by Peifer and Engeser (2021), proposed an integration of the ingredients of flow into three 'meta-components': those of absorption, perceived demand-skill balance, and enjoyment (p. 417). Flow theory adaptations

such as Peifer and Engeser's model continue to circulate as today's performance-oriented society pursuits countermove to stressful situations and personal conditions.

Aligning Theories of Positive Psychology

The subjective framework of flow falls into the category of theories focused on motivation and engagement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 110). This cluster of theories embodies aspects of intrinsic motivation, self-determination, self-efficacy, and aspirations. Aligning theoretical concepts included Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of self-determination and Bandura's (Bandura & the National Institute of Mental Health, 1986) social cognitive theory.

Ten years after Csikszentmihalyi introduced flow theory, self-determination theory was proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000). Based on the need for competence and stimulation, they argued that "intrinsic motivation is maintained only when actors feel competent and self-determined" (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 112). Environmental factors or external forces might result in decreased levels of motivation. In the workforce, this might include instances of limited autonomy or critical feedback. For an individual to flourish and develop satisfaction in their social environments, basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be achieved (Gagné & Deci, 2005, pp. 336-337). During the constant balance of internal and external motivations, the ultimate goal of self-determination theory results in individual internalization or behaviors that are internalized (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 112; Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69).

Bandura's (Bandura & the National Institute of Mental Health, 1986) social cognitive theory utilized self-efficacy as the cornerstone of approaching one's goals. The psychologist defined self-efficacy as "one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task" (Tandon, 2017, p. 88). Like an individual's perception of self-determination,

one's belief in the ability to succeed could also be influenced by external factors in a social environment. While flow centers on the autotelic experience with no demand for external aims or recognition, Bandura emphasized individual development through observational learning and social practices. This represented a three-party relationship among factors of human behavior including individual determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants. The Bobo Doll study, for which Bandura is best known, provided a proving ground for behaviors learned through environmental actions and influences (Davidson & Davidson, 2003).

Although theories of positive psychology have proved pivotal over recent decades, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow theory has served as a slight deviation with key components of intrinsic motivation, a balance between challenge and skills, and the transformation of time; however, it is a theoretical framework that has not come without critiques and speculations.

Framework Critiques

From its emergence in 1965, flow has been categorized as a subjective, conceptual framework of human optimal experience. However, influential researchers such as Seligman (2002) viewed flow theory as a mere lack of emotion (Abuhamdeh, 2020). Anthropologist Turner (1982) stated: "If flow is as happy as a human can be, then this stroll through the flow zone paints a boring picture of human existence" (p. 58). These perspectives contrasted with Csikszentmihalyi's notion of enjoyment as a product of the flow experience (Abuhamdeh, 2020, p. 158). Researchers (Soderman, 2021) have debated whether the challenge-skills balance alone produces an experience that is inherently enjoyable or whether flow states could be operationalized without the need for enjoyment as a product. Although Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi collaborated on research studies in support of positive psychology, the former

classified flow as "the absence of any kind of consciousness – no feeling, no emotion" (Seligman, 2002, p. 116).

While flow has been shown to produce benefits in physical and mental concentration along with optimal enjoyment, a disservice would be done if researchers did not consider access and opportunity to achieve such a state. Flow has been categorized into degrees of experience including deep macroflow and less complex microflow. As early as 1975, Csikszentmihalyi acknowledged that microflow was often used as a coping strategy for "alienated people, women, and young adults," while macroflow catered to fortunes of professional males with privileged worldviews and beliefs. Furthermore, not all cultures value the pursuit of self-absorption and individuality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, pp. 175-178). While decades of research on flow theory have concentrated on athletic performance, gaming, and occupational engagement, exclusionary conditions continue to apply to those less privileged.

Although flow has amassed a large body of research spanning over decades, inconsistencies remain in attempts to operationalize the optimal human experience. Depending on the field of study, definitions of flow vary widely. Neuroscientists (van der Linden et al., 2021) classified flow as a "state of task engagement that is accompanied with low levels of self-referential thinking" (p. 1), while organization psychologists (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017) sited flow as "a short-term peak experience that is characterized by absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation" (p. 1). Differentiation also remains in attempts to classify flow as a continuous or a discrete construct. Continuous constructs take the forms of lows, highs, and averages such as one's feeling of sadness or anxiety. In contrast, discrete constructs act as separate or distinct emotions or experiences. Studies conducted in 1977 and 1988 are known as the experience sampling method and the quadrant approach (Csikszentmihalyi &

Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1977), which operationalized flow as a discrete

construct. However, recent studies (Abuhamdeh, 2020, pp. 2-3) on flow found it continuous,

applicable to a widening range of participants' experiences in varying levels.

Nuances and Oversimplifications

In the initial stages of Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of positive psychology, the flow

state was classified as a balance of challenges and skills. Researchers have since separated

optimal human performance into aspects of macroflow and microflow. Macroflow, most recently

studied in the Flow Genome Project (Kotler, 2020) is said to consist of four characteristics:

selflessness, timelessness, effortlessness, and richness. Macroflow would be classified as acts of

deliberate risk-taking or 'laying it all out' and putting your body on the line for performance

standards. The Flow Genome Project classified this experience as "sense of time is dilated, either

slowing down or speeding up, beginning with the human brain's prefrontal cortex response to

heightened self-awareness" (Kotler; as cited in Lakhiani, 2018, 17:13). Dr. Newberg, a leading

neuroscientist from the University of Pennsylvania, labeled this "transient hypo frontality,"

implying the moment "our inner critic is silenced and the brain gets a real sense of peace.

Actions that we perform during this transition come with a state of grace and ease, fully noticing

the environment around us" (Kotler; as cited in Lakhiani, 2018, 17:51). It is critical to remember

that every single condition of flow does not need to be untied to undergo the flow state. As such,

microflow might be experienced during small hints of selflessness, timelessness, effortlessness,

and richness (Kotler; as cited in Lakhiani, 2018, 18:14). Microflow is most experienced during

activities such as yoga, hiking, chess, or even reading. During this process, norepinephrine and

dopamine are released into our body, resulting in a raised heart rate, heightened sense of focus,

and an elongated span of attention (Kotler; as cited in Lakhiani, 2018). Microflow is also most

commonly achieved at one's place of work, allowing for increased productivity and creativity during task engagement. These small signs of performance are critical for avoiding boredom and anxiety in one's everyday life experiences (Emerson, 1998, p. 42).

Macroflow and microflow, subjective states of performance and enjoyment, have created challenges for sound measurement. The Flow Questionnaire (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) served as the foundational means of operationalizing one's optimal experiences during the early stages of research. Although updated versions of The Flow Questionnaire exist, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) measurement tool identified situations where one might experience flow, dis-including intensity during specific activities. It is still recognized as the ideal measure for gauging one's prevalence of achieving flow experiences. Eight years after the establishment of The Flow Questionnaire, Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1977) implemented a highly popularized, controversial form of self-reporting known as the experience sampling method. Participants were given a paging device that sent out notifications up to eight times per day. This method attempted to gather information as it occurred with current experience sampling forms incorporating the use of phone applications for measurement and participant note-taking. While questions could be tailored to meet research purpose needs, professionals called into play the reliability of the experience sampling method as measurement of flow would be hard to conceptualize if participants were asked to temporarily disengage from activities to measure the level of current engagement. Attempts to measure flow have seen popularity in athletics, the arts, education, and performing work-related tasks. The Flow State Scale (Jackson & Marsh, 1996) has been revised to measure flow in physical education activities; the Flow in Education Scale (Heutte et al., 2021) evaluates flow in the learning environment. The FLOW-W Questionnaire (Flow at Work) established by

Bakker in 2008 is currently implemented in efforts to measure peak occupational engagement. Ultimately, the flow state is not easily quantified or assessed as perceptions vary.

Flow is often discussed in conversations pertaining to play and gratification; however, labeling flow, the opposite of fatigue and burnout, would be incorrectly oversimplified according to researchers. The concepts of fatigue and tiredness are commonly aligned with aspects of hard work and labor but "absorption of flow does not cure fatigue; it simply allows us to ignore it" (Soderman, 2021, p. 235). Flow surfaces between states of relaxation and stress, allowing for the positive handling of demands as one maintains the ability to temporarily forget fatigue. This relationship is further investigated in the alignment of occupational flow and symptoms of burnout.

Flow Across Fields

The phenomenon of flow, as researched through multiple disciplines of human performance, was introduced in the 1970s as a theory of positive psychology. The last 50 years of research have spanned fields ranging from applied psychology to neuroscience. This subjective psychological state, answering the question of why people engage in highly committed activities without external motivators, continues to intrigue those interested in optimal performance, intrinsic motivation, and self-satisfaction.

Cognitive psychology, defined as "a branch of psychology that explores the operation of mental processes related to perceiving, attending, thinking, language, and memory, mainly through inferences from behavior" (American Psychological Association, 2023, n.p.), focused efforts on high-order processing. In 2018, European psychologists including Simlesa et al. (2018) published a theoretical model known as the flow engine framework. This model was the first to associate the phenomenon to functions of an engine, producing mechanisms for thought

that include inputs, processes, and outputs. This model (Simlesa et al., 2018, p. 235) incorporated inputs as fuels of the flow engine or conditions that must exist prior to the performance. Core processes included those of attention and motivation to act, resulting in task-oriented engine outputs (absorption, affect, and achievement; Simlesa et al., 2018, pp. 235-236). The flow engine framework, representing an ongoing relationship among a challenge-skill balance, clear goals, and immediate feedback, is one that might bring awareness to aspects of occupational flow.

Cognitive psychological concepts of flow expanded into research on neurocognition, leading way for two predominant applied theories of the neuroscience of flow theory. First, Dietrich's (2004) transient hypofrontality hypothesis considered flow "a state of transient downregulation of the highest cognitive hierarchical component, the prefrontal cortices, defining flow processes in the form of transition from explicit to implicit information-processing systems" (pp. 746–761.). However, Weber et al.'s (2009) synchronization theory of flow disputed this hypothesis, focusing on "the neuronal efficient, featuring binding processes of synchronizing neurons and networks to more effectively communicate and create holistic, higher-order experiences" (pp. 397).

As neuroscience began to surge in popularity in the early 2000s, Dr. Newberg led the initial campaign to combine magnetic response imaging and position emission tomography scanning in radiology to capture blood flow in the braining, a technique known as functional magnetic resonance imaging. Kotler (as cited in Lakhiani, 2018) commended Dr. Newberg in *The MindValley Podcast* by stating:

> It took a while to figure out that what we call quasi-mystical experiences in the brain
> aren't the same thing as flow states, but there is a tremendous amount of overlap. The
> knobs and levers in the brain are the same thing. When you move into flow, anxiety

floods out of your system. All of these stress hormones flood out of your system. They

are replaced by these positive, feel-good neurochemicals such as dopamine,

norepinephrine, and serotonin. This is the physical biological process that happens,

instead of sounding like a surfer bro. (8:13)

Along with continued studies taking place in the fields of neuroscience and positive

psychology, recent research on the optimal state of human performance has entered the realms of

addictive psychology, marketing development, and educational psychology (Chen & Tang, 2023;

Wang, 2022; Zheng, 2023). Concurrently, the first wave of research on using flow to cope with

the effects of Covid-19 is being released including studies in mental health, well-being, and

battling occupational burnout.

Flow in Athletics, Performing Arts, Gaming, and Education

Flow theory has consistently been applied to sport and performing art preparation,

viewed as a way to motivate and create 'the perfect performance.' Peak performance is

considered by many to be the holy grail of goal-oriented experiences. While external motivators

might include money, sponsorships, and fame, athletes continue to search for the quality of

experience that competition and performance bring. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999)

released *Flow in Sports: The Keys to Optimal Experiences and Performances* in efforts to

operationalize the "harmonious focus, where mind and body are working together effortlessly"

(p. 5). In the context of sport performance, participants experience flow when (a) goals are set by

the athlete and (b) feedback is clear and immediate, thus allowing for the creation of full

concentration and an absence of worry (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Stavrou et al., 2015).

While studies exist that incorporate variations of the Flow State Scale (Jackson & Marsh, 1996)

to measure peak performances (Sanchez Vara et al., 2023; Stavou et al., 2015; Wang, 2022) in

athletics and the arts, Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi continued to highlight the importance of perception. Athletes and performing artists push boundaries and explore new limits as mentioned in Kotler's (2014) groundbreaking *The Rise of Superman*; however, importance lies in the perception of the challenge at hand, not what the objective challenge of a situation is (p. 45).

While this phenomenon has been studied in the fields of athletics and the performing arts, the motivational psychology of gaming is most closely fastened with the effects of flow. Acland (2020) described three areas of current gaming research including cyber addiction, gamification, and flow theory (p. 318). Game developers have refined the challenges-skills balance for users, incorporating aspects of enjoyment, interest, and camaraderie. The global gaming industry is now worth more than $300 billion with a market of 2.9 billion active players worldwide. Allowing players to enter and maintain a state of flow has a direct impact on gaming economics and profit. Research on player entry points has included motivation and passion types (Acland, 2020; Kiatsakared & Chen, 2022). If a game becomes boring or effortless according to type, most players simply discontinue playing the game. Chen (2007) revealed two types of adjustments in video games: static flow and dynamic difficulty adjustment or DDA. In static flow, programmers provide players with levels of difficulty according to skill (Chen, 2007; Soderman, 2021). This is customarily witnessed in traditional videos as players choose levels of easy, medium, or difficult. Dynamic difficulty adjustment, however, caused backlash in the gaming industry dating back to the 1970s. Gamers began to ponder: 'Am I getting better, or is the game adjusting to my lack of skill?' In DDA, the challenge-skills balance is re-calibrated as the game progresses, allowing for a never-ending appropriate level of player pursuit. Like the use of a personal smartphone, game program and research teams continued to track player data and analytics in efforts to create environments that induced flow (Soderman, 2021, pp. 117-122).

The advent of flow research on gaming, social media, and use of technology has been incorporated into aspects of optimal educational environments. Efforts to measure experiences in the classroom began with the Flow in Education (Heutte et al., 2014). The 12-item scale, along with perception questionnaires, have been used to study flow in foreign language classrooms (Egbert, 2003; Wang & Huang, 2022), general chemistry classrooms (Kemats, 2020), music teacher and students' experiences (Bakker, 2005), elementary schools (Beard & Hoy, 2010), high schools (Shernoff et al., 2003), and college campuses (Rogatko, 2007). The era of COVID-19, tracing the global pandemic from 2020 to 2023, has resulted in adjustments of what constitutes the 'typical classroom environment.' Students now rely heavily on computer access and usage along with battling decreased levels of motivation for learning. Researchers (Schmidt, 2010; Schmidt et al., 2007) have challenged the traditional educational settings in efforts to promote avenues for student flow. Conditions fail to exist in many academic classrooms as teaching methods continue to not involve students, missing opportunities for enhanced concentration and enjoyment in a task at-hand (Schmidt, 2010, p. 602).

<div align="center">**Occupational Flow**</div>

Prior Research

Bakker (2008), a leading researcher in occupational flow, defined the phenomenon as "a short-term peak experience characterized by absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation" (p. 400). In one's occupational tasks, absorption consists of two factors: loss of time and full concentration. Happiness and good work-related judgement epitomize enjoyment, while employees who maintain motivation and interests in occupational tasks in the absence of external rewards experience intrinsic motivation (Bakker, 2008). According to a study conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989), flow is three times more likely to be experienced during

occupational tasks than leisure activities. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1987) confirmed this hypothesis using in-depth experience sampling methods. However, there was a correlation between the role autonomy of an employee and the level of flow experienced. For instance, managers reported higher levels of flow than novice, general workers (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Theoretically, there might be a higher probability of experiencing boredom or anxiety as a general employee than as a manager with increased responsibilities assigned.

Implementing Csikszentmihalyi's challenge-skills balance, "employees should particularly experience flow when their job demands match their professional skills" (Bakker, 2008, p. 401). Like an athlete or performing artist, employees must have an established skill level and resources available. Skill sets might include post-secondary education or on-the-job training, while occupational resources suggested immediate feedback and opportunities for self-development (Bakker et al., 2005). It was not until 2008 that Bakker created the Work-Related Flow Inventory to measure occupational flow by investigating job resources versus demands on the dimensions of absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation. The Work-Related Flow Inventory has since been used across occupational fields to detect flow according to Bakker and Demerouti's (2006) popularized job demands-resources model of occupational stress (Datu & Mateo, 2017; Fagerlind et al., 2013; Habe & Tement, 2016).

Occupational flow has been separated into employee aspects and those of an employee's organization (Bakker, 2008). Employee work-related enjoyment and happiness has been indicated as the top predictor of job performance. Intrinsic motivation has been categorized as the best predictor of performance, which increases organizational efficiency (Bakker, 2008; Wolfigiel & Czerw, 2017). Occupational therapists and psychologists have studied what it is

about one's job that establishes self-confidence, well-being, and satisfaction, incorporating the measurement of flow at the individual and team levels of engagement (Emerson, 1998).

Maeran and Cangiano (2013) proposed:

Flow tends to occur when a person performs a task characterized by clear objectives so that the person knows exactly how to act, without having to ask others for more tips and information regarding what is to be done. If workers are fully aware of how they have to perform the assigned tasks, they are more likely to fall into a flow state. (p. 14)

Individual Aspects

Bakker (2005) indicated that organizational resources could be strong predictors of the flow experience in one's occupation. Resources might be physical, psychological, social, or organization in nature (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Organizational flow antecedents were described as high degrees of autonomy, assistance from teammates, efficient job coaching, and immediate feedback (Salanova & Llorens Gumbau, 2006, p. 3). These antecedents aligned with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) prerequisites of flow in the work environment including (a) challenges matched to skill level, (b) clear proximal goals, and (c) clear and immediate feedback. Once prerequisites were established as a result of occupational resources, characteristics of individual workforce flow included total concentration, a sense of control, and intrinsic motivation or the autotelic experience (Simlesa et al., 2018, p. 234).

Team Aspects

Innovative teams need to function smoothly, exhibit cooperation, and perform autonomously. Dysfunction and burnout remain on the rise in the aftermath of COVID-19 as occupational demands outweigh individual and team resources. Sawyer (2003), a pioneer on collective flow research, defined team flow as "a collective state that occurs when a group is

performing at the peak of its abilities" (p. 167). Van den Hout and Davis (2019) stated, "This team flow experience and its accompanying benefits are experienced both at the individual and at the group level, creating feelings of positivity, accomplishment, mastery, and meaning" (p. 4). While most flow research on the workforce has been performed at the individual level, too few studies exist on the benefits of occupational team flow (van den Hout & Davis, 2019).

Sawyer's (2007) research on team flow resulted in 10 antecedents needed for optimal group experiences: (a) a group goal, (b) intent listening, (c) total concentration, (d) sense of being in control, (e) blending of egos, (f) equal member participation, (g) familiarity, (h) effective communication, (i) moving the task forward, and (j) the potential for failure. As employees think differently in teams than they do as individuals, it is important to ascertain the difference between personal and collective flow. Quinn (2003) simplified the experience into three differences: (a) coordination of members through cognitive and affective processes, (b) a collective goal that superseded individual structures, and (c) the need for comparable levels of skill.

Flow and Its Possible Negative Impacts

While flow is a highly desirable optimal experience, it is worth shifting focus to the downside of such psychological conditions. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) admitted that people would go to great lengths and jeopardize the health of themselves and those around them to obtain and maintain such enjoyable states. For example, Schüler (2012) studied the negative impacts of each condition of flow, from loss of the reflective self, to excluding other important aspects of one's life during the complete concentration of a task at hand. Van den Hout and Davis (2019) stated, "Flow experiences can potentially lead to short-sighted, self-centered, and/or high-risk behaviors" (pp. 13-14). It is not uncommon for athletes, performing artists, and even employees

to search for high-risk challenges to test skill sets. While an appropriate level of risk might be beneficial and serve as an advantage at the individual and team level, increased risk acceptance does not come without social and psychological wear. It is important to recognize that flow activities (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993) could also take the form of destruction and disturbance. In seeking pleasure and gratification of one's emotional state, flow has been linked to acts of aggression, violence, and crime (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993).

Since its inception in 1975, researchers have established addiction as the primary negative impact of efforts to obtain and maintain the subjective state of flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Soderman, 2021). Flow addiction has been studied in gaming (Soderman, 2021), sports (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), extreme human performance (Kotler, 2014), and individual and team-oriented occupational tasks (van den Hout & Davis, 2019). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) emphasized, "When a person becomes so dependent on the ability to control an enjoyable activity that he or she cannot pay attention to anything else, then they lose the ultimate control: the freedom to determine the content of consciousness" (p. 62). In efforts to provide an overview of flow addiction in the gaming industry, Soderman (2021) clarified how game designers have learned how to initiate and control gamer flow, altering moods and enhance withdrawal, and ultimately using it as a 'dangerous resource' to provide fuel to consumerism and self-centered involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 139; Soderman, 2021, p. 211).

Kotler (2014) likened this realization in *The Rise of Superman*:

The state of flow, like the path that bears its name, is volatile, unpredictable, and all-consuming. Flow feels like the meaning of life for a good reason. The neurochemicals

that underpin the state are among the most addictive drugs on earth. Equally powerful is

the psychological draw. (p. 158)

In *The Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002)

emphasized this 'dangerous resource' as a product of participating in activities that one is

passionate about. Gamers, athletes, performers, and employees seek out opportunities to

experience flow in ways that might hinder themselves, their families and surroundings, and their

place of work (Kiatsakared & Chen, 2022).

Summary of Literature

This chapter included a thorough review of relevant literature in school counselor

occupational engagement including a brief history of the transformative role of the American

school counselor. Also discussed were work-related issues including burnout, decreased self-

esteem in the profession, and challenges that remained as a result of the COVID-19 global

pandemic. The origins of flow theory were reviewed including a brief summary of optimal

human performance across scientific and applied fields. Prior research on occupational flow,

both at the individual and team levels, was also discussed. To my knowledge, no literature

demonstrated professional school counselor burnout through the framework of flow theory. The

purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was to examine

the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in

one school district. Chapter III outlines the methods implemented for this research study.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The intent of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative, phenomenological study regarding occupational and team flow in secondary school counselors. This interpretive approach allowed for a deeper understanding of secondary school counselor experiences within one school district in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Development of themes from the data emerged to discern the lived experiences of school counselors as related to occupational flow, team flow, and burnout. As established in Chapter I, occupational flow indicates "a short-lasting peak experience, characterized by involvement, pleasure of working, and intrinsic work motivation" (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017, p. 47). According to van den Hout et al. (2018), "Flow could have even more benefits and stronger positive effects at the team level by promoting optimal experiences, well-being, and meaningful experiences, all of which promote creative production and higher performance" (p. 389). Burnout, in the framework of secondary school counseling, suggests "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397). Using a constructivist paradigm, a phenomenological approach is discussed in-depth in this chapter. The research plan includes the research questions, methodology, inclusion and exclusion criteria, participants, procedures, data collection measure, method of analysis, and ethical concerns. Additionally, my role as a researcher was considered as the primary instrument for data collection, working to make meaning to thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of participants. To

capture the essence of such thoughts and perceptions, 15 individual interviews, a focus group, and member checks were used to gather data.

Methodology Selected

To apprehend how they thought and experienced, I attempted to capture the voice of the participants, providing a distinct description that originated from each secondary school counselor's unique point of view. Creswell (2012) explained, **"**A qualitative study is suitable when the object of research is to explain a phenomenon for which you do not know the variables and need to further explore, collecting data based on words from a small number of individuals so that the participants' views are obtained" (p. 16). Qualitative designs have been used in flow studies to contribute to the understanding of a particular type of experience in fields such as social science and positive psychology (Bloch, 2000; Elkington, 2010). As outlined by Creswell, "A quantitative approach is appropriate when a researcher seeks to identify a research problem based on trends in the field or on the need to explain why something occurs, ultimately using mathematical procedures" (pp. 13-15). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the data gathered in this type of inquiry are addressed as soft data, using copious detail to describe an environment being studied. Since the overall intention of this study was "to explore the subjective meaning and essence of another's experience of a phenomenon," qualitative methodology was the most appropriate path to achieve a greater understanding of the flow phenomenon directly from the perspective of school counselors (Glesne, 2016, p. 20).

Phenomenology

This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach—one applicable to studying affective, emotional, and often powerful human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Based on perceptions of one's own experiences, an understanding and vision into the

phenomenon of flow was further examined. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

approach was utilized to interpret known phenomenon, thereby distancing objectives from a

mere description of the essence by collecting data through interviews with school counselors in

one Rocky Mountain region school district. The following research questions were guided by

inquiry:

Q1   What is the experience of occupational flow for secondary school counselors?

Q2   What are secondary school counselors' perceptions of the relation between occupational flow and team flow?

Q3   What are the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in terms of occupational and team flow in the workplace?

A phenomenology, primarily developed by German philosopher Husserl, is "the

acquisition of data through interviews focused on the lived experiences of study participants in

which the interviewer is the tool of measurement" (Seidman, 1998, p. 15). It is both a 20th-

century school of philosophy and a type of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25).

This approach has a central research purpose of exploring the subjective meaning and essences

of another's experience of a phenomenon—how one comes to understand the world (Glesne,

2016, p. 290). For this study, the phenomenon of flow experience for secondary school

counselors was analyzed through the lens of occupational burnout. This understanding in

qualitative research is commonly traced back to social constructions in interpretivism.

Glesne (2016) provided a summary of this framework:

Accessing the perspectives of several members of the same social group about some

phenomena can suggest some cultural patterns of thought and action for that group. With

the research goal of interpreting the social world from the perspectives of those who are

actors in the world, it follows that research methods include interacting with people in

their social contexts and talking with them about their perceptions. (p. 9)

This interpretive paradigm of human understanding, sometimes referred to as hermeneutics, was

introduced by German philosopher Kant as the study of interpretation. Interpretivism "rejects the

idea of universal laws and accepts that interpretation is fundamental to human interactions and

knowing" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 143). This interpretation enabled both me and participants to

share in the journey of discovery, acknowledging the authenticity of one's own experiences in

the process of comprehending the lived experiences of secondary school counselors (Hodge,

2009).

Bracketing and Epoche

Establishing a healthy awareness of researcher assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions

became evident during processes of bracketing, which involves ideas researchers and participants

take for granted as true. Phenomenology is based on the essence, or essences, of shared

experience. The experiences of diverse individuals are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to

identify a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). To focus on experiences of participants, these personal

assumptions must be put aside, or bracketed, to be open and receptive to what the interviewer is

attempting to understand (Ely et al., 1991). In a process known as epoche, I explored my own

"dimensions of the experience to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and

assumptions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 16-17). In its simplest form for this study, it meant

the suspension of judgement and prejudgment. As the researcher, I reflected on my own

experiences related to the occupational flow phenomenon; however, these experiences were

bracketed from the lived experiences of the participants before interviews were conducted as

well as during the analysis and reporting of data. Bracketing was established through reflective

journaling, recognizing and temporarily suspending personal judgements on the subject to guide deep critical understanding (Wall et al., 2004). Peer debriefing, later defined, also served as a way for me to approach each interview and analysis with a fresh, intuitive perspective.

Lived Experience

Attaining a new understanding of the experiences of others to gather insight is the cornerstone of phenomenological research design. This methodology emphasizes "people's conscious experience of the lifeworld; that is, their everyday life and social action" (Schram, 2003, p. 71). By examining flow, new interpretations and appreciations are conceived to reorient how we understand the experiences of secondary school counselors. Lived experiences are transcribed for themes and meanings as obtained through first-person accounts.

The Researcher

Phenomenological research entails evaluating a real-life phenomenon and determining the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings of participants—both in terms of *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91). Therefore, I served as the primary agent for data collection including developing interview questions, performing interviews, and uncovering themes from counselors' responses. To avoid biases when sharing the experiences of those involved, I articulated my thoughts and beliefs with regard to occupational flow and school counselor burnout.

I am a 38-year-old male who grew up in northeastern Pennsylvania. The third of four boys and the son of an educator and insurance agent, I come from a middle-class family who placed much emphasis on education and hard work. While I was introduced to flow upon reading Kotler's (2014) *The Rise of Superman*, my perception of flow encompassed past accomplishments in team and individual sports along with leisure activities such as my love for

literature and live performance. Completing my 13th year as a professional school counselor at the secondary level, I have experienced a heightened sense of occupational burnout since the onset of COVID-19 in March of 2020. Awareness of occupational microflow allowed me to find overall job satisfaction, increased focus during the workday, and enjoyment in secondary counselor duties. It was with this background and belief that I examined the phenomenon of occupational flow.

<p align="center">**Participants and Setting**</p>

Participants

This study sought to achieve a greater understanding of the flow phenomenon directly from the perspective of secondary school counselors experiencing burnout. An interpretive lens was employed to explore the lived experiences of five counselors in one Rocky Mountain region district. Purposive sampling consisted of persons who had unique backgrounds or characteristics that made them the target for closer individual studies (Shank et al., 2018, p. 66). Specific to purposeful sampling, the method of criterion sampling involved selecting cases that met predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2001). Through criterion purposeful sampling, school counselors with at least three years of professional experience in secondary schools were targeted to participate in the study. In the Rocky Mountain region, initial school counselor licensing must be renewed after three years, requiring completion of six professional development credit hours or 90 clock hours of renewal credit to be obtained. This three-year induction program, with standards set by each school district, requires evaluations of a continued commitment to the field (Colorado Department of Education, 2023). To fully support the intent of the study, it was important that I purposefully selected participants who were willing to share their personal stories and experiences around the phenomenon, requiring a professional

commitment to continued development as a secondary school counselor. Inclusion criteria for the selection of participants are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Sampling Criteria

Criterion	Objective	Description
Criterion-a	Professional Experience	At least 3-5 years of professional experience as a secondary school counselor
Criterion-b	Location	Employed in one Rocky Mountain region school district as a secondary school counselor
Criterion-c	Professional Commitment	Disclosed symptoms of burnout and interest in reclaiming occupational satisfaction
Exclusion Criterion-a	Exiting or Transitioning Out	Exclude those currently exiting the field

Exclusion criterion-*a* ruled out those school counselors actively exiting, or transitioning out of, the field of professional school counseling. This population was selected for the present study due to access to the sample including five secondary school counselors representing four student service departments. Smith et al. (2009) indicated the challenges in determining an appropriate sample size for IPA research; however, aligning contemporary studies ranged in similar sample sizes (Blake, 2018; Ward, 2022; Wiggins, 2017). According to Seidman (1998), establishing this degree of trust in a small, but intimate sample was essential in gaining access to sensitive information during the three-interview process.

While outreach efforts took place within a population of 64 secondary school counselors in one district, five interested candidates met the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation. An initial participant interest email sent by a district administrator representing Student Services via Microsoft Outlook in August 2023 was delivered to 64 secondary school counselors in the district. To provide more information on the study, I conducted an introductory presentation during a monthly secondary school counselor gathering. Also taking place in August 2023, this presentation included an overview of my intent along with incentives for participating in the interview processes. Initial participation was collected by means of a Qualtrics interest survey sent through Microsoft Outlook email immediately following the district presentation (see Appendix A). Embedded in the interest survey was an initial notice of informed consent for participant reference. A follow-up Microsoft Teams video meeting was held to discuss participation in the study, which served as our school district's approved platform for employee communication. A rationale for the methodology selected and the criteria for participants in the study was further interpreted. I then contacted selected participants via Microsoft Outlook to determine their willingness to participate.

Setting

The setting of the research included a mid-sized city in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. While a student population of 29,907 made this district the eighth largest in the state, covering more than 1,800 square miles, enrollment increases continued to outpace those of neighboring areas. The school district consisted of 52 K-12 public schools including six comprehensive high schools of 1,600 to 2,200 students. Student demographics remained consistent with 71.4% identifying as Caucasian, 19.5% as Hispanic/Latino, and 4.6% making up other minorities; and 28.2% of K-12 students were identified as free and reduced lunch

participants. The 2022 staffing included 2,135 certified teachers and special service providers across 55 schools with an average of 12.99 years of professional experience. This made the school district the second largest employer in the county (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Counselor Profile

District caseload ratios of students-to-counselors ranged from 31:1 to 364:1 with smaller caseloads assigned to secondary counselors designated as career specialists. While the district hosted four alternative high schooling options including online, hybrid, and experiential learning platforms, 33 secondary school counselors were assigned to caseloads in six comprehensive high schools. Twenty-two counselors, or 66% of district secondary school counselors with student caseloads, had ratios above the 250:1 recommended ASCA (2023b) national average.

Institutional Review Board Procedures

Prior to participant selection and data collection, I obtained approval through the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix B). With human rights of research participants protected in all stages of the study, consent began with the submission of a research study narrative. Written and signed consent of participants (see Appendix C) was obtained and included in my audit trail. Participants were also made aware of the continued right to not participate in the study, to not continue interviewing, to not respond to every question, and to stop allowing me the right to use their data. I emailed an electronic version of the Consent Form for Human Participants in Research directly to participating secondary school counselors via Microsoft Outlook and requested an electronic signature be returned. A copy of the consent form, along with a copy of the email response, was retained by both me and the participant for future reference. All identifiable participant information,

including informed consent forms and interview data, was stored in a password protected drive on my personal computer. A separate storage folder was used for de-identified qualitative data. To protect the confidentiality of participants, access to data required a personal computer username and password along with separate user passwords to unlock storage folders.

To make the research process a beneficial relationship for all parties involved, I compensated participants with respect to time spent interviewing. Participant benefits included the distribution of Visa gift cards. To increase retention for subsequent data collection, as attrition is a likelihood in all research studies, I provided a $50 gift card for individual interviews along with a $25 gift card for participation in the focus group.

Data Collection

It was critical that multiple data sources were implemented to ensure reliability, validity, and trustworthiness when performing qualitative research. Trustworthiness in my observations, interpretations, and conclusions was practiced through triangulation of data. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people" (p. 245), therefore increasing the likeliness the phenomenon under study was being comprehended from several points of view. Triangulation was obtained through individual interviews (Phase 1), a focus group (Phase 2), and additional follow up member checks (Phase 3). I produced preliminary sets of open-ended questions for each secondary school counselor interview and the focus group. The development of applicable interview questions was crucial to obtain credible data and ensured that interview questions measured the lived experiences of counselors. The development of each drafted question was warranted in writing. Initial sets of interview questions were presented to my committee

members during the proposal phase. Semi-structured questions for 15 individual interviews and a focus group were revised and adjusted according to participant time constraints (see Appendix D). Interview questions were revised and adjusted according to participant time constraints. A description of each data source and how the data were collected are provided below.

Phase One: Individual Interviews

Phenomenological research traditionally involves multiple focused interviews that rely on participants' memories and reflections to revisit experiences. While other interview formats had the potential to support participants, the selected three-interview method engaged with the phenomenon as it presented itself to one's consciousness, affording time to think about, and reflect on, interview responses (see Table 2). Interview design protocols included such methods as semi-structuring of questions, think-aloud scenarios, and use of stimulated recall as I developed sub questions or probes to solicit desired information.

This study followed a three-step, phenomenological interview design established by Seidman (1998). Three separate interviews, ranging from 16 minutes to over 58 minutes in length, took place with each participant in school offices via Microsoft Teams Video; therefore, participants were allowed to choose the day and time of each interview. I provided each participant with options for meeting times via the use of When2meet. Once the times were confirmed, a follow-up Microsoft Teams meeting invitation was sent for confirmation. Participants had the option of scheduling all three individual interviews within a 14-day period as suggested by Seidman.

Table 2

Three-Interview Method

Interview Focus Question Example	Alignment to Flow Phenomenon
Interview #1. Talk about your experiences in light of present occupational struggles. What are some professional experiences with burnout, job satisfaction, and recovery from Covid-19?	Questions will establish the context of the school counselor's experience.
Interview #2. Talk about your relationship with this occupation, and experiences involving any other school personnel. Tell me a story that directly relates to your experience with burnout and/or flow. Feel free to share stories about your experience.	Reconstruction of details of one's experience within the context in which it occurs. Concentration on the concrete details of a present lived experience.
Interview #3. Given what you have said about your experiences with occupational flow, how do you understand it's relation to job-satisfaction? What do you notice, both as an individual as well as a member of a team, with regard to flow? What do you see in the future with regard to reclaiming job satisfaction?	Reflection on the meaning that experiences hold for participants.

Seidman (1998), in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, developed an interview guide for phenomenological inquiry. A short introduction was followed by semi-structured interview questions designed to allow for a conversational tone. The questions were developed in a way that limited predetermined answers to questions, thereby aiding in the reduction of personal biases on my part as the researcher. While the number of questions depended heavily on the interviewee, selecting their own terms to formulate responses, I indicated the length of each interview before opening remarks. The opening interview established the context of each school counselor's experiences up to the present time, avoiding the use of "why" questions and focusing on the "how" instead (Seidman, 1998, pp. 17-22). The second interview, conducted within 3 to 10 days of the opening interview, allowed the counselor to reconstruct and reflect on those experiences, concentrating on the concrete details of the present lived experience of occupational flow and team flow. A third interview was designed to encourage school counselors to reflect on

what previously disclosed experiences meant to them as individuals as well as members of a

Student Services team. According to Seidman, a sample of participants who all experience

similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few

participants (pp. 51-52). Collecting information and stories verbatim was vital for my subsequent

analysis to be considered valid. Interview voice recording and transcription took place through

Microsoft Teams Transcription with a personal digital voice recorder utilized as a backup during

each participant interview. Transcribed interviews were secured in a password protected storage

folder on my personal computer. I ensured validity of transcriptions through researcher checks

immediately following the interviews, listening to the interview alongside transcripts to ensure

transcription accuracy. All individual interviews were conducted during September 2023.

Phase Two: Focus Group

In addition to 15 individual counselor interviews, I conducted a focus group with all

participants in October 2023. This type of interviewing has become a popular method of data

collection in educational research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "A focus group is an

interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic. Since data

obtained is socially constructed, a constructivist perspective underlies this collection procedure"

(p. 114). Interactive group discussions generated perspectives that might not have been

approachable through individual interviewing, sharing views and hearing views of others in

efforts to answer appropriate research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As advised in

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research (Smith et al., 2009), I

played three distinct roles in the focus group: facilitated the discussion, monitored the discussion,

and maintained a reasonable and ethical format (p. 73). Table 3 provides samples of focus group

questions.

Table 3

Focus Group Sample Questions

Focus Group Question Examples	Alignment to Flow Phenomenon
Interview #1. Talk about your experiences, both as a secondary school counselor as well as part of a Student Services department, in light of present occupational struggles. Please share a story about your experience. How does occupational flow present as a team member? What are your professional experiences with burnout, and do you notice symptoms amongst department members?	Questions will establish the context of the school counselor's experience, along with being part of a Student Services team. As a group, counselors will further construct details of present lived experiences, both as an individual, as well as part of a team.

I coordinated a secondary school counselor focus group through Microsoft Teams Video upon conclusion of individual interviewing. Concluding one-on-one interviews beforehand allowed for uninfluenced, individual probing of attitudes, beliefs, desires, and experiences of each participant. Given the size of the school district and limiting participant burden to engage in the research study, the focus group was held virtually. In late September 2023, I sent participants an invitation via Microsoft Outlook. Entrance was only achieved with an individual password I provided. Invitations consisted of a direct link to the group and a one-time passcode for each participant. Group interviewees had the options of pseudonym-use and cameras off with respect to continued participant confidentiality. Through privacy settings on Microsoft Teams, names of meeting participants were hidden; however, all participants chose to have cameras on throughout

the duration of our time together. Before recording took place, participants were informed of policies for privacy including a review of the informed consent agreement and the option of withdrawing from the study if circumstances arose. With me serving as the primary focus group mediator, interviewing took place through a semi-structured format. Thirty-eight minutes in length, this online meeting was guided by themes developed from individual interviewing along with open ended questions focused on understanding, experiencing, and processing team flow, burnout, and job satisfaction. Along with audio and video recording of the group interview, responses were processed using Microsoft Team Transcriber. The focus group concluded in early October 2023.

Phase Three: Follow Up Member Checks

Additional follow-up member checks were conducted once individual and focus group interviews were complete. I invited each participant to a conclusional Microsoft Teams one-on-one interview to review themes from each session along with allowing the participant the ability to dig deeper into any thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions of the phenomenon that might have been missed in initial efforts. The follow-up member checks also served as a critical aspect of the study, allowing for data saturation to occur from the five secondary school counselors in one school district.

<center>**Informed Consent and Confidentiality**</center>

It was important to protect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals who participated in the study, emphasizing that people should participate in research through voluntary and informed consent (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2016). For qualitative research involving in-depth interviewing, participants must have consented to be interviewed. According to Seidman (1998) and researchers, attempts to collect purposeful samples, self-selection, and randomness are

incompatible (p. 51). Selected participants chose to be in the study on a voluntary basis. As previously stated, while adhering to the University of Northern Colorado's IRB procedures, students were not involved in the interview processes. As such, the study qualified as Exempt as all participants were 18 years of age or older (see Appendix B). While focus group questions were altered according to responses obtained during individual interviewing, application modifications were not required. I acquired consent forms from all participating secondary school counselors along with an updated letter of support from the school district's Institutional Effectiveness Officer. Permission to conduct site-based research, requested via Microsoft Office email, was also granted from eight of nine secondary schools principals throughout the district.

Several methods were employed to keep the identity of each participant confidential. While confidentiality is never guaranteed in a qualitative study, pseudonyms were used for each school counselor. According to Kaiser (2009), "Maintaining respondent confidentiality, while presenting rich, detailed accounts of social life presents unique challenges" (p. 1632). As the study took place in one Rocky Mountain region school district, deductive disclosure might have emerged as characteristics of individuals or populations made them recognizable. Participants had the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms while conveying detailed, accurate accounts. Personally identifiable information was stored in a secured database to protect sensitive information.

Analysis

The formation of secondary school counselor data included the processes of interviewing, documenting, and analyzing audio and video materials (Creswell, 2007). While audio transcription in recent research attempts was conducted through NVivo 14 to allow for conclusive analysis, Microsoft Teams Transcription served as the initial platform. School

counselors were interviewed with respect to work-life schedules, while factors contributing to accurate responses for analysis ranged from quiet settings to ideal levels of personal comfort. As my intent was to direct focus on each counselor's attempt to make sense of experiences, an IPA was conducted.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which "produces an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41), served as the foundation of interview data and reporting. While the IPA approach was meant to identify, it also capitalized on both convergent and divergent themes, highlighting the differences rather than simply focusing on the commonalities of responses. Although existing literature on IPA has not delineated a single method for working with data, this type of approach frequently begins with each participant transcript being analyzed individually. Cyclical steps of data analysis included (a) reading and re-reading, (b) initial noting, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case, and (f) looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). Initial readings of transcripts were followed by three levels of cyclical coding to identify emergent and divergent themes across counselor cases. NVivo 14 software data analysis services were also implemented, uploading each interview transcript to begin analysis.

Levels of Coding

Transcripts were given an initial reading immediately following each interview. No outlines or notes were produced for this reading. I also viewed the Microsoft Teams recorded interview to accompany the first reading. The purpose of this initial reading and observation was

to make me familiar with the data and ensure that no errors were made in the transcribing of interview questions and answers as IPA requires a verbatim record of all data collected. This first stage ensured that the interviewee became the focus of analysis as I learned to actively engage in the participant's world (Smith et al., 2009). A second reading created a more intimate familiarity with the interview data and enabled me to make notes of interesting phrases without attempting to make meaning of what was said. Two initial readings created a heightened level of awareness of the described experience, "allowing for a model of the overall interview structure to develop, permitting the analyst to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of interview together" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82).

Three tiers of coding including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual coding were applied for line-by-line analysis. As referenced in Appendix E, levels of cyclical coding were identified by color-codes. Descriptive coding, highlighting particular words or phrases that appeared to become prominent, was used to increase the level of inquiry created. Descriptive annotations were attached to words or phrases that stood out because of frequency or perceived significance. According to Smith et al. (2009), "This level of initial notes is very much about taking things at face value, about highlighting the objects with structure the participant's thoughts and experiences" (p. 84).

Following the first level of description, I carried out linguistic coding to focus on specific words choices—the many linguistic levels of interpretation that might have been present in each word and phrase. In linguistic coding, attention was paid to the use of elements such as metaphors to describe experiences. Among many things I attended to were "pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone, and degree of frequency" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 88).

The third level of IPA annotation, known as conceptual coding, explored the conceptual domain of interpretations. Deeper levels of meaning within the context of experience emerged from conceptual comments. Conceptual coding of individual transcripts also enabled the identification of emergent themes to capture the essence of participants experiences. "Conception annotation is often not about finding answers or pinning down understandings; it is about the opening up of a range of provisional meanings" (Smith et al., 2009, p.89).

As transcripts were stored electronically, Microsoft Teams Transcription services were used to color-code each level of inquiry. For instance, I highlighted descriptive comments in red, followed by linguistic comments in blue, and conceptual comments in green. Results of my preliminary coding were then uploaded and processed through NVivo 14 for comparative analysis and credibility.

Themes

Generated themes helped write a composite description of the essence and understanding of the occupational flow phenomena at hand. The development of emergent themes was conducted on two levels: individual interviews as well as cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis was driven by the constant comparison method, "an iterative and inductive process of reducing the data through constant recoding" (Fram, 2013, p. 3). According to Smith et al. (2009), "In looking for emergent themes, the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes" (p. 91). Unlike tiered coding of interviewer responses, construction of themes and constant comparison signified my attempt at interpretation.

The development of initial connections, or themes, was organized using original transcripts from each interview as a reference point. Ordered chronologically or the order in which they came up in interviews, I adjusted themes around to form clusters. I then clustered each emerging theme using visual representations (whiteboard connections) and NVivo 14 for spatial representations of how themes and subthemes related to each other (adapted from Smith et al., 2009, p. 96). The identification of patterns or clusters of themes and subthemes began with connections. Analytic processes for clustering (Smith et al., 2009) included

1. Abstraction: putting like-themes together

2. Subsumption: the putting together of a series of themes

3. Polarization: an examination of oppositional relationships between themes

4. Contextualization: identifying narrative elements within an analysis

5. Numeration: taking account of the frequency with which a theme is supported

6. Function: an examination of their specific function within a transcript. (pp. 91-99)

In order to develop patterns across secondary school counselor responses, I then moved to the next case to continue the cyclical process of reading, coding, and producing emergent themes using the constant comparison method. Compiled transcript extracts were composed, analyzed, and securely stored using personal folders on my laptop. Interpreted analysis was then member checked by participants, provided via Microsoft Office email, as a continued demonstration of credibility.

Interpretation of Results

The results of interpretative phenomenological analysis created a narrative of the phenomenon of flow as experienced by each secondary school counselor. This purpose was twofold: to give a record of the data gathered and to offer an interpretation of the data to present

an argument for what they meant (Smith et al., 2009). Significant themes were presented as I worked to bring to light the lived experiences of each participant. Specific examples from transcripts including quotes, personal stories, and experiences were reflective of identified themes through cross-case analysis and constant comparison of five counselors. Results of this phenomenological analysis of secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain region school district will help stakeholders, including those in leadership roles, understand what it is like to experience a specific situation or life event. An understanding of occupational flow and team flow, as related to secondary school counselor burnout, will provide improved awareness at individual, school, and community levels of advocacy and engagement.

<div align="center">**Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness**</div>

Reliability and Validity

The quality and high rigor of flow research were determined by conditions of reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of results. This IPA approach was designed with unending reflection on the believability of what was reported.

In qualitative research attempts at validity and reliability, some refer to more fitting concepts of data that are credible, transferable, and dependable (Hodge, 2009, p. 78). I established accuracy by the length of interaction, or exhaustive interviewing, with each secondary school counselor. Incorporating Seidman's (1998) three-interview approach, 15 semi-structured meetings were conducted with participants over a 28-day period. Providing time for reflection between interviews, ranging from 3 to 10 days, allowed participants to "account for idiosyncratic days and check for the internal consistency of what they said" (Seidman, 1998, p. 24). It was important for me to reflect on the timing and environment of each interview. School counselor responses might have differed depending on recent experiences related to burnout.

Vivid descriptions warranted readers to cognitively attach to lived experiences of counselors interviewed. One must be able to imagine and form an emotional connection to these experiences. Validity, enhanced by interviewing five participants with adequate time between sessions, was established through cross-referencing of experiences as well as the continued bracketing of my biases through the process of data collection. In a qualitative process widely known as peer review or debriefing, biases were further bracketed through checks on findings. Results from data collection were reviewed by others including committee members to provide credibility in research findings.

Trustworthiness

In this interpretive study, being trustworthy implied producing results that represented as closely as possible the lived experiences of participating secondary school counselors. In phenomenological studies, the researcher is the primary research tool. The following criteria ensured trustworthiness of the study: triangulation of interview phases; prolonged engagement; rich, thick descriptions of interview data and/or theoretical perspectives; member checking to include the sharing of interview transcripts with participants for feedback and interpretation; and saving and organizing all documents related to the study as an audit trail (Glesne, 2016). An electronic audit trail, increasing the neutrality of the study, was used to provide documentation of all data collection methods and records. Transcripts and recordings of all individual interviews, the focus group transcript and video recording, and coded data were systematically filed for review on my personal computer, username and password protected.

<div align="center">

Ethical Assurances

</div>

Ethical practices, upheld throughout the entire endeavor, were grounded in principles about how interview data were collected, analyzed, and stored. This included checks on my

assumptions and conclusions, how school counselors were involved, and how research results were communicated (Glesne, 2016). In this interpretative approach, using phenomenological methods, constant interactions with research participants took place during the fall 2023 semester. Three core ethical principles for human participants included respect, beneficence, and justice. Respect emphasized that people would participate in research through voluntary and informed consent (Glesne, 2016). For this study, consent began with submission of a research study narrative through the university's IRB. While this study qualified as Exempt, I obtained consent forms from all participating secondary school counselors.

Beneficence, related to do no harm and maximizing possible benefits of and minimizing possible harm, was operational as I asked questions of sensitive nature so as not to cause emotional distress along with protecting rights to privacy. This was checked through the IRB process along with obtaining permission from the school district to conduct research through a formal Application to Conduct Research. This step ensured that pseudonyms would be used for all participants along with approval of all interview questions in alignment with district research standards. Justice, focusing on the equitable sharing of research benefits, was established through confirmation of a full committee review by the university's ethics board along with conditions as stated in the district's formal letter of approval to conduct research (Glesne, 2016)

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in one school district. The participants in this study included five secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain region school district. Using three phases of data collection including individual interviews, a focus group, and follow-up member checks, responses were

coded and categorized. Chapter IV provides the counselor responses from interview questions

used throughout the fall 2023 study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was

to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and

team flow in one school district. By utilizing the perspectives of current field professionals, I was

able to reveal aspects of burnout and job satisfaction. During this examination of occupational

flow in contemporary school counseling, modern interpretations were developed through the

transcription of themes and meaning. Additionally, the study was designed to consider how

school counselors experienced team flow in the workplace. Using the process outlined by Smith

et al. (2009), data analysis was guided based on the interpretation of the research. The use of

constant comparative methods, drawing heavily on inductive analysis, allowed for an emergence

of patterns, themes, and concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 201). An IPA approach guided

three research questions:

Q1   What is the experience of occupational flow for secondary school counselors?

Q2   What are secondary school counselors' perceptions of the relation between occupational flow and team flow?

Q3   What are the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in terms of occupational and team flow in the workplace?

This chapter discusses the data amassed from 15 semi-structured interviews gathered

from five secondary school counselors, one focus group comprised of all five participants, and

my reflective journaling. Results from the data collection and analysis are then outlined. This

chapter also includes a brief description of the five participants to allow the reader to gain a better understanding of each counselor's unique experience and perspective throughout one school district. In addition, it provides space for each voice to be acknowledged and honored as contributions to this phenomenological work. Following a description of the interviewing environment, excerpt quotes from individual interviews and a focus group detail the basis for emergent codes, themes, and subthemes. A narrative approach is integrated to support the justification for each established theme. Essential findings are then provided in a conclusive summary.

Interviewing Environment

Fifteen phenomenological interviews took place over the course of 28 days during the fall 2023 academic semester. Conducted via Microsoft Teams Video platforming, interviews were completed during traditional schooling hours of 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. In alignment with Seidman's (1998) three-step phenomenological interviewing process, each participant was interviewed three times over a duration of 12-14 days.

While no formal cancellation requests or rescheduled times were required, an optimum interview environment was not standard in the process of obtaining data. Interviews, lasting an average of 30-35 minutes, demonstrated constant triage and multi-tasking that are further analyzed in this chapter. This included answering phone calls, responding to email communication, and catering to the most important stakeholder who walked through the door— the student. Participants, aiming to set up an interview environment needed for direct focus, took the measures of shutting their office doors, closing the blinds, and dimming the lights—all steps taken to let an interested staff member or student know "I am not available at this time." This effort included fielding text messages from coworkers, responding in duress to amassed urgent

email requests, and having to mute incoming office phone calls. As one participant put it, "This job is constant triage, but flow can be found in that" (Taylor, Oct. 4, 2023).

Upon completion of individual interviews, a focus group of five participants took place through Microsoft Teams Video. Lasting 38 minutes, with one participant exiting early for job duties, questions and conversation reached topics ranging from facets of team flow, both at individual sights as well as throughout the district, along with concepts of burnout and job satisfaction.

The Focus Group Interview

Completed in early October upon conclusion of individual meetings, a focus group interview was held for approximately 38 minutes with five participants via Microsoft Teams Video. Meeting the criteria for participation, school counselors were assured their comments would be held in strict confidence and each participant would be identified by their preferred pseudonym. Prior to the session, I contacted all five participants using When2meet as a scheduling platform. Before the interview began, the participants were told the group meeting would be audio and video recorded, and later transcribed by me.

I described my overall role as that of a group facilitator, monitoring progress and discussion; however, the direction of discussions would largely be in control of the five participants. In the first part, participants were asked two open-ended questions: "What does it mean to you to have job satisfaction this academic year?" followed by "What about current feelings, if any, of experiencing burnout this year?" In the last part of the discussion, participants were given previous words and phrases used to describe occupational flow and team flow. Phrases included "this matters" and "I'm right where I need to be. Right here, right now." Counselors were asked if phrases resonated with personal experiences. And if so, how?

The dialogue produced was subsequently coded and referenced for emerging themes. Participants' responses paralleled the findings that emanated from individual interviews. All five participants indicated that although concepts in question were present, flow was established more often at the collective level of department functioning.

The Participants

Five secondary school counselors were selected using purposive, criterion sampling in one Rocky Mountain school district. The process of recruitment began in September 2023 with a Microsoft Teams email notification sent through a district administrator. Initial interest was requested using a Qualtrics Participant Interest Form (see Appendix F). Six participants completed the Qualtrics survey and met initial inclusion criteria including participation in a one-on-one Microsoft Teams Video session for more information and informed consent. Overall, participants represented four secondary student service teams throughout the district. To safeguard participant confidentiality and anonymity, each secondary school counselor was presented with the option to select a personal pseudonym. Additional identifiers under consideration such as counterpart names, professional titles, and school locations were also modified during participant-researcher member checks.

Taylor

Taylor has 13 years of experience as a full-time secondary school counselor. She serves as the Student Services department head at her high school and holds a master's degree in School Counseling from a local institution. Her work is primarily centered on co-teaching the school's peer counseling program along with playing a central role in graduation duties. During interviews, Taylor mentioned being a mother of two grade school daughters. I met with Taylor in September and October of 2023 for a total of 2 hours and 22 minutes.

Kaytee

Kaytee has 11 years of experience as a full-time secondary school counselor. Her previous role was that of a social studies teacher. Kaytee is former department head and holds a master's degree in School Counseling from a local institution. Her caseload work is centered on English language learners along with district concurrent enrollment processes. She referenced being a mother of two daughters throughout interviews. My meetings with Kaytee yielded a total of 1 hour and 45 minutes of data.

Sean

Sean has 15 years of experience as a full-time school counselor. His previous roles included middle school counseling for five years along with time spent as an elementary school paraprofessional. Sean has a strong background in athletic involvement and obtained his master's in School Counseling from a local institution. He is assigned as a ninth-grade counselor in his large, comprehensive high school. Amid interviews, Sean mentioned being a father of three grade school children. I met with Sean for a total of two hours and eight minutes.

Phoebe

Phoebe has eight years of experience as a secondary school counselor. Before obtaining her master's in School Counseling from a local institution, Phoebe was employed as a special education teacher. She has a strong background in athletics and coaching at the high school level. Her primary role is serving as the Head of Gifted and Talented programming in her school. I met with Phoebe for a total of 1 hour and 41 minutes over the course of three interviews and a focus group.

Heidi

Heidi has 18 years of experience as a school counselor. Before holding secondary counseling roles at three district locations, Heidi was a middle school counselor for 12 years in a neighboring school district. Heidi is the only school counselor at her designated site and is responsible for all social-emotional, career, and academic programming for high school students. She referenced her role as a mother of two young children while interviewing. My meetings with Heidi yielded a total of two hours and seven minutes of data.

Obtaining Results

The acquiring of results was governed by three research questions designed to elicit in-depth and concentrated responses from the participants. As the researcher, I performed all of the data analysis to incorporate the growth of emergent themes. Of all the codes derived throughout the analysis process, clear themes and subthemes emerged as the most telling of the participants' experiences and the most consistent across the five cases while addressing the research questions. Research Question 1 was meant to analyze the essence of occupational flow for each of the five participating secondary school counselors. As such, emerging themes and subthemes in Occupational Flow provided phenomenological experiences in one school district. Research Question 2 served as a link between collective team flow and its relation to individual occupational flow as experienced within four Student Services departments. Accordingly, themes and subthemes developed in team flow provided an essence of interconnectedness. Finally, Research Question 3 was designed to address the phenomenological, lived experiences of secondary school counselors in reference to occupational and team flow. Lenses of lived experiences centered on job satisfaction and burnout in the workplace of one school district. For

that reason, themes and subthemes established from Lived Experiences were applied to provide awareness and discernment.

The methodological approach of IPA began with my reflective journaling before each participant interview. To bracket out my assumptions and inferences, and articulate personal feelings and opinions on each subject matter, time was spent on approaching each interview with a neutral, exploratory stance on topics related to occupational flow, team flow, and lived experiences. Immediately following participant interviews, each Microsoft Teams Video and transcript was saved onto a password protected file, followed by member checks for accuracy of transcribed data. The process of coding responses took shape over five distinct rounds of analysis.

Round 1

Each participant's transcript, in accordance with Smith et al. (2009), was read and re-read for accuracy of responses along with initial viewing of Microsoft Teams Video data. Accuracy was ensured through member checks of participant transcripts immediately emailed to each upon completion of initial edits. A preliminary line-by-line analysis of general claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant was then conducted (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79).

Round 2

The IPA, involving three levels of experiential coding including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual reference checks, was performed. Manual coding, categorized by various highlighting and exporting of references, was used to extract codes from each participant transcript (see Appendix G). Table 4 shows the participant, interview number, date of interview, and total number of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual references exported from each interview.

Table 4

Participant Codes/References

Participant	Interview	Date	Codes / References
	1	9.17.23	76
Taylor	2	9.20.23	33
	3	9.27.23	18
	1	9.13.23	61
Kaytee	2	9.18.23	54
	3	9.21.23	21
	1	9.07.23	56
Sean	2	9.18.23	35
	3	9.24.23	14
	1	9.14.23	32
Phoebe	2	9.25.23	23
	3	9.28.23	21
	1	9.11.23	68
Heidi	2	9.21.23	26
	3	9.25.23	22
Focus Group	1	10.04.23	44

Round 3

After manual coding attempts had been established, an NVivo 14 student software package was used to conduct deeper analysis of emerging themes. The following analysis of codes was extracted from NVivo 14, showing my initial attempt of emerging themes from 16 uploaded participant transcripts (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

NVivo 14 Coding Snapshot

Codes

Name	Files	Refere
TF - Where it's felt	6	28
TF - Feelings and Emotions	3	6
TF - Definition of	2	3
TF - Challenges to	6	19
OF - Where it's felt and defi	5	25
OF - Feelings and Emotions	6	27
OF - Challenges to	5	23
OF - Burnout	3	4
EPSC - Job Satisfaction	6	50
EPSC - Current Experiences	5	45
EPSC - Constant Triage	6	15
EPSC - Challenges and Burn	6	78
EPSC - Career Influences an	6	22

Note. Screen shot of computer screen.

Round 4

Constant comparison began with the cross-analysis of two participant transcripts via NVivo 14. Using visual aids and whiteboard charts, I was able to see, connect, and quantify which codes were the most prevalent per participant as well as across all of the data sources (see Appendix E).

Round 5

Final themes were analyzed for placement into categories according to research question alignment. This step allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of each participant's experiences

and perspectives as related to research questions as well as interpret the meanings of their

sentiments. Themes were placed into three categories: Occupational Flow (OF), Team Flow

(TF), and Experiences of the Professional School Counselor (EPSC; see Figure 2).

Figure 2

NVivo 14 Hierarchy Pie Chart
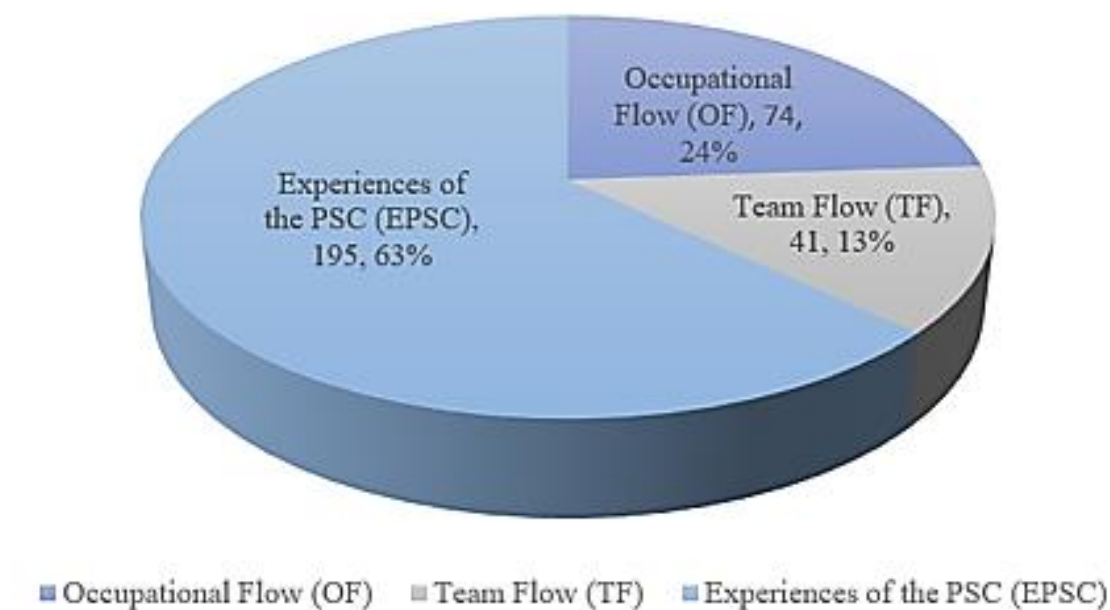
Note. Created by researcher.

Themes

Analysis of the data and its subsequent theme development extracted themes that related

to three research questions and the areas of focus within occupational flow, team flow, and lived

experiences of secondary school counselors. Each theme, unearthed from the interpretative

analysis of 16 transcribed interviews and reflective journals, was supported by contextual

information including excerpts from the participants' data sources. Furthermore, Acts One, Two,

and Three are provided as lead-ins to portray the essence of flow and team flow at work. The use

of italicized words and phrases is implemented to stimulate and draw attention to an emphasis or clear contrast in the linguistic significance of participant responses.

Act One: Occupational Flow: "Right Here, Right Now"

The morning begins with a check list of duties including the returning of student, parent, and peer communication, followed by brief check ins with department members. I am afforded time by both peers and administrators to prepare for the day ahead. A mix of emotions is led by eagerness and optimism for the opportunities I provide. Grounded and present in my physical and cognitive demeanor, I reflect on why I chose to become a secondary school counselor. This job is a gift, and today is an opportunity. The workday is filled with a combination of one-on-one student time, focusing on aspects of career, academic, and social emotional counseling within my skill set. I feel confident in my responses, respecting the environment created. Right here, right now. I look up to check the clock, and one hour has passed with ease. The transition to my next task feels effortless, finding personal satisfaction in competence accumulated through years of experience and familiarity with colleagues. My role within the department and school is known. I complete duties with an absolute, undivided focus on the student. I am not interrupted in carrying out services to my most important stakeholder, mirroring my energy and engagement in the golden relationship established.

Occupational Flow

The following three themes and 15 subthemes present a detailed description of the thematic findings as determined through an in-depth analysis of the participants' interviews and reflective journal entries. Themes developed in Occupational Flow were in direct response to Research Question 1. Using direct quotations representative of the extensive coding, the participants' experiences are featured to support each of the described themes directly related to occupational flow (see Table 5).

Table 5

Occupational Flow Coding

Theme	Subtheme
Where It's Felt and Defining It	Gotta Block It Out
	It's Just Me and the Student
	The Class Was Engaged
	I Don't Mind the Indirect Stuff
Flow Experiences and Emotions	This is Why I Do This
	Exactly How It Should Have Gone
	It Would Just Fly
Obstacles to Achieving Flow	Steady Triage
	Constantly Interrupted, Constantly
	It's What I Gotta' Do

Where It's Felt and Defining It. This theme was derived from the participants' reoccurring expressions of how they felt about job duties, both current and past, in relation to occupational flow. Throughout the data collection process, each counselor talked about awareness of tasks as related to direct and indirect school counseling services.

Gotta Block It Out. It was evident through the interviews and reflective journal entries that the sense of micro flow was primarily achieved through advanced planning and blocking out time amid the workday. Heidi indicated, "I think one thing I'm noticing is that being deliberate and intentional for occupational flow is *really* important. Not just assuming it's going to be part of your day" (Sept. 18, 2023). Kaytee, throughout the focus group interview, reiterated her need to block out uninterrupted, intentional times.

> The best flow that I've had is honestly when we can shut our doors and just crank
> through what we need to do. We are *very good at that* during registration. When we're
> cleaning up schedules, we take turns of "Ok, I've got this block today. Can I block my

door for like four hours and just crank through it?" and I'm not getting interrupted

(satisfaction). (Oct. 4, 2023)

In addition to planning ahead for conditions of flow to surface and making oneself

unavailable for coinciding job duties, participants emphasized the need to plan for time outside

of the conventional academic day. Heidi clarified how such planning played out,

I just have to, *honestly*, do it on an evening. I just have to do it (indirect job duty) at night,

but I get into the flow. I just sit down for like four hours after school and bust through

504's. It feels *really good*. It feels really good getting up the next day because I feel so

much less stressed. What I've noticed is that if I *plan* for occupational flow, that is

necessary (pointing in satisfaction). And if I don't plan for it, it doesn't happen. (Sept. 21,

2023)

Referring to direct Student Services during the academic day, Heidi mentioned, "If I plan to have

a meeting with a kid that I know is needing some extra support, I can *really get into it* with that

person and we can really get somewhere" (Sept. 25, 2023).

It's Just Me and the Student. For the five participants in the study, the notable influence

of one-on-one counselor-student interactions was habitually at the forefront of job satisfaction

and impact. During Microsoft Teams Video interviewing, body demeaner transformed upon

metacognitively reflecting on the student relationship. Counselors sat up straighter in their office

chairs, smiled more, and reframed responses to convey continued interest and enthusiasm for the

chosen occupation. Phrases to describe feelings of flow established included "cutting through the

BS," "in sync moments," and "in a good groove."

Three caseload counselors mentioned senior meetings as a source of student-counselor occupational flow, including Phoebe's iteration of engaging with seniors pertaining to post-secondary planning:

I *really* enjoy the senior meetings, especially when kids are on top of it and you don't see that glazed-over look. You're on top of it, having a really good conversation with the kids and they're like "This was super helpful. Thank you so much" (smiling). I feel like *those* are the good ones. (Sept. 14, 2023)

Heidi, responsible for all academic, career, and social emotional demands as the solitary school counselor at her current site, addressed her counselor-student fulfillment by adding:

I'd meet with kids who had been suspended. I had a curriculum and I loved it. We would get through it together and it was just me and the kid, one-on-one. I'd have these *really distinct* tasks and roles when I could really dig in. I'd have great occupational flow. (smiling, nodding head; Sept. 11, 2023)

Further, Sean provided multiple narrative accounts of how the counselor-student relationship provided satisfaction in his role as a ninth-grade counselor at a sizeable, comprehensive high school. He oftentimes affirmed his critical awareness of one's thinking and learning along with the ease of conversational tones established.

I'm having these sessions with students where the conversation is going well. I'm asking these questions that are kind of out-of-body, like "*Who's coming up with these?*" I'm not smart enough to come up with these questions (look of confusion). So those *really good, good sessions* with students where you feel like you're talking about those things that *really* matter. You're cutting through all the BS. *That's* the counseling session where I experience flow, in this really good conversation. (Oct. 5, 2023)

The reason I became a counselor is because I wanted to be in those, you know, face to face, one-on-one interactions and deep conversations about life, and purpose, and contentment, and gratitude (long pause). When I'm in a conversation like that with a student, and the student is engaged and I'm not pulling teeth and getting one-word answers, *that's* flow for me (reaffirming head nod). (Sept. 7, 2023)

The Class Was Engaged. Participants cited ways in which their occupational flow manifested during classroom instruction. In the role of the secondary school counselor, it is common to conduct classroom presentations on topics including psychological development, learning strategies, self-management and social and career exploration. Heidi elaborated on her previous role as a caseload counselor in charge of drug and alcohol curriculum. She was tasked with presenting units in Health and Wellness sections along with cohorts of ninth-grade transition classes.

I was in the classroom a few days a week at my prior site (high school). I was really, *exactly* how you're describing it, feeling the high (affirming body language). The kids were engaged, and they loved the brain. They loved talking about addiction. They loved talking about mental health, and it was *just such a flow*. (Heidi, Sept. 11, 2023)

Sean's role as a ninth-grade counselor incorporated many opportunities to speak to students, parents, and incoming stakeholders. Although his social anxiety was recurrently mentioned as a personal and professional barrier to suppress, Sean provided an example of ways in which he felt occupational flow in a classroom of active participants:

This morning I went straight from an MTSS meeting to a 101 presentation on Xello and ICAPs. And, that went really well. The kids were engaged, and everybody was working

to check those boxes in Xello. There was good engagement and questions. *You just have those moments* as a school counselor. (Sept. 18, 2023)

I Don't Mind the Indirect Stuff. One of the ways in which the participants conveyed their ability to get into occupational flow was through menial, indirect counseling duties. Examples of secondary school counseling indirect services commonly included department operations, field advocacy and community outreach, collaboration with teachers, and outside referrals. The coordination and completion of Section 504 Plans, indicated by all five participants, was a primary indirect student service as the academic year took shape. While differing opinions were expressed regarding the overall task, most secondary counselors admitted "feeling in the work zone right at the beginning of the year when I had a lot of 504s" (Heidi, Sept. 21, 2023). Furthermore, through her own reflections, Taylor recognized her need to alter environmental disturbances to complete menial tasks: "I get into a groove a lot of times where I'll have my standing desk up, and get some music on, and I'm just powering through the things I need to do. *That's* where I feel like I'm in flow for a little bit" (Oct. 4, 2023).

Intriguingly, Kaytee used phrases such as "I'm unique in a sense that" and "I think I'm kind of known for" to justify her belief of being 'an outlier' in the field of secondary school counseling:

I'm unique in the sense that I don't mind clerical work (laughing). *Flow is there.* There are times that I do have to listen to music or have background noise to get into the zone, and I can crank through things. I think I'm kind of known for being able to crank through some very menial tasks. (Sept. 13, 2023)

That gives me some sense of job satisfaction, to be able to check off those things and or throw away the sticky note to remind me of that. I really do enjoy getting the task

done. It is an indirect way that I know I'm supporting the kids (affirming), so I do find

job satisfaction in that. (Sept. 18, 2023)

Flow Experiences and Emotions. The Flow Experiences and Emotions theme included

participants' merging of present action and self-awareness, effortless concentration on a goal, a

sense of control in one's duty, a loss of self-consciousness, and a shift or loss of time. Each

participant mentioned a metacognitive connection to a state of intense concentration, resulting in

thoughts focused on the present experience rather than on themselves. Emotional connections to

flow presented as being in total control of the present tasks, ultimately finding both indirect and

direct student services to be highly self-rewarding.

This Is Why I Do This. Participants displayed a strong connection to the metacognitive

processes taking place during both direct and indirect duties. While counselors found the

experience tough to articulate, there was an apparent sense of *right here, right now* in body

language, tone of voice, and care displayed to provide descriptions of the environment at-hand.

Kaytee likened this experience to overall job satisfaction as a secondary school counselor by

summarizing, "…being in that zone, I feel super accomplished. Like, 'yes, I got all these things

done!' I feel good when I get things done (smiling). I feel like my occupational flow is at work,

and it provides me job satisfaction" (Sept. 21, 2023).

Heidi and Sean converged on positive self-talk and the reward of absolute control during

an experience. The present experience was summarized by Heidi: "You know that feeling that

you're talking about (provided with definition of flow), 'this is *exactly* where I need to be?' You

believe '*that* was a good day. That was good, I did a *good* thing.' *That's* why I do this. *That's*

why I did this job" (Sept 11, 2023). During the focus group of five participating counselors,

Heidi reaffirmed her 'why' by stating:

that emotion when you're doing something. You're like, "*This is why* I do this," with all

the other stuff that is going on. This feeling of "being in the zone with this exact work,"

whatever that task is in that moment, or with that experience with the kid or oftentimes a

parent too like, "*This* is why I do this." (Oct. 4, 2023)

Of the five participants, Sean exhibited the closest kinship to the emerging sub-theme of

This is Why I Do This. Growing up immersed in an athletic background, Sean habitually related

feelings of occupational flow to his past performance on a high school baseball team by stating,

There is this feeling. I don't know what to call it, but it's just like I'm knocking it out of

the park… I'm having these conversations with students and just, there's this connection

and there's, like, these questions are pouring out of my mouth. I don't know where they're

coming from. And I'm not saying that in an arrogant kind of way, but I just feel like, man,

I can do this, you know? Like I get into those moments and I'm like, OK, I'm helping this

kid how best I can help them right now. I think I just have that feeling of "*this is*

important." You know, like "*this is good*." …I feel like when I am in those conversations

with students like I'm just like *this matters*. (long pause) *This is important*. This is like the

nitty gritty of why I became a school counselor. (Sept. 7, 2023)

Sean's statement, as related to past feelings of peak performance, recognized pure absorption in a

work action, enjoyment in the task-at-hand, and motivation as intrinsically created.

Exactly How It Should Have Gone. The importance of field experience and time in the

role of professional school counselor materialized in responses related to competence and

confidence in one's ability to react to demands. For instance, Phoebe stated that "being able to

put them (students) at ease and understand that it's (future planning) a process, and it's scary,

and it's hard, and it'll be ok. Then when they walk out, they're like 'I'm ok, I have resources. I have supports'" (Sept. 14, 2023).

Sean invariably reiterated the personal importance of learned expertise in efforts to achieve occupational flow: "I go back to that competence of "OK, I have to run a link crew meeting and it's not the most important thing in the world to me. But like, hey, at least I felt like it went pretty well and I didn't have a bunch of anxiety about it" (Sept. 24, 2023). Matching one's ever-evolving set of skills to current occupational challenges became apparent in the ninth-grade school counselor's responses:

> I've been in this job 10 years now, so I'm pretty comfortable and familiar with what's going to be thrown at me and I know I'm going to respond (showing confidence in demeanor). You do have that flow. And then, when I get home, and my three kids and my wife, and all the other things that are thrown at me, when I get home I feel like I can navigate them. …I think a lot of that flow comes from knowing the job, and knowing the people that you work with, and knowing the resources and supports that you have in your building. I would say I'm feeling more of that. Those flow moments, the longer I'm here, are felt. (Sean, Sept. 18, 2023)

Sean also shared his previous ventures to educate students on aspects of obtaining a state of flow through confidence in one's abilities:

> That's where mental health is going to come from, is getting to *that* place. And you *cannot get to that place if you avoid*. If you make excuses, and you avoid. I think it all ties together… mental health… workflow… just flow in life comes from not avoiding and accepting the challenges that are thrown at us and trying to overcome them (satisfaction, preaching). (Sept. 24, 2023)

It was clear that Sean was using himself and previous struggles that he had overcome as a teaching tool for overall competence and confidence in one's skill set as a preliminary means to achieve flow.

It Would Just Fly. During this state of complete immersion in an activity, participants depicted their sense of time as slowing down for total control or passing by without effort or awareness. Characterizing one-on-one student engagement, Heidi noted, "It *flew* by, that hour (look of confusion and surprise). I looked up and it was 2:00 p.m., and he had come in at 1:00 p.m., and just the flow of getting some really good work done with a student for his emotional state" (Sept. 21, 2023). As experienced during classroom presentations, Heidi reported,

> I had these units about addiction I would give to classes, and it was over an hour of
>
> content (facial gesture of anxiety), and it would just fly. *It would just fly in there*. We
>
> would talk. The kids were so interested. They had a lot of personality and it's just that
>
> feeling you're talking about with your students of they had so many personal anecdotes
>
> about this topic and would share them vulnerably. And then you would feel yourself with
>
> them. (Sept. 11, 2023)

Conducting senior meetings with caseload students, Phoebe affirmed, "I looked up (look of awe) and I was like 'Oh, my God, it's 3:30.' So yes, there are days that you're just wrapped up in what you're doing (senior meetings) and the day flies by" (Sept. 14, 2023).

Obstacles to Achieving Flow. The Obstacles to Achieving Flow theme arose from 27 combined interview references pertaining to the challenges of obtaining occupational flow in secondary school counseling. As previously referenced, participants acknowledged the immense amounts of multi-tasking and triage control during the workday. While interviews were semi-structured in nature, a common question was, "As this fall semester sets in, do you feel as though

you've experienced occupational flow on the job? If so, when?" Participants responded with hasty attempts of contemplation, followed by raw admissions of what was truthfully occurring in their work environments. Assertions included "I think there are times that I feel that, and times that I hate *every second of every day*, like schedule changes" (Phoebe, Sept. 14, 2023). Taylor admitted, "Since that one experience, I *cannot* tell you a time (long pause). I feel like a customer service agent in that the only flow that I can achieve is responding to emails in my inbox" (Sept. 20, 2023). A lack of school counselor role identity surfaced in responses, appearing to stress the increased carrying out of non-counseling duties and pressures to perform.

Steady Triage. Each participant mentioned the hardships that entail a reactive services-based occupation. With stakeholders including students, parents, co-workers, community members, and administrators, it has been a common saying among veteran school counselors, "The days where I walk in, and my calendar is empty. *Those* are the days that I dread." Kaytee equated her 'organized chaos' to both organized and unorganized meetings by stating, "I'm trying to get my Section 504s done, and I can't get into a good groove to get all of them completed and wrapped up (flustered look), because of meetings that pop up" (Sept. 13, 2023). In response to the seasoned counselor saying, Taylor echoed, "I'm even planning ahead and trying to block my calendar to allow myself some time to get into workflow. The fires pop up (throwing hands in the air) and all the other things just take over the time that I'm trying to plan for myself" (Sept. 20, 2023).

Heidi's responses from our first interview embodied her struggle with multi-tasking and triage as a secondary school counselor with three separate previous roles in the district:

In this current role, every day is *so* different and that there's *so many* meetings. It seems like when you're taken out of your role for random district meetings, *it's hard*. It's hard to

get going (pause). You're constantly shifting between sites and shifting between priorities of the different people you're with and trying to pick up what their priority is and how it fits with yours. It can be hard to get momentum. (Sept. 11, 2023)

I think counselors that are in the second half of their career have learned through adaptation how to *not have* occupational flow. Even trying to find moments where I was *so* deeply involved with whatever I was working on that it was such a flow was hard to do, because it's more of a reality for me to feel like I'm multitasking (shrugging shoulders). That I'm like doing this, and doing this, and doing this, and l just have to pick up whenever. (Heidi, Sept. 11, 2023)

Constantly Interrupted, Constantly. In relation to occupational task completion, participants vocalized the environmental expectations of consistent interruptions as a barrier to get 'in the zone.' Kaytee emphasized:

The problem with this field is that finding that bubble is hard because we do have the *constant* interruptions (look of distress). There are times where I have no appointments and I can get a lot done. But for instance, this afternoon I even said, "Oh, I need to get in the zone." I haven't done that yet because I have three unexpected appointments come up, so never mind. (Sept. 13, 2023).

Taylor, a colleague in the same Student Services department, reaffirmed: "I think it's very difficult for school counselors to get into occupational flow because we are *constantly interrupted, constantly*" (Sept. 17, 2023). Inconsistent, unestablished work boundaries were also reiterated in her role as a department head:

But I never feel like I really get that rhythm going because I'm interrupted *all the time,* even if my office door is closed, my shades are down. I have a sign on my door.

Inevitably, *somebody* is going to knock (look of astonishment and frustration). *Somebody* is going to need something that they can't wait on. (Taylor, Sept 17, 2023)

It's What I Gotta' Do. To generate an experience of occupational flow inhibitors in the workplace, participants were asked, "Tell me about a work-related challenge that you haven't been able to overcome." Responses included environmental factors that needed to be altered to increase productivity of direct and indirect services offered to shareholders. Kaytee professed, "I haven't been able to sit down and focus (shaking head in displeasure). I think tomorrow I don't have much scheduled, so I might shut my door for a little bit and just crank through it" (Sept. 18, 2023). Her statement of challenges aligned with previous interview responses:

There're times where I can zone in and get all those things marked appropriately, because *I have to*. But I do sometimes have to shut my door because "I'm on a tight deadline. I cannot be interrupted right now." Luckily, today I'm just getting through emails and trying to get in the flow, and answering all my emails and cleaning it up and making sure I address all the needs. But when students pop in, they're the number one priority. (Kaytee, Sept. 13, 2023)

Taylor emphasized her need to alter the work environment to enhance concentration and productivity. This included physical adaptations to her office accessibility as well as ways to incorporate focus and attention-to-tasks at hand:

The last time I experienced it (flow) was when I had to go and work from home for an afternoon because I didn't have childcare and I had my laptop open and I was sitting at my kitchen table. I was able to get through all of my senior transcripts in like 25 minutes because I had *zero interruptions* and I had my multicolored pens and I'm making separate

piles and I'm doing all of that, and I got it done (look of satisfaction). (Taylor, Sept. 17, 2023)

I feel like I need to start to do that (schedule personal time) for myself a couple times a week. Scheduling, not just an hour, but maybe a couple hours and feeling ok to shut my blinds, and shut my door, and put my head down and get some good work done. I've never done that for myself. (Taylor, Sept. 20, 2023)

Act Two: Team Flow: "Everyone's Behind It, On Board, And Excited"

As I walk into the Student Services department, the environment feels one of supportiveness, vulnerability, and uniformity of goals. This collective group of school counselors and support staff are my team, our team. Our personalities are different but our objectives are the same. In our weekly department meeting this morning, we let our guards down, laugh, and check in on each other. We may each bring a differing level of energy and momentum into department functions today, yet that is ok. We have pride in our services offered, and our colleagues and direct administrators understand our department's mission. If I wasn't able to complete job duties today, I can trust that fellow professionals would come to my aid, unconditionally and free of judgment. As a seasoned secondary school counselor in the building, I know my individual strengths, my individual role, and my individual insecurities. I also know and understand my individual role as part of a larger collective unit. There is room for failure in our tasks assigned throughout the day, but anxiety and rumination are not present. We are confident, competent, and supportive of each member's endeavors. Most importantly, if I get overwhelmed or need a timeout in the process, I find relief in unequivocal acceptance. This team is much more than a place of work. The atmosphere created in the room also influences my focus, my motivation, and my morale. I am an instrumental component of this department.

Team Flow

The subsequent themes and subthemes developed from facets of team flow in student service departments provided a detailed description of thematic findings derived from participant quotations. Contemporary emergent themes, directly satisfying conditions of Research Question 2, included an essence of where team flow was felt, experiences and emotions as related to group flow, and presented challenges of obtaining such an experiential state in one school district (see Table 6).

Table 6

Team Flow Coding

Theme	Subtheme
Where It's Felt	Flow in Knowing My Role
	Everybody's On the Same Page
	That's a Dept. Meeting Effort
	We're In a Better Place Now
	It's Just Trust
Challenges and Burnout	A Toxic Place
	I Don't Know Who's Doing What
	Not Planned, Not Happening

Where It's Felt. Derived from six subthemes, Where It's Felt captured emotions encircling the collective state of peak performance referred to as team flow. Participants, through direct experiences and stories, detailed antecedents needed for optimal collective performance as a Student Services department. Examples included an overall group goal and intent, concentration in a shared task, equal member participation and clarity or individual roles, and effective communication. Differing from aspects of individual occupational flow, it is important to ascertain experiences of a collective community.

Flow in Knowing My Role. Clear roles and responsibilities, as established by team members or department heads, were acknowledged by participants of three separate student service teams. As a department leader for four years, Taylor stated, "We do a really good job of looking at the tasks that need to be done, getting through it, making sure that everybody can kind of have their voice and opinion (look of confidence), and making sure that we're all agreeing on an outcome" (Sept. 17, 2023). In reference to both the individual and school levels of roles, Phoebe specified,

> You're doing this, and you're doing this. We're all *super* on the same page with everything. Even bigger picture, our whole building is starting to figure things out and obviously we got a new principal this year, and it's been just this shift in culture where it feels like everybody is trying to work more together. (Sept. 14, 2023)

Heidi, working as a solitary counselor but in a cooperative "school within a school," recurrently accentuated the importance of knowing her role within a team. This included fellow educators, administrators, and community partners:

> We designate what we call a DRI (directly responsible individual). That person is in charge of that task. If we're planning an event, if we're planning an info night, if we're planning an exhibition, if we're talking about our social media strategy or our whatever it is, *we have a DRI*. You know that's the person that all the questions are going to (speaking with confidence). And it's going to make sure all the "I"s are dotted and all the "T"s *are crossed* (pause). And then that person recruits, we call them 'Co-conspirators,' people that are going to help you get done. So, *you always know where you stand*. I've been on so many teams where I'm like, "I don't know who's doing what." (Heidi, Sept. 11, 2023)

There's something about when *you have to* create everything from scratch that forces people to be really creative, but I like the flow of knowing *exactly* my role because I know I'm either directly responsible for the outcome, or I'm assisting in a really specific way. So that team flow is *really amazing* here and it's something I value. (Heidi, Sept. 11, 2023)

Everybody's On the Same Page. Across 15 individual interviews and one focus group, all participants stressed the importance of working well together as a collective whole. From an isolated department of one to Student Services departments composed of 18 members, participants used phrases such as "little conflict," "more of a culture and a vibe," and "coming together to get information." As a ninth-grade counselor in an all-encompassing high school, Sean recognized, "There's very little conflict between the 12 or 13 people that work in Student Services here. And everybody's on the same page and people are supporting one another" (Sept. 18, 2023). In reference to the impact of building dynamics established, he affirmed, "I think flow in the workplace is everybody being on the same page, even if it's more of a culture and a vibe in the building more so than a specific task" (Sean, Sept. 18, 2023).

As a department lead of 16 staff members, Taylor provided insight from a group facilitator's perspective, stating, "Flow is going to look differently for every single counselor, and we need to recognize those person's strengths and what they do really well, help them bump those (strengths) up" (Sept. 17, 2023). Affirming efforts to respect and appreciate fellow team member perspectives, Kaytee added,

Have conversations and be vulnerable (confident body demeanor). Sometimes team members will disagree on something and it's not attacking the person. We respect each

other enough to be like "I disagree," and we can have those conversations and just work it out. (Oct. 5, 2023)

That's a Department Meeting Effort. Staff collaboration opportunities, including department meetings, were organized at least once per week depending on individual site needs. These meetings ranged from 45 minutes in length, up to 90 minutes, depending on agenda items. For many student service departments, it was the only opportunity throughout the work week to organize all members into a centralized space with a standard agenda and goals. "Our department meetings; *that's* a team effort. We all have to come together to get this information" (Kaytee, Sept. 13, 2023). Heidi, emphasizing the significance of team dynamics in her condensed department, specified, "I have a high satisfaction with team flow when meetings are efficient, and they are fun, and they are goal oriented with everybody knowing *exactly* their role (speaking with authority). Then things start to happen and you can have checklists" (Oct. 5, 2023).

We're In a Better Place Now. With high burnout rates and increased turnover taking place in public education, the field of secondary school counseling has not been immune to team hardships. This includes unfilled district mental health and counseling positions, along with new team members from one academic year to the next. It is common to have multiple probationary counselors as members of a Student Services department. Kaytee mentioned improved team dynamics during states of collective flow:

> This year now we had everyone returned (look of relief). So everyone's been here a year, and we were able to redispatch some of those duties. So it's a more balanced workload for all of us. I think someone described it today (during the focus group), that we have very different personalities in our team, but we work really well together. (Oct. 5, 2023)

I think the team dynamics that we have right now is pretty amazing. We were just

joking about silliness, and it's those little moments (smiling). You can be your authentic

self, and joke around, and just laugh about silly things that get you through the day.

(Kaytee, Sept. 18, 2023)

Additionally, Phoebe iterated, "Just being in a really good working place after not being

in a good working place for so long has been a sigh of relief and like: 'OK, this is good'" (Sept.

28, 2023). Collective flow as experienced due to improved team dynamics, including improved

functionality, was reaffirmed by Heidi: "This team is the most productive team I think I've ever

worked on. It is a *very high* functioning team in terms of creativity, and then productivity" (Sept.

11, 2023).

   It's Just Trust. Team member vulnerability and trust in the process along with cohesion

as a department, school, and district were expressed by Kaytee and Taylor. Collective flow was

described by Kaytee as "We can be vulnerable with each other. We can be open and honest, and

we respect each other as professionals, which makes a really great working environment" (Sept.

18, 2023). Taylor reiterated, "I think it's just trust. Trust that each of us are doing our job and

doing what we need to do to support all students" (Sept. 17, 2023). Expanding her sphere of

influence to the district student service departments' cohesion established, Taylor mentioned,

I really like how we seem to be coming together in terms of high school counseling at the

comprehensive level, following the same process and a little bit more of the same

policies. And I think *that's felt really good* (pause). We know we can trust our colleagues

and the team that we have, but that I can also reach out to you at any point in time and I

reach out to peers. (Sept. 20, 2023)

Challenges and Burnout. The Challenges and Burnout theme emerged from 19 direct references throughout individual interviews. Four subthemes, ranging from team toxicity to individual rumination, highlighted the difficulties of obtaining team flow in a secondary Student Services department. Departments tended to get disengaged when there was a lack of proper direction or vision. A lack of motivation stemmed from team members failing to understand their role in the larger picture.

A Toxic Place. Detrimental team dynamics were mentioned by four of five participants as a principal challenge. Phoebe reiterated the importance of current team cohesion and balancing of power and personalities by stating, "Two years ago, our team was in just *a really toxic place* where it was attacking in every single team meeting (shaking head), and you were scared to speak up because I was like, 'Oh my God, I don't want to just get demolished here'" (Sept. 14, 2023). In conjunction, Heidi highlighted accountability at her current site as opposed to previous experiences both inside and outside of her current district:

> The team flow is *so* important, because if you go to a lot of meetings and there is no cohesion about who is doing what and your intended outcome, *it's just madding*. You just spin your wheels and spin your wheels (making circular hand motions). No one ever takes any accountability for what happens next. (Sept. 11, 2023)

In his current role as one of two ninth-grade counselors at his site, Sean reiterated the past and current divisions that take place in collective department flow. Since Sean started in his current position, many of his department members have retired, changed positions, or left the field of school counseling. As one of two grade-specific department members, he confessed,

> While we all get along and we're all in the same page, there's still that separation…
> They're talking about a lot of stuff that just doesn't apply to us… So that's kind of

challenging. …I've been here 10 years now and I've loved everybody that I've worked with. But there were times when, like, there were divisions, certainly like divisions of power and not agreeing on directions of things. I feel like when there are those divisions, it's hard to experience that flow. (Sept. 7, 2023)

I Don't Know Who's Doing What. Participants from two sites mentioned a lack of team goals, tasks, and responsibilities as a barrier to obtaining collective flow. While counselors acknowledged department meetings as a common, weekly environment to achieve team flow, an overall lack of structure was also mentioned. Stemming from a continued emphasis on lack of uniform systems in place at the district and school levels, one counselor described this trickledown effect at the department level by highlighting the district's informal label of "not a school district, but a district of schools." Kaytee, working in a department with multiple probationary team members, stated,

> I hate leaving a meeting where I don't know my specific part in the ultimate product (shaking head in continued disgust) or leaving wondering if any of the ideas that were bounced around to help solve a problem… if anybody's going to do it… I remember sitting through some of our meetings where there was no goal oriented. It was people just rambling off, and being playing devil's advocate to the point where it's like time out, "What is the purpose of this conversation? Like what is the goal of this conversation?" (Sept. 13, 2023)

Taylor emphasized frustrations within the same department, both as a team member as well as a department head. She expressed dissatisfaction in the length of meetings without a set agenda as well as fatigue in efforts to create change:

I remember when those department meetings *would be like two hours* and I just felt like we were going on about nothing, or we were sitting around just kind of talking for forever when I was like: "I've got a meeting in an hour and a half." Like, "what are we meeting about today? What do we need to know? Or else I'm just going to go." (Sept. 20, 2023)

Not Planned, Not Happening. While the hinderance of constant interruptions was referenced during difficulties of attaining occupational flow, it was also recognized in efforts to obtain communal flow as a department. In her interviews, Heidi established the importance of planning for productivity, both as an individual, as well as part of a team: "We just had a strategy session about a couple different things. One of them was attrition, and since we set aside that time, we had an hour, and *we got a ton brainstormed* and planned and coordinated. But if it's not planned, if it's not on the calendar, it doesn't happen" (Sept. 21, 2023).

Kaytee, as part of weekly department meetings of 16 members, emphasized the detrimental effects of interruptions. While her team's meetings take place each Tuesday morning in a centralized Student Services location, it is customary to be regularly interrupted for situations involving students and staff members in crisis:

If there's a goal, and we need to reach this goal, I think we're very good at working together to accomplish that; *it's just whether we get interrupted or not*. That sometimes breaks that flow. So it does feel really good to be productive and use our time wisely (look of satisfaction). It's just whether that actually happens or not. (Kaytee, Sept. 13, 2023)

**Act Three: Lived Experiences: "This Job Is
Constant Triage"**

This school year has once again gone from zero-to-60 overnight. Coming off the summer break, I am not yet ready to multitask and be 'on' for eight hours straight. Someone once told me, "Beginning the year as a school counselor is like running a marathon and having to sprint the first mile. You know it won't end well, but you have to do it anyway." With years of experience under my belt, I feel competent in my abilities, yet struggle to keep up with fast-paced, fluid information in academic, social-emotional, and career guidance. Still recovering from the effects of COVID-19 on the field of Student Services, I tell myself, "This is going to be a great year. This is going to be *my* year." I'm optimistic about my professional goal, to be present for the student in front of me and focus on delivering strength-based services; however, I'm burnt. Opportunities to establish focused, undivided attention on tasks simply aren't there. I honestly can't recall the last time I felt flow in this office. The amount of energy, time, and focus that I put into this job is straining my other 16 hours of the day. Others notice, including my family, as I ruminate over job responsibilities and self-doubts of "Am I good enough?"

Today I was asked, "What does it mean to be a contemporary school counselor?" Underneath the lack of role identity, stress, and insecurities, I know I'm a darn good professional school counselor. I continue to have hope for the next generation and put students first. I do what's best for the kids. Satisfaction is found in concentrating on what I'm good at, and utilizing the skill set that I've established. As I reflect on the school atmosphere created, it becomes clear that we lack systems, a voice, and clarity in why we do the things we do. Yet, I *know* I'm a force of change. This job is a gift, and I recognize that finding flow in the smallest of places takes individual and team effort.

Lived Experiences

Lived Experiences represents the first-hand involvement, choices, and options of participants, strongly associating with objectives of Research Question 3. Contemporary lived experiences, as drawn from 210 references across 15 interviews and a focus group, portrayed an understanding of individual human experiences and how those factors influenced one's perception of knowledge. Thematic data collection in this category of references, including a heightened sense of linguistic and conceptual coding on display, materialized from participant vulnerability, instances of unrefined emotion, and full disclosure offered. Associations to occupational and team flow were cited in antecedents needed and obstacles to establish such a desirable state (see Table 7).

Table 7

Lived Experiences Coding

Theme	Subtheme
Current Experiences	Professional Goals
	What I'm Doing Well With
	Defining the PSC
	Experiences During Covid-19
Job Satisfaction	Feeling Competent
	Task Completion
	Team Dynamics and Culture
	Little Repetition
	Holistic Student Success
Challenges and Burnout	Competent, Yet Overloaded
	It Starts at the Top
	Work-Life Harmony
	Zero-to-60
	The Pandemic Ain't Over
	A Shortage of Sympathy
	All Triage, All the Time
	I've Considered Pivoting

Current Experiences. This theme was comprised of four subthemes that examined the current goals, occupational outlooks, and personal narratives of professional secondary school counselors in one school district. Interview questions involved the exploration of everyday lived experiences from the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic to the present time. Participants were also challenged by the candid question, "What does it mean to be a contemporary school counselor?"

Professional Goals. Counseling pursuits encompassed both individual and building objectives including continued work on peer relationships and individual vulnerabilities. Some participants equated this ask with a need to restate professional goals as evaluated and graded by their direct supervisors, while others focused on areas of personal improvement as a secondary school counselor. Kaytee admitted, "I think a goal I've always had, and not just this year (laughing), is one of my weaknesses; that social, emotional piece" (Sept. 18, 2023). Heidi focused on both department-wide and individual goals, stating,

> I want to have a more strategic plan for registration season. I don't know what that looks like yet, but something *has to give* (body demeanor showing stress). In this role, there's a lot of master scheduling and coordinating with ten different master schedulers, and everybody does it differently. And then the promotional piece, and the course requesting piece. …*I really want* a good relationship with the people at my level, and then my students. I want just solid relationships so that if I ever do need something that people feel like "well, I'm willing to give her that because she's worked hard at our relationship." You *want* good rapport. (Sept. 25, 2023)

Phoebe and Taylor referenced their professional goals as evaluated by direct supervisors. Pheobe specified, "I think meeting 85% of my freshman is my goal this year, because last year

we had asked them to all sign up for a meetings, and did a really crappy job of meeting them"
(Sept. 28, 2023). Taylor, discussing a professional objective of the district, iterated, "One area
that I think we really need to acknowledge is just doing a bigger needs assessment to really see
where these students are academically, emotionally, and just seeing what they need now,
continuing to move forward out of this pandemic" (Sept. 20, 2023).

What I'm Doing Well With. Kaytee and Phoebe, caseload counselors at sizeable,
comprehensive high schools, acknowledged the creative ways in which occupational objectives
are met. Kaytee continuously referenced her ability to accomplish both direct and indirect duties.
Her academic planning strongpoint was emphasized as "I'm *really good* at working with those
struggling students academically and finding plans to get them to where they want to go. I can
think of plan A, B, C, D, etcetera, etcetera to get them across the line," and "I'm very good at
puzzles (look of confidence), and working their schedules, and helping them navigate. I can get
them there if they do their part, then of showing up and completing the work" (Kaytee, Sept. 13,
2023). In reference to her ability to accomplish menial tasks, Kaytee stated,

> I think some of the things I've been doing well with is administrative work. We're
> working on getting concurrent enrollment teachers approved and classes already for next
> school year. I'm trying to be ahead of that game because it's hard to think about classes
> for next year when we just started this year. But, that's what we need to do. (Sept. 18,
> 2023)

Phoebe, heading the Gifted and Talented logistics of 550 students at her high school,
reaffirmed her team's potential to embrace creativity and changes involving student-centered
Advanced Learning Plans:

We're in ALP season, right? Last week I got like 10 to 12 dozen donuts every day, and we batch-called classes down to fill out their ALP's. *I feel really good about that* (look of satisfaction, confidence) The number of ALPs that we knocked out is probably the best we've ever done. (Sept. 25, 2023)

Defining the Professional School Counselor. Efforts to provide contemporary definitions of the secondary school counselor were met with frustration, burnout, introspective lenses of individualized roles, and hints of optimism. Heidi discussed the challenges of defining a role that is site dependent by stating, "I like that everyday is different (smiling). I don't know from day to day, or year to year, what my role will look like, so I connect to being a lifelong learner, because every year is *so* different for me" (Sept. 11, 2023). This testament was immediately followed up by her outlook on continued professional development in various roles within one school district:

What it means for me is ever learning. I *can't believe* how this is year 18 for me. And in 18 years I've had just three schools and three sites, and they've all been *completely* different (look of awe), like, *totally different* jobs. It's bizarre, and it's the same profession. (Heidi, Sept. 11. 2023)

Counselors in large high schools had concentrated responses in efforts to assign identities to their current role. For instance, Kaytee defined her role as "I'd like to refer to myself as a band-aid counselor (stated with truth). I can get them in a better emotional state and get them back into their world" (Sept. 13, 2023), while her teammate, Taylor, admitted, "(It means) to be overworked and underpaid (showing sarcastic dismay)" (Sept. 17, 2023). Sean took the opportunity to define his role within the larger educational system, providing insight on the

concept of student service supports and the background role that is customary. In his position as a ninth-grade counselor in a comprehensive high school of 2,000 students, Sean pointed out,

> I see the role of a school counselor as somebody in the building who is helping teachers and students to remove barriers to students being successful in the classroom (shaking head in agreement). I think the overall goal of school is these kids are getting in these classrooms, and they're learning how to work, and how to pay attention, and how to ask questions in addition to the content that's being taught. …Counselors in general, and also Student Services departments, we're kind of in the background (reaffirming action). In the student's world and their foreground, they have their classes and their teachers, and they're trying to get these assignments done. They're trying to learn the content and we're kind of the shepherds in the background saying "yes, do that because you need that knowledge, but you need that experience." (Sept. 7, 2023)

Experiences During Coronavirus Disease-19. As the onset of global pandemic challenges settled on public education efforts in March of 2020, professional school counselors were forced to be adaptive, on-call for crisis situations, and systematically redefining individual and team roles in response to school and student needs. Responses included candid stories of meeting occupational and student challenges along with reflection on requisite developments in the field of professional school counseling. Kaytee, focusing on deceitful past claims, asserted, "It *really brought to light* the inequities that our district has (look of frustration, defeat). I think we've had rose colored lenses before, saying "all these kids can do fine" (Sept. 13, 2023). In response to recent realities, she iterated,

> It's the mental health part (for kids). We're seeing a huge uptick of kids struggling with their mental health. It's trying to figure out how they can be the best little humans they

can be with the mental health struggles that they have, *especially* coming out of COVID.
I think a lot of these kids missed some developmental milestones and development
because of COVID protocols. So it's helping kids navigate what that looks like. (Sept. 13,
2023)

Phoebe, in response to the altered role of working from home for an extended period as a
contemporary caseload school counselor, stated, "Back when the world shut down, I think it was
good and bad. There were parts of it that I *loved* (laughing admittedly), like being at home. But
there were parts of it that were really hard" (Phoebe, Sept. 14, 2023). Providing insight on
personal and professional value of the role, she admitted, "I don't know that it changed my view
on our jobs as much as just my view on humanity in general (look of dismay). But, just realizing
that we are important. And the supports we offered do matter" (Phoebe, Sept. 14, 2023).

Heidi, in response to an adaptive, evolving role of the professional school counselor in
the district, emphasized,

> It made me more empathetic to our students and how much turmoil they were going
> through because I felt it too. I think that might be where my identity as a school counselor
> changed a little bit (shrugging shoulders). I felt more like I had to be somebody who
> bulldozed through the unknown rather than 'a counselor of people, a counselor of kids.'
> Someone who just had to keep moving day by day, create something, create something
> that might stick, and it felt more administrative than ever. (Sept. 11, 2023)

Taylor, responding in frustration with the overlooked lack of response systems
established by the school district, yet emphasized as a need by student service departments,
admitted,

I think we're now having to be more creative than ever to try and meet these students where they're at and try to be really creative with their class schedules and what they're picking. Many of them *are not at grade level* and missed, frankly, a year and a half (frustrated), maybe two years of instruction, and we just promote. So instead of having students repeat a grade to get those academic skills that they are lacking, we just push them on and then we say "we're going to catch them up." (Sept. 17, 2023)

Participant responses, as a result of COVID-19 modifications to the traditional brick-and-mortar model of education, were focused on the inequities and lack of systems in place as experienced in one Rocky Mountain school district. Consistency was observed in each counselor's focus and continued efforts to meet the needs of the students, while also navigating personal, familiar, and professional hardships that arose.

Job Satisfaction. Job Satisfaction*,* a theme that emerged from feelings of competence and task completion, was evident in response to watching one's students succeed in school. Participants emphasized the mere enjoyment of students developing a love of personal learning and application on the path to post-secondary success. As Taylor acknowledged, "It makes me *really proud* when they (students) advocate for themselves, and they reach out for help" (Sept. 17, 2023).

Feeling Competent. The capability to internally validate oneself was witnessed in multiple participant responses as a means of overall job satisfaction. One's time on the job, planning and preparation allowed for a task at hand, and an increased knowledge base appeared to directly correlate with feelings of competence. It appeared easier for counselors to perform job duties, and multi-task, if competence was on display. For instance, in our focus group conversation, Sean responded,

For me, *it's just competence* (pause) and tackling the things that are thrown at me throughout the day. Like we talked about that day (individual interview) where I came in, and it was a really busy day, and I had all kinds of different things, but I felt like I wasn't nervous. I didn't stumble. It was kind of like that fruit game where that fruit comes in and you're just slicing it and you get to the end (confidently laughing). And like, "yeah, that was a really busy day. *But I feel good*." I feel like I handled everything, and so I think that's job satisfaction at the end of the day for me. (Oct. 5, 2023)

Heidi, in her role as the single counselor at her site, mentioned,

Competence has *been huge* for me. Four years into this role of knowing the ins and outs of this particular role, which is a little bit different than the traditional like caseload counselor. But just knowing how to answer things somewhat competently and how to help kids competently makes me feel satisfied. (Oct. 5, 2023)

Task Completion. The ability to complete tasks including direct and indirect Student Services was also noted as a contributor to job satisfaction as a secondary school counselor. Regarding menial labors, Taylor stated, "I think job satisfaction for me is feeling like I've returned some calls, I've answered some emails, and I've talked to some kids. Spreading myself, knowing that I've kind of done a lot. *That's* what job satisfaction feels like" (Sept. 17, 2023). Kaytee equated task completion to the feeling of knowing that her kids were supported:

Last Friday was the first day that I actually was able to catch up on things for the entire year. I was like, "wait my To Do List is actually shrinking and not getting bigger" I did a grade check. I'm like, "just generally, how are my kids doing?" And thankfully, most of them are alright (sense of ease). (Sept. 13, 2023)

Kaytee followed this up by stating, "I pride myself on the fact that I can find satisfaction, knowing how to think ahead and backwards plan so that we can be productive and most efficient for our school" (Sept. 13, 2023).

Taylor, in later interviews, stated,

I'm a list person (short pause). When I can check things off my list that I do, that makes me feel satisfied. This sounds strange, but a lot of times it's having a full calendar (look of importance). Just knowing that there's lots of things that I'm involved in, and that I'm not just sitting around and waiting for kids. (Sept. 20, 2023)

Team Dynamics and Culture. Job satisfaction emerged from positive working relationships among counselors, staff members, and building administrators. Consistently acknowledged was the importance of sound professional relationships as a basis for productive collaboration. Heidi reaffirmed, "If my relationships are strong, I don't have as much anxiety if I'm dreading people. Certain people (look of anxiety). *I don't want that*, because I think that always makes me happier at work when my relationships are strong" (Heidi, Sept. 11, 2023). Additionally, Phoebe reiterated her satisfaction of improved team dynamics by stating, "This year, we have a *great* team (at-ease body facial expression). Everybody is working well together," followed by "We're in a *really good* place, which is pretty cool because there have been years where it's been a struggle. And our staff here is awesome, so that's helpful" (Phoebe, Sept. 28, 2023).

Sean, emphasizing the importance of building, team, and student-relationship cultures, admitted, "I *just want* to have good interactions with people, with coworkers, with teachers, with my fellow counselors, with the students that I check in with, and the students that walk in. I just want to have positive interactions that are uplifting" (Sean, Sept. 24, 2023). He followed this

sentiment by recognizing how different each work site is: "It also makes me think how situational those feelings of job satisfaction are if you're at a building that has a lot of toxicity or unreasonable work expectations."

Little Repetition. Heidi and Kaytee mentioned the variety of "no two days being alike" throughout the academic year. Daily work functions differed depending on the social emotional, career, and academic needs of the student population. As interviews were conducted during the onset of the fall semester, participants were preparing for the start of the first quarter. Kaytee stated,

> I like the variety of work that we do (smiling, satisfaction). I've talked about the classes
>
> that we're developing for next year, but we're also in the midst, or right in the middle of
>
> senior meetings. We're working with students individually on planning what they're
>
> doing after high school. (Sept. 13, 2023)

Heidi, a district counselor with three distinct roles including that of drug and alcohol counselor, caseload counselor, and singular counselor, specified: "*There's a ton* I enjoy about my job (smiling). I've been at three different levels and the thing that I like about every single one is that no day is alike. I don't think I could be in a job where there's a ton of repetition (shaking head" (Sept. 11, 2023). She later iterated, "I like that there are so many days I walk in and *I have no idea* what this is going to look like. I could not predict it, so I like that a lot."

Holistic Student Success. Of the subthemes derived from school counselor job satisfaction, Holistic Student Success resulted in the largest number of emerging references from all participants. Emphasis was placed on the description of counselor-student relationships, background work taking place, and the basic act of supporting the student across from them. In response to the importance of indirect student success, Kaytee stated, "I *know* I'm helping the

kids inadvertently," followed by "I think that gives me some of that inadvertent job satisfaction, knowing that the work I'm doing now is going to help kids and teachers in the future, teaching classes that they're passionate about" (Sept. 13, 2023). Regarding the significance of the counselor-student kinship, Phoebe mentioned, "I think (just) knowing that you've helped a kid. When they walk out and they're like "that was really helpful and you're thinking 'cool, I'm glad that I kind of know what I'm doing'" (Sept. 14, 2023).

Sean reflected on the satisfaction and gratuity established in meeting the basic, core needs of his students. Finding continued appreciation in his eleventh year as a ninth-grade counselor, he stated,

> Just to find appreciation that I'm in this position (look of satisfaction). I think as long as I have appreciation for the role that I've been placed in, and I can come here and feel like "man, I have an opportunity to not only change lives, but to be light. Even if it's a small light in these students, the daily interactions." As long as I can be appreciative of that and go home at the end of the day feeling grateful for the work that I get to do here. (Sept. 24, 2023)

Taylor emphasized her passion for direct Student Services: "I *love* graduation. I've just seen kids have that realization that they did it (long pause). They accomplished something huge, something that they've been working on for 13 years" (Sept. 17, 2023). She also stressed the importance of one-on-one mentoring:

> I love those little 'ah-ha' make a difference moments of helping them realize that their dreams, their wants, their goals are totally attainable, or I make that schedule change that I shouldn't to get that kid with the teacher that I know is going to help them understand math (tearing up). …It's when I can make that difference of getting them connected with

help resources. Sometimes just providing that time to hear, to talk with them, to have

them understand, to make them feel safe, that really makes the difference in them not

wanting to self-harm or something like that (tearing up). *That's* what I enjoy about my

job. *That's what I love* about my job. (Sept. 17, 2023)

Challenges and Burnout. The theme Challenges and Burnout emerged from references

pertaining to a myriad of job demands, rising student caseloads, and endless requests from

administrators and key stakeholders. Participants emphasized a growing detachment from the

most important stakeholder—the student. Mounting from excessive periods of time spent on

duties not related to the job description of professional school counselor, participants' responses

accentuated the need for action through lead-ins including "more than ever this year," "This year

is the worst," and "I feel like the poster child for burnout." Vulnerability, anxiety, and frustration

were witnessed in each counselor's continued efforts to maintain professional vitality and self-

care.

Competent, Yet Overloaded. The field of secondary school counseling has historically

been described as fluid, ever evolving, and filled with complex information. Responses of

participants included the professional need to feel competent, while also recognizing that

expectations might rise once information was obtained. In our focus group, Taylor, a department

head and team leader, emphasized:

I see the piece of competence in there. And, I also feel like it has cursed me more than

ever this year (look of frustration). Because I'm competent, and because I know all of

these things and take on all of these things, I have become the dumping ground for our

admin, for other people to go to and talk to in the district, and that sort of thing. It's been

that curse of competence of "oh, she can handle it and she'll take it." And I think that has weighed heavily on my job satisfaction. (Oct. 5, 2023)

Kaytee, showing dissatisfaction with the lack of district-level guidance and training of how to effectively carry out programming, admitted,

Just not being competent. We talked about job satisfaction and being competent when they're (district administrators) rolling out all this continued programming (angry body demeanor). For instance, the JROTC program and "get kids involved!" I'm like, "but wait, I can't even answer the basic questions to even advise a kid to take this (throwing hands in the air). You haven't told me what credits they're getting. You haven't told me the details of the program, so how do you expect me to market this for a kid to take when I can't even competently tell them about it?" (Oct. 5, 2023)

Phoebe, also responding to a lack of information provided, few systems in place, and responsibilities of other professionals being placed onto the school counselor, attested, "Oh my gosh, *how much more* are you gonna expect us to do?"…And I'm *not* a college counselor like this. This is *so far out* of my world. But the decision lands on us" (Oct. 5, 2023).

It Starts at the Top. Burnout and occupational frustration were directed at school and district administrators. This included a lack of guidance provided, a lack of understanding the defined role of the professional school counselor, and a sheer amount of indirect and direct service that was expected. For instance, Heidi stated, "This is the first year, maybe this year and last year, that my burnout has been directly related to leadership decisions that trickle down to the people doing the work" (Oct. 5, 2023). Additionally, she mentioned,

It's the *sheer amount of work with one swipe of a pen* for any given policy. And then if there's 10 new policies, the amount of out-of-touchiness there is with leadership is

frustrating and angering, but also just completely overwhelming. I sometimes feel like you don't have a voice at all. I think it's honest. Again, *it's going to get dicey*. (Oct. 5, 2023)

The other thing that leads to burnout for me is the amount of change a system can go through without asking for input from the people doing the actual job. When there's a ton of change being thrown at the people, and they have not even been on the floor to say "let me tell you what the job is that you're changing." (Heidi, Sept. 21, 2023)

Sean, discussing the constant stress of building and district expectations, admitted, "If you're sitting there and constantly being hounded by your administrators, and your other MTSS people of, 'you need to do this, we need to do this,' that's going to lead to more burnout" (Oct. 5, 2023). Kaytee emphasized this feeling of frustration by stating, "I think our society, district, admin, etcetera, put a lot of weight on our shoulders on things that we *cannot* control" and "I think that's what leads to burnout. There's lots of things that get put on our plate, like 'solve this problem' and you're like 'it's out of my control. Sorry'" (Sept. 13, 2023).

Work-Life Harmony. A lack of balance between occupational and family duties was expressed by each participant. This included feelings of sacrificing family and personal time and ruminating while away from work along with completing indirect duties while off contracted hours. Empathizing with the managing of duties, Heidi stated, "With burnout, I don't feel like I have enough work life balance. When my work life balance is out of whack…I'm not a good mom. I'm not a good wife. I'm not a good counselor" (Sept. 11, 2023). Phoebe, to combat working from home, iterated, "(It was experienced) *All of last year*. Just exhaustion on the job (look of defeat). It's a hard job. Coming up with boundaries to leave. I don't take my laptop home anymore because I'm thinking 'we don't need to work outside the school day'" (Sept. 14, 2023).

Sean, in reference to his struggle in feelings of competence, work anxiety, and self-worth, stressed,

> OK, I'm feeling super stressed, but I'll give everything I have from 8:00 to 4:00, and then at 4:00 o'clock I check out. I go home and I'm a husband and I'm a father. I managed to get through for a while with that kind of mindset, but it got to a point where I *was so overwhelmed* and so stressed (shaking head). (Sept. 18, 2023)

Of the participants, Taylor had the closest connection to struggles with work-life balance and the stresses it placed on her mental and physical health along with that of her family's:

> I *really* need to stick to my contract hours because those are only the times that I'm getting paid, and I need to do that for my own psyche and my own self-care. I used to be really good at it, and now I struggle (frustrated, defeated). I really struggle. I'm bringing work home. I'm on email late at night. I'm responding to emails at night, which I shouldn't be. You're just trying to feel a little more prepared for the next day, or getting something done that I remember later on. …It's (job satisfaction) small. It's *really* small. (tearing up) My stress level is impacting my physical health to the point where I don't see that it's such a big deal, but my husband does, and he's ready for me to quit and for him to take on a second job. Or for us to stop contributing to retirement, so that I don't have to work, so that I'm not so stressed out. And so that I can be there for my kids and my family. (Sept. 27, 2023)

> I feel like I'm the poster child for burnout. My husband tells me like I'm just this shell of a person. That's hard to hear because it feels negative, like he's targeting me in a way like I'm just the shell of a person (teary-eyed, head down). But then when you take a step back and reflect, I'm giving my all at work and I'm letting it drain me so much that

there's *nothing* left for my family or for me as a person after. And that's hard to hear. (Sept. 27, 2023)

Zero-to-60. Heidi and Sean mentioned the pace at which academic years begin for professional school counselors. August and September in this Rocky Mountain district is a timeframe filled with overburdening requests from all stakeholders including a reintegration into mass amounts of communication and requests. Sean admitted,

> The toughest time for me every year is just the transition from summer back into the job in August (look of defeat and disbelief). I hit the ground running my second day back. I'm running a training with 100 upper classmen Link leaders, and just all the emails and the phone calls, and all the schedule change requests (shaking head). I go from like 0 miles an hour in summer to just 100 miles an hour coming back. *That* is the hardest time for me every year. (Sept. 18, 2023)

Heidi confirmed this sense of time to adjust by also acknowledging her changed familial and personal roles:

> I think the beginning of the year is one of the hardest times to plug through because I don't how to manage all the emails from families, and kids, and counselors. So that can *really* be a sense of burnout. I can't keep up with the schedule changes. The *sheer amount of work to do* can really make you feeling like "I'm so burnt out, especially I feel like the older I get, I've got other things I want to do. I don't want this to be the only aspect of my life." (Sept. 11, 2023)

The Pandemic Ain't Over. Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing and continuing to reaffirm the effects of COVID-19 on students, colleagues, and community members. Counselors described instances of an overtaxed support system, students falling

behind in social emotional and academic development, and personal feelings of helplessness, guilt, and frustration. Heidi, in reference to multiple roles throughout the district, stated,

> It was hard to advocate for that role (drug and alcohol counselor) of meeting the mental health, wellness, and addiction needs of our students during a pandemic. We didn't see clearly for a long time. I don't feel like as a system we did a good job seeing what we needed. We just were *really* reactionary. (Sept. 11, 2023)

Kaytee, a team coordinator for English language learning services during the global pandemic, admitted frustration with those expecting unreasonable results:

> Some of it was that guilt, of "am I doing everything that I need to be doing that I typically have done?" and *I wasn't. I just wasn't* (looking defeated). I felt like I wasn't meeting the need of my kids, especially in the mental health world. I knew my kids were struggling social-emotionally. But there was no way to connect with them. …There's a part of me that's like: "*I can't control that. I cannot help this family* out or get Internet when five kids are trying to work off one little Mifi device." No wonder they're having issues. They're getting frustrated because they can't get on and watch videos, so a lot of them gave up. There was a lot of helplessness of "I can't help these kids through these struggles because there's so many factors at play that are out of our control." (Sept. 13, 2023)

Taylor aligned the effects of COVID-19 with that of her own daughters, admitting that both are struggling academically and socially in their respected elementary grades:

> There is a going to be a good chunk, generationally, of students who are really going to be struggling, socially and academically, for many years to come. I look back at what the pandemic did to my own children in their social skills and their academics. And they're

still really young... so when my children get through it; that's when I feel like we'll see this new turnover and shift. (Sept. 17, 2023)

  A Shortage of Sympathy. Compassion fatigue, as labeled in the field of mental health and public service, was mentioned as a primary reason for burnout as a secondary school counselor. This lack of sympathy for outcomes and expected results appeared to stem from case management burdens, assigned caseloads too big for one school counselor to support, and a lack of effort returned from students and support systems. Working with at-risk students, Kaytee admitted,

> I can lead a horse to water, but I can't get them to drink (shrugging shoulders). And when we've got caseloads that we have, *I can't* spend every day, all day, just hand holding this kid. There's a certain part I have to cut my ties and say "they might drowned and I've done what I can." (Sept. 13, 2023)

> Phoebe, in reference to a difficult one-on-one student situation, iterated:

> I feel like I have poured time, and resources, and energy into this kid. I've met with the mom. I met with her at a coffee shop with the middle school mental health person, and then two other mental health people in the district (circular hand motion). I've gotten him to come to school maybe three days this year and I'm like "holy ****, I've put so much time into this kid." I'm straight up bribing him with meals because they say that the food is hard for them, and I'm like "*I don't know what else to do to* get this to kid to come to school." (Sept. 25, 2023)

Phoebe added, with recurring situations of student case management from year-to-year, "It's like 'just insert the CD and hit repeat.' Tell me something different that's going on in your life, you know? So just feeling like you're beating your head against the wall" (Sept. 14, 2023).

All Triage, All the Time. Continued advocacy remains in professional school counseling to lessen the number of students on one's caseload. This seemingly limited effort, combined with an absence of role transparency, resulted in what various participants termed "constant triage." Taylor, in short, admitted, "I find it challenging to be a really good, effective school counselor when I have *so many students* on my caseload" (Sept. 17, 2023). Sean, using a shrewd metaphor to describe the struggles that he witnesses from traditional 9th-12th grade caseload team members, professed:

> I see that it's like 10-12 counselors are kind of treated as like a Christmas tree, where it's just like (throwing motion), "yeah, let's throw one more ornament on it. You know, what's one more ornament?" Just throw one more on it and I don't know how you guys manage it. (Oct. 5, 2023)

> Heidi reiterated Sean's comparison by admitting, "We are just really kind of masters of

many things. It's the most 'multitasky-job' ever (sarcastically laughing)" (Sept. 21, 2023). She also portrayed her triage-focused time as a middle school counselor:

> I was in a middle school for 12 years *and I loved it*. I was the only counselor for 700 kids and it was just *constant* triage (shaking head). The role I have is *by far* the least chaotic, and I sometimes tell myself when I feel a little guilty about what I know my colleagues are doing. But I'm like, "look, I was in the trenches *for 12 years*." The only counselor for 700 middle school kids in a high needs district, so I'm proud of those years because man, that was some crazy work. (Sept. 11, 2023)

The struggle to feel competent and efficient with rising caseload numbers across the district and state was reiterated by Sean:

When your caseloads are like 250 to 300 kids, I feel like we come into the office and play

like a version of Russian Roulette every day. I always wondered (looking curious), if

even 100 of my 300 students, or their parents, or their teachers needed something on the

same day, *I'd be screwed*! (Sept. 18, 2023)

I've Considered Pivoting. Most participants interviewed uttered considerations and

interest in exploring alternative careers and fields; however, all expressed a continued dedication

to the students as a primary motivator to remain as a professional school counselor. Expressions

of physical and verbal burnout, stress, anxiety, and exhaustion were exhibited in responses.

Phoebe, with a continued interest in other fields, stated, "Last year I was like 'I might go become

a firefighter '*cause this sucks*.' Then everything went down this spring (physical complications)

and I was like, well 'I can't leave because of health insurance.' But I think that the reset within

our team made it OK to come back" (Sept. 28, 2023). Kaytee, a 11-year-school counselor and

former high school teacher, iterated,

I think about that (career change); I don't know what else I would do. I really enjoy my

job. There's lots of parts I enjoy, and there's parts that I don't. But I think I'm going to get

that in any field that I'm in (reaffirming). So, I really don't think there's anything else that

I could do with the skill sets that I have that I'd find job satisfaction in. Student

interaction really provides a lot of intrinsic motivation for me, and I wouldn't get that in

other fields. I think I can honestly do any job. I'm very versatile (portraying confidence).

I would find success, but would I find enjoyment with it? I don't think so. So, I really

don't anticipate doing anything else besides school counseling in this realm of life. (Sept.

21, 2023)

Taylor, also a 13-year professional school counselor, expressed continuous challenges with occupational burnout, stress of work-life boundaries, and overall health issues:

I have never considered quitting this occupation and doing something else more than this year (tearing up). It feels a little bit like it's kind of not my choice because my husband is saying it so much. And that I feel like, wow, I'm really not seeing how much this is affecting me because I've gotten comfortable and content in the stress of just thinking that it's normal and chalking it up to that. *That is not OK.* …I'm considering pivoting and doing something else (tearing up, shaking head). That's shocking, and I feel like I have this commitment, and I want to be here for the kids and I'm happy doing what I'm doing for the kids. But, *I can't do this to my body anymore* (long pause). If other people are noticing my stress and how this is affecting me, and they're saying that I need to do something else, that's a *huge* red flag for me. (Sept. 27, 2023)

Summary

To enable the reader to become well acquainted with the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain school district, this chapter provided in-depth summaries of the five research participants. Data collection was structured around each counselor's individual perspective of their experiences as student service providers. In addition, this chapter identified thematic findings that were cultivated as a result of the data collection and analysis process as outlined in Chapter III. Responses from 15 individual interviews over a three-week period and a focus group of five participants, along with researcher reflective journal entries, conclusively yielded primary themes and subthemes. Each of the themes was supported by excerpt quotations from the participants' interview transcripts.

Research Question 1, meant to examine the essence of occupational flow for each of the five participants, resulted in short-lived experiences that materialized in both direct and indirect job duties. Each secondary school counselor made clear the importance of the flow environment created in the student-counselor centered relationship. Research Question 2 served as a link between collective flow and its relation to individual flow as experienced by student service departments. Predominantly occurring in weekly department meetings free of interruptions, participants stressed the importance of clear roles and responsibilities along with utilizing team member specific strengths. Finally, Research Question 3, designed to address the phenomenological, lived experiences of participants in relation to occupational and team flow, resulted in responses demonstrating job satisfaction and burnout. While elements of flow were commonly associated with overall job satisfaction, confidence, and competence, participants equated occupational burnout and rumination to the inability to achieve such a focused state.

Chapter V, the concluding chapter, provides a discussion of the discoveries as related to the three research questions, the foundational theoretical framework, and the scholarship associated with the topic. In response to this study's findings, recommendations for the reclaiming of flow for secondary school counselors in one school district are offered. Directions for future research are also addressed.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) study was to examine the lived experiences of secondary school counselors as related to occupational and team flow in one school district. Utilizing a flow theory lens of approach, in combination with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, I sought to better understand facets of occupational and team flow of professional school counselors. Conjointly, I was interested in learning about the lived experiences amongst secondary counselors as related to flow and burnout in one district. Given the severely limited body of existing research on occupational flow and team flow in secondary school counseling, and an overwhelming emphasis on needed changes in the field of present-day education, the results of this study might support the development and implementation of advocacy and awareness of Student Services departments in one Rocky Mountain region district. This final chapter provides a summary of study findings in connection to existing literature on school counseling. Additionally, this chapter discusses implications of the study results for secondary school counselors and involved stakeholders as well as offering an examination of the applicability of flow theory as a framework for understanding lived experiences of contemporary secondary school counselors. In conclusion, I outline study limitations and provide recommendations for future research in this chapter.

Discussion of Research Questions

This section provides an overview of the results and the relationship to the research questions that directed the focus of the study. Definitions of principal concepts are also provided in accordance with both previous and current field literature. Topics of research included an examination of the occupational flow, team flow, and lived experiences as pertaining to flow of secondary school counselors.

Research Question 1

      Q1   What is the experience of occupational flow for secondary school counselors?

Three emergent themes were identified in the data: Where It's Felt and Defining It, Flow Experiences and Emotions, and Obstacles to Achieving Flow. Secondary school counselors who participated in this study appeared to share experiences as to where the essence of occupational flow was felt. Defined by Bakker (2008) as "a short-term peak experience characterized by absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation" (p. 400), short stints of occupational flow materialized in both direct and indirect job duties. All five participants addressed and continuously made clear the significance of the flow environment created in one-on-one student-counselor relationships. Approaching research from a phenomenological lens, participant responses on the powerfulness of this relationship simply seemed different; however, emphasis was continuously situated on the job modifications needed to establish such an environment—that being an environment of uninterrupted focus with complete control of attention on the student. As Heidi stated, "If *that* feeling didn't exist, people simply wouldn't do this job" (Sept. 11, 2023).

Emerging subthemes of Where It's Felt and Defining It also included the conscious effort of blocking out time during the workday to control for undivided attention along with the

influence of conducting both social emotional and career lessons for an active classroom. Whether setting time aside for group meetings or individual task completion, the essence of uninterrupted time was a deciding factor on efforts to obtain a state of flow. Lastly, occupational flow was present during indirect student affairs. While one counselor considered it necessary to justify occupational flow in menial, indirect tasks, this subtheme appeared present in several interviewee responses.

Participants in the emerging theme of Flow Experiences and Emotions incorporated unique lived stories and examples to describe direct attention as accompanied with mental and physiological stimulation. Secondary school counselors epitomized metacognitive processes as experienced in direct Student Services, embracing expressions such as "*right here, right now* with the student," "*This* matters. *This* is why I do this," and "I looked up from our conversation, and an hour had gone by." This hyperawareness of importance appeared to dictate tiers of job satisfaction as related to absorption, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation in one's assigned duties.

In efforts to research the lived experiences of occupational flow in secondary school counselors in one district, the theme Obstacles to Achieving Flow produced a vast number of references. Counselors employed phrases including "all triage, all the time" along with "can't obtain flow with the number of interruptions." The participants described the challenges and struggles that came with being titled Student Services, otherwise known as "the place that services all student needs." The perception as an all-inclusive colleague within a school signified a physical and emotional reaction of deflation when asked about opportunities to achieve flow. In response to rates of occurrence of occupational flow during the standard workday, many participants simply responded with heads shaking and looks of reverence and discouragement. Managing interviews in school offices via Microsoft Teams Video platforming, counselors

further reiterated the realities of unrealistic job demands and information overflow, all combined with little role clarity. Excessive amounts of response-based work, coupled with a surplus of disruptions, led to emerging subthemes that included affixed to triage, constant interruptions, and altering physical environments to decrease student and colleague accessibility.

Research Question 2

Q2   What are secondary school counselors' perceptions of the relation between occupational flow and team flow?

The secondary school counselors who took part in this study described their experiences with team flow and its relation to occupational flow through two emergent themes: Where It's Felt and Challenges and Burnout. Sawyer (2003), a pioneer on collective flow research, defined team flow as "a collective state that occurs when a group is performing at the peak of its abilities" (p. 167). In this study, developing themes provided an essence of where collective flow was perceived and experienced, emotions as related to how team flow influenced individual flow, and presenting challenges of obtaining such an emotional state.

Where It's Felt consisted of six subthemes capturing emotions surrounding the communal state of peak performance. Participant responses identified antecedents needed to establish such an optimum, absorbing environment as both an individual as well as part of a Student Services team along with factors needed to maintain such a state of collective flow. In line with participant responses, team flow was most customarily experienced during weekly department meetings—those organized with a set span of time to meet, an established agenda, and concrete goals. Representing members from each of the four Student Services departments also acknowledged much-needed, improved team dynamics as a catapult to establishing a culture of trust, acceptance of ideas, and vulnerability. Across 15 individual interviews and a focus group, two more notable subthemes arose: Flow in Knowing My Role and Everybody's On the Same

Page. Participants stressed the impact and importance of clear roles and responsibilities for each team member, citing a lack of role clarity as a consistent deterrent to collective productivity. Additionally, a department head for a team of 16 staff members recognized the significance of emphasizing personal, specific school counselor strengths as a facilitator to establish effective department flow. Participants used phrases such as "little conflict" and "coming together to get information" in reference to establishing a culture of support and clarity.

Together with obstacles to achieving occupational flow, 19 direct references emerged during interviews to produce Challenges and Burnout. Interview responses reflected the actualities of Student Service departments in one district with too few resources and insufficient role clarity. Participants shed light on hardships including individual and team rumination along with disengagement when a lack of direction or vision was set forth. As emphasized by participants, a primary barrier included the hinderance of constant interruptions during difficulties of obtaining collective flow. This included the importance of planning for productivity, a frequently mentioned antecedent to establish both occupational flow, as well as team flow.

Research Question 3

Q3   What are the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in terms of occupational and team flow in the workplace?

The five participants in this study expressed the lived experiences of professional secondary school counselors as related to flow through emergent themes: Current Experiences, Job Satisfaction, and Challenges and Burnout. Drawn from 210 references across 15 interviews and one focus group, participants exhibited vulnerability, passion, and unrefined emotion amid full disclosures. Semi-structured interview questions focused on modern aspects of burnout and job satisfaction. Locke's (1976) definition of job satisfaction was referenced for clarity during

interviews, "a desired or positive mood formed due to assessment of work or work-related experiences by a person" (p. 1300). Burnout was described to participants as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397).

The Current Experiences theme helped provide a focus for examining the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in present labors including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants discussed professional goals related to personal growth and supervisor evaluations along with acknowledging aspects of their jobs that were going well. As previously noted, both direct and indirect Student Services were emphasized as strong points during story telling. In attempts to define the role of the professional school counselor in 2023, responses exhibited physical and verbal frustration, disclosures of increased burnout, and trivial hints of optimism for the trajectory of the field. While an adaptive, fluid role of a Student Services provider was also present in responses, the visual and verbal environment established portrayed an atmosphere described as bleak and deflated in efforts. Many participants prefaced verbal responses with head nods, extended sighs, and tearful eyes when referencing COVID-19 experiences and failed bids to establish antecedents accompanying flow.

The essence of satisfaction on the job was principally described in one word: competence. Responses related to job satisfaction were student-focused, highlighting feelings of flow in one-on-one relationships along with the capacity to internally validate oneself. During the focus group, one animated counselor was met with laughter and full agreement while demonstrating competence on the job as equated to mastering the popular game, *Fruit Ninja*. The fruit comes in, you slice as much as you can, and you get to the end feeling good about how you

handled what was thrown at you. Compared directly, he described this sense of competence as a prelude to feelings of occupational flow at work.

Job satisfaction was also present in responses directly related to assigned task completion, improved team dynamics and school culture, little repetition in daily duties, and experiencing holistic student success. While competence was the showcased sign of satisfaction, emotions and experiences related to holistic student success created the largest number of emerging references from all participants. During linguistic coding, clear signs of emphasis were portrayed in response to direct Student Services. Habitually confirmed by each participant was the power of, gift of, and basic act of having the opportunity to assist and advocate for the student sitting across from them. During responses, long pauses and silence were commonly used to signify what mattered most in the role.

Challenges and Burnout, a theme emerging from references pertaining to increased job demands, increased student caseloads, and increased requests from administrators and stakeholders, emphasized an increased detachment from the student-counselor relationship. Participants used phrases such as "competent, yet overwhelmed," "burnout directly related to leadership," and "burned out because I don't have work life balance." Also exhibited in lived experiences was compassion fatigue or a lack of sympathy stemming from job demands and stressors. Counselors described the onset of the academic year, as described in Zero-to-60, as a timeframe filled with overburdening requests along with hardships related to lack of role identity and clarity as the global pandemic persists. Overall, essences of micro flow were experienced during stories related to job satisfaction, while participants equated burnout to the inability to achieve a state of flow during the academic day.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, each subject of research is discussed in detail, further elaborating on their meaning as it relates to the secondary school counselor's lived experiences in one school district. Also addressed is the connection to relevant literature on occupational flow, team flow, and school counselor lived experiences. A newly emerging classification of occupational flow, termed meaningful flow, is also introduced.

Occupational Flow

Participants in this study acknowledged aspects of occupational microflow in direct and indirect Student Services through three emerging themes: Where It's Felt and Defining It, Flow Experiences and Emotions, and Obstacles to Achieving Flow. The ASCA (2019) national model recommended that 80% of school-based time be spent in direct Student Services comprised of one-on-one student guidance, group facilitation, and classroom instruction. At the very most, 20% of a secondary school counselor's time should be spent in program planning and school support activities (ASCA, 2019). It was evident through interviews that each participant found job satisfaction in meeting the basic career, academic, and social emotional needs of the student across from them in accordance with the ASCA national model. Participants collectively recognized the force and magnitude of honoring the student-counselor relationship, expressing the purest sense of occupational flow as achieved through present interactions with teenagers. Examples such as student-counselor relationships, categorized as direct Student Services, appeared significantly more important and satisfying than attempts to find flow through menial indirect tasks. For instance, Kaytee stated, "…but when a student walks in, they are my number one priority" (Sept. 9, 2023). As previously mentioned in Chapter IV, references to It's Just Me and the Student served as the only subtheme with a change in body demeanor of importance in

one's role as a secondary school counselor. Direct tasks also included finding flow in classroom instruction as described by Sean and Heidi through engaging environments and active students finding a love of topics presented.

In alignment with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) landmark claim "Optimal experiences is thus something we *make* happen" (p. 3), one participant confessed, "If I don't plan for it (flow), it doesn't happen" (Heidi, Sept. 21, 2023). Needed preparations were frequently paired with Bakker's (2008) characterizations of absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation. Based on these characterizations, participants ultimately expressed competence in abilities to carry out work demands. For instance, finding and creating microflow in menial tasks, as discussed in I Don't Mind the Indirect Stuff, conveyed participant attempts to achieve microflow through beginning of the year duties including the completion of Section 504 Plans and Advanced Learning Plans for caseload students. Frustration was expressed with the process of such tasks, including Phoebe admitting, "I *hate* them, I do not think they should be the responsibility of counselors" (Sept. 14, 2023); however, multiple participants found flow in performing such duties when afforded the uninterrupted time to do so.

One unique manner in which the participants in the study expressed their Flow Experiences and Emotions was through present, emotionally powered use of silence and nonverbal cues including tone of voice, gestures of importance, and improved posture. When describing their ideal emotions and feelings as connected to flow, participants used phrases such as "*Right here, right now*," "That is *exactly* where I need to be," and "*This* is why I do this." The atmosphere created by responses to this interview question, filled with metacognitive reflection and a keen sense of importance, can best be described as just different.

Respondents, including Heidi and Sean, recognized an altering of time, whether speeding up or slowing down during moments of concentrated, interrupted flow in direct Student Services. Sean emphasized a unison of action and awareness and a disappearance of self-consciousness in direct conversations with students (Sept. 9, 2023); Heidi's responses of this relationship recognized an orderly, noncontradictory demand and an autotelic nature (Sept. 11, 2023). This aligned with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow channel model.

Although indications of microflow were described in subthemes by each secondary school counselor, emphasis was situated on constant triage and interruptions as principal barriers to achieving such a state of performance. While prior research including the presence of flow in classrooms and amongst teacher-student relationships (Bakker, 2005; Shernoff et al., 2003) has been measured using the Flow in Education Scale (Heutte et al., 2014), aligning suitable conditions did not exist in Student Services departments for the use of such an instrument. As participants portrayed ways in which they experienced occupational flow through both direct and indirect Student Services, it became gradually more evident during interviewing that several obstacles hindered a secondary school counselor's ability to achieve such a state. Obstacles and impediments that emanated from 27 combined interview references included a steady triage of responsibilities, the reality of dealing with constant interruptions, and the need to alter environments to limit access to colleagues and students. It became evident that experiencing occupational flow was not a daily or even a weekly occurrence for most participants. Select participants responded by simply confessing, "I haven't felt it this year" and "I can't tell you the last time I achieved flow" (Taylor, Sept. 27, 2023). If not present during one-on-one, uninterrupted student interactions, the establishment of occupational flow was limited to

worktime outside of the traditional academic setting including non-contracted hours before or after the school day or by significantly limiting access during contract time.

Team Flow

The emergence of two themes, Where It's Felt and Challenges and Burnout, surfaced from three stages of IPA coding, those being descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. An essence of where team flow was felt in Student Services departments, emotions as related to collective flow, barriers to establishing and maintaining such a state, and team flow's effect on occupational flow materialized from 56 overall references. While is it widely recognized that teams operating at the peak of their abilities need to function effortlessly, manifest cooperation, and perform independently, too few studies pertaining to collective flow in the workplace have been performed (van den Hout & Davis, 2019).

According to five participants across four student service departments, team flow was described in experiences exhibiting (a) an overall goal and intent, (b) collective concentration in a department task, (c) equal member participation, (d) transparency of individual roles as assigned, and (e) through the use of effective communication. Cases included uninterrupted planning time during weekly department meetings—meetings that incorporated an agenda, a focused, strategic plan, and team member competence and support. Heidi emphasized the importance of designating a directly responsible individual on what she labeled "the most innovative, creative team I've worked on" (Sept. 11, 2023), further emphasizing the importance of knowing one's role within a team. In direct alignment with Sawyer's (2007) research on team flow, participants also explained needed antecedents to collective performance including a blending of egos, familiarity with the subject, and recognition of effective communication in place. Taylor emphasized the benefits of team flow including a blending of egos and a

recognition of understanding one's role during continued triage and interruptions by confessing, "I feel like our team is working really well, and doing all the little pieces that need to happen. And (chuckling, emphasizing), we still *somehow*, come together at 8:30 a.m. every day to form this incredible team. We do really good, hard work when we're here" (Sept. 17, 2023).

Participants, displaying nonverbals such as frustration and lack of control and satisfaction with the current environment, also depicted challenges to establishing collective flow through 19 references. Responses included ties to toxicity of one's working conditions within the school district, a lack of goals and team focus, and the hinderance of continuous interruptions from surrounding stakeholders. While Csikszentmihalyi (1975) acknowledged the benefits of microflow including the pursuit of self-absorption, future research would point to the importance of access and opportunity to achieve such a state. Combined with constant interruptions and concurrent demands for counselor time, participants also stressed continued rumination over individual duties as assigned. Once a department meeting was planned and in-progress, participants reiterated individual anxieties. As Kaytee summarized, "There's a lot of things we do well as a team together…but in the back of my mind I'm thinking I have to do X, Y, and Z, so can we get through this material…that pulls you out of that productive time together" (Sept. 13, 2023).

Overall, aspects of collective flow were primarily found in planned, structured weekly department meetings. As stated by participants, this included uninterrupted time with each team member recognizing individual roles. Descriptive phrases of the atmosphere formed included focused, supportive, competent, and vulnerable.

Lived Experiences

Lived experiences of the contemporary school counselor in one Rocky Mountain region, emerging from 210 references across three themes, included Current Experiences, Job Satisfaction, and Challenges and Burnout. Portrayed were the choices, minor gratifications, and adversities of each research participant. While job satisfaction and optimism surfaced in experiences, an extensive number of responses emphasized the demands of a high turnover occupation and symptoms of burnout that were taking time and energy away from the student and ultimately limiting opportunities to obtain professional goals and achieve occupational and team flow.

Responses to current experiences included professional goals for the 2023-2024 academic year along with examples of what each participant was currently doing well with both as an individual as well as part of the Student Services team. In alignment with Pyne (2011), secondary school counselors who engaged in counseling-related tasks reported elevated levels of overall satisfaction when performing duties as related to the ASCA (2019) national model (i.e., Kaytee's desire to work on social-emotional counseling skills or Phoebe's goal of working with more ninth-graders). In defining the professional school counselor, responses were met with appearances of confusion, head shakes, frustration, and disappointment. While participants found satisfaction in each day looking different, they struggled to assign identities to current roles within their departments and schools. Mentioned in relation to previous research (Clemens et al., 2009; Pyne, 2011), participants demonstrated instances of job satisfaction as related to having administrative support such a Phoebe's admission of embracing her school's new principal, and by establishing good communication with staff members. Having clearly written goals and

directives, particularly in the aftermath of a global pandemic, was also expressed by each participant.

While research on COVID-19 experiences for the professional school counselor was limited in scope (Alexander et al., 2022; Gokalp, 2022), participants acknowledged the lingering effects of serving student needs through a global pandemic. Accounts included thoughts of role ambiguity and role confusion were combined with a focus on inequalities and a lack of district systems in place. Experiences related to role confusion during the COVID-19 pandemic included Kaytee's frustration,

> I could not control it. I couldn't help this family out or get them Internet when five kids are trying to work off one little Wi-Fi device. It was no wonder they were having issues. They were getting frustrated because they (students) couldn't get on and watch videos, so they gave up. There was a lot of helplessness. I couldn't help these kids through these struggles because there were so many factors at play that were out of my control. (Sept. 13, 2023)

Challenges and Burnout, a frequently emerging theme during interviews, resulted in an astonishing 78 references. Paralleling Kim and Lambie's (2018) research on occupational burnout, impacts included Taylor's impaired family relationships along with Sean's continued imposter syndrome as a seasoned counselor. Emotional exhaustion and anxiety, as researched by Bardhoshi et al. (2014), surfaced in Phoebe's inability to simply "leave work at work." Counselors felt competent in abilities as a result of time-on-the-job, yet overloaded with duties and responsibilities.

Most prevalent was counselor burnout and frustration oriented at school and district administrators. As referenced in the literature review, while school leaders might not have

training related or exposure to the ASCA (2019) national model (Geesa et al., 2019), participants expressed overwhelming frustration with the sheer volume of work not in alignment with the national model. As Heidi stated in relation to an administrative decision,

> Last year, I had this really demoralizing meeting with district leadership about our program, in which they criticized a bunch of things that were happening. And then in the same breath, slashed or cut, or changed all the things that we were trying to do to keep those bad things from happening… I was so burned out because I had just spent three years trying to address all of this, and it didn't feel seen. (Sept. 21, 2023)

Alternative motives underlying secondary school counselor burnout were also centered on pacing of the academic year with frontloaded duties urgently assigned upon return from a summer break. Participants expressed feelings of exhaustion and burnout setting in during the beginning weeks of the academic year. Unlike district teaching schedules, school counselors begin the academic year with eight frontloaded contract days filled with scheduling changes and requests, new and returning student registration, parent and student email and phone call communication, and mandatory professional development. These district conditions aligned with participant responses including increased compassion fatigue as mentioned in A Shortage of Sympathy as well as feelings of everlasting triage during work hours. As a result of job demands, multiple participants expressed an interest in pivoting or changing careers to include fields outside of education.

Lived experiences of the secondary school counselor signified depleted attempts to create and hold such a state of focused, undivided attention during direct and indirect tasks. Minor glimpses of satisfaction and quality of work-life were portrayed in alignment with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) factors of enjoyment including a merging of action and awareness, a

concentration in the task at hand, and a transformation of time (pp. 51-62), most commonly occurring during the direct, uninterrupted student-counselor experiences and department meetings. Participants referenced the desire to strive for and experience elements of flow more often, both as an individual as well as part of a team; however, factors detrimental to this experience were referenced 78 times during interviews.

Challenges and Burnout accentuated lived experiences that did not allow for occupational and team flow of secondary school counselors in one district. Regarding a lack of time spent performing non-counselor duties, a lack of energy while processing triage, and lack of role identity in the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic, participants continuously described instances of exhaustion and displeasure in the current environment. If flow is summarized as an undivided presence and attention with no need to worry or question one's adequacy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 33-39), described was an atmosphere that did not allow one to reach a state of optimal experience.

Meaningful Flow

Aspects of a previously undefined approach to occupational flow were witnessed in uninterrupted, supportive environments designed to elicit job satisfaction. A new phenomenon that emerged from the data was introduced to the field as meaningful flow or a state of mind where one is immersed in the fulfillment of purposeful tasks of personal and professional significance; an emotional mindset of role satisfaction. Emerging from this new form of flow, significance and role satisfaction were explicitly dependent on both personal and professional needs of participants. As such, meaningful flow was different for each school counselor. This included instances such as Kaytee's contentment in completing Section 504 plans for the sheer

betterment of her colleagues and students, and Taylor's deep appreciation for assisting with academic scheduling and graduation duties.

The process of fostering such gratifying environments, in alignment with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) landmark claim, differed from instances of establishing occupational flow to meet and complete administrative tasks as required. From the viewpoint of a building administrator, this previously established state of flow is beneficial as it leads to higher productivity. In opposition to externally motivated task completion, respondents continuously identified the significance of seeking out various job duties that would lead to internal gratification as a school counselor, along with gratification of primary stakeholders, during uninterrupted opportunities throughout the workday. As Sean stated in relation to internal feelings of significance, "I became a counselor because I wanted to be in those deep conversations about life, purpose, contentment, and gratitude. *That's flow for me*. That feeling of *this is good… this matters*. *That's* the nitty gritty of why I became a school counselor" (Sean, Sept. 9, 2023). Participants sought out these direct and indirect job opportunities to re-energize, renew satisfaction, and avoid exhaustion and burnout. While components of meaningful flow experiences aligned with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) initial model, including a centering of attention, a governance of one's actions, and no demand for external incentives (pp. 39-44), along with Bakker's (2008) factors of absorption and enjoyment (p. 400), additional elements considered (a) meaningfulness of personal and/or professional significance and (b) a sound perception of personal satisfaction.

While in accordance with prior reviews of occupational flow literature conducted by Emerson (1998), such occurrences of meaningful flow varied according to each counselor's job motivations, personal and professional backgrounds, influences, and recognized unique elements

of job satisfaction. Meaningfulness in work, also in alignment with basic psychological needs as outlined in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), is an important predictor of experiences related to work engagement and motivation, performance, and living a meaningful life (Autin et al., 2022, pp. 78-79). These particular experiences were described as "personally satisfying and enjoyable" and "those little ah-ha make a difference moments" (Taylor, Sept. 17, 2023) during such fulfilling emotional states of performance.

> Taylor emphasized this feeling of personal satisfaction by stating,
>
> I love those little 'ah-ha' make a difference moments of helping them (students) realize that their dreams, their wants, their goals are totally attainable… or I make that schedule change that I shouldn't to get that kid with the teacher that I know is going to help them understand math (tearing up). And I love graduation. I've just seen kids have the realization that they did it. They accomplished something huge, something that they've been working on for 13 years. For me, that was one of the *best days of my life* as I walked across the same stage. (Taylor, Sept. 17, 2023)

Environments created for such meaningful enjoyment were not task or assignment referenced but individually referenced according to each counselor's needs. Newly emerged from this qualitative study, meaningful flow was portrayed through planned, purposeful tasks related to the search for personal job satisfaction. Regarding such instances, Kaytee mentioned,

> I like being in that zone because I feel *super accomplished*. Like, yes I got these things done! It's sort of like the way our Microsoft email system works. There's a little bar for your inbox. When that bar gets really big, it means that you don't have a ton of emails. So when the bars is big, you're like: "Yes, I cleaned it up!" I addressed all the needs. The same feeling goes for completing 504s or concurrent enrollment. (Kaytee, Sept. 13, 2023)

Unexpected Findings

The focus of this study was to unveil the authentic, lived experiences of secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain district. While thematic findings of Occupational Flow, Team Flow, and Lived Experiences of the professional school counselor emerged through analysis of three stages of coding, it was surprising to constantly compare relationships between flow and triage, or multi-tasking on the job. While one counselor (Taylor) described microflow achieved in the cycle of continuous tasks and duties, a fellow colleague admitted, "I think we are trained as counselors to *not* achieve flow as a means to expected productivity on this job" (Heidi, Sept. 11, 2023). The participants talked more on their expectations to meet mounting duties assigned, offering two competing introspective outlooks as to emotions and feelings present in the process. Instead of genuine, authentic concentration on the student-counselor relationship as taught and evaluated on in graduate schooling, the expectation at all sites appeared to be a mastery of triage. This finding went in direct opposition to previous literature on achieving occupational flow (Bakker, 2008).

Curiosity was also present in the differences between student service departments in one school district, much less across districts and states. As Sean stated, "It makes me realize how situational job satisfaction is. It is all site dependent, and the folks you work with" (Sept 24, 2023). While IPA sampling strove for homogenous samples of participants experiencing similar situations, responses appeared heavily site-dependent, even in one school district. It was evident from the participants' responses that opportunities to achieve occupational flow, team flow, and experiences related to burnout were reliant on environments created by peers, school administrators, and community stakeholders. This discovery further conflicted with the ASCA (2019) effort to systematize the role of the secondary school counselor.

Implications for Practice

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

In the post-COVID-19 era of high turnover and increasing rates of burnout in the field of professional school counseling, it is clearly imperative for educational leaders to remember that we are working with adolescents who need love, support, and undivided attention. As special service providers engrained in the fields of education, psychology, and social work, the professional school counselor is also a title currently equipped with role ambiguity, low pay, and low job satisfaction (Kim & Lambie, 2018). While the results of this research cannot be generalized to the larger population, those of school counselors in one Rocky Mountain region, articulated participant responses conveyed deep concern for the professionals who are currently facing similar occupational challenges. As the researcher, it was difficult to listen to audio recording of interviews without an emotional response. This was due, in part, to the fact that I got to know the participants as human beings, educators, and game changers in the field. They are very good at what they do as holders of hope and agents of change in their chosen profession.

Initiatives must be taken by educational leaders and primary stakeholders to develop procedures for monitoring the well-being of professional school counselors. This includes taking a holistic approach to employee effectiveness as working professionals who are also fulfilling life-role duties. Providing counselors with a space (i.e., office), supplies (i.e. computers, platforms), and professional development is insufficient. Environments must be created that allow elements of flow to exist and time afforded for secondary school counselors to make flow happen. Participants described occupational states of enjoyable, satisfying flow related to overall task completion of indirect services along with intrinsically motivated tasks of fulfillment such

as meaningful exchanges with students; however, satisfaction in such job duties differed with each counselor as dependent upon professional needs.

Meaningful flow, as expressed by each participant, might serve as an employee-driven, intrinsically motivated approach to combat current levels of burnout in the field. Counselor meaningfulness might be beneficial for continued, future-oriented acts of giving, while personal satisfaction might be achieved in present, here-and-now opportunities as afforded. Of importance was an understanding of flow according to each counselor's *perceptions* of satisfying occupational experiences. Building administrators must involve school counselors in individual and team discussions of fulfilling needs, unfeignedly listening to the voices of counselors in efforts to create personally meaningful environments. Such understandings draw needed attention away from what must be changed about a school counselor to that of what must be modified in an unfavorable environment. School and district environments to honor each counselor's meaningful flow might include contracted time during the workday, reserved for uninterrupted direct and indirect tasks, along with providing clear individual and team job descriptions at the beginning of each academic year. As inadequate work environments and conditions result in societal consequences, including the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting (Soren & Ryff, 2023, p. 1), recent research on burnout and the protection of counselor mental health (Kee, 2020) continues to emphasize constant intentionality by both counselors and administrators. Creating and implementing standards, such as affording meaningful personal space and uninterrupted down time, might improve each school counselor's ability to serve the needs of stakeholders.

Perhaps a greater understanding would become apparent upon administrators and stakeholders conducting a professional development in-service focused on the ASCA (2019)

national model. This might include a book study or providing building and district administrators with opportunities to shadow counselors. Furthermore, allowing goal-oriented clinical supervision from a qualified supervisor is fundamental to provide guidance on effective interventions. This could encompass professional development time for case study analysis, peer supervision and consultation, and time afforded to share professional perspectives.

Educational leaders must also expose staff to training in the continued demands of student service departments. While school counselors and teachers collaborate and work side-by-side, there is little to no overlap in job duties, demands, and expectations from administrators and stakeholders. A current belief in education is school counselors are always available, doing "what's best for the student." While this model caters to building colleagues and teaching demands, it is simply not sustainable or beneficial for the secondary school counselor. According to the national model (ASCA, 2019), 20% of a professional school counselor's time should be away from students, completing indirect tasks as related to school needs. This implies uninterrupted time, much like that of teacher planning periods, to prepare for student engagement. The data presented in this study suggested that caring, empathetic, and competent administrators, ones who genuinely understand the demands of school counseling, created supportive environments for the profession. This included space for antecedents needed to establish occupational and team flow.

Recommendations for Secondary School Counselors

With current occupational demands in place, delivering comprehensive programming to all students can be challenging. While the ASCA (2019) national model recommended a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, the 2022 academic year resulted in a national average of 408:1 (ASCA, 2023b). Consequently, it is common to experience feelings of overwhelming stress,

symptoms of burnout and fatigue, and lowered overall job satisfaction. As student numbers in the

Rocky Mountain region increase, combined with lowered per pupil funding, mentioned

challenges including student-to-counselor ratios, assignment to inappropriate duties, and role

confusion will continue to serve as field barriers.

Since the establishment of the American School Counselor Association's national model

in 2003, select student service programs have achieved RAMP (Recognized ASCA Model

Program) status. These programs implement effective counseling services, both as individuals as

well as part of the team, by demonstrating leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic

change. It is recommended to implement the initial steps of developing a data-driven, needs-

based model of services. Initial steps of collaboration, examining enjoyment and satisfaction of

flow within a department, might include taking a conscious, collective look at factors that

stimulate individual team member's effort and creativity in efforts to fulfill job duties. This

might include recognizing, and advocating for, such individual factors that nurture meaningful

flow in a counseling department. Achieving group and individual workflow begins with the

awareness and fostering of counselor needs and established goals. While directly responsible

stakeholder leadership is necessary for successful development and implementation, school

counselors are ultimately responsible for carrying out programs that identify, target, and address

all students' needs.

To collaborate effectively with responsible stakeholders, as referenced in interview

response frustrations, counselor advocacy must begin with defining the role of the professional

school counselor and defining the role of school counseling programs within the district. Taking

place at board meetings, school information events, and during new student and family

registrations, transparency could be established between what district stakeholders want and the

practical services and supports school counseling programs can provide (Hall, 2017).

Reestablishing such an environment might allow for researched antecedents of occupational flow

including uninterrupted focus, intrinsic motivation, and clear goals (Bakker, 2008), and therefore

distancing current levels of department functioning as tied to constant triage and interruptions.

Limitations and Future Research

In this study, I sought to learn more about the lived experiences of occupational flow,

team flow, and lived experiences in secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain district.

By interviewing participants using an IPA approach, data collected were varied but meaningful,

resulting in several limitations that were of importance to note. These limitations included the

heterogeneity of the small, but intimate sample; the inability to capture lived experiences from

counselors at each secondary Student Services department in the district; and the strong

possibility of losing some of the counselor's conveyed meaning through undesired interviewing

environments.

Interpretive phenomenological approach researchers, such as Smith et al. (2009), adhere

to the idiographic nature of a lived experience. An idiographic approach is concerned with the

particular or each participant's unique experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). However, they also

recommend that research is conducted with a small, homogenous sample, ensuring that results

emerge from those who experienced a specific phenomenon of interest under similar conditions

(Smith et al., 2009, p. 39). While this study drew from a sample of secondary school counselors

who all worked in the same district, it became apparent that individual participant environments

produced great variability in individual and team identities, roles, and lived experiences. The

study included generalist counselors with caseloads exceeding 330 students, an identified ninth-

grade transition counselor, and one counselor in charge of all programming for an opt-in,

pathway specific school. Given such diversity in the social identities and experiences of the participants in this study, I was not able to fully capture their unique experiences in the selected themes. Examples of this included Heidi's role as a registrar, administrator, and program marketer while satisfying all student career, social emotional, and academic needs as a school counselor. Also not captured was the importance of established team dynamics and norms at each site such as Sean's need to feel supported and accepted in self-care efforts of eating lunch at home. The heterogeneity of this sample pointed to the importance of viewing secondary school counselor's lived experiences, even as studied in one school district, as extremely diverse points of data collection.

The second limitation of this study was related to in-district experiences that could not be accessed due to limited responses in requests for participation, IPA procedures of rich data collection, and respect to research timeline requirements. Given that five counselors across four student service departments provided in-depth stories and experiences as related to research topics, the district is comprised of nine secondary sites ranging from large comprehensive schools to choice-in only, small online campuses. In other words, study results provided insight into the essence of lived experiences for counselors at select sites in one Rocky Mountain school district, while neighboring high schools were not represented in data collection attempts.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that there was a strong possibility of loss of meaning resulting from environmental conditions of interviewing. All research interviews were conducted from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. work hours via Microsoft Team Video platforming in participant offices. Video recordings of each interview showed counselors making an effort to close doors, shut blinds, and dim lights in attempts to escape outside influences and interruptions. Not accounted for were continuous email notifications on one's computer screen, continuous access

to phone notification from colleagues in need, and students continuously knocking on office doors. Attempts to establish and maintain undivided, focused attention were rare to witness while asking interview questions.

My hope is future research attempts would provide access to a larger sample of counselors within one school district, thereby allowing an increased representation of voices within one population. Approaches might involve a single case study design, a collection of artifacts to accompany interviewing, or the implementation of a descriptive research design using survey methods. To provide insight on secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain Region, aligning research attempts might also include participants serving caseloads with low college-going rates or those serving low socio-economic status student bodies. Phenomenological perspectives of interest might be sought from participants nearing the end of their career or those who started after the COVID-19 pandemic and are not accustomed to alternative working environments.

Future research method considerations might include an appropriate timeframe for interviewing with respect to both district academic calendars and specific counselor duties, and an elongated participant interest process. In a profession inundated with email notifications, requests for time, and "information overload" as stated by one participation, future studies might benefit from uninterrupted face-to-face attempts at providing research objectives. Most noticeably for those relying on interviewing methods, primary consideration should be the establishment of creating ideal environments. For this study, travel time across a sprawling school district would have provided unending barriers to participation. Ideal environments might imply interviewing at off-site locations such as a local coffee shop or library with limited

interruptions and respect to time allotted. Establishing a safe, uninterrupted space for processing and reflection is a cornerstone in the art of conducting qualitative interviews.

Lessons Learned

To capture the true, lived experiences of a small, but intimate sample of secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain school district, an IPA was selected to accentuate meaning making. Through the utilization of aspects of IPA, I was able to gather rich accounts of each participant's interpretation of their professional and personal lives. Therefore, I was able to contribute to the awareness of the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in one district, including elements of burnout, through the lens of flow theory.

Although the commanding methodology was impactful with regard to designated outcomes of the study, my personal experience with IPA is worth recognizing for future research. While I was not able to conduct a pilot study using this methodology, I was afforded the flexibility to hone in on semi-structured questions throughout the process of conducting 16 interviews during the fall 2023 academic semester. Through the honing of interview questions along with preliminary attempts at coding emerging references, I was introduced to the nuances of the IPA. Included was the intensive time commitment required to carefully analyze the growing data collected. While charts constructed from colored markers and diagrams were initially constructed on a white board to begin rounds of coding, the ease and accessibility of programs such as Microsoft Word and NVivo 14 served as primary data collection and analysis platforms (see Appendix E for reference).

Minor changes were made to the methodology of the dissertation to create a more realistic, thoughtful research design. While Seidman (2006) recommended interview lengths of 60-80 minutes to capture rich phenomenological perspectives, it was quickly recognized that this

span of time was not appropriate with respect to participant schedules. Therefore, in alignment with sound IPA literature (Becker, 2015; Smith et al., 2009), semi-structured interviews were condensed to accommodate 30-to-45-minute time slots. Additionally, the focus group on October 5th was shortened to 38 minutes in length. While I do not believe this restructuring minimized the strength of my research design, it did lessen what was already an arduous data analysis process. This process, following the analysis steps for IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2009), was quite time-intensive, requiring intentional and dedicated time to complete in an acceptable timeframe.

I did encounter other challenges while engaging with my initial methods that I found to be beneficial in sharing, particularly as it relates to continuous member checks. I gave the participants three opportunities to engage in data collection accuracy and integrity including an initial inspection of transcripts, themes established, and a confirmation of quotes used. However, as member checks occurred via short Microsoft Team Video meetings, additional time for analysis or follow up experiences as related to feelings, emotions, and reactions was not always reflected and afforded.

Overall, there were slight deviations from the original methods presented. There were interviews that lasted as long as 58 minutes, while others were conducted in under 20 minutes. Some participants were dedicated to the interview process in terms of the topics they discussed and how they expressed their feelings and emotions; other kept responses short and to-the-point, opting not to provide revealing stories and personal connections as piling-up job duties ruminated during interview attempts. Based on experiences such as these, along with other slight alterations to the methods process, my suggestions for future IPA studies would be two-fold: (a) conduct a pilot study to pinpoint structuring of interviews including time allotted and richness of information obtained, and (b) conduct interviews away from the work environment. Allow

participants to share their lived experiences and reflections in ways that do not feel rushed, filled with other duties compiling around them, and without access to other means of communication (i.e., open email on the computer, work cell phone within reach).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the mentioned limitations, this study contributed to filling a gap in professional school counselor research by offering new insight into the lived experiences of secondary school counselors in one Rocky Mountain district. Additionally, this study pointed to the need for qualitative research to better understand the challenges in contemporary school counseling, a field experiencing increasing levels of burnout, low job satisfaction, and turnover. This study contains promising results regarding the applicability of flow theory within the field of professional school counseling; however, additional research on the effectiveness of creating such occupational environments is still necessary. Beyond essential reflection of research efforts, ideological questions remain. In this school district, what steps would be established in efforts to create spaces for occupational flow? This includes input and action from all stakeholders. Why do select student service departments provide support and space for self-care, according to the needs of each individual counselor, while others do not? With the right systems of support in place, secondary school counselors in this district would feel acknowledged in efforts, provided with space to achieve instances of occupational flow, and supported in establishing and maintaining personal self-care and health.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT REQUEST

Secondary School Counselors of Poudre School District:

Welcome back from the restful summer break. Here we go!

As part of my doctorate program, I've been working on a research study through the University of Northern Colorado, and I need your insight and perspective as field professionals.

The goal of this study is to explore the lived experiences of secondary school counselors through the lens of two subjective phenomena: 1) work-related burnout, and 2) occupational flow. An understanding of occupational flow and counselor burnout will provide improved awareness at the individual, school, and community levels to increase advocacy and engagement.

Data collection for eligible participants will take place during the fall 2023 semester. To see if you are eligible, please read the requirements below.

Who Can Participate?

Secondary school counselors…

- ✓ with at least three years of professional experience
- ✓ currently employed in Poudre School District for the 2023-2024 academic year
- ✓ with a professional interest in understanding, or reclaiming, job satisfaction and occupational flow

If you fit these requirements and are interested in learning more about the study, please scan the QR code on the flyer below as a request for more information.

Participants will receive $50 in Visa gift cards for completing three individual interviews, and a $25 Visa gift card for participating in a focus group of four-to-six secondary school counselors. All interviews, 60 minutes in length, will take place via *Microsoft Teams*. Identifiable participant information (PII) will be removed from data collection, including the use of personal pseudonyms.

Please let me know if you have any questions that I can answer!

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 08/01/2023

Principal Investigator: Brett Fedor

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 08/01/2023

Protocol Number: 2307050609

Protocol Title: Reclaiming Flow: A Phenomenological Study of Secondary School Counselors

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(701) (702) for research involving

Category 1 (2018): RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).

- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).

- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.

- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Interim IRB Administrator, Chris Saxton, at 970-702-5427 or via e-mail at chris.saxton@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - http://hhs.gov/ohrp/ and https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/.

Sincerely,
Michael Aldridge
Interim IRB Administrator

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Reclaiming Flow: A Phenomenological Study of Secondary School
          Counselors
Researcher: Brett W. Fedor, M.S., Doctoral Student, Educational Studies
E-Mail: fedo9182@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Matthew Farber, Ed.D., School of Teacher Education
Phone Number: (970) 351-1981   E-mail: matthew.farber@unco.edu

In the present study I am attempting to provide an in-depth, phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of school counselors in one northern Colorado school district. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete three 90-minute semi-structured interviews over a span of 14 days, where I will ask questions related to your experiences with occupational flow and burnout. You will also be asked to participate in a 60-minute focus group with eight-to-ten secondary school counselors, with follow-up individual member checks taking place immediately after. Interviews will take place during the fall 2023 academic semester. There are no right or wrong answers. I am only interested in your honest experiences and outlooks.

For this study, identifying information, aside from basic demographic information such as age, gender, and position, etc., will not be reported in the study. All responses will be recorded and transcribed, and both recordings and transcriptions will be encrypted by a username and password. Due to the nature of electronic data storage, it is not possible to guarantee confidentiality. However, every effort is made so that participants in this study will remain confidential, as all data will only be reported using pseudonyms (fake names) or in a group format.

There is no more than minimal risk to being in this study outside of a possible sense of discomfort that may occur naturally in daily workplace conversations around issues of occupational flow and burnout. You may have feelings of discomfort when answering questions related to current practices in your school setting. Benefits associated with your participation in this interview include Visa gift cards, valued at $25 and $50. Your responses will help elevate the importance of occupational flow practices and burnout, and the potential impact these practices have on secondary school counselors, staff, and stakeholders.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, reply to this email with the

statement below if you would like to participate in this research. By replying to this email with the statement below this form, you give your permission to be included in this study as a participant. Please keep a copy of this form and electronic reply to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

I, _____, have read and understand the parameters and risk involved in participating in this phenomenological study conducted by Brett Fedor and I give my consent to participate on this date, _____. As part of this study, I may provide additional information from my school (i.e. personal examples, pictures, written statements) and share it with the researcher via his email (fedo9182@bears.unco.edu).

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

First Interview: (The lived past)

Introduction: Thank you so much for your interest in participating in this study and for meeting with me today. My name is Brett Fedor and I am a doctoral student in the University of Northern Colorado's Educational Studies program. I am conducting this study as part of my dissertation, which explores occupational flow in secondary school counselors. Because today is our first meeting, I will be spending a few minutes explaining the study and what it entails. I also want to answer any questions you may have and confirm that you would like to participate. After that, if you decide to participate, we will begin with the interview. We will be meeting for 60-90 minutes, and I'll ask you some questions about your experiences with job satisfaction, burnout, and occupational flow. Are you ready to begin?

Informed Consent: Read through IRB Information Sheet. I am wondering if you have any questions about the study or your participation. Would you like to enroll in the study?

If the school counselor would like to participate: Perfect! Thank you so much for your willingness to participate. We will begin the interview portion of our meeting now, which I will need to record. May I obtain your permission to begin recording?

If the school counselor would not like to participate: I completely understand. Thank you so much for your willingness to meet with me today. If any questions or thoughts about the study come up for you, please don't hesitate to reach out.

1. Talk about the experiences that led you to become a secondary school counselor.

2. What do you enjoy about your job?
   - …and what is challenging about your job?
   - What past experiences as a school counselor are you most proud of?

3. Tell me about your current connection to this occupation.
   - What does it mean, in your own terms, to be a school counselor in 2023?
   - Talk about what aspects of your job lead to feeling satisfied in your role.
   - How about feelings of burnout?
   - Tell me a story about these views or give an example.

4. How did the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic affect your role as a school counselor?
   - How about over the last few months?
   - Tell me about a defining occupational moment in relation to the global pandemic.
   - When you reflect on this time, what feelings do you remember?
   - Tell me about how the pandemic changed your view, if at all, on your role as a professional school counselor.

5. Occupational flow is defined as "a short-lasting peak experience, characterized by involvement, pleasure of working, and intrinsic work motivation." What is your understanding of experiencing occupational flow?
   - Based on your experiences, how has this type of work-related experience been recognized in the past?
   - Share an example of this.
   - What emotions do you recall from being in that situation?

6. Flow can also affect the team level by promoting optimal experiences, well-being, and meaningful experiences, all of which promote creative production and higher performance. Reflect on recent team experiences. How has the concept of flow been applied to your team?
   - Walk me through a past example.
   - Tell me about your feelings connected to being "in the zone" as a team, during times when you may have felt immersed in concentration in the task at hand or experienced a loss in sense of time.

7. As you reflect on the concepts we've discussed, including flow, job satisfaction, and burnout as a secondary school counselor, is there anything else you'd like to discuss, or anything you haven't shared that you'd like to regarding past experiences?

Closing Remarks: That is all the questions I have for you today. Thank you so much for your time and openness in this process. The information you provided was incredibly helpful! I will be emailing you your $50 gift card to the email you provided me earlier, does that work for you? What type of local gift card would you prefer? We have our next interview

scheduled for [date/time]. Just like this time, we will spend 60 to 90 minutes on questions

based on present experiences, along with time for reflection. I will reach out with a reminder

prior to our meeting. Please feel free to contact me if any questions or concerns come up

prior to our next meeting. Thank you again!

Second Interview: (The present)

Greetings: Thank you so much for meeting with me again. I am happy to see you again! Today is

our second interview, so like last time, we will be meeting for 60 to 90 minutes, and I'll be

asking you to answer some questions about occupational flow, burnout, and job satisfaction. Just

like before, I will be recording our time together. All the information you share will be

confidential and I will not be asking for any identifying information during the recording. Before

we begin with the interview, I want to remind you that there are no right or wrong answers to

these questions. I am only interested in learning about your experiences. You can be completely

honest; you can choose not to answer specific questions, and you can choose to end the interview

whenever you'd like. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. Since our first interview ended, is there anything including job satisfaction, burnout, or occupational flow that has come up?
2. Last week, we talked about things you've done well in your role. Tell me about some things you're currently doing as a school counselor, and how they're going.
   - Can you share a time?
   - Do you recall what you were experiencing during that story/experience?
   - What relates this time to how you're currently feeling as a secondary school counselor?
3. What do you value most about the role of the secondary school counselor in your district?
   - How about Student Service departments in your district?
     - Give a recent example.
   - What makes this important for you?

4. Tell me a story about a recent critical time on the job.
   - Walk me through the feelings that you remember from this experience.
   - How about thoughts that you remember?
   - And what about the reactions around you?
5. Tell me about a time this school year when you felt supported through an occupational challenge?
   - What feelings do you remember when receiving that support?
   - How, at all, did this impact your relationship with co-workers?
6. Last time we met, we talked about experiences you've had that relate to occupational flow. Let me redefine it for you. Occupational flow is "a short-lasting peak experience, characterized by involvement, pleasure of working, and intrinsic work motivation" (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017, p. 47). As our fall semester sets in, how, if at all, have you experienced occupational flow?
   - How about as part of a Student Services team?
   - Walk me through a recent experience.
7. What is a time, this academic semester, in which you felt "in the work zone"?
   - What feelings do you remember having towards your role?
   - How about feelings as part of team?
8. Tell me about a challenge related to work concentration and productivity that you've been able to overcome.
   - When you recall this difficult time, what feelings do you remember having?
   - What did you take away from that experience?
   - How, if at all, did the concept of flow benefit this experience?
   - Approaching from a different lens, how about a challenge related to work concentration and productivity that you haven't been able to overcome?
9. Are there additional thoughts, experiences, feelings, or stories about concepts of job satisfaction, burnout, or occupational flow as a secondary school counselor that you'd like to share with me today?

Closing Remarks: That is all the questions I have for you today. Thank you so much for your time and openness in this process. The information you provided was so helpful! We have our final individual interview scheduled for [date/time]. That meeting will be dedicated to focusing on future aspects of occupational flow, job satisfaction, and burnout. I will reach out with a reminder prior to our meeting. Please feel free to contact me if any questions or concerns come up prior to our next meeting. Thank you again!

Third Interview: (Held experiences)

Greetings: Thank you so much for meeting for our last individual interview, and like last time,

we will be meeting for 60 to 90 minutes to conclude responses. Like past interviews, I'll be

asking you to answer some questions about occupational flow, burnout, and job satisfaction. Just

like before, I will be recording our time together. All the information you share will be

confidential and I will not be asking for any identifying information during the recording. Before

we begin with the interview, I'd like to provide a summary of what was discussed last session. I

am only interested in learning about your experiences. You can be completely honest; you can

choose not to answer specific questions, and you can choose to end the interview whenever

you'd like. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. In our second interview, we touched upon things you're doing as a secondary school counselor. Tell me about some goals you'd like to accomplish this academic year.
   - How about experiences you'd prefer to avoid, both as an individual as well as part of a Student Services team?
2. What would it look like, if needed, to reclaim job satisfaction?
   - What factors would it take to make that happen?
3. Given what you've previously shared about experiences with occupational flow, defined as "a short-lasting peak experience, characterized by involvement, pleasure of working, and intrinsic work motivation" (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017, p. 47), how does occupational flow impact job satisfaction?
   - How about its impact on burnout, if any, on the job?
4. As you reflect on previous interview responses, what do you notice about occupational flow this semester?
   - How about things you notice as part of a team?
   - Have you experienced flow recently?
     - Tell me more about that.
5. Tell me more about your interest in a continued commitment to the field.
   - Share a recent self-reflection involving that commitment.
   - What were your feelings and emotions tied to that reflection?
   - As you reflect, how may this continued commitment align with occupational flow?
6. Are there any additional thoughts, experiences, feelings, or stories that you'd like to share with me today around the concepts we've discussed?
7. Our next interview will take place as a focus group of eight to ten counselors throughout our school district. Do you have any questions regarding focus groups, or participation?

Closing Remarks: That is all the questions I have for you today. Thank you so much for your time and openness in this process. We have our focus group scheduled for [date/time]. That meeting will be dedicated to focusing on team aspects of occupational flow, job satisfaction, and burnout. I will reach out with a reminder prior to our meeting. Please feel free to contact me if any questions or concerns come up prior to our next meeting. Thank you again!

Focus Group: (all secondary school counselors)

Introduction: Thank you so much for your interest in participating in this focus group. I am conducting this study as part of my dissertation, which explores occupational flow in secondary school counselors. Because today's group discussion is focused on aspects of occupational flow, team flow, and jobs satisfaction, I will be spending a few minutes re-explaining the study and what it entails. I also want to answer any questions you may have and confirm that you would like to participate. You may notice that participants are using pseudonyms, and some counselors have chosen to keep *Microsoft Team* video turned off. With that being stated, we will begin with the focus group. We will be meeting for one hour today, and I'll ask you some questions about your experiences with job satisfaction, burnout, and occupational flow. Are you ready to begin?

 Informed Consent: Read through IRB Information Sheet. I am wondering if you have any questions about the study or your participation. Would you like to enroll in the focus group?

If the school counselor would like to participate: Perfect! Thank you so much for your willingness to participate. We will begin the focus group now, which I will need to record. May I obtain your permission to begin recording?

If the school counselor would not like to participate: I completely understand. Thank you so much for your willingness to meet with us today. If any questions or thoughts about the study come up for you, please don't hesitate to reach out.

1. How are each of you feeling about participating in the focus group?
2. With respect to your comfort level, please provide your version of "job satisfaction", and how you are currently feeling about the concept as a secondary school counselor.
   - How about feelings, if any, involving the concept of burnout?
3. During individual interviews, we discussed concepts of occupational flow, job satisfaction, and burnout. Would anyone like to start by telling a recent story of experiencing flow on the job?
   - How did that make you feel, and what made you aware that you were in a state of flow?
   - How about other counselors in the group?
4. Team flow is described as "a collective state that occurs when a group is performing at the peak of its abilities" (Sawyer, 2003). Can you give me an example of experiencing this performance level as a Student Services team?
   - What was it like when this was experienced?
   - Would other counselors in the room like to add, or share similar experiences?
   - Feel free to vocalize feelings, emotions, or thoughts associated with this experience.
5. During individual interviews, the following words, feelings, and phrases were used to describe elements of being in flow.
   - Do any of these mentioned words, feelings, or phrases resonate with your experiences? If so, how?

APPENDIX E

INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH
THREE LEVEL CODING

Code: Occupational Flow – Feelings and Emotions

Metacognitive Thoughts in the Moment

Job Competence and Confidence Needed to Obtain Flow

Time Flying By

How Others Felt/Reacted

References:

Focus Group

that emotion when you're doing something. You're like, "This is why I do this," with all the other stuff that is going on, this feeling of "being in the zone with this exact work," whatever that task is in that moment, or with that experience with the kid or oftentimes a parents too like, "This is why I do this." (Heidi)

I go back to that competence of "OK, I have to run a link crew meeting and it's not the most important thing in the world to me. But like, hey, at least I felt like it went pretty well and I didn't have a bunch of anxiety about it." (Sean)

Heidi

I had these units about addiction I would give to Elaine Holmes's class classes, and it was over an hour of content, and it would just fly. It would just fly in there. We would talk. The kids were so interested. They had a lot of personality and it's just that feeling you're talking about with your students of they had so many personal anecdotes about this topic and would share them vulnerably. And then you would feel yourself with them. (1)

It always felt really authentic, really valuable. I felt like I was an expert in this one area that actually the kids really needed. So just that value added which probably made me feel valuable. (2)

"oh, you know what that feeling you're talking like I am exactly where I need to be." You believe "that was a good day. That was good, I did a good thing." (3)

you always felt like that was exactly how it should have gone. That's why I did this. That's why I did this job. (4)

So it flew by, that hour. I looked up and it was 2:00 pm, and he had come in at 1:00 p.m., and just the flow of getting some really good work done with a student for his emotional state. (5)

connecting him to something that he can have joy in, like in a pathway that he can access at his home high school. So I felt good with a relationship was built, and maybe a step forward for his education. So that was definitely an occupational flow situation. (6)

APPENDIX F

QUALTRICS PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM

Participant Interest Form

Q4 Name: (Last, First)

_____

Q5 Location of Employment: (Ex. Fort Collins High School)

_____

Q3 Have you been employed as a secondary school counselor for three or more academic years?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Have you been employed as a secondary school counselor for three or more academic years? = No

Q6 Are you currently employed in Poudre School District as a secondary school counselor?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you currently employed in Poudre School District as a secondary school counselor? = No

Q2 Do you have an interest in examining job satisfaction, work-related burnout, and occupational flow in your role as a school counselor?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q8 This phenomenological study will be conducted during the fall 2023 semester. All interviewing will be conducted using Microsoft Teams Audio/Video. Identifiable participant information (PII) will be removed from data collection, including the use of personal pseudonyms.

If selected, would you be willing to participate in this research study? Your time requirements would include: 1) three 60-90 minute individual interviews, 2) one 60-minute focus group, and 3) a follow-up member check.

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q7 How would you prefer to be contacted for more information?

○ Email (1)

○ Phone (2)

Q9 Preferred Contact Information: (Email address and/or phone number)

_____

End of Block: Default Question Block

APPENDIX G

MANUAL CODING

1   **INTERVIEW 1 (Kaytee)**

2

3   **Researcher**

4   Talk about experiences that led you to become a secondary school counselor.

5

6   **Kaytee** 1:52

7   When I was in high school, we had to do what we called a 'senior project' where you

8   volunteered to get this accolade. So, I volunteered at the local middle school. I wanted to work

9   with students, and that really solidified my desire to work with students. I really enjoyed working

10   with the middle schoolers and getting to know them and helping them through stuff. When

11   deciding what to study for my undergrad, I was indecisive. I didn't know if I wanted to teach, or I

12   didn't know if I wanted to do something else, like counseling. I knew I didn't know much about

13   the counseling profession, but I knew it was something of interest because I really liked

14   psychology. So, for my undergraduate degree, I dual majored in both history education and

15   psychology. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do. I also knew that teaching just needed a

16   bachelor's degree, versus school counseling needed a master's. I tried to teach for a few years

17   and other aspects I liked about teaching, but I knew I wasn't hitting those marks for me. I knew

18   that it was more counseling. So, I decided to then pursue my masters in school counseling. And

19   here I am today.

20

21   **Researcher** 3:07

22   What do you enjoy about your job?

23

24   **Kaytee** 3:09

25   I really like helping kids find out who they want to be, and what they want to be. At the high

26   school level, I like working with the high school developmentally because they're in that stage of

27   "Who am I? What careers do I want? What do I want to do with my world?" I like assisting them

28   through that versus at the younger ages. I don't feel like they're really in that developmental stage

29   of self-realization. I think also part of this led to growing up. My dad always asked us "what are

30   your friends do for work or their parents do for work? What are their parents doing? It led me to

31   become generally interested in a variety of careers. So I think I like helping kids navigate the

---

Fedor, Brett - FCH
Knew at a young age that she wanted to work with children

Reply

Fedor, Brett - FCH
Public servant mentality at a young age.

Reply

Fedor, Brett - FCH
Indecisive about world of work and careers.

Reply

Fedor, Brett - FCH
Valued level of education obtained, and searching for job satisfaction

Reply

Fedor, Brett - FCH
Finds enjoyment and value in career counseling