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“In Spite of the Storm, I Saw Bright Spots”: School Counselors Experiences During COVID-19

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY In the spring of 2022, researchers conducted a phenomenological investigation on the lived experiences of 12 U.S. school counselors during the COVID-19 global pandemic, triangulating individual interviews and participant drawings, to gain a rich, comprehensive account. According to researchers, school counselors perceived their experiences during the pandemic as multifaceted and complex, comprised of intertwining initial and ongoing challenges, as well as growth or positives that emerged in the face of crisis and loss. These findings were reported across multiple areas of participants’ lives: personally, professionally, and at the K-12 educational/societal level. Results are discussed within the lens of shared trauma and posttraumatic growth, with implications for school counselors presently, as they work within the current “new normal” and reverberating impacts of a global pandemic.

HOW THE RESEARCH ADVANCES THE PROFESSION Based on these results, we recommend school counseling leaders assess their school counselors’ needs; specifically, assessing the needs of the school counselors’ schools/communities, as some school communities were/are disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic (schools with high percentages of BIPOC communities, individuals with pre-existing health concerns, and other factors such as poverty, racism, and access to resources). Leaders can offer individual and/or group counseling and clinical supervision. Workplaces can support healthy work/life balance and healthy boundaries. Next, due to the impact of the pandemic—high mental health needs in schools and greater prioritization of mental health—school counselors and educational leaders should use this opportunity to continue promoting the benefits of school counseling and advocating for more of school counselors’ time to be used actually serving students, rather than in ancillary counseling roles. Further, advocacy can address the need for more allied mental health providers to work in tandem with school counselors.

GUIDANCE FOR PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELORS While previous research has studied school counselors’ professional roles early in the pandemic, this is the first known study to examine their experiences during a later pandemic phase (i.e., recovery phase), as well as to reach beyond work roles, examining school counselors’ experiences more robustly. This study led to a novel understanding, that school counselors’ experiences were (a) aligned with concepts of shared trauma and PTG, and (b) were multifaceted, complex, and impacted multiple aspects of their lives. In addition, we saw the participants in this study struggle in the complicated recovery phase of the pandemic, adjusting to a “new normal.” As we remain in a “new normal” today, a year after data collection and three years after the start of the pandemic, this reality is especially important, as some scholars predict we will be coping with the aftermath of the pandemic for years (Hamilton & Ercikan, 2022). In our sample, we saw that this “new normal” (i.e., the present needs depicted by participants) was not the same for all school counselors or all school communities. Rather, acknowledging that this “new normal” appears ripe with inequities, across different school communities. As we continue to wrestle with the aftershock of COVID-19, we are left asking, “What occurred these last couple years, and what have we learned? What do school

counselors now need? How do we support school counselors so they can continue their crucial work meeting the complex and multi-faceted needs of their students, schools and communities? And as the impact of the pandemic has not affected all schools equally, how can the school counseling profession continue to advocate to develop more just and equitable systems in K-12 schools, and beyond?”

EQUITY DIMENSIONS While many schools/communities have returned to a “new normal”/recovery phase of the pandemic, this has not occurred equitably across K-12 schools/communities. The results of this study reinforce the U.S. educational and societal inequities that have historically been present, that were magnified during the pandemic, and still present today. This study adds to the call to dismantle inequitable and unjust systems in education and our society. Interrupting inequitable, oppressive and racist structures is especially fitting for the school counseling profession, given our prioritization of social justice. School counselors must continue their advocacy across multiple levels: students, schools, communities, and beyond.