

**COUNSELLOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE SCHOOL SETTING:  
A NARRATIVE STUDY**

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in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
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By

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe school counsellor development, paying particular attention to (a) what experiences school counsellors identify as significant markers in the development of their professional beliefs and practices, and (b) how such events come to attain their significance. Narrative methodology was utilized, with the intent of eliciting storied material and presenting the findings in storied format. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants: two school counsellors and two school social workers. A narrative was composed for each participant based on the researcher's analysis of the interview transcripts. The researcher discussed the individual participants' contributions to the research questions as well as some emergent across-cases themes.

Participants identified a wide range of experiences that had impacted upon their personal and professional development. There were several factors contributing to an experience's significance: (a) emotional intensity, (b) readiness to learn, (c) goodness of fit, (d) positive reinforcement, and (e) cognitive accommodation. Across-cases themes with reference to critical experiences included the influence of childhood, the challenging or painful nature of incidents, and the simultaneous strength and vulnerability of empathy. Issues in the practice of school counselling included a necessarily remedial focus, insufficient supervision, and interventions beyond counselling. Self-care practices and metaphors of counselling also frequently appeared in the narratives.

The narrative design of this study allowed for detailed descriptions of experiences that underlie general developmental trends identified in the counsellor development literature. The data suggested that school counsellors develop in much the same way as the wider counsellor population. However, they face impediments to optimal professional development in the form of excessive caseloads, inadequate supervision, and role confusion. Implications for future research and the practice of school counselling are discussed.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Doreen Chaddock.

Grannie, it is in no small part due to you that I have reached where I am. You have always been genuinely interested in my writing projects and I have been inspired by yours. Thank you for your loving attention and making me feel so special.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I was the shortest kid in my class during most of elementary school. What began to bother me as I approached puberty was not my height per se, but the fact that I couldn't fit into the "grown up" clothes and shoes like many of my classmates. I felt *stuck* in my childishness. At some point, I began to be woken at night with sharp pains in my legs. Neither aspirin nor comfort from my parents helped. A trip to the doctor confirmed that these were growing pains and nothing to be concerned about. My leg pains represented the beginning of a *growth spurt*: a critical period that was both confusing and exhilarating. While physical growth spurts are now behind me, I wonder whether psychological growth proceeds in the same stop-and-start fashion. There are certainly times when I experience "stuckness" and others when I can barely keep up with the changes. As I embark on my career in counselling, I am conscious not only of my clients' needs for development, but also my own. What needs to happen for me to grow and develop as a professional and as a person? How will I overcome stuckness in this career? When can I expect to be an "expert" at what I do? These are the kinds of questions that led me to this research project.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis was to explore and understand, within a narrative conceptual framework, how certain experiences act as catalysts in the personal and professional development of school counsellors. It was my intent to understand the kinds of real-life experiences that underlay the themes and stages predominantly described in the research literature on counsellor development. Thus, it followed that I conducted in-depth interviews with a small number of participants and attempted to represent their stories in a holistic fashion. A second purpose of the study was to address the paucity of research on counsellor development within specialty areas of the profession. I chose to examine school counsellor development, in part because it is my own area of practice, but also because of some unique facets of the role. For example, school counsellors often work in multiple settings, lack role clarity, and have little access to supervision. All of these factors and more may impact upon the professional development and personal well-being of practitioners in this field. Naturalistic, narrative inquiry was also considered appropriate for this exploratory purpose.

## Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, the research questions were:

- 1) What experiences do school counsellors identify as turning points or critical incidents in the development of their professional practices and beliefs?
- 2) How do these events come to have their significance?

## Need for the Study

The importance of studying counsellors' personal and professional development over the career span is twofold. Firstly, although graduate training programs are designed to prepare counsellors for a certain level of competence, the development of knowledge and skills does not end with the issuing of a degree. "The path from novice to expert is like a long hike on a challenging trail. It is step by step and can be filled with pitfalls and unexpected turns" (Skovholt, Grier, & Hanson, 2001, p.175). Practitioners in this field as well as new entrants might be wise to assume a stance of life-long learning. A second rationale arises out of the professional hazards of counselling such as therapeutic "failures" and inadequate self-care. Left unchecked, these kinds of experiences can have serious consequences such as professional burnout, which signals the end of competent practice (Skovholt et al., 2001). Counsellor development entails not only the work needed to help others, but also the work of sustaining the self.

Researchers have been looking at counsellor and therapist characteristics from a developmental standpoint since the 1960's (Hogan, 1964). This produced a number of stage models of counsellor development (e.g., Hill, Charles, & Reed, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). However, with the exception of one major study (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995), all these models focused on development during graduate education rather than over the entire career-span. There is a need for more studies adopting a developmental perspective to investigate counsellors with various levels of experience. Furthermore, a narrative approach may contribute to a refreshing new view of counsellor development. While the current

literature contributes greatly to one's knowledge of general patterns and themes in development, it is difficult to discern what real-life experiences underlie these generalities. As I hope the brief vignette at the beginning of this chapter shows, stories have the power to draw people in and to promote an emotional level of understanding that is difficult to achieve through other means.

A further focus in this thesis is the development of a specific subgroup: school counsellors. Few researchers have explored the personal and professional growth of practitioners within specialty vocations of counselling (Brott & Myers, 2002). This study is justifiable for this reason and also because certain facets of the school counselling profession, such as role confusion and insufficient supervision, present potential impediments to optimal development. The results of this study will be of interest to other practicing school counsellors, counsellors-in-training, and counsellor educators and supervisors. Furthermore, the subject matter could also appeal to other school personnel as well as consumers of counselling services.

#### Note on Terminology

Throughout this thesis I most frequently use the term "counsellor" to describe professionals who work in the mental health field. This is due primarily to my own educational grounding in counselling psychology. However, it is important to note that counselling is a general term for the activities of professionals with a variety of training backgrounds. The studies reviewed in chapter two included professionals with various titles such as counsellors, therapists, psychologists, and social workers. Furthermore, while I was aware of

differences between the fields of school counselling and school social work, I judged there to be enough common ground for one to inform the other. This study explored the experiences of both school counsellors and school social workers and found more similarities than differences in the way they perceived the work and their roles.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### Introduction

A review of the research literature on therapy and counselling shows that a majority of papers and studies focus on client factors. Less attention is paid to the other vital ingredient in a helping relationship: the counsellor. While a multitude of texts and manuals describe various skills and behaviours of counsellors that may facilitate client change, relatively fewer explore the more personal dimensions of practicing in this profession. A series of articles in *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* elucidated this issue of “the therapist as a neglected variable in psychotherapy research” (Special Series, 1997). The authors in this series agreed that “the therapist, as a person, contributes uniquely to the change process, above and beyond the skills normally applied in the form of techniques” (Bergin, 1997, p. 84). As individuals from a variety of theoretical viewpoints are converging on the importance of the person of the therapist and of the therapeutic relationship, more research is needed about counsellor development, particularly with regards to its subjective and personal aspects.

There are two overarching topics covered in this chapter. The first, counsellor development, begins with a discussion about the interrelatedness of personal and professional development for individuals in helping careers. Next, I

review what the literature reveals about counsellors before they even begin their professional training. Following this is a section on the developmental supervision literature, which encompasses counsellor development during graduate training and internship. I then review an extensive study that focused on therapist and counsellor development over the entire career span. Segments on an international project on psychotherapist development and the study of critical incidents in development comprise the remainder of the first topic. The second section focuses specifically on school counsellors. I review the limited research on school counsellor development and then comment on some factors that may hinder the process, particularly the documented rarity of clinical supervision in school counselling.

## Counsellor Development

### Professional Versus Personal Development

It is difficult to distinguish between the professional and personal development of counsellors. Wilkins (1997), although acknowledging the arbitrary nature of the distinction, described each term as follows. Professional development includes activities such as formal training, engaging in research, updating skills and knowledge by reading and attending conferences for example, and reflecting critically upon one's practice. On the other hand, personal development is:

the process of attending to our own needs in such a way as to increase our ability to be with our clients in a way that is not only safe for both parties but which incrementally improves our effectiveness. It is about dealing with our blind spots and resistance so that we may better accompany our clients on their painful or challenging journeys rather than risk blocking them because they seek to enter areas which are frightening or painful for us. It is also about

resourcing ourselves so that we have the energy and enthusiasm that effective work demands. Personal growth includes an obligation to address personal material which may inhibit our clients' therapy and also an equal obligation to care for the self of the therapist. If the self is the therapist's principal or only tool... then it is incumbent upon therapists to develop and maintain the self – that is to engage in the process of personal growth. (Wilkins, 1997, pp. 9-10)

Counselling is a challenging and demanding profession that often takes a heavy toll upon its practitioners (e.g., Watkins, 1983). At the same time, few other occupations have such a vested interest in their practitioners being happy, healthy, and whole.

Johns (1997) identified two forms of self-development that are important for counsellors: defensive self-development and proactive and creative self-development. Defensive self-development includes the actions counsellors must take in order to protect the safety of their clients and themselves. In terms of client well-being:

Clients are likely to be most vulnerable to unaware practitioners who use inappropriately power, seduction, influence, pressure or emotion; who are unable to identify their own "blind spots"; who are meeting their own unacknowledged needs; or who are unskilled or incompetent on any number of key dimensions. (p. 57)

Self-awareness and development are also necessary for the protection of counsellors against manipulative clients, and more commonly, against the weariness, cynicism, and staleness associated with professional burnout.

Whereas defensive self-development is about ethical practices and avoiding negative outcomes, proactive and creative self-development emphasizes the potential to flourish as human beings (Johns, 1997). Realizing the full extent of one's potential might be conceptualized as an appropriate long-term goal or vision for all counsellors.

Some key values in counselling and therapy cluster around the search for wholeness and balance; for integration of head and heart; for increasing awareness, understanding and growth; for the possibility of working towards a reliable belief system; for ways in which to identify, accept and meet enough of our own needs for life to be purposeful and rewarding; and for the learning that enjoying dependence, independence and interdependence is a lifelong task. These values lie at the heart of much therapeutic work for clients and should have an equal importance for therapists. (Johns, 1997, pp. 59-60)

It is apparent that engaging in professional development is a necessary, yet not sufficient activity for counsellors. In a profession that is part science, part art, the whole self of the practitioner will have bearing on his or her effectiveness. Thus, research that examines only specific skill or knowledge acquisition does not provide a complete picture of counsellor functioning.

#### Development Prior to Formal Training

Most theory and research that specifically addresses counsellor development uses entry into formal training programs as a starting point. However, there is another body of research that examines significant events in the lives of therapists and counsellors prior to any career training. The general line of thought in this research is that not only do such events influence the choice of a helping career, but they may also continue to affect counsellors throughout their careers.

Some writers and researchers in the field of counselling and therapy believe that painful or traumatic experiences in counsellors' own pasts stimulate a powerful interest in helping others. For example the concept of the "wounded healer" implies that practitioners create meaning from their own suffering and then apply this understanding with those they help (Goldberg, 1986). Several kinds of research have addressed this notion, including survey research assessing the

prevalence of trauma in counsellors' pasts (e.g., Pope & Feldman-Summers, 1992) and interview studies exploring how painful experiences are instrumental in developing counsellors' helping capacity (e.g., Wolgien & Coady, 1997). For example, Pope and Feldman-Summers (1992) surveyed 290 clinical and counselling psychologists and found that approximately one third had experienced physical or sexual abuse as a child or adolescent, as defined by the participants themselves.

Elliot and Guy (1993) surveyed a stratified random sample of 6,000 professional women with regards to childhood experiences and adult psychological adjustment. Their questionnaire included information regarding the history of childhood trauma, physical abuse, and sexual molestation. The mental health professionals (n=340) reported higher childhood rates of physical abuse, sexual molestation, parental alcoholism, hospitalization of a parent for mental illness, and death of a parent or sibling than other professional women (n=2,623). These were statistically significant differences. Interestingly, the mental health professionals reported less current psychological distress than the other professional women. In a similar study (Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994), mental health professionals (n=225) reported higher rates of childhood trauma than law enforcement professionals (n=46), although statistical significance was not assessed. Again, the mental health professionals reported lower rates of current trauma symptoms and psychological distress. It must be considered, however, that a reporting bias exists: perhaps, because of their psychological training, mental health professionals are more willing to acknowledge traumatic experiences than people

in other fields. If counsellors indeed experience more childhood trauma than other professional groups, it is unclear how these experiences influence career choice or professional ability. This is a question well suited to qualitative inquiry.

Wolgien and Coady (1997) interviewed eight therapists who were identified by their colleagues as particularly effective, asking them to identify experiences that had contributed to their ability to be helpful to clients. Five therapists identified difficult experiences in childhood, and explained that these events had increased their capacity for empathy and understanding, and sensitivity to issues of diversity and oppression. However, the question still remains as to why some individuals who have experienced trauma or painful circumstances assume a helping identity while others do not. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) noted this matter also, and suggested that a traumatic experience might act as a catalyst for individuals whose self-concepts are already congruent with a counselling occupational direction. Thus, painful experiences may activate or reinforce a helping orientation primarily when individuals already perceive themselves as possessing relevant abilities, interests, and values.

The importance of possessing appropriate abilities, interests, and values helps explain why individuals without significantly painful histories also become helpers. Farber (1985), for example, explored the concept of psychological-mindedness, which is “the disposition to reflect upon the meaning and motivation of behavior, thoughts, and feelings in oneself and others” (p. 170). Theories about the development of psychological-mindedness range from those that stress completely inborn tendencies to those emphasizing familial patterns. However,

Farber concluded that development always proceeds via the interaction of genetic endowment and a complex constellation of environmental influences, not as a result of a single developmental event. In any case, it appears that by the time individuals commit themselves to formal training in counselling, they have internalized the role of carer/helper/nurturer.

### Developmental Supervision Models of Counsellor Development

Many theories and research studies on counsellor development focus on the period of formal training. Graduate programs, especially internships, provide the opportunity for intense professional socialization of counsellors. As such, they are important arenas for counsellor development. The developmental supervision literature focuses on understanding how trainees develop so that training programs may provide the most appropriate, timely, and growth-enhancing supervision environments.

Hogan's Four Level Model. Stage models have been the dominant format for the description of therapist and counsellor development since Hogan's (1964) seminal paper on developmental supervision. Hogan proposed a four stage model of psychotherapist development and described supervisory behaviours that would be most appropriate at each stage. In this model, *Level 1* trainees are characterized as highly motivated, but insecure and un insightful. They are dependent on a supervisor and rely heavily on imitation. *Level 2* trainees are characterized as being both overconfident and overwhelmed, alternating between feelings of autonomy and dependence with respect to supervision. *Level 3* trainees have developed increased professional self-confidence and insight, and rely only

conditionally on a supervisor. They also possess more stable motivation for their chosen career. *Level 4* therapists are deemed *master psychologists*. They are autonomous, insightful, and secure. Peer consultation rather than formal supervision is suggested as appropriate at this stage.

In classical developmental theory, stages are characterized as universal, hierarchical, invariant, and as representative of qualitative changes in functioning (Lerner, 2002). However, most proponents of counsellor development stage models adopt a looser conceptualization. For example, Hogan (1964) cautioned that his levels of development are intended to be descriptive and not interpreted as discrete or mutually exclusive stages. He suggested that most developing therapists have characteristics of more than one level at any given point, and that therapists may cycle through *Levels 1* through *4* many times during their careers. Although Hogan's paper was brief and theoretical, it acted as a catalyst for further theory and research about the nature of professional and personal development for therapists and counsellors.

Stoltenberg's "Counselor Complexity Model". Stoltenberg (1981) appreciated the developmental perspective of Hogan's (1964) model. In the early 1980's, most discussion about counsellor supervision focused on specific skill acquisition, the use of theory to guide training, or supervision as a form of counselling. Stoltenberg felt that the supervision process was more aptly described as "a course of development that will culminate in the emergence of a counselor identity. This end point constitutes the integration of skills, theory, and a more complete awareness of oneself and others" (p. 59). Stoltenberg integrated

Hogan's (1964) four level model with Hunt's Conceptual Systems Theory (1971, cited in Stoltenberg, 1981), which described students' conceptual development through five stages and identified the environments that facilitate advancement to higher stages. Stoltenberg's (1981) resulting model, the Counselor Complexity Model, maintained Hogan's (1964) four levels of counsellor development, but elaborated on the changing supervision environments that are necessary to encourage movement towards increasingly complex levels.

Hill, Charles, and Reed's Conceptual Framework. Hogan's (1964) and Stoltenberg's (1981) theories were based on their personal experiences with trainees in counselling and psychotherapy. Hill, Charles, and Reed (1981), however, followed twelve counselling psychology students through three years of a doctoral program. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with the doctoral students about (a) the changes they felt they had made during graduate studies and (b) the perceived professional and personal impact of graduate school. These 30 to 60 minute interviews were conducted by the senior investigator and were analyzed by all three researchers. They developed a conceptual framework which summarized the changes discussed by the students and which incorporated ideas from Hogan (1964) as well as cognitive-developmental theory.

Hill et al. (1981) conceptualized the doctoral students as passing through four stages, whose main themes echo those of Hogan (1964) and Stoltenberg (1981). During the first stage, *Sympathy*, counsellors are typically overinvested in their clients and have difficulty setting limits. They base their evaluations of effectiveness on the degree of client change and feedback rather than on their own

behaviour. The second stage, *Counselor Stance*, describes the trainee at the point where he or she has rather rigidly adopted a particular system of counselling and is highly reliant on a supervisor's judgment. Counsellors at this stage tend to be more focused on their own thoughts and behaviours than on clients. Stage three, entitled *Transition*, represents a period during which counsellors realize the failure of any one system of counselling to work in all situations. They may learn to work with several systems simultaneously or become atheoretical in their approach. The fourth stage, *Integrated Personal Style*, describes counsellors who have succeeded in integrating many techniques and theories into a style that is uniquely theirs. These counsellors are independent, secure, and able to select appropriate interventions for clients. Although they studied graduate students, Hill et al. (1981) surmised that counsellors likely develop a truly integrated and personally relevant style only once they have acquired considerable experience, which occurs in the years following graduate study.

#### Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth's Conceptual Model of Supervision.

Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth (1982) offered another stage model of counsellor development. They proposed that counsellor trainees experience change and development around a number of key content areas. They suggested, based on an adaptation of Chickering's seven vectors of young adult development (1969, cited in Loganbill et al., 1982), that such key content areas may include (a) competence, (b) emotional awareness, (c) autonomy, (d) theoretical identity, (e) respect for individual differences, (f) purpose and direction, (g) personal motivation, and (h)

professional ethics. For each of these issues, counsellors sequentially experience the stages of *Stagnation*, *Confusion*, and *Integration*.

During *Stagnation*, the beginning counsellor is naively unaware of the need for development, while the more experienced counsellor is “stuck” in his or her current understandings. The second stage of *Confusion* characterizes how the counsellor becomes unstable, disorganized, and conflicted with regards to a particular content area. *Integration* occurs when she or he comes to a new conceptual understanding. Loganbill et al. thought that counsellors cycle through *Stagnation*, *Confusion*, and *Integration* in successively more profound levels throughout the professional life span. Unlike the previous models that were purely descriptive of counsellors at various stages of development, this model proposed the process of development.

Loganbill et al.’s (1982) conceptualization of counsellor development was influenced by the theory of Erik Erikson (1968, cited in Loganbill et al., 1982), which emphasized the role of critical periods. “Potential crises” that occur throughout the developmental process are “not a threat of catastrophe but a turning point, a critical period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential...” (p. 14). Thus, periods of conflict or uncertainty force counsellors to reconceptualize or reintegrate existing knowledge in a way that is qualitatively different than earlier understandings. The notion of critical incidents or intense learning experiences as factors in counsellor development will be discussed in greater depth in a subsequent section of this review.

Stoltenberg and Delworth's "Integrated Developmental Model". Based on the work of Hogan (1964), Stoltenberg (1981), and Loganbill et al. (1982), Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) delineated an expanded model of developmental supervision entitled the Integrated Developmental Model. Like Loganbill et al. (1982), they outlined a number of specific domains relevant to professional activities in which development takes place. The domains in this model include (a) intervention skills competence, (b) assessment techniques, (c) interpersonal assessment, (d) client conceptualization, (e) individual differences, (f) theoretical orientation, (g) treatment goals and plans, and (h) professional ethics. Within each domain, progress through three levels is determined by the degree of change within three overriding structures: self- and other-awareness, motivation, and autonomy. Thus, within any particular domain of the counselling profession, counselling trainees may be described as *Level 1*, *2*, or *3*.

The *Level 1* counsellor is focused primarily on him- or herself and is apprehensive about evaluation by the supervisor or client. He or she is highly motivated towards professional activities because of the intense desire to become a counsellor. The counsellor at this stage exhibits strong identification with authority figures. At *Level 2*, the novice counsellor has switched to an intense focus on the client, sometimes to the exclusion of her or his own experience. The experience of having success with some clients and not with others often results in fluctuating motivation to continue learning and working with diverse clients. This variability in motivation coincides with a dependency-autonomy conflict: at times the trainee wishes to function independently, while at others he or she is still

reliant upon direction from a supervisor. By *Level 3*, counsellors are able to move back and forth between their own experience and that of clients. Motivation stabilizes, as counsellors accept their own strengths and limitations without feeling they are failures. The counsellor is now confident working autonomously, willing to consult when necessary, but able to take or leave advice. A fourth possibility is called the *Level 3 Integrated Counselor*. A practitioner at this level has knowledge and skills at *Level 3* across all domains of practice. This person would be characterized as a “master therapist,” reflecting the fact that not all individuals reach this level.

Stoltenberg and Delworth conceptualized the process of development from one stage to the next as occurring through assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1972, cited in Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Assimilation occurs when one fits new information into an existing conceptualization. Accommodation is the process of changing one’s conceptualization in order to make sense of new information. These processes work in tandem, resulting in slow forward movement (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987).

Sawatsky, Jevne, and Clark’s “Becoming Empowered”. Sawatsky, Jevne, and Clark’s (1994) findings provide support to Loganbill et al’s (1982) ideas about the mechanism of development for counselors: the *Stagnation-Confusion-Integration* cycle. They conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine doctoral students in the final stages of a counselling psychology program. The students were asked about experiences that they felt had contributed to their effectiveness as counsellors. The interview transcripts were analyzed by the three

authors into themes. After several rounds of taking the data back to the participants for feedback, Sawatsky et al. articulated a basic developmental process called *Becoming Empowered*.

*Becoming Empowered* is a cyclical process, and has four component themes. The cycle begins with *Experiencing Dissonance*, a feeling of discomfort brought about by gaps in skills, knowledge, or experience, or by emotional turmoil. The following themes of *Responding to Dissonance* and *Relating to Supervision* center around activities that lessen discomfort. For example, an individual may engage in extensive reading, or use the supervisory process as a model for subsequent counselling sessions. The fourth theme is *Feeling Empowered*, in which counsellors experience changing perspectives and increased competence. When new experiences provoke dissonance, counsellors encounter each of these tasks again, leading to successively higher levels of development. This conceptualization bears a striking resemblance with Loganbill et al.'s cycle of *Stagnation-Confusion-Integration*. Although based on graduate students' experiences, the model could apply to any number of challenges that counsellors encounter over the professional life span, from the paucity of knowledge upon entering a training program to the feelings of burnout at the established professional level.

Summary. Several of the trainee development models focused on describing the behaviours, thoughts, and feelings of counsellors at various stages of development (Hogan, 1964; Stoltenberg, 1981; Hill et al., 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Although each model used different terms, there was a great

deal of similarity in the stage descriptions. Most of the models portrayed counsellor trainees' progress from a focus on self to a focus on the client, from sympathy to empathy, from rigid theoretical adherence to eclecticism, from anxiety to confidence, and from imitation to a personalized style. The other two models (Loganbill et al., 1982; Sawatsky et al., 1994) provided process-based stages. In each of these conceptualizations, counsellor trainees cycled through phases of calm, upheaval, and new synthesis, coming to deeper understandings with each successive phase. Future research is needed to assess the models' fit for non-student populations of counsellors, and to explore what factors promote and diminish development.

#### Counsellor Development over the Career Span

The models summarized up to this point fall under the rubric of developmental supervision in counselling and psychotherapy. The focus is on providing an overview of development so that supervisors of counsellor trainees can know how best to promote growth. One may conclude from this body of research that counsellors have reached their highest stage or level of growth once they no longer require formal supervision. Despite this optimistic picture, the literature is also replete with first hand accounts of counsellors who have felt ill prepared and ineffectual upon their entry into the professional world (e.g., Kottler, 1997). Even once counsellors achieve a sense of competence and comfort in their daily interactions with people in pain, hindrances to development do not disappear. The literature on professional burnout (e.g., Maslach, 1982), vicarious traumatization (e.g., Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995), and compassion fatigue (e.g.,

Figley, 2002) points to the dangers inherent in the helping professions. It seems clear that counsellor development is an important topic beyond the training phase.

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) recognized and addressed this important gap in the literature with a comprehensive study that sought to provide a thorough overview of therapist and counsellor development over the entire career span. They interviewed counsellors at every career phase, from prior to professional training to post-retirement. Their inquiry also tapped into a broad range of professional and personal experiences that impact development. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 120 therapists and counsellors. Based on existing literature and on the authors' work as practitioners and supervisors, Skovholt and Ronnestad created eight categories for structuring the interview data. Thus, the interview guide included prompts to illuminate the areas of stage definition, central task, predominant affect, sources of influence, role and working style, conceptual ideas used, learning process, and measure of effectiveness and satisfaction. Inductive analysis of the interview transcripts generated a stage model of counsellor development over the professional life span, as well as a model of the mechanism of development and a set of developmental themes. Their eight stages of counsellor development substantiate and expand the models previously described.

Eight Stages of Counsellor Development. Individuals at the *Conventional* stage are lay helpers who have not yet begun formal training as counsellors. Their role is that of sympathetic friends who, using personal experience as a knowledge base, listen and give advice. Conceptual ideas are based on common sense and

personal epistemology of life. Lay helpers measure their effectiveness and satisfaction according to feelings of friendship and enthusiastic interest, putting little focus on the actual success of their skills. *Conventional* stage helpers who have experienced suffering, as well as those who are older, have had personal therapy, training at the paraprofessional level, or have been involved in a social movement advocating freedom, liberation, or equality, have characteristics of the *Conventional* stage as well as more advanced stages of counsellor development.

The next stage in Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) model is *Transition to Professional Training*. This period generally ranges from the time individuals decide to enter graduate training through the first year of the training program. Trainees have the task of assimilating an extensive amount of new information and beginning to apply this knowledge in a counselling setting. With predominant feelings of enthusiasm and insecurity, these students learn much from the information gathered from classes and practicum, as well as the process of intensive "psychologizing." This term connotes the application of theoretical constructs to self and others. These students are influenced by multiple sources, including theories and research, clients, professional elders, their own personal lives, peers and colleagues, and the social and cultural environment. Because the sheer volume of information to be learned can be overwhelming, individuals at this stage often search intensively for a conceptual system that helps make sense of the data and provides specific techniques to help clients. With clients, these beginning counsellors are characterized by strong commitment, positive expectations, and often overinvolvement. There is a felt need for client improvement or

acknowledgment; otherwise, there is a great deal of stress for individuals at the *Transition to Professional Training* stage.

Counsellors at the *Imitation of Experts* stage are generally in their second or third year of graduate school or newly employed in the field. The central task of this stage is to remain open to the vast amount of information that is still being acquired, while at the same time selecting out theories and techniques to use in practice, particularly those that are modeled by professional elders. Imitation of the behaviour, appearance, style, or viewpoint of chosen models helps to transform initial bewilderment into temporary security. This step seems necessary to avoid becoming overwhelmed by such an intense learning environment. In adopting a conceptual system, however, student counsellors make it their own by first ensuring it makes sense in their own lives and the lives of their family and friends, as well as with clients. Skovholt and Ronnestad highlighted the process of self-development that is occurring at this time:

In an intense and pervasive fashion, the individual at this stage experiences strong emotions and compelling conceptualizations about one's past and present life. There is an intensive and private quality to this work. From this introspective and internal work comes a lava flow of new information which serves to strongly influence the individual's development. (pp. 33-34)

A final characteristic of individuals at the *Imitation of Experts* stage is a slightly reduced dependence on positive feedback from clients.

The fourth stage in Skovholt and Ronnestad's model is entitled *Conditional Autonomy*. Typical individuals at this stage are full-time interns under active supervision. Variable confidence is the predominant affect as interns attempt to function at an established, professional level. As in previous stages, personal and

professional development are intertwined. Awareness of personal issues has been brought about through intensive training experiences, and interns have realized the impact of these issues on their professional work. This often serves as a catalyst for entering personal psychotherapy. Interns continue to use modeling as a primary learning tool, but can now accept or reject specific components of the model. They also realize how personality influences professional work. Counsellors' working style at this stage tends to be serious and earnest: they may take on too much responsibility or have unrealistic expectations. However, the development of more subtle ways to assess client change as well as the "buffer effect" of seeing many clients further reduce interns' needs for positive client feedback. Supervisor evaluations are particularly important to interns' feelings of competence.

Previous models of counsellor development have left off at the point where trainees become professionals. Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) remaining four stages help to describe the triumphs and challenges that counsellors face in their journey from professionalization to retirement. Counsellors at the *Exploration* stage have typically recently received a graduate degree and are developing a professional experience base. Their task is to move beyond imitation and to sow the seeds of an original, personalized style of working. Central to this process is "personal anchoring," in which select theoretical and conceptual structures become anchored to one's own value base. New professionals experience both confidence, due to increased experience and skill, and anxiety, due to the realization that graduate training has not prepared them to address the complexity of work tasks.

Counsellors must learn to rely less on professional elders and more on colleagues and peers for sources of influence and measures of effectiveness. The need to solve clients' problems has been replaced by a vision of empowering, unblocking, or enabling clients to come up with their own solutions. In addition, new professionals experience more clarity, purposiveness, playfulness, and understanding within sessions that were once an overwhelming deluge of information. In terms of self-development,

There increasingly is a sense by the individual that people are motivated to become a therapist/counselor for a variety of reasons and that understanding one's own motivations and aspects of that motivation is important for success in the field... As the individual is increasingly choosing this occupational specialty and increasingly developing a deeper commitment to it, understanding oneself and establishing a personally chosen value base for one's work become an important focus. (p. 54)

For example, counsellors may need to address their "need to be needed," a previously unconscious motivation for entering the field.

The next stage, *Integration*, is typified by counsellors who have been practicing for a number of years after achieving a graduate degree. The central task at this stage is to develop a close fit between one's personality and one's professional role, working style, and conceptual system. With this development comes increasing self-trust. Counsellors learn by whatever means they find most useful, they become more flexible and take more risks, and they usually operate from an eclectic or personalized theoretical orientation. A new source of influence has arisen: mentoring novice counsellors helps many practitioners to clarify their own thinking. The predominant affect of the *Integration* stage is satisfaction due to the achievement of experience, credentials, the development of a personally

unique conceptual system and working style, as well as financial rewards. However, disillusionment is still possible, especially with the growing recognition that counsellors can only take clients as far as they are willing to go. Often clients do not change. At this point in one's career as a helper, the demands can become draining. Moderating factors that influence whether development or stagnation occurs at any point in the career span of counsellors will be discussed in a following section.

Practitioners at the *Individuation* stage of counsellor development are a heterogeneous group because of their divergent experiences, work settings, and individual paths of development. In spite of this diversity, there is surprising uniformity in terms of assumptions, procedures, and expectations about their work. While counsellors at this stage are more able to be present for clients while working, they are conversely more able to be distant from clients when away from work. The use of self as a primary therapeutic tool is an indication of how entwined professional and personal development have become. In contrast to earlier times as novices placing much importance on imitating the counselling style of professional elders, *Individuation* stage counsellors are the same people in and out of their professional roles. Few external markers of effectiveness are needed: expertise and giftedness are accepted as givens. Important tasks during this phase include developing deeper authenticity, continuing to explore and push oneself during a period where much settling down occurs, and avoiding energy draining pulls and stagnation. Satisfaction and distress are commonly experienced at the *Individuation* stage. Satisfied counsellors enjoy feelings of competence,

creativity, and “quiet excitement.” Distress, on the other hand, results from boredom with routine tasks, exhaustion, reaching a plateau in competence, motivation, or interest, or an unsupportive work environment. Continuing to seek learning experiences and constructing self-protective measures such as strict boundaries, adequate vacation time, and broader definitions of success are all important defenses against distress.

The final stage in Skovholt and Ronnestad’s (1995) model is called *Integrity*. By this time, counsellors have been practicing for 25 to 35 years. Each has developed a unique personal style; however, there are considerable similarities among these veteran counsellors. Wisdom accumulated over many years of professional and personal experience is more important than the influence of theories and research, colleagues, and the social and cultural environment. Nevertheless, learning is still an important dimension. At this stage, counsellors learn by the process of reinterpretation, integration, and synthesis of what is known. Data from personal life, clients, and broad reading are apt to support this process. Practitioners have strong autonomy: their working styles differ according to personality, experience, and work settings. The challenge at this stage is to accept and endorse oneself as a counsellor, which helps to maintain individuality while preparing for retirement. The overall focus is not on new growth, but on maintaining and prizing what has been developed and accepted as true. Depending on the degree to which they achieve these ends, *Integrity* stage counsellors have a sense of acceptance or regret. Those who are predominantly accepting develop an

understanding at the deepest level of what the work entails and what one can get from the work.

In summary, Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) stage descriptions corroborated the earlier theoretical work of Hogan (1964), Stoltenberg (1981), and Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987). They also resounded with the empirical findings of Hill et al. (1981). However, some of the developmental tasks appeared to extend much further into the career span than the earlier studies would seem to suggest. For example, the transition from imitation of professional elders to a personalized style was not complete by the end of formal training for Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) participants. It was not until after a significant period of professional practice, perhaps at the *Individuation* stage, that therapists and counsellors developed the wisdom and personal/professional unity that might be considered characteristic of a "master therapist." Skovholt and Ronnestad's research also highlighted the importance of studying counsellor development over the entire career span because of the ever-present risks of fatigue, burnout, and loss of motivation in human services careers. It is important not only to know how counsellors develop, but also to discuss what is happening in the absence of development.

The Stagnation/Development Model. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995), using the same data that generated the eight stages, addressed the mechanism of change underlying development through the stages. Development from one stage to the next in Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) model of counsellor development entails mastery of the stage's central task. The process that enables counsellors to

achieve mastery at any stage is labeled *Continual Professional Reflection*. The three components of this process are ongoing professional and personal experiences, a searching process with others in an open and supportive environment, and active reflection about one's experiences. When these components are in place, counsellors are said to be on the *Developmental Track*.

There are several alternatives to development. Counsellors may consciously enter *Moratorium* for a period of time, which represents a rest from the relatively tumultuous process of development: a "psychological sanctuary" (p. 135). From here, individuals can readily return to the *Developmental Track* when they are ready. The *Stagnation Track*, on the other hand, includes *Pseudodevelopment* or exiting the field altogether. *Pseudodevelopment* involves abandoning the reflective process due to its inherently anxiety producing quality. Individuals who enter this track often prematurely close off the exploration of conceptual systems. For example, some counsellors may make a committed choice to a particular theoretical orientation or a particular subset of clients without having engaged in extensive contemplation and exploration. Of course, events may occur that lead individuals back to the process of *Continual Professional Reflection*, and thus back to the *Developmental Track*.

Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) stagnation/development model resonates with the theoretical work of Loganbill et al. (1982) and the empirical findings of Sawatsky et al. (1994). In all of these conceptualizations, development entails moving back and forth between periods of relative stability (stagnation, moratorium), upheaval (confusion, dissonance), and consolidation (integration).

Counsellor development appears to depend on a willingness to experience times of intense doubt and uncertainty. If a practitioner avoids phases of confusion, then development does not occur.

There are a number of factors influencing whether development or stagnation occurs (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). An awareness and acceptance of the complexity of the work is favourable for development. In contrast, those who seek simplistic and reductionistic understandings will be inclined to stagnation. Awareness and insight into one's motivations to enter and stay in the profession are also important for ongoing development. In addition to readily accessible motivations such as the desire to help people, counsellors often harbour such incentives as obtaining increased power or intimacy. Skovholt and Ronnestad suggest that any of these motivations are valid so long as practitioners remain aware of them and keep them in check.

A number of other individual factors influence development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). The more counsellors can move away from the narcissistic belief that they are responsible for client change, the more likely it is they will continue to develop. Also, although self-development enhances professional development, an excessive focus on self-healing is likely to lead counsellors in the direction of stagnation. Individuals with a positive attitude towards challenge, who are able to tolerate and modulate negative affect, will be resistant to the stagnation track. Higher levels of integration between counsellors' personalities, value systems, conceptual systems, and methods and techniques are conducive to

higher levels of development. Finally, having a long-term, overarching career goal or vision facilitates professional development.

Counsellors' educational and work milieus also influence whether development or stagnation occurs (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). In training programs and work settings, people need opportunities to acquire new knowledge as well as "down time" to process and consolidate their understandings. Optimal development is also promoted by a balance between supportive and challenging aspects of the environment. Finally, Skovholt and Ronnestad asserted that all graduate students and professional practitioners establish contracts with their work environments, whether explicitly or implicitly. Making these contracts explicit, that is, mutually agreeing upon processes, demands, contributions, and goals, reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflict between the individual and the setting.

Summary. Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) work can be viewed as the most comprehensive work on counsellor development to date. Their stage model, derived from hundreds of in-depth interviews, reflects counsellor behaviours, attitudes, and emotions at every career phase. Their stagnation/development model explains what processes contribute to development as well as what is happening in their absence. Furthermore, they have articulated a variety of mitigating factors that influence the course of development. Their work corroborates and expands upon the developmental supervision literature described earlier. However, because Skovholt and Ronnestad's model has such a broad scope, one does not obtain a sense of the lived experience of the research

participants except through brief excerpts from select interviews. Future research that focuses on the rich description of individual experiences will complement the breadth of Skovholt and Ronnestad's work.

#### An International Project on Counsellor Development

In 1989, members of the Society for Psychotherapy Research formed a Collaborative Research Network (CRN) with the purpose of generating a program of research on psychotherapist development. Their research was conducted in order "to examine the nature, correlates, and perceived determinants of development among professional psychotherapists from different countries and cultures at all career levels, trained in different professions and theoretical orientations" (Orlinsky, Ambuhl, et al., 1999, p. 203). The CRN developed an instrument entitled the Development of Psychotherapists Common Core Questionnaire (DPCCQ), which taps into various aspects of the professional's background, functioning, and experiences. Its 370 items are primarily structured-response scales or checklists, with the exception of eight open-ended questions. The project was designed to gain four types of perspectives on psychotherapeutic development: therapists' own assessments of currently experienced development as well as retrospective career development, and researchers' assessments of cross-sectional cohort development and longitudinal individual development. Data collection began in 1991 and continues as additional opportunities arise.

Orlinsky, Ronnestad, et al. (1999) examined the 1998 database of the CRN, which included 3,958 psychotherapists from Western countries, with reference to psychotherapists' assessments of their development at different career levels.

Specifically, they looked at the relationships between level of professional experience, perceived therapeutic mastery, and currently experienced growth. As one would expect, they found that perceived therapeutic mastery increased with therapists' years in practice ( $r = .53, p < .0001$ ). In contrast, currently experienced growth was not significantly related to years in practice ( $r = -0.02$ ), indicating that regardless of length of practice, most therapists were perceiving similar levels of current growth. Thus, from the practitioner's point of view, development is more or less constant over the career span. A third finding was that perceived therapeutic mastery and currently experienced growth were moderately positively correlated ( $r = .27, p < .0001$ ). The authors suggested three plausible explanations for this finding: therapists who feel competent may tend to feel as though they are currently improving, therapists who feel they are improving may tend to feel high levels of mastery, or some third factor is influencing both variables. The authors offered a theory that tied together their data and reconceptualized growth as involving more the acquisition of therapeutic mastery:

The most plausible hypothesis we can offer at present is that the therapists' sense of currently experienced growth reflects a renewal of the morale and motivation needed to practice therapy, a replenishment of the energy and refreshing of the acumen demanded by therapeutic work.... If currently experienced growth is viewed as the "regrowth" or restoration of recurrently depleted resources, it is understandable that it is as essential to highly experienced practitioners as to trainees. On this view, currently experienced growth and the restoration it signals are needed as a consequence of the continuous investment that therapists make in their work rather than as a result of their inexperience. (p. 212)

Thus, "growth" occurs at all levels of experience, although beginning practitioners are gaining knowledge and skills while experienced professionals are renewing their commitment and deepening their understandings. The interview data from

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) support this expanded view of development for experienced therapists.

Another section of the DPCCQ was examined by Orlinsky, Botermans, and Ronnestad (2001). Using the database of over 4,000 therapist questionnaires, they examined the positive and negative influences of a number of variables on therapists' overall development. Participants rated the influence of fourteen potential factors. A general finding was that many of the influences were rated as highly positive while negative ratings were consistently low. Of the positive influences on career development, "experience in therapy with patients" emerged as the most salient. Next were "getting formal supervision or consultation" and "getting personal therapy, analysis, or counselling." These interpersonal experiences were clearly more significant to therapists' development than experiences such as reading or conducting research. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) also found this to be true: one of the themes they discussed in their work was entitled "interpersonal encounters are more influential than impersonal data" (p. 116). It shouldn't be surprising that human relationships are central in a profession that focuses on human potential. What is surprising is that despite the very real incidence of professional burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatization, on average the participants did not endorse negative influences on career development. Perhaps, since most therapists reported currently experiencing growth in their careers, the overall outcome of negative or difficult experiences was perceived as positive. It would be interesting to look at the

negative influence ratings for the subset of therapists indicating low levels of current growth.

### Critical Incidents in Development

In a capturing issue of the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) presented brief stories of 58 counsellors and therapists about career-altering events. Based on their own life experiences and their readings of lifespan developmental theorists, the authors asserted that “development (is) a life-long process, facilitated by the occurrence of numerous critical incidents” (p. 69). They solicited one-page written submissions of critical incidents, defining them as “events that stand out as significant markers in an individual’s professional development” and as “developmental turning points” (p. 69). In their discussion of the critical incident summaries, Skovholt and McCarthy noted that whether or not an event became critical for the contributors depended on their readiness to learn. Counsellor development, they proposed, results from this interaction between one’s readiness for challenge and the nature of a particular event. Put together with the later findings from Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995), it would seem that counsellors’ readiness for challenge and complexity keeps them on the developmental track, thus rendering critical incidents as ultimately positive developmental events. Critical incidents without such an openness to challenge could lead to the stagnation track with such outcomes as burnout or leaving the profession altogether.

Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) noted how several assumptions from the lifespan developmental perspective are helpful in conceptualizing the critical

incident summaries. Critical incidents can happen at any point: contributors to this issue wrote about childhood events as well as those occurring in later adulthood. Developmental change does not always occur incrementally, and can be both quantitative and qualitative. For example, some counsellors wrote about incidents that initially represented setbacks in their professional lives. A third theme is that the critical incidents – intrapersonal or interpersonal events, paradoxes, or disturbances – are necessary for developmental movement. And finally, both positive and negative occurrences can constitute critical incidents in terms of being developmental turning points.

#### Future Directions

The short vignettes compiled by Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) point to the potential for narrative research to elucidate what actually happens in counsellors' lives to promote professional and personal development. These authors attempted to sample a wide variety of counsellors and types of critical incidents. It would be interesting to find out how the critical incidents fit in with the larger life narratives of the participants. If development proceeds via a cycle of stability, turmoil, and reconsolidation, then it would be expected that counsellors experience multiple critical incidents over the career span. Creating a narrative of these important developmental events for several individuals would provide readers with a better understanding of how counsellors change throughout their careers.

#### School Counsellors

School counselors are at the forefront of the issues facing society. They see the impact of the major changes in Canada – jobs, interdependence of business

and government, full equality of women, bilingualism, unemployment, latch-key children, single mothers, drugs – as they affect students in the schools.... Children at all ages, but especially in the teen years are presenting stress-related problems, some culminating in suicide and other serious psychopathologies. This has put pressure on training institutions to prepare counselors to deal with a myriad of problems and utilize external services to greater degree now than ever before. (Paterson & Janzen, 1993, p. 155)

In general, the literature on counsellor and therapist development encompasses practitioners who work in a variety of settings and with a variety of clientele. Few researchers have specifically investigated the development of practitioners within the various specialties of counselling (Brott & Myers, 2002). School counselling is appropriately recognized as one such counselling specialty: one whose recent reconceptualization includes a focus on comprehensive, developmental, and collaborative programs (Paisley & Borders, 1998). The major components of such programs are individual, small, and large group counselling, consultation, and coordination (American School Counselor Association, 1997). The ability and preparedness of individual school counsellors to fit within this model presents an interesting context from which to view their career development.

#### School Counsellor Development

Brott and Myers (2002) pointed out that a great deal of attention has been paid to defining the profession of school counselling and the role and functions of school counsellors. However, “the actual functions of counselors in the schools do not always reflect what have been identified as the best practices in school counseling” (pp. 145-146). These authors suggested that within this context of conflict between school counsellor preparation and actual working environment,

one's professional identity is a frame of reference for carrying out work roles, making significant decisions, and developing as a professional. They conducted a grounded theory study investigating the development of professional identity for school counsellors. They focused their investigation of identity around professional conflict decisions, which arose as a salient theme in their review of the literature. Ten elementary and middle school counsellors participated in one-hour interviews with one of the researchers, answering questions about professional role, issues of conflict, and conflict decisions. The authors followed the rigorous coding procedures set forth by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in order to articulate a grounded theory of school counsellor professional identity development.

Brott and Myers (2002) labeled the process for performing in the role of school counsellor as the *Blending of influences*. A number of phases are involved in this ongoing process: *Structuring*, *Interacting*, *Distinguishing*, and *Evolving*. These are conceptualized as existing in dynamic interplay rather than as linear stages. *Structuring* describes those activities of school counsellors that define their role. This phase is evident at the onset of school counsellors' professional role as well as when conditions of the role change. Whereas the *Structuring* phase emphasizes the external perspective of professional identity development, the *Interacting* phase initiates the personal or internal aspect of self-conceptualization. Because interacting with multiple publics is inherent to the role of school counsellor, there is need for a personal framework to guide decision-making and judgments. The *Distinguishing* phase is characterized by school counsellors'

determination of the focus of their role performance and their perceptions of how they and others perform this role. The interplay of these three phases is a precursor to *Evolving*. Out of the intertwined structural and personal perspectives comes the guiding focus of personal guidelines for the school counsellor role. Brott and Myers (2002) concluded that school counsellor identity remains fluid over the career span because of the changing nature of conditions (e.g., experience, number of service providers, population being served) and the varying influence of the phases. Overall, there was evidence of professional maturation, and the authors recommended that further research explore this process.

#### School Counsellor Supervision

Within the counseling profession in general, clinical supervision has come to be recognized as essential to the continuing professional development of practitioners. The primary purpose of clinical supervision is to enhance the competence and increase the counseling skills of the counselor who is being supervised. Unfortunately, however, this is the type of supervision that school counselors are least likely to receive. (Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002, p. 56)

Recall the finding by Orlinsky et al. (2001) that counselors and therapists rated their supervision experiences as the second most positive influence on their career development. While most school counsellors receive administrative supervision – that is, direction from a school principal with regards to school requirements and accountability, a much smaller proportion receive supervision related to clinical skills, program development skills, and professional growth (Magnuson, Norem, & Bradley, 2001). A national survey of school counsellors in the United States (Page, Peitzak, & Sutton, cited in Herlihy et al., 2002) indicated that merely 13% were currently receiving individual clinical supervision and only

10% were receiving group clinical supervision. These results are troublesome, given the empirical support for the efficacy of clinical supervision in school counselling, including “enhanced effectiveness and accountability, improved counseling skills, encouragement of professional development, and increased confidence and job comfort” (Herlihy et al., 2002, p. 56). It is quite likely that these percentages are even lower in Canada. The American School Counselor Association has focused intensively on the professionalization of school counselling, including the development of position statements, publication of a professional journal, and development of national standards for school counselling programs (Herr, 2003). There is a school counselling chapter of the Canadian Counselling Association, but it has not yet made clear its vision for Canadian school counselling programs. Both the insufficiency of clinical supervision and the lack of a strong professional association for Canadian school counsellors are likely to affect professional and personal development for individual practitioners.

#### Future Directions

From an extensive review of the literature, only one article emerged as looking at school counsellors from a developmental perspective (Brott & Myers, 2002). It is difficult to compare this study with the general counsellor development literature because the authors described general action categories rather than counsellor characteristics at any given point in development or mechanisms of development. Thus, the question still remains as to whether school counsellor development is congruent with current conceptualizations of development in the broader profession (e.g., Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). There

are indications that school counsellors face significant obstacles to optimal professional development, including confusion over the role, insufficient clinical supervision, and for Canadians, the absence of an influential professional association. While Brott and Myers (1999) articulated some general issues that school counsellors face as they define themselves as professionals, they did not convey a sense of their participants' lived experience. Again, a narrative approach whereby individual school counsellor voices could be heard would be instrumental to our understanding of development in its day-to-day realities.

### Conclusion

In the general counsellor development literature, a number of stage models have contributed to a moderately cohesive description of developmental trends and processes. To date, the studies reviewed focused on the common rather than the unique aspects of the participants' stories. The exception that points to another possibility for understanding counsellor development is Skovholt and McCarthy's (1988) use of critical incident summaries. The question I asked upon reading this research remains pertinent: *How is it that certain experiences act as catalysts for personal and professional development?* It is here that the unique, personal, and idiosyncratic experiences of individuals could supplement an understanding of general patterns. I believed it would be revealing to explore a number of personally significant stories as they are anchored in counsellors' overall life experiences and their current professional understandings and practices.

Furthermore, I have found that relatively little has been written about school counsellor development. Considering that these professionals work at the

complex intersection between psychology and education and that they are often at the front line for children and families in need of support, it can be said that multiple challenges exist in their line of work. Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) suggested that readiness for challenge in combination with critical incidents provide the essential ingredients for professional development across the career span. Consequently, I decided to explore the development of school counsellors by asking them about events that were particularly meaningful in the construction of their counselling beliefs and practices. By looking at these developmental markers as well as the overall context of school counsellors' experiences, I believed it would be possible to understand how these professionals learn and grow.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2)

#### Narrative Knowing

Jerome Bruner (1986) distinguished between two fundamental ways of knowing: paradigmatic and narrative. While it could be argued there are more, I believe he meant to describe the two streams of thinking that are common in empirical research. The paradigmatic mode represents a traditionally scientific approach to knowledge: its aim is to describe and explain, and it employs such means as categorization and conceptualization. Explanations in the paradigmatic mode are context free and universal. In contrast, the narrative mode seeks out knowledge that is context sensitive and particular. “It deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). In other words, paradigmatic knowing is about factual “truths” while narrative knowing is about stories.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) posited that the term narrative describes both a human phenomenon and a way for studying it. The phenomenon is that people live storied lives. “People strive to organize their temporal experience into meaningful wholes and to use the narrative form as a pattern for uniting the events

of their lives into unfolding themes” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 163). Narrative is the human propensity to generate stories to make sense of ourselves and our lives. Not only do we tell stories about real experiences, but stories also shape reality (Winslade & Monk, 1999). The stories we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us influence our actions on a continual basis. The absolute truth of narrative accounts is not a primary issue: through stories, we see the world as the teller sees it, connoting narrative truth (Reissman, 1993).

According to Bruner (1986), the paradigmatic approach is most appropriate if one wishes to describe, explain, or make predictions about a particular phenomena, human or not. Conversely, the narrative approach is suitable when the goal is to understand some aspect of human experience. Narrative as a research method resounds with, rather than fragments, a fundamental human way of understanding and ordering phenomena. “Narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10).

### Narrative Inquiry

There is no simple or single explanation of narrative inquiry. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) acknowledged that “the use and application of this research method seems to have preceded the formalization of a philosophy and methodology parallel to the practice” (p. 1). Polkinghorne (1994) identified two distinct types of studies that fall under the heading of narrative inquiry. In the first, which he called the “analysis of narratives,” researchers use stories as data,

but use paradigmatic processes such as thematic analysis or taxonomy in the analysis. Discourse analysis is an example of this kind of narrative study. In the second type of narrative inquiry, which Polkinghorne (1994) labeled “narrative analysis,” researchers synthesize a collection of descriptions into a story.

In this type of analysis the researcher’s task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the elements as contributors to a goal or purpose. The analytic task requires the researcher to develop or discover a plot that displays the linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in a denouement. (Polkinghorne, 1994, p. 15)

Thus, narrative research is used to move from stories to common elements as well as from elements to stories.

Reissman (1993) contrasted narrative analysis with other approaches to qualitative analysis. She argued that approaches such as grounded theory often fracture narratives, taking bits and pieces out of context in the service of interpretation and generalization. She maintained that narratives, as respondents’ essential structures of meaning-making, should be respected and preserved. Whether a narrative study employs “analysis of narratives” or “narrative analysis,” the final research product includes participants’ narratives in a more or less complete format. The intended effect of the narrative research method is to provide a sense of the whole through rich descriptions of the “concrete particularities of life that create powerful narrative tellings” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5).

#### Selection of Narrators

In order to investigate school counsellors’ stories of meaningful experiences in development, I planned to conduct in-depth interviews with three to

five school counsellors. Most narrative studies utilize a small number of participants because of the large quantity of data that tends to be generated (Leiblich et al., 1998). Having fewer participants allows for in-depth coverage of each individual's story as well as some breadth, as each person will have a unique history and perspective.

A purposeful sampling approach was used, meaning that people meeting certain criteria were sought rather than a sample representative of the overall population (Palys, 1997). For the purposes of this study, school counsellors were defined as individuals whose primary place of employment is within a school system and whose primary role is counselling students. I decided to include school social workers in the sample because counselling is a significant component of their roles. I was aware of philosophical differences between the fields of counselling psychology and social work, such as the relative focus on individuals versus systems. However, it has been my observation, given the unique characteristics and demands of working in schools, that school counsellors and social workers share many of the same issues, outlooks, and practices. The common practice of including mental health professionals with a variety of training backgrounds (e.g., clinical and counselling psychologists, social workers, mental health counsellors) in studies pertaining to counselling and therapy provided further support for my decision.

Participants were recruited by means of an information letter (Appendix A), which was distributed to school counsellors and social workers in an urban area in Saskatchewan. Six individuals contacted me about the study and four of

these wished to participate: three females and one male. One participant was at an early career stage, two were mid- to late career, and one had recently retired. Two identified themselves as “school counsellors” and had training in educational psychology and two preferred the term “school social workers,” reflecting their training background.

### Procedure for Gathering Narratives

#### Interviews

The method for gathering data for this study was the qualitative research interview (Kvale, 1996). This tool helps the researcher “to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation” (Kvale, 1996, p. 1). Conversation is a fundamental aspect of human interaction and conversations tend to be replete with stories. An interview, put simply, is “a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). However, interviews depart from informal conversations because one person is more responsible for guiding and shaping the direction of the discussion. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer introduces the major themes to be covered and has in mind some suggested questions, but remains open to the directions suggested by the answers and stories of the interviewee (Kvale, 1996). This structure allows researchers to stay with the main topic of interest, but also to follow the interviewee’s lead in a spirit of discovery.

Interviewing is a widely used tool, and interviews for varying purposes look very different from one another. Even within qualitative research

interviewing, there are diverse traditions that shape the way interviews are conducted. In phenomenology, for example, researchers look for the *essences* of lived experience (Merriam, 2002). A phenomenological interviewer focuses on gleaned descriptions of what it is like to experience a given phenomena. When a study is conceptualized as narrative, this affects the interview situation as well as the analysis and final report. In a narrative research interview, the interviewer may encourage participants in the unfolding of stories, help them to produce coherent stories, or ask directly for stories (Kvale, 1996). Thus, narrative is not only what one does with the data, but intertwined with and inseparable from the entire research process, from question formulation to final manuscript.

Two, ninety minute meetings were reserved for a semi-structured interview with each participant. I used an interview guide (Appendix B) to anchor the conversations in the purpose of the research. There were three main areas to cover: overall life context, details of current practices and beliefs, and the stories of important experiences in development. In order to address my primary research questions, I asked, “*Looking back on your life, what stories would you tell in order to explain how you’ve become the counsellor you are today?*” The interview guide also contained potential follow up questions and prompts that helped to flesh out the stories. In framing these questions, I was influenced by Seidman’s (1998) interviewing structure, which emphasizes context, the details of current experience, and the overall meaning of experience. Thus, in addition to specific stories of meaningful experiences, I was interested in the overall context of the

participants' lives, their current professional beliefs and practices, and how they saw it all fitting together.

In qualitative research, one does not wait until all the data have been collected before beginning analysis (Merriam, 2002). The researcher begins to process and reflect on the data beginning with the first interview. This initial data may shape, inform, and influence the data collection, according to emerging concepts. During my data collection, the second interview with participants often provided me with the opportunity to clarify or expand on my understandings of stories already introduced. The two-interview structure also granted the interviewees time to reflect and to offer further insights or anecdotes. Additionally, participants who were interviewed earlier brought up certain interesting points, which I then incorporated into interviews with others. For example, my first participant, when asked whether there was anything she would add, spoke about the importance of self-care. I asked the other participants about this facet of professional development and their responses resulted in a section entitled "reflections on counsellor development" in the results chapter.

Once I had written the narratives based on the interview transcripts, I gave each participant his or her story to read. I asked them to think about whether the narrative captured their experience and seemed to "fit." They also had the opportunity to change or eliminate any information they were not comfortable having in print. Finally, I asked them to suggest a title for their individual narratives. Thus, I met or spoke with each participant at least once more to discuss his or her response. The purpose was to maximize our collaboration in the creation

of the narrative product rather than to delimit a singular truth. Narrative researchers acknowledge that “the two narratives of participant and researcher become, in part, a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As such, there is no one truth that can be verified or disconfirmed – only a story that represents a set of understandings at a given point in time and place.

The interviews took place in various locations according to the participants’ preferences. I asked that the location be quiet, comfortable, and private in order to facilitate open discussion (Glesne, 1999). Aside from one interview conducted in a small conference room at the University of Saskatchewan, we met either at the participants’ homes or mine. Each interview was recorded with the use of an audio recorder and microphone. I also kept a notepad for writing down points of interest to come back to. Soon after the interviews I transcribed the audiotapes into written documents.

### Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes can provide any study with a personal log that helps the researcher to keep track of the development of the project, to visualize how the research plan has been affected by the data collected, and to remain aware of how he or she has been influenced by the data. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 108)

A second source of data informing this project was the notes I kept as I planned the study, conducted interviews, transcribed, and wrote narratives. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) differentiated between descriptive fieldnotes and reflective fieldnotes. Descriptive fieldnotes portray observable details, such as the setting of an interview, what an interviewee is wearing, or facial expressions. I did not focus on taking descriptive notes because I believed the participants’ narratives

would speak for themselves. Reflective fieldnotes, on the other hand, record the researcher's subjective processes such as ideas, hunches, questions, decisions, and plans. My purposes for keeping reflective fieldnotes were to assist me with data analysis, to help me describe the research process in the final document, and to establish the credibility of the study (see the section on criteria for quality).

### Researcher as Instrument

Merriam (2002) noted that, in all forms of qualitative research, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (p. 5). The “human instrument” is able to immediately respond and adapt, thus making attainable the goal of understanding a phenomenon. However, human perception also makes it possible to understand a single phenomenon in a variety of ways. Instead of trying to eliminate bias, qualitative researchers believe it is important to identify and monitor their “subjectivities” in order to know how their beliefs, attitudes, and cultures influence the research process (Merriam, 2002). Peshkin (1988) suggested that researcher subjectivity can be viewed positively, as it can be “the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 18). By acknowledging the worldview from which research decisions and interpretations are made, the researcher empowers the audience to come to their own conclusions about the legitimacy of the research product.

One rationale for conducting the current study was developed in the previous chapter. Narrative research on counsellor development can help to fill in the real-life details that inform more advanced practice. Furthermore, little

research has been conducted pertaining to the development of school counsellors. My research was intended to fill in these gaps in the literature. I also came to this project with more personal motivations. I am a graduate student in counselling psychology, and as I reach the conclusion of my training program I am strongly aware that I lack the wisdom and finesse of a “master therapist.” Any research that suggests that counsellors continue to gain expertise throughout their professional careers is of great comfort and encouragement. Secondly, I am recently employed as an elementary school counsellor and I find that working at this crossroads between psychology and education brings about unique challenges. For example, do I define myself as an educator or a mental health professional? Recent school counselling literature emphasizes the educative, developmental, and preventative aspects of the role while the realities of counsellor to student ratios mean that I attend primarily to problems and crises. Research that delves into the challenges and triumphs of my particular career is of great interest and benefit to me.

A personal trait that I needed to remain aware of during this research project was what I would call an optimistic/idealistic view of the counselling profession. It is my general expectation that things will work out, that no challenge will be too great, and that there will usually be a happy ending. This could place me at risk for what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) called “the Hollywood plot” or what Spence (1986) called “narrative smoothing.” This is a process occurring during data collection and writing which results in a plot where everything works out in the end. I attempted to counterbalance this tendency by

listening for the participants' current vulnerabilities, dissatisfactions, and limitations as counsellors as well as their strengths and wisdom. It seems reasonable to expect that certain life experiences, particularly painful ones, could be simultaneously advantageous and detrimental to one's capacity as a counsellor. For example, an increased capacity for empathic understanding that could result from one's own struggles may also be accompanied by an increased vulnerability to compassion fatigue or overinvolvement. I needed to remain aware that, like myself, my participants are on a journey of development without a prescribed endpoint. Their stories represent not a finished product, but a point in time on that journey.

## Narrative Analysis

### Transcription

Although transcripts tend to be regarded as the hard empirical data in interview studies, it is important to note that interpretation plays a prominent role in the translation from oral to written form (Kvale, 1996).

Transcribing involves translating from an oral language, with its own set of rules, to a written language with another set of rules. Transcripts are not copies or representations of some original reality, they are interpretative constructions that are useful tools for given purposes. (Kvale, 1996, p. 165)

The amount of detail recorded in a transcription usually depends on the type of analysis being performed with the data (Kvale, 1996). For example, for a detailed sociolinguistic analysis, it would be important to record the speaker's "ums," pauses, stutters, and hesitations. As with the current study however, when the objective is to communicate the meaning of participants' stories to readers, a smoother, more literary style is appropriate. I decided to transcribe the audiotaped

interviews myself in order to become immersed in the data. This was made easier by the use of a transcriber, a foot-operated tape player that frees the hands for more continuous typing. As I listened again to the interviews I could jot down reflective fieldnotes to be used in the analysis.

### Writing Narratives

Narrative analysis comes under the general umbrella of inductive analysis. Unlike many quantitative studies, which assess the data's fit with preexisting theories and hypotheses (top down), qualitative research emphasizes starting with the particulars and moving towards the general (bottom up) (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In the current study, I took the raw data (the interview transcript) and organized and condensed it into a coherent story. Once this was completed for an individual participant, I commented on some intraindividual themes and patterns. Then, I discerned some even broader patterns by making comparisons amongst the four participant narratives. In this way I moved from a substantial amount of data to a few key points.

Lieblich et al. (1998) presented a useful model describing different possibilities for reading, interpreting, and analyzing narrative materials. Researcher decisions can be placed at some point on one dimension ranging from categorical to holistic approaches and on another dimension emphasizing form versus content. The categorical – holistic continuum refers to the unit of analysis. Researchers who take a categorical approach may be interested in certain utterances or sections irrelevant of the complete text. Conversely, “in the holistic approach, the life story of a person is taken as a whole, and sections of the text are

interpreted in the context of other parts of the narrative” (Leiblich et al., 1998, p. 12). On the second continuum, a form-based approach is oriented toward structural elements of stories such as sequence, style, and word choice. A content-oriented approach, on the other hand, may focus on explicit content (what happened) and also on conceptual content (meaning and understanding). The current study, when examined on these dimensions, employed a holistic-content type of narrative analysis.

The holistic-content mode of reading uses the complete life story of an individual and focuses on the content presented by it. When using separate sections of the story, such as the opening or closing sentences of the narrative, the researcher analyzes the meaning of the part in light of content that emerges from the rest of the narrative or in the context of the story in its entirety. (Leiblich et al., 1998, p. 13)

The holistic-content type of analysis resounds with what Polkinghorne (1994) referred to as “narrative analysis” whereas categorical or form-based approaches describe the “analysis of narratives.”

The principal outcome of my analysis was an overall narrative for each participant. As Kvale (1996) claimed,

An interview analysis can be treated as a form of narration, as a continuation of the story told by the interviewee. A narrative analysis of what was said leads to a new story to be told, a story developing the themes of the original interview. (p. 199)

To do this, I engaged in narrative finding: looking for portions in the interviews that are essentially intact stories, as well as narrative creating: weaving the unstoried aspects of interviews into coherent narratives (Kvale, 1996). This resulted in individual participant narratives, each representing a holistic account of what was constructed during the interviews. Once the narratives were written, the

participants read them and then we discussed any misinterpretations or desired changes. On the whole the participants expressed satisfaction with their narratives and no major revisions were requested.

Many of the models presented in Chapter 2 focused on identifying common themes and patterns in counsellor development: a procedure that necessarily eliminates the unique elements of each individual's journey. In contrast, the primary focus in this research project was to provide a sense of the lived experience of school counsellor development through stories that extensively incorporated the participants' voices. However, once that end was accomplished, I also commented on patterns within and across the narratives in order to integrate my research findings with the current literature. While thematic analysis was not my focus, I was cognizant that "a full description of a story should include both the elements that are unique to that particular story and those that can be found, at least in essence, in other stories" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 167).

#### Criteria for Quality

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted that the language and criteria for conducting "good" narrative research remains under development in the research community. "Like other qualitative methods, narrative relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). The same authors in a later manuscript highlighted the practice of "wakefulness" as an overriding concern (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Wakefulness describes an overall alertness and awareness about

all of one's research decisions. This is best achieved within a research community that encourages diversity, questioning, and searching. I believe wakefulness was achieved in this research project thanks to the careful readings, questions, and comments of my advisory committee.

Despite the debate as to what constitutes appropriate criteria for quality in narrative research, I attended to several procedures that have a tradition in qualitative research "trustworthiness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A trustworthy piece of research is judged to possess adequate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checks are the key strategy for establishing credibility or "truth value." By taking the written narratives back to the participants to assess their fit and attending to any misinterpretations, I confirmed that the stories were adequate representations of their realities. Peer debriefing is another technique that helps to establish credibility, in which the researchers' thoughts and decisions are elicited and examined by a "disinterested" peer. The existence of my research committee, particularly during the planning stage, ensured that this project did not become too clouded by individual biases and assumptions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that thick description improves the transferability of research results, or the degree to which results can be applied to other contexts. I accomplished thick description by presenting the data in narrative format and by keeping the narratives as closely reflective of the interview transcripts as possible and practical. Dependability refers to whether other researchers, following similar methods, would reach similar results and confirmability refers to the degree to which conclusions arise from the data and not

the researcher's assumptions. While I did not have an outside party audit this inquiry, in essence my documentation of methods, procedures, and decisions as well as my reflective fieldnotes would enable readers and future researchers to assess my study on those dimensions.

I would also like to include Runyan's (1982) criteria for evaluating case studies. Lieblich et al. (1998) found these to be relevant goals for researchers embarking on a narrative inquiry. While there are no set rules for achieving these ends, I aspired to create narratives that:

1. [Provide] 'insight' into the person, clarifying the previously meaningless or incomprehensible, suggesting previously unseen connections;
2. [Provide] a feel for the person, conveying the experience of having known or met him or her;
3. [Help] us to understand the inner or subjective world of the person, how they think about their own experience, situation, problems, life;
4. [Deepen] our sympathy or empathy for the subject;
5. Effectively [portray] the social and historical world that the person is living in;
6. [Illuminate] the causes (and meanings) of relevant events, experiences, and conditions; and
7. [Are] vivid, evocative, emotionally compelling to read. (Runyan, 1982, p. 152)

Lieblich et al.'s (1998) concluding statements about narrative research criteria convey the same message as Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) wakefulness:

We do not refer directly to the truth-value of a narrative study but propose that a process of consensual validation – namely, sharing one's views and conclusions and making sense in the eyes of a community of researchers and interested, informed individuals – is of the highest significance in narrative inquiry. (p. 173)

Exact criteria for research quality are always in flux because, as Mishler (1990) asserted, validation is the "social construction of knowledge" (p. 417). The issue

is whether the relevant community of researchers can rely on a particular set of reported findings for their own work. Mishler felt that most important in this process is “the task of articulating and clarifying the features and methods of our studies, of showing how the work is done and what problems become accessible to study” (p. 423).

### Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board, I took steps to ensure the well-being of the participants in this research project (Appendix C). Informed consent was obtained from each participant. The consent form (Appendix D) outlined the purpose and procedures of the study. It described the possible benefits of participation, such as gaining increased insight into one’s professional development, having one’s story heard, and contributing to professional knowledge about school counsellor development. Although this study was judged to be of minimal risk, participants were informed of foreseeable risks or discomforts. Some experiences that came to mind may have been of a sensitive nature, and recalling and speaking about them could have resulted in participants feeling upset or uncomfortable. At all times, participants were free to decide what they would or would not disclose, and could choose not to answer any question. They also had the right to withdraw from the study without penalty at any time, including any and all data. A list of community resources (e.g., counselling services) was provided for participants.

The consent form also outlined the steps that were taken to protect participants’ confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were asked to choose

pseudonyms for themselves and any other individuals mentioned in their stories. Direct identifying information was altered or excluded from the written narratives. Once participants read a draft of their narrative and discussed any desired additions, deletions, or changes with me, they were asked to sign consent for the public release of narrative information (Appendix E). Participants had the right to withdraw any or all of their responses. At the end of the study, all data, including audiotapes and transcripts, were securely stored at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years by one of the faculty members supervising this project.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**NARRATIVES OF SCHOOL COUNSELLOR DEVELOPMENT**

Introduction

The stories of Alyssa, Lucy, Luke, and Maria, four individuals who counsel(led) in a school setting, are the heart of this chapter. Each story is presented in first-person narrative and retains much actual dialogue from the interview transcripts. I precede each narrative with a brief introduction to the participant, noting his or her career stage and some prominent personality traits or highlights of the interview. The narratives have a uniform structure: an overview of the counsellor's career is followed by a description of his or her current beliefs and practices in school counselling. The next sections comprise each participant's response to the question, "Looking back on your life, what stories would you tell in order to explain how you've become the counsellor you are today?" This is where the narratives become as unique as the individuals telling them. Readers will discover that a variety of experiences - distant and recent, personal and professional, painful and positive – impact upon how counsellors think and practice. The narratives are concluded with the participants' reflections on counsellor development. Finally, I follow each narrative with my own reflections on what it has contributed to the primary research questions, namely what

experiences are important to counsellor development and how do they act as catalysts?

Alyssa

### Researcher's Introduction

I was excited when Alyssa called me about participating in this study. She has considerable training and experience in the fields of psychology, social work, and counselling. She is currently employed as a school social worker. I met with Alyssa in her home, which reflected her many and various interests and hobbies. We sat down with herbal teas and discussed her work and the experiences she believes to have been fundamental in her professional development. Alyssa spoke with warmth, wit, and confidence, and I believe her story reflects those aspects of her personality.

### Alyssa's Narrative: "If You're Not Part of the Solution, You're Part of the Problem"

A Career Overview. How did I come to be a school social worker? Let's see. That came about as a fluke, really. After I graduated from high school I was expected to go to university. Mom had two degrees and dad was a professional and so they were keen on me going to school. But what to take? I took psychology classes because I was interested in people and that's about as far as my thinking went. And I minored in sociology for the same reason. I just loved the university life. I liked learning and I liked being on the scene. I didn't feel like I was doing it to get someplace else: it was an end in itself. It was just very cool to

be there and I ended up spending six years there getting my psych. degree and working as a research assistant.

After I graduated from university I worked for several years at a residential treatment facility for children and adolescents. My job was in assessment: I would work with kids over a six-week period and write reports at the end of it. I loved working there. Not only was it a great training experience but I discovered how much I liked working with young people. It was a very cool place – I'll tell you more about it later.

After that, my husband and I moved to a smaller center and I couldn't find work. You know small towns: you have to be third generation or you don't get hired. But it didn't matter. We had a child by that time so I stayed home. The next year we moved again and I worked in a group home while my husband stayed home. I stayed there for a year. It wasn't what I had wanted but I was from out of province and I find they're very particular here about hiring their own. In fact, I was turned down by a residential treatment center, which was right up my alley because of my previous experience. They were crazy not to hire me! Someone from that center later admitted that. But, too late!

For the next few years I held a variety of positions within a governmental organization. During that time I also began working on my social work degree. Compared with the individualism of psychology, I think that social work was a better fit with my philosophy of life. That sounds like a very altruistic motivation, but the real reason that I went in to do my degree was that my agency was requiring it. Saskatchewan has historically been a social work oriented province

so if you wanted to fit in with people in the field, you really had to have a social work degree. So the final year I went full-time and finished my B.S.W. After that, I continued to do some contract work with the governmental organization but I also went into private practice. That was the next few years, and then a friend of mine at the school board took the liberty of putting my name forward for a school position. I'm happy to say that turned into a permanent position and that's how I ended up where I am now.

A few years ago I went back to university to do my master's in social work. It was exciting to get involved in academic life again. I went back to school because I love to learn and I had so enjoyed my earlier experiences in university, not to get a raise or a different position. I'm not finished yet: there will always be new things to learn and I've got plenty of ideas that will keep me interested in this line of work.

Current Beliefs and Practices. The way things are currently set up, I am involved in four schools as well as a special program for children with behavioural problems. That means I'm on the move a lot. I keep a rough schedule of where I'm going to be but it's never written in stone. I often have to make changes in order to meet with families at their convenience or to deal with high priority issues. If there's such thing as a typical day, I guess it would be arriving at the school where I'm scheduled to be and checking in with the secretary. I usually head to the staff room and check my mailbox for new referrals. Often, somebody – the principal, a teacher, or a parent – is waiting to talk to me as soon as I walk in the door. Hopefully I can get a coffee and then I go to my office and check over

what I have planned for that day. I try to organize my time around my priorities at that school, so if I have five students I need to see I'll consider each child's need and availability. But that's a simplified version because it's not only individual students who make up my caseload. Sometimes it's a family, sometimes a group of students or a classroom, sometimes a staff member, and it can even be as large as an entire school in the case of a tragic event. So I really don't have the same kind of work or the same kind of client all the time.

A significant issue in the schools is that I have no control over the number of clients that I have. I guess that one option would be to tell principals that I can deal with ten students and have them prioritize the requests but I'm not comfortable with that. That's a professional judgment that I would prefer to make. When I get a referral I start by assessing the situation and deciding on the most useful intervention. Individual counselling for students is not always justified. I might be better off working with the parents to deflate some conflict or talking to the teacher about behavioural management. If someone is looking for long-term, weekly counselling I will refer them to the community because I simply cannot guarantee that. But I never turn things away at the outset because I don't have all the information. You know, something may look very benign and then I may find out that there's much more going on than what the referring person was aware of.

In cases where I do decide to counsel a child, I prefer to first meet with the parents and share with them a bit about myself and the way I work. In my first meeting with the child I do the same thing: let them know about confidentiality and what to expect. If I'm aware of a serious situation, like a suicide threat, then

I'll do a risk assessment right away. Otherwise I like to start off doing a family map with the student. It's a great conversation starter, it gives me a sense of how the person fits with their family, and it helps me to have a written record of information I might otherwise forget by our next meeting. I would say that some of my best skills are in assessment: I like to be informed before I go off in a particular direction. In terms of counselling theories and techniques, I'm not a subscriber to any one thing. I think a lot of them have value, so I borrow ideas from solution-focused counselling, narrative therapy, coaching, and strategic family therapy, to name a few. I have even drawn on some concepts from the alternative therapies field. Regardless of theoretical position, I feel that when somebody comes in to see me I need to do something beneficial for them, no matter how small. Many times it's as simple as being a good listener so that the person can work things through on their own.

I find that it's very difficult to get around to preventative kinds of activities. When I first started working in the education system, I had only one school and so I did my work very differently. I would go around to every classroom, every year, and introduce myself and talk about my profession. I would offer to give classroom or small group presentations on communication or social skills or divorce. I would give staff inservices. I'm not so keen on doing that now because I think it would be death by stress. I have trouble just keeping up with what I get without having to advertise my services. It's not that I say no when someone asks me but I think there's something unethical about promoting the idea that I'm available when I can't fit the bill. Maybe other people can do it.

Generally speaking, I wouldn't have a clue what other school social workers' or counsellors' jobs are like and they wouldn't have a clue about mine. That's because I essentially create my job: I make the decisions about what I do and how I do it and that's something I actually enjoy. It's too bad that we're so stretched though because preventative activities are a better bang for your buck. I've facilitated some programs that made a huge difference in the functioning of whole classrooms.

Nowadays, I'm usually asked to get involved when there's some kind of problem. Often it's teachers referring disruptive students. Of course, any number of issues might be behind that, like attention problems, mental health issues, family stress, or trauma. Sometimes families of students request help with parenting or talking with their child about divorce or illness or death. Students sometimes request themselves to talk with me and that often involves peer issues like friendships and bullying.

Many people don't want change unless they're very uncomfortable. In order for there to be change, people need to feel ready, to have opportunities to see or do things differently, and to have support and information. And I think that people change through relationship: it's like a mirror that you see yourself through. As a helper, you have to keep your own hopes for the client in check. If you're waiting for total success at the end you're likely to be disappointed. It's pretty shaky ground to hang your own success on somebody else's behaviour. You have to realize that each small step is significant. If you think like that, you'll last for a long time.

The number one thing I like about this job is the kids. They're really amazing in their ability to change. I think we expect more out of kids when they're doing something wrong than we do of adults. We're very quick to point the finger at kids and get them to straighten up, but we're inept to deal with a misbehaving adult who has much more responsibility and capability for good conduct. So working with children is inspiring and fun. I like the creative opportunity that's afforded me – I really enjoy the fact that I create my day. I generally like the people that I work with. I don't have many dissatisfactions, although I sometimes get a bit frosted at the lack of support and the case load issue. Those things aren't significant enough to have me thinking, "God, I can hardly wait to get home... pretty soon I can retire..." I do in fact plan to do this until I retire, at which point I may do something entirely different, but I'm still enjoying this very much.

Freedom to Move in the World. When I was growing up, my dad treated me much like he would a son. I ended up doing a lot of things with him that I wouldn't have been able to do if I'd been raised as a typical girl. Also, in our neighborhood there weren't many girls around and so I basically grew up in the culture of the average boy. I had all the same attributes as the boys, you know, in terms of misbehaving, aggressiveness, and fearlessness. I think my mom found me to be an enigma. She had her fantasy about having a little girl to fuss over. I remember her trying to get me to wear a dress and I said, "all right, I'll do it for a day." Afterwards I said to her, "it just doesn't work. When I'm jumping over

fences it gets caught. It's no good for me." So that was the end of that. I figured there was no more experimentation: I'd been reasonable and it just wasn't for me.

I didn't have any close girlfriends until high school. I hung out with the guys, made a very easy transition into adolescence, and missed out on all the cruel little social games that girls can play with each other. Because of the way I grew up, I think I felt more of a claim to say what I thought, to say, "I don't think this is right." I was never under the impression that I was number two. It's like I had more freedom to move in the world, whereas I think that women are sometimes shortchanged in that. To move in the world freely is a gift and I got that from being raised to value myself regardless of my gender. So even as a child I would advocate for kids who couldn't stick up for themselves. That was good career preparation for acting on behalf of people who are disadvantaged or who don't have the same opportunities as others.

I think I started thinking about these things as they related to my career when I was studying psychology. I had some dealings with social workers at that time and I basically thought that they were very nice but that they needed to be more clear about what they were doing and saying. I spoke with a social worker who was counselling someone I knew. This lady was more typically feminine: you know, wanting to please, more passive. I remember thinking, "come on, call a spade a spade. You can sit here and walk around this conversation for the next three months and you're not gonna come any closer to solving this problem." So I saw the need for a better balance between caring and confronting.

Throughout my own career I've always been assertive. When something isn't right, I can address it without worrying about what people will think of me. Early in my career, a client brought it to my attention that another professional who worked with her was practicing in an unethical manner. Some people didn't want to believe that and preferred to dismiss this troubled girl's claims. And that would have been the easier route but I talked to my supervisor and then I went and met with this individual. I explained what my client had told me and the professional acknowledged it was true and the appropriate actions were taken. If I'd had a different kind of upbringing, I doubt that I would have had the courage to confront someone in a respected position. It's important as a counsellor to be caring and empathic, characteristics we think of as more feminine. But once you step out of that one-to-one role and become involved in management or anything that isn't strictly counselling, other characteristics have to come to the fore. You have to be a little stronger if you want to manage people clearly and fairly and some of those typically masculine kinds of characteristics come into play then I think.

The independence and assertiveness that I developed as a child continue to influence the way I work in the schools. The reality of my job, being one social worker for a number of schools, is that I alone am responsible for defining my role. I structure every day on my own, deciding what I'm going to do, how I'm going to do it, in what order, to what extent, and with whom. There is no supervision, there's no debriefing anywhere other than what we can occasionally put together - you know, when the planets align. So I'm very isolated but I think

that my history has made that relatively easy for me to do. It's a job where you need to establish your own boundaries based on your values and professional ability and time. You sometimes have to protect yourself from being misdirected or misused. I feel it's important to inform other school staff about the ways I feel comfortable working: my role, my process. And I know that it's impossible for everyone to be happy with that. I'm not able to be everything to everybody so it's probably wise to tell them that ahead of time. Of course, it's important not to alienate the people I work with. I think I do a decent job keeping my boundaries without compromising relationships.

Another issue in my work that relates to my tomboyish ways is which clients I'm most comfortable and happy working with. I find it easier to deal with misbehaving, adolescent boys than grade five girls. It's just so easy to relate and to connect with them. I think my history of being athletic and competitive and quite willing to do anything helps me to do that. Before I was in so many schools, I used to be able to do a lot of extracurricular activities with the kids, which was a big plus. I loved being able to do stuff with them in a different environment and to see how much they grew. I still like to engage kids in ways that are a little unusual. A lot of these "bad" kids aren't used to relating to an adult in ways other than, "don't do that in the hall." So it might just take an unusual question, like, "who do you think, out of your group of three, is the leader?" to get them thinking. Or I might dip into my eclectic life experience and incorporate a concept from alternative therapies or First Nations spirituality. Anything that increases my connection with that student. I believe that when you're working with these kids,

you're working from your relationship, and if you don't have one, it makes it very tough. One of the most inspiring parts of my job is getting to know these very cool kids and seeing past the misbehaviour to how strong and resilient they really are.

Overall, I think this freedom to move in the world, as I've called it, has had a positive influence on my career. I do realize though, that there's the potential for it to backfire. Some of the people I've disagreed with or confronted were in positions of power over my career: I suppose they could have made my life miserable or even fired me. But it literally hasn't cost me yet. Then again, it may relate to some less obvious obstacles. I'm a person who basically likes control, and for most aspects of my work, there's a good fit. What tends to get me very stressed and tired is the death and dying stuff. I obviously can't change what's happening for people in those situations. I can make a difference for them, I know, but I'd like to be able to do more and that kind of bugs me. It especially wears on me when there's too much of it. For example, last year I dealt with a couple of kids who had cancer and one student who was killed and kids who had lost parents, to name the major things. When you put it all together, you can feel pretty helpless. At the same time, I think I've mellowed out over the years. I have the same convictions, but whereas before I would sometimes have difficulty letting go, now I find it easier to accept the things that I can't change.

The Root of Helping. Another experience from my childhood, and here we are on the brink of how it all began, is that I was the ear for everybody during my teenage years. I was a pretty good listener and that was a role that I played quite

comfortably. I think what people appreciated was that I didn't try to direct the flow of things. I just listened and empathized – you know, “that must be really tough” – and that was pretty much enough for them. I myself was never a person to talk to others about my problems, but I was quite willing to hear what they had to say and be available to them. I was beginning to realize that I offered something that, compared with the real world, was unusual and unique. It may seem like a very small thing, but it's actually very hard to find a time and space where someone is willing to just listen. I think it's a special gift when I can provide people with that small but sacred thing.

It's never a one-way street either. At the same time I was helping people by listening to their stories, they were providing me with the benefit of their experiences. The lives that people had were amazing to me. Through hearing about their struggles, I avoided a lot of difficult things that I might have otherwise stumbled into. And it's still the same today. I'm reverent of that exchange. I'm amazed by people's bravery in dealing with adversity and tragedy and I'm awed that they trust me enough to tell me how they feel.

When I decided to study psychology, I didn't really imagine that there was actual work related to listening to people. And yet if it hadn't been for my earlier experiences with being helpful, I don't think I would have had the interest in going down that road. In all my experience since then, even though there are all these cool theories and techniques, helping people really comes down to some basic

elements. I'm reminded of the book *The Heart and Soul of Change*<sup>1</sup>, which shows that when therapy is successful, it's because the professional listened, paid attention, showed empathy – all the things that have nothing to do with theory. It's kind of professionally disappointing, and yet maybe more difficult to achieve than we might imagine. While certain things can be taught in counselling courses, like asking open-ended questions and reflecting back what the person has said, I think people will see through you if you aren't genuine. I think people in the helping professions need to be congruent: you shouldn't be a professional carer and not care the rest of the time. Those characteristics probably enabled me to help as a teenager and still play a fundamental role in my work today.

Searching for Evidence. As I've mentioned, I didn't go into psychology with a specific career goal in mind. However, being in that program has had a large impact on my thinking about practice – big time. It wasn't what people typically think of in terms of learning to do counselling or therapy: that part came later for me. My psychology program was highly influenced by the experimental field. It was very research oriented. I was able to work as a research assistant all through my years there. While I wasn't yet practicing counselling skills, I became very keen on evidence-based practice. Basically that means only doing the kinds of interventions that research has shown to be effective for a given problem or population. That kind of empiricism has slanted my career development ever since.

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<sup>1</sup> Hubble, M.A., Duncan, B.L., & Miller, S.D. (Eds.). (1999). The heart & soul of change: What works in therapy. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Thinking like I did was pretty weird in the world of social work a number of years ago. I was saying, “boy, you guys could do some really simple research and then you would know that what you’re doing works,” and people were going, “yeah, right... uh-huh.” Now, there’s been more emphasis on evidence-based practice and people are more aware of the need for it. I think the reason it wasn’t embraced as quickly in social work is that the goal has always been to be helpful to people rather than to describe or explain them. We had theories and they sounded pretty good and people that used them said, “I do good work with this.” It was more a way of knowing through your own beliefs and hunches. But here we are, years and years after I learned all this, and social work professionals are just now saying, “hey, evidence-based practice is probably a good idea. It’s not only ethical, but it gives you professional confidence in what you’re doing.”

I’ve experienced a similar lack in the field of education. On the whole, we don’t really evaluate how well our strategies work. I feel very dissatisfied with the attitude of education towards its products, which are students. If this were a business like an oil company where the product was money, I think they would be a lot more interested in how their strategies are working. I used to hand in statistics – that was where my brain was at. I feel best when I can produce some concrete evidence that what I’m doing is helpful. For example, there was a period where I implemented a social skills program in several classrooms and I kept some basic statistics. I found that significantly fewer students in those classes were ever referred to me on the basis of school problems. That’s not even a rigorous measure but it’s very unusual for anyone to keep that kind of information and use

it to promote something. I admit that I do much less of that stuff now because, quite frankly, I haven't been able to drum up any interest in it. That's kind of sad for me.

More recently I have had opportunities to rekindle my involvement in research activities. When I went back to do my master's degree several years ago I wanted to immerse myself in the university life, much like when I first studied psychology. I worked again as a research assistant and I was eager to conduct my own research project for my thesis. I was able to explore some innovative ideas during my practicum and for my thesis that pulled together my love of research and technology. It's given me some exciting ideas about future possibilities for practice and it's gotten me thinking about how to bring research into the realm of everyday work in the schools.

First Foundations of Practice. I want to say more about the residential treatment facility where I worked after my psych. degree because it's also had a big impact on how I've developed as a professional. Prior to that, interacting with kids had not been a large part of my experience. Yet working there was such an excellent experience in terms of training and discovering my talents that it influenced me to work with children ever since. It really was an incredible learning situation. There were seven different units in the facility with differing purposes ranging from assessment to lock down. For the first phase of training, I spent one week in each of four units of my choice. Each day I was assigned to a different staff member who evaluated me on how I related to the kids, how I accepted feedback, my trainability, and all sorts of relevant measures. At the end

of four weeks there was a final evaluation by a psychologist and then the various units could bid on me. If nobody bid, it was, “thank you very much and have a nice life.” I was hired by the assessment unit because of my background in psychometrics and went through a second extensive training phase. They had lots of resources to support me. The supervision evaluations could be three hours long sometimes. At the end of that, you knew exactly where your strengths and weaknesses were and the agency knew what they needed to do to bolster your career directions or compensate. It was run like a business, which was excellent.

As a result of that intensive training experience I became completely comfortable with supervision and evaluation. I viewed it as a growth experience and I appreciated the support and the ability to consult with experienced professionals. Some people fear evaluation but I never saw it as negative. In fact, when I was hired by the school board, I asked for evaluations and was actually turned down. There seemed to be the general notion that evaluations were for when you were having problems, which didn't make much sense to me. It's a funny situation because we have so many bosses – principals, coordinators, superintendents – and so little supervision in terms of our counselling skills. We, as a group of school social workers and counsellors, try to get together to do that for each other but it's difficult when everyone is so busy. Even though I'd like to have more of that, there are other ways in which I'm always learning and developing. I'll hit a plateau sometimes and it feels like there's just not enough, like there should be something more. And then I'll read something or attend a

workshop or make a connection with some whole other genre of wellness and get very excited and energized again.

Another outcome of my experience with evaluation at that agency is that I feel very responsible and accountable for the individuals that I now supervise. I sometimes work with practicum students and I think I'm a little more thorough than they're expecting. I guess I take it seriously: they're there to learn something and I structure the situation so they get the experiences I want them to have. I have my students do reading, check out agencies in the community, and experience all stages from the beginning to the closing of a referral. And then I want them to come back to me and discuss what they are learning. Apparently I'm much more structured than other practicum supervisors, but I want the students to experience what the work is truly like and I want them to really get something from the practicum. I've thought about trying not to have such high expectations, particularly for part-time students, but when I think back to how helpful it was for me, that sense of responsibility returns.

Working at the residential centre was also meaningful for me because it resounded with my experiences growing up. As a kid my life was all about riding my bike and playing football, baseball, and hockey. I was in Cubs for a year until they figured out I was a girl and kicked me out. And my mom eventually gave up on me going to Sunday school because that was when the local football team practiced. All of those abilities and interests put me in good stead when it came to working with the residential kids. The context suited me: we played lots of sports and went camping and had outdoor education. It was very cool, very fun. I

mentioned earlier that I particularly enjoy working with misbehaving boys. It was the same kind of thing at this facility: it was just so easy to relate to and connect with their experiences. And that opened the door to the kind of relationship where I could really help a child and have a positive influence on his or her life.

Some of my philosophies about helping took root during my time at the residential facility. One idea that underlies my work is that if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Sometimes you have to step outside of the regular boundaries if you're going to make a difference. I remember one boy at the home who would not relate to anyone under regular circumstances. We tried many different ways to connect with him. Another worker and I did back-to-back twelve-hour shifts just to try and intensify our contact with him. When that didn't work, I took him home with me and my husband. We tried that for a while, and although the boy still never developed a really meaningful relationship with us, he was probably as successful as he was going to be. There was another time we tried this and it worked out beautifully. It was with a really tough street kid who had been quite successful in the program until his last six weeks. At that point it was like he realized he was out of there soon so why not kick up the dust? I didn't want to see him ruin all his progress so I checked it out with my boss and then I invited him to spend a long weekend with my husband and me, provided he could keep it together for the remaining month and a half. He wanted that so badly that he was good for the whole rest of his time. And then he came to our house and was just wonderful for the three days. When somebody really needs that, when

they don't have other options, what are you going to do – say, “good luck, see you around”? Nah, sometimes you have to do a little extra to make things work.

There was the opportunity to think creatively about solutions at the residential centre and that has expanded as I've entered the social work profession. There's a basis to the whole thing, which is you want to make a difference for people. You want to somehow affect somebody else's existence positively. I saw social work as a continuation of what I'd learned in psychology, but with a broader scope. As a social worker my focus is on the person in their environment. In the context of the school that means the students, their peers, their classrooms, their schools, their communities, and their families. To me that level of analysis goes beyond counselling, which I see as an interaction between one person and another. Counselling is often what is called for when I get a referral but it's also somewhat limited. With the broader perspective of social work I can help to set up other supports in students' lives. In reality though, I don't know that what I do as a school social worker would be much different than what a school counsellor does. I think that once you start working in that situation, the roles blend together because you respond to the structure and the needs of your work environment. You have a lot of flexibility, which means you can do things not ordinarily focused on by your profession. However, you pay a price for that because you're not specific enough, you don't have that hard-core professionalism.

Reflections on Counsellor Development. One thing that people don't usually consider about careers is the wellness of the workers. I think that having interests and activities outside of work keeps you okay in work. There are many

people that can't do this job as long as I've done it and still be happy about it. I credit my career longevity to living a balanced life. I've always felt free to pursue my interests, which have been many. I guess you could call it an openness to experience and learning. It's helped that I've never felt restricted or incapable of things because of being female. I grew up with the attitude that if I want to do something, all I have to do is go do it. I find that as I've experienced different things outside of work, I've evolved and changed as a professional. God forbid it should be stagnant. I guess it sometimes is for people but I don't think it has to be.

I still feel excited about future possibilities. I'm not sure where my career will take me after I retire from the school board but I know that it will relate to alternative, holistic practice. I might get closer to a dream I had when I first went into private practice. I didn't like the way practice was set up and I wanted to do things differently. I even thought about offering counselling in people's homes rather than at an office. I felt that a really good holistic practice would treat the total person: imagine a place that offered not only counselling, but other services related to self-care like massage, beauty, and exercise. It reminds me of an article I read about a hairdresser who noticed how people really opened up to her as she cut their hair. She went and got a PhD in psychology and then would style her clients' hair as they talked. I thought that was so cool! I see myself doing something similar. It's just a nice thing to be able to do for people. Having been in the worlds of psychology, social work, and now alternative healing, I think I'm developing an integrative view of wellness. I'm looking forward to the next step in helping body, mind, and spirit.

### Researcher's Reflections

Alyssa's narrative illuminates a number of issues, including the kinds of experiences that influence the choice to enter a helping profession, the day-to-day realities of counselling in schools, and methods of sustaining oneself in a demanding profession. However, the key questions in this research project pertained to what kinds of experiences counsellors identify as developmental turning points and how such experiences advance their sense of expertise and skill. Alyssa's "freedom to move in the world" stems from her early childhood experiences and is a reflection of her personality development rather than any singular event. While her experience of being a "tomboy" was positive, Alyssa grew up with a sense of being different than most girls she knew. Perhaps it was this sense of difference that fostered her capacity for empathy. That she was a particularly empathic child is reflected in Alyssa's recollection of helping children who were unable to defend themselves. Furthermore, she received positive reinforcement for being assertive, forthright, and self-assured from early on in her career.

A second theme from Alyssa's childhood is her development of an orientation towards others. Again, this formative experience unfolded throughout her youth. Her empathic capacity to identify with and understand the experiences of other children met with reinforcement in several ways: firstly, others responded to her with trust and friendship, and secondly, through vicarious learning she was able to avoid some of the negative experiences that others were struggling with.

Alyssa also identified the importance of her psychology degree in the development of a scientific, evidence-based orientation towards professional practice. Her undergraduate training represented a period of intense learning and professional socialization. This experience was both positive and challenging. There seemed to have been a goodness of fit between Alyssa's no-nonsense, adventurous personality and the practical, modern atmosphere of her psychology department. Furthermore, this orientation was reinforced by Alyssa's own satisfaction when she could summon evidence for the effectiveness of her interventions.

A second key experience pertaining to Alyssa's professional training and orientation was her first career position. Again, there were the elements of intense learning and professional socialization, a goodness of fit between person and environment, and positive reinforcement. Alyssa experienced the training as positive and challenging. Many of the activities associated with her work, such as outdoor education and athletic pursuits were inherently enjoyable for her. She received affirmative feedback from her superiors and through her own sense of making a difference for the children she worked with. The residential facility experience also required Alyssa to accommodate her understanding of helpful interventions: when the usual methods failed, she developed unconventional strategies with her clients in order to experience success. Perhaps this is an example of how counsellors can become "stuck," necessitating an adaptation in understanding and action.

These were the experiences Alyssa spoke of when asked to explain her development into the professional she is at present. Apparently both personal and professional experiences were relevant, as well as both early and more recent situations. It is notable that Alyssa named experiences that unfolded over a period of time rather than singular, discrete events. These experiences influenced her in a multitude of ways. One factor was Alyssa's orientation to the experience: she appeared to have an openness to learning and a reflective quality which facilitated a personal transformation. The goodness of fit issue also seems important: some aspects of the situation resonated with her disposition or way of seeing things. Thirdly, Alyssa received affirmative feedback and reinforcement for her developing capacities. Finally, the experience usually required a cognitive and behavioural accommodation: Alyssa had to change some aspect of thinking and action in order to incorporate new information.

Lucy

### Researcher's Introduction

Lucy has been counselling within a school setting for about the same length of time as Alyssa. Similarly, she also obtained graduate training once she was already a practicing counsellor. However, her pathway to this career was quite different: her education and training are in the areas of education, special education, and educational psychology. Lucy and I met at my home for our interviews. She spoke about her experiences with passion, humour, and courageous transparency and I felt honoured that she shared some of her innermost

struggles with me. Her story highlights the importance of resiliency and insightfulness when counsellors encounter difficulties in their own lives.

Lucy's Narrative: "Faith"

A Career Overview. You know, what's funny is that when I was young I wanted to be a social worker. I don't know where I'd have even known the word from because in those days kids were going to be teachers or nurses or fire fighters. I remember somebody asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said, "a social worker." And my poor mother totally freaked out: "No, you can't be a social worker! You can't deal with other people's problems all day. That would be horrible!" Isn't that funny? So I hope I didn't come into this line of work just to spite her.

Anyway, that idea of being in a helping career must have stuck with me. As I was graduating from high school I was planning on going into dentistry but at the last minute, and I don't even know why, I went and registered in education instead. In those days you could teach after two years and so you did student teaching stuff almost immediately. I discovered pretty quickly that mainstream teaching was not for me. I was just bored stiff in a regular classroom. The only kids I enjoyed were the misbehaving ones. As soon as I walked into that class I had the sense of, "Well I'll work with these kids...you can take the rest." You know, I was a really rotten child myself, like I was really bad, so I guess I knew it from their side too.

With that in mind, after I finished my two years, I studied special education and majored in behaviour disorders. After that I had several jobs teaching children

with behavioural and emotional problems. I guess that over the years I kind of fell into this niche of working with troubled kids. And that was a fit because all my life, people have come to me and told me their stories. I've never had the desire to "fix" things for them; I think I'm more like a door-holder, you know, someone who can say, "oh, here's a door you could go through if you choose to." I was teaching a behaviour adjustment class when my superintendent encouraged me to take on the role of a school counsellor. I was really nervous to do it because I just didn't feel qualified, but I agreed to try it. It wasn't really much different than what I was doing in my therapeutic classrooms, it was just on a broader scale. Once I knew that this was a job that I would probably stay with for some time, I went back to university and got my master's degree in educational psychology. And I've been with it ever since.

Current Beliefs and Practices. A significant part of my role as a school counsellor is supporting and consulting with other school staff: teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. I listen to their concerns about students and try to help them develop plans to deal with those situations. Often people just like to bounce their ideas off of me. I do individual counselling with kids: nothing real intense because I don't see my job as doing deep down therapy. It's about helping a child get through school and helping them survive in whatever their situation is. A percentage of my time is spent supporting parents too. And I do small group work and classroom presentations – some years I do tons and others years very little. It depends on how many requests I get. Another chunk of my work has been in program development and facilitation. I have been very involved in

developing several programs that have been implemented throughout our school system. Those things have been extremely demanding in terms of time and so I've pulled back as much as I can once the programs are up and running. Yeah, so I work from a lot of different angles to help students.

Students get referred to me for all sorts of reasons: family violence, parents divorcing, somebody's sick or dying, peer group conflict and exclusion, power struggles with teachers, poor social skills and impulsivity. Usually there's some behaviour, acting out or withdrawing, that brings people's attention to the situation. When it comes to individual counselling I'm pretty eclectic in terms of theories and techniques. What works best with one person doesn't necessarily work as well with another so I find I need to be flexible. I do like to use art in therapy and I rely on a lot of behavioural strategies like modelling and role-plays. I also really like some of the strategies that come out of solution-focused counselling and choice theory. I take bits and pieces that fit and it all becomes part of what I do. Ultimately, I think that the most helpful thing I do is listen and help people tell their stories.

There are some definite challenges to this role. One of the things I find really discouraging is the "fix it" mentality that some school staff have. As if I had a magic wand and could make problems disappear within that half hour or so that I spend with a student. I'm really bothered by staff politics when people become more focused on being right, having others on their side, and avoiding blame than on their real task, which is to educate children. A major issue is that our caseloads are way too high. You end up running, running, running to keep up and that's not

healthy. In this job you have to learn quickly that you'll never be caught up, that there will always be more work. And it's difficult to get enough professional supervision or mentorship. It's not really built in and so I think we have to find more ways of supporting each other.

On the other hand, I get to have a lot of fun in my work. I can use sitcoms like *The Simpsons* as a forum to talk about things like anger management and the kids love it. It's a great creative outlet. Sometimes I can help students without ever directly seeing them. If I can create some positive changes for a child through working with a teacher or parent that feels very successful to me. The least invasive route seems best. Over the years I've developed a personalized way of working: I've defined the role of school counsellor for myself. So I have the freedom to structure my day and to prioritize my time the way I see fit. And ultimately, I just find that I connect really strongly with kids, especially the ones who are acting out, and that's been my niche for many years.

Childhood: Not Fitting the Mold. My first memory of not fitting the shape that people wanted me to fit was when I was in grade one. It was a spring day and I had just gotten a new swing set and so I convinced half of my class to come to my house at afternoon recess. It seemed like such a great idea: it never occurred to me that we'd get into so much trouble for not going back! At that age I wasn't deliberately being "bad," I think I just had more of an independent spirit than most kids, especially the girls. Another example of that is when I decided to join the convent. After school one day my poor parents had no idea where I was. As it turns out I had walked for miles, rang the buzzer at the convent, and told them I'd

come to be a nun. The Mother Superior, bless her soul, took me into her office, served me little cookies and tea out of a fancy silver teapot, and asked me why I wanted to be a nun. She was so respectful! And then of course she told me I couldn't stay and she phoned my dad. Again, it wasn't a rebellious kind of thing: I was just following what had seemed like a very good idea at the time.

The energy I had as a child often led me to be misunderstood and mistreated. I was a tomboy and I took lots of pride in my physical strength and the fact that nobody could bully me. But I think I also needed those things to shield myself, to prevent others from seeing that I felt hurt. I had a teacher who hung me up in my locker by my belt loop, which was really horrible. And I would always make a joke of it and so the class would laugh and the teacher would get even crazier. What would have been good for me would be some adult in my life who was on my side, but who challenged me to look at my behaviour. Maybe I wanted to be a social worker because I knew that I needed somebody.

At home I was certainly loved and cared for but I don't think my parents understood me at all. My dad was the kind of person who had to have his socks colour coded and folded in an exact way in his drawers. I used to make him nuts by sneaking in and messing them all up. I felt controlled and smothered, which is probably why I was acting out at school. And Mom didn't know what to do with me. Girls were supposed to wear dresses and nice shoes and sit quietly and not get into trouble: that just wasn't me! So she had a really hard time with that. Life was different then and I'm sure she got lots of flack around my behaviour.

In terms of family roles I was the troublemaker. Like if things were tense around the house, I would do something to make things blow up and relieve the strain. I was also the joker. As an adult I began to recognize these responses to conflict and to resort to them less often. The first experience I had really taking someone under my wing was with my little brother. He struggled with some health problems and some learning difficulties and I was fiercely protective of him. I was always sticking up for him and trying to make things happen for him. I guess that because of my own experiences of feeling misunderstood I could understand what he might be going through. That's why there's always the hook for the underdog with me.

Anyway, by adolescence I was horrible. I was nasty. I'd be labeled all sorts of things if I were in school these days. And no, I didn't have many adults in my life that I thought were there to support me. I mean, I had some teachers who really liked me and both sets of my grandparents adored me, but there was no one that I would tell about what I was going through. You couldn't go and tell your grandparents that your friend was whacked out on acid and those kinds of things! Somehow, though, I came out okay. I always had lots of friends and even though I was hardly in class, I still managed to stay an honour roll student. I think that I had some good role models in my grandmothers and my aunt, who were all powerful, professional women. Maybe they were proof that there were other options for being a successful female.

The Troublemaker's Champion. As I mentioned earlier, right from the time I began teaching I was attracted to the troublemakers and the underdogs.

Yeah, I really enjoy them. They know that too and that's how we can connect. I sometimes have a hard time keeping a straight face when I hear stories about what kids have done and I think, "Good for you! You're getting what you need: you're just doing it in a different way." Usually it's kids' behaviours that bring people's attention to the situation, but the behaviour is only the surface. Behind a lot of the behavioural stuff there's family strife, bereavement, lack of social skills, and so on. I think my own experiences have helped me to empathize with how these children are experiencing the world and also to appreciate their resourcefulness and creativity in coping.

So while there can be a lot of pressure to "fix" kids with behaviour problems, I find that I really respect people's ability to define their own needs and solutions. I don't see my goal as a counsellor as convincing people to change. I think my goal is to listen and to help people tell their stories because when they do that, they'll come up with what they need on their own. I may ask questions that help them to clarify that but it's not my place to decide whether they need to change.

Even though many of my childhood experiences were negative, I think it's been meaningful in a primarily positive way for my career. That's the way I tend to look at painful experiences. You know, it was tough but it sure taught me a lot and it made me really strong and it made me what I am. Having experienced the other side has helped me to empathize with the children I work with and to see their behaviour as their best attempt at problem solving rather than as something meant to deliberately annoy others.

In terms of any less positive effects, I guess I'd have to say there's a tendency for me to "hook in" in an overly emotional way when there's a situation involving an underdog. I get so protective that I can become really adolescent if I don't check myself. I have to talk myself down, saying, "Just stop, take a deep breath, forget it, it's not yours," you know. My own kids have picked up on that. One of them had something happen in school and I immediately offered to phone the teacher. My other child burst out laughing and said, "that's the best way to get her! Make her think that somebody's doing something wrong to you and she'll stick up for you like mad!" So obviously they know. Maybe that's doubly so because of another experience I'll tell you about.

A Mother's Nightmare. As a parent your main goal is to protect your child. When you think you've done everything to keep your child safe and something happens despite all that, your world really comes crashing down. When one of my children was seriously hurt, I remember thinking, "Oh my God, I failed. I haven't done my job as a parent." The fact that my child had been hurt was difficult to handle, and the self-doubt that I experienced made it even worse. I felt like I should have been able to prevent this from happening. I lost confidence in my parenting ability. You know when there's a bad flood and the soil all gets washed away? That's what it felt like: everything I believed about myself as a mother was washed away from under me. What else hadn't I been seeing in my life? What was real?

I think this experience was all the more significant for me because of my own childhood. You know, I certainly didn't feel stood up for as a child and as a

result I was going to be this supermother who would always be there for my kids. And I failed. And while that was devastating to my own sense of control over things, I also gained some perspective on the adults who I had judged so harshly for failing me. It shed a light on the possibility that they didn't realize they weren't supporting me. Maybe they were doing everything that they knew how to do. So again, there was a sense of, "Oh my God, there's a whole other way to see everything in my life."

Out of Tragedy. So again, while I'd never, ever, have chosen to experience that, I feel like I've grown vastly as a person and as a professional because of it. I think it really helped me as an individual to be accepting and to have empathy. Before that I could look at people and see they were in pain but I could never understand the depth of it. If someone had come to me and said, "I failed my child," I would have listened. I would have listened a second and third time but at some point I would have started to think, "Suck it up, get over it." Until I had gone through it I don't think I could have understood the ramifications of having the ground washed out from under me and those intense feelings of guilt and powerlessness. Now I know these parents need to hear over and over that it wasn't their fault, that nobody can completely control what happens to their children.

And in my own family, once everything started settling, I had better communication with my kids. Going through it together opened up a kind of relationship where we could talk about anything. So that was positive too. On the other hand, you never totally get over something like that. Once you know that bad things do happen, you always worry. And yet, somehow I think I'm on

sturdier ground now because I know that it can happen and that I can come through it. I can have things crumble around me and I can pick up the pieces and rebuild them into something even stronger.

The Counsellor's Crisis. I think that the role I played in my family of origin was repeated in my marriage. Although I couldn't see it at the time, I married somebody who was a lot like my father. I was brought up not to talk about problems, to just make everything nice and smooth. And so I was perfectly suited to fill that role with my husband as well. It worked for us for a while but then I began to change some things about myself. I went into therapy, had a lot of insights about my family of origin, and began to realize that things didn't have to work that way. The healthier and stronger I got, the wider the gap in our marriage. And yet we stayed together even after things were really over and dead. During all of this, I had made the transition from teaching to counselling. The shame involved with that was just amazing, you know? I was thinking, "I'm in the mental health field: I shouldn't have this happening in my life!"

Eventually we did end our marriage and, unfortunately, it was a really horrible time. I went through a lot of shame, humiliation, and anger because of the way things happened. This was the first crisis in my life that coincided with my counselling career. Of course that begs the question of how you can be effective and ethical professionally while your personal life is in shambles. And you know, I'm not sure. During that time there were some general and some specific difficulties I had performing my job. Generally, I was more stressed and I wasn't thinking as clearly. I was probably more impulsive when making decisions.

Yeah, I just wasn't as grounded and centred as I normally would be. I guess that a lot of my energy was invested in the work of grieving and healing myself. And then specifically, I had a difficult time working with some families who were going through divorce, especially when the parents weren't putting the needs of their kids first. I remember having a really hard time with one father and having to say to him, "I'm really sorry but I think you need to go and talk to somebody else. I can't do this right now." It can be very difficult to separate those things out. Whenever you go through something the universe provides you with all sorts of examples of it happening elsewhere. I don't think the incidences are any higher, it's just that you're aware of it on a different level.

As with the other experiences I've mentioned, once I'd had the time to heal, coming through my marriage breakup became a source of personal strength and greater compassion and understanding. Certainly other people don't react and feel it in the exact same way I did, but it gave me an understanding of what they may be going through and probably made me less judgmental. I've become gentler on people's "stuckness" because I've realized that often we need to keep saying something until we're finished saying it. That's the healing process. I guess I'm more accepting of painful experiences in general because I believe we're all exactly where we're supposed to be and it's all happening for a reason. I guess there's a spiritual component there. Of course I don't say that to people who are in the midst of a crisis – they'd whack me! But I have the patience to sit with them as they do things at their own pace.

The Weight of the World. After my divorce I became a single parent. It was really difficult to stand in the parent role without the support of a partner. That was the biggest struggle: to keep them the kids and me the adult. There were just so many pulls on my energy – work, money, driving the kids to twenty-five thousand places every day. Basically it's just more intense compared with having two parents in a household. It's really humbled me because we live in a world where lots of people say, "oh well, you know, they're from a single parent family," and there's a negative judgment attached to that. It didn't feel good when it started: I thought it was horrible, but those horrible things are the things that make us I think.

As my kids got older and started to have bigger people's problems, it really would have been nice to have a partner to discuss these things with. Thank goodness for the support of my friends: I can talk to them anytime. It's really tough to see my kids go through painful experiences of their own. At first, I would panic and jump to conclusions and imagine the worst-case scenarios. And of course I would want to make everything better for them. But I've learned that you have to let them struggle and sometimes fail in order for them to learn and grow. I try to be as supportive as I can without actually rescuing them. It's not easy, but I've grown to have more faith in my children's strength and character. I also feel more confident that I've done a good job instilling them with basic values and self-worth. So you bleed for your kids when things are hard and you just try to trust that there will be a silver lining to their experiences.

Reflections on Counsellor Development. The biggest lesson I've gotten through all of this is that adversities are a part of life. They change your thinking and therefore they change your life. And there's good in that. We grow tremendously as people when we have had to face those horrific, awful events that broadside us when we don't expect it. In my work, those experiences have given me a depth of understanding and compassion that I hadn't reached before. It's not a cut and dried match: like I've been through a divorce so now I can empathize with everyone who's divorcing. You don't have to go through these exact things to be a good counsellor. Everybody has some painful experiences and I think it's more about learning that you do work through them and survive them that gives you the ability to see others through their pain.

Obviously my personal life has provided much of the material that has most profoundly influenced my professional development. Those things you typically think of as professional development activities – courses, books, and workshops – are all just icing on the cake. Really, the best thing about grad school was the opportunity to focus on myself and to feel really successful academically. Over the years I've learned various techniques and tools but I think good counselling really comes down to a few basic things. Can you care for someone while keeping appropriate boundaries? Do you respect people's ability to make choices that are best for them? Have you found ways of working that fit with your values and personality?

In this line of work you have to have some self-care practices built in really strongly or you will burn out. I don't think it's healthy to hear horror stories from

kids for years and years on end. I have a variety of things that feed my soul and keep me energized. I do some alternative healing, which keeps me well grounded. Even when I'm doing sessions on other people it's beneficial for me because I can feel it flowing through me. I have hobbies that consume me: journaling, reading, handicrafts. I think it's beneficial to do things that cause you to lose all track of time. Exercise is really important in my life. The more difficult day I've had, the more important it is that I get a really physical workout and get that stress out of my body. If I don't do those things it gets to be too much and I start to get pulled down.

Social support is another key. I've talked about how much I value my friendships. As difficult as it is when you're working itinerantly, you have to create a social support network amongst other professionals. Otherwise you're alone out there. A good friend and mentor of mine is a therapist and we talk about once a month and bounce ideas off one another. He's given me some really good ideas and has been a big influence and support in my life. And there are other people who I've worked with over the years that I will call to discuss certain cases and get different ideas. But I think more of that should be built in to this particular job: there needs to be more opportunities to talk with each other and consult and brainstorm.

What keeps me doing what I do? Well, I get to do creative things all day long. I love to incorporate drama and art and story telling into the work I do with children. That was another road not taken for me – actually being in the arts – but I found ways to bring that passion into my professional life. And I get to work

with kids that have spunk and that little bit of extra life in them. That's really positive for me and it meets my personal needs. It's wonderful when a staff comes together and works collaboratively to help a student. The individual student counselling that I provide may be helpful but I don't think it's enough: what's half an hour once a week? Yet if I can influence a frustrated teacher to see things differently or to try a different approach, the whole feeling of their classroom can improve. It feels good to have an impact on the overall climate of a school. That's when I feel most successful. You know, I always thought that eventually I would go into private practice. And it's funny, just in the past year or two, I'm thinking that I won't. I think this will be it. Isn't that something?

#### Researcher's Reflections

I noted many similarities in Alyssa's and Lucy's descriptions of their views and practices as school professionals. However, I was struck by each woman's distinct perception of what life experiences had most impacted upon her professional development. The experiences that Lucy described were derived not from her professional training or practice but from her personal life. Her own childhood, her child's ordeal, her marriage breakup, and single parenting were the experiences she felt had most profoundly influenced her work as a counsellor. Furthermore, these experiences were to various degrees difficult, challenging, and even traumatic. As a child Lucy felt misunderstood and discounted by the adults in her life. When her child was hurt she experienced intense feelings of failure and the loss of her bearings. Her marriage and its demise brought about shame, humiliation, grief, and anger. Single parenting came with the sense of being

negatively judged and well as doubt and helplessness. The point in time of these experiences was not significant: both long ago and recent happenings had meaning for Lucy in terms of professional understandings and practice.

How did experiences that were initially so difficult ultimately facilitate Lucy's growth and development as an individual and as a counsellor? She believed that just coping with the events and getting through them had the effect of making her stronger and more resilient. She learned that no matter how painful something was, she could come through it and be the wiser for it. Another vital factor was that each difficult experience increased Lucy's capacity for empathy, understanding, and appreciation for others who were struggling. For example, because she felt misunderstood as a child, she was able to perceive this in her brother also and to act as the advocate she never had. Later, as a counsellor, she understood how children's misbehaviour was indicative of coping rather than malice. Lucy's ability to translate adversity into strength is an illustration of accommodative processes. Initially, not surprisingly, she reacted to these difficulties with dismay and anger, only perceiving how they negatively affected her life. Later, as she noticed the subtle benefits of increased wisdom and empathy, she could no longer view the event as entirely harmful. A new conceptualization took place: "It was tough but it sure taught me a lot and it made me really strong and it made me what I am." Although such experiences represented an overall growth experience for Lucy, at the same time they left her with certain vulnerabilities. Her tendency to hook in overly emotionally when advocating for an "underdog" is an example of the reverse side of her empathic

gift. Awareness and self-regulation with regards to this vulnerability seems to be Lucy's solution. It is also important to note the role that adequate self-care and social support played in Lucy's capacity to cope in the midst of her crises.

Luke

### Researcher's Introduction

In contrast to Alyssa and Lucy, Luke is relatively new to working in a school setting. However, he came to this position with a variety of work experiences in the helping field and otherwise. I interviewed him once at the university and once at my home. Despite his hectic schedule with work, family, and volunteering, Luke seemed eager to discuss the particular rewards and challenges of his work in the schools. Nevertheless, it was evident to me that his busy pace is tiring: he apologized several times for yawning and for "rambling on." An interesting aspect of his story is how a particular theme prevails throughout his significant experiences.

### Luke's Narrative: "A Different Perspective"

A Career Overview. I think I've been a counsellor ever since I was a kid. It seems like people have always sought me out as someone to talk with about their problems. But it didn't occur to me to follow that kind of career route right out of high school: I never liked school and it was a chore to get through it. Until a few years ago, I'd always planned on becoming a police officer. I knew I wanted to help people, but in the end I just wasn't convinced that police work was the best way to do that.

When I was in grade twelve and just kind of getting through, my mom called me out of class and got me to sign with a military recruiter. That way I could get a university education. I didn't consider myself a military kind of person and I was dreading it. That summer I went through basic training and it actually went really well. There was a lot of discipline but not the demeaning kinds of practices you might think of – no polishing toilets with a toothbrush or that kind of thing. So I stuck with it and in between periods of service I completed a bachelor's degree in psychology.

I had just returned from a three-year stint with the military and was finishing my last class, which happened to be in sociology. I was planning on finally applying to the police force. It was strange, but as I was on my way to mail my application I had a realization: "This is not what I want to do. I don't like having power and control over people. I don't like telling people what to do. I don't like drunk people." I was kind of lost after that because I had always assumed on having a career with the police. I confided in my sociology instructor, who was a friend of mine, and he suggested that I become a social worker. My first reaction was dismay: "I don't want to be a baby snatcher!" But he went on and explained what social work is and he got me thinking about it pretty seriously.

That year I did end up applying to the social work department. In the entrance essay I wrote about wanting to practice as a school social worker. I talked about the difficulties I had experienced in school and how I wanted to see kids treated in ways that weren't controlling and disempowering. Eventually I was accepted into the program and I spent three years earning my B.S.W. What I

found most memorable about that degree were the practica. My first one was at a sexual assault centre, where I got to sit in on counselling sessions. I became really interested in the counselling and therapy end of social work from that experience. For the second practicum I worked in an adolescent treatment home for troubled teenage boys. I ran up against that whole power and control issue there again – I'll say more about that later. Another big influence during that time was my volunteer work. I volunteered at the campus women's centre, sexual assault centre, and help centre and I became really familiar with sexual assault and abuse issues. Because of those experiences, I immediately got a job as a sexual abuse counsellor once I finished my degree.

When I first got that position I was happy. I was doing clinical work, I was being challenged every day, and most of my clients wanted to be there. However, it was in a smaller town and other than my supervisor I didn't have anyone to talk to or consult with. Much of the time I was making decisions on my own. It was incredibly busy: I was always on call and I had very little time off during the time I worked there. After a while I started to experience secondary trauma from all the stories I was hearing. I no longer felt safe living in that town and so I started applying for other jobs. I applied for my current position as a school social worker thinking I wouldn't get it because I'd never worked in the schools. But I had a really good interview and I had strong skills in crisis intervention so it did come through for me. The odd thing is by the time I'd finished my social work degree, I'd forgotten about my initial desire to work in the schools. It's been neat to revisit

some of the issues that brought me to this career in the first place. This position is also intense but I'm figuring out how I work best and what I can do to stay well.

Current Beliefs and Practices. The way things are structured, I'm the one social worker assigned to four schools. Each of the schools also has two or three guidance counsellors. We work very closely to support students with emotional needs. I would be more likely to handle cases where social services are involved or where there are family problems, suicide threats, or mental illness. The counsellors are more likely to handle the students with academic concerns or the more day-to-day kinds of difficulties. However, it depends on the counsellors themselves: some of them have many years of experience and are very qualified to work with serious issues. Often once I've met with a student several times and we've resolved a crisis, I'll ask one of the counsellors to continue to support the student in their school. Because my position covers such a large population of students, I'm not able to do long-term counselling. It's not unusual to receive five new referrals each week from each of my schools. My responsibilities are assessment, referrals, short-term counselling, and consulting with other staff. And because there may be a variety of school professionals involved with a particular student – myself, counsellors, administrators, and classroom and learning assistance teachers – I'll often be the case coordinator and liaison with outside agencies.

So this job is very hectic. Often, as soon as I walk in the door there's a student waiting for me and I don't get out until after everyone else is done. Many times I don't take lunches. Maybe it's the dynamics of this particular job because

of being the only person with my role. Also, I was plopped in this job without any supervision at all. I had to learn a lot of things through trial and error. Luckily, the person who had this position before me is still working in the school system and has been a kind of mentor to me. However, I think I could have learned a lot faster with someone to talk with on a day-to-day basis. Being my own supervisor can be nice because I have the freedom to go about things in the way that makes the most sense to me. On the other hand, I can be my own worst enemy. I'm constantly questioning myself: "did I do enough work today? I've still got more to do. Should I get that done before I leave?"

As for my guiding theories, I describe myself as a feminist and a cognitive-behaviourist. Feminism is something I became rather immersed in when I studied social work. It's based on the deconstruction of hierarchical, patriarchal power structures. The issue of power has been pervasive in my own life so feminism really appeals to me and makes sense to me. I think it's important to empower the students I work with and help them to feel that they have decisions in their lives. And I'm a cognitive-behaviourist because I believe that when I can get people to think differently about a problem, they will be able to start acting differently. Those are my ideological bases but I also like to take bits and pieces from many other areas. For example, I often bring up the idea of catharsis to students – I think a lot of Freudian stuff is interesting. Much of my work could be described as psychoeducation. For example, when I work with a student who is clinically depressed, I would help him or her to get an understanding of what that means, how it needs to be handled, and what might happen in the future.

The most rewarding aspect of working as a school social worker is having a positive influence on students and families who otherwise feel there's no one out there to help. I like having all these other people to work with – counsellors, teachers, and administrators – because we can confer about important decisions and because our influence as a team can be so much broader. And on the practical side, I don't mind the hours and the pay! There are some difficulties too, such as the issue of confidentiality. It's an ethical struggle to have both good communication with other professionals in the schools and a confidential relationship with my clients. I think I perceive it as more important than most of the school staff: I've even had a staff member ask me for a list of students who are using drugs! Another thing I struggle with is staff politics and territorialism. It's always been important to me to have good relationships with my coworkers and until recently I've been trying to please everybody. Unfortunately, being itinerant means that I don't get time to build relationships with everyone and inevitably there will be misunderstandings. I'm trying to give up my insecurities about staff relations. I'm focusing on doing my job well and hopefully if others have concerns they will discuss them with me.

To do well in this career I believe you can't forget the importance of building rapport. I think one failure of many counsellors is diving right in and trying to solve the world's problems without allowing their clients time to get to know and trust them. When that's the case, clients won't experience the support that they need. Also, I think you need to have the ability to take multiple perspectives. Everybody sees things differently. As the facilitator of

communication between students, parents, teachers, and others, you have to be open to each person's perception of the situation and realize that each one is legitimate. Self-awareness is essential. Part of that is identifying your biases and working to remain as unbiased as possible. I think all of these practices enable clients to make decisions that are best for them and to be accountable for those choices.

Childhood: Impressions of School and Helping Relationships. My experiences in school growing up have had a profound impact on the way I think and practice as a school professional. My first memory of school is being spanked in front of the class by the teacher. I don't remember ever enjoying school. I was always getting into trouble for something and most teachers thought of me as a difficult kid. My school was strongly authoritarian: there seemed to be the attitude that kids needed to be kept on a short leash and punished when they misbehaved. I have memories of some pretty severe corporal punishments. Middle years were particularly rough. I was quickly on my way to becoming a criminal and this was intensified by a teacher who seemed to have it out for me. He targeted me even when I wasn't doing anything wrong. Essentially he made my life very difficult in the school and as things snowballed, I remember just giving up. I thought, "Why bother trying when nobody's going to believe me anyway? If I'm going to get blamed for something I might as well do it." That's when I started doing crazier things and getting into more serious trouble.

Luckily, after that I had an entirely different kind of teacher. Mr. G. showed an interest in me, was willing to take a chance on me, and would believe

me. By that time I was pretty much a fibber – I lied on a regular basis – but he wouldn't call me on it. He would say, "Alright, that's your story." Because of that, I gained a respect for him and he quickly became the one person that I would not lie to. It became a matter of pride for me to show him that I could do what he expected of me. He did expect better and because he showed me respect, kindness, and genuineness, I worked my butt off for him. I actually studied and I stopped goofing around. It seemed like he knew I was having difficulties and so was all the more patient and tolerant. I remember getting into his class and those negative feelings just evaporated: I felt safe and good.

Those two years with Mr. G. probably saved me from going completely astray with my life. I never got back into being a major troublemaker. However, I still didn't care about school itself. I didn't develop that sense of wanting to do good for myself until I was an adult. I tried hard in Mr. G.'s class but when I came across other, more typical teachers I wouldn't do anything for them. I'd do the bare minimum to get by. That pattern continued through high school: with teachers that I liked and respected, I'd try, and with those I didn't, I'd just float by. I had too often experienced the school system as oppressive and my main goal was to be done with it.

A Stance on Social Justice. I read a book in a human relations class in university that really resonated with my experiences in school. The book is called, *How Children Fail*<sup>2</sup>, and it's about how we can enable children's failure by treating them as objects to be controlled and manipulated. I grew up resenting people having control and power over me. As a manifestation of that I also hated

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<sup>2</sup> Holt, J. (1965). How children fail. Oxford, England: Delta Books.

the idea of having that effect on others. Those early experiences, along with some in the military, caused me to eventually turn aside the idea of being a police officer because wielding that kind of power was unappealing. My overriding goal as a school social worker is to challenge the kinds of ideologies and practices in education that cause children to feel powerless. I believe that people are at their best when treated with respect and dignity. I think it's important to empower kids and help them to feel like they have a say in their lives. This is not to excuse adults from exercising authority but to say that less discipline is needed when students feel validated.

In this job I'm very often faced with power struggles within families or between teachers and students. I'm frequently asked to step in and help control a student who is acting inappropriately but that's not how I see my role. I think I'm more like a mediator who can help them find a balance between structure and relationship. In the families I see there's often an imbalance: either the parents are underinvolved and have little supervision or discipline in the home or they're so rigid about rules and boundaries that the kids feel stifled. In the first kind of scenario I encourage parents to establish some clear boundaries. At the same time I'm trying to empower the students by showing how their actions and decisions have distinct consequences. In cases where parents have been extremely rigid, I would probably persuade them to ease up on the less important points in order to open up some space for a closer relationship with their child. I definitely see myself as an advocate – for children with difficult parents, for parents with difficult children, for teachers with difficult families, and so on.

So although school was often difficult for me, I think those experiences motivated me to become a helper in the first place. One of the few things I remember enjoying in school was the buddy system where we got to read to younger students. As I got older more and more people would turn to me as a confidante. That was probably reinforced because I'd pretty much just listen and not tell them what to do. To me, that's empowerment because you imply that only that person can know what is best for him or her. Having an understanding of what it's like to be the "bad" kid or the misunderstood kid helps me to empathize with my student clients, to act as their advocate, and to help them establish a sense of control over their lives. Furthermore, it's helped me to have a vision of what education can and should be: it should be less about conformity and more about teaching children to be lifelong learners.

The influence of my school experiences is not always positive in my career. I can get a little intolerant when I hear of adults treating students poorly. My immediate instinct is to believe students, even though I realize that their perceptions of events may not be exactly accurate. If a student comes and tells me their teacher called them an idiot in front of the class, I might experience a knee-jerk reaction where I want to have that teacher fired. My sense of advocacy can come on a little strong. When it actually comes to action I think I treat those things in a professional manner but it can be difficult to keep my personal attitudes and feelings in check. Another thing I have to watch for is that while my clients do need someone to advocate for them and believe in them, they are often a large part of the problem themselves. I have to make sure I'm balancing these kids'

need to have someone on their side with the necessity of challenging their behaviours that maintain the problem. Again, I guess Mr. G. modelled that balance: he was caring and understanding, yet he had high standards for conduct. When I would get off track, one look from him was enough to destroy any idea that it was cool or the right thing to do.

Military Life. My childhood theme of disempowerment was underscored by my experiences in the military. Although the practices that could be considered psychologically or physically abusive were being phased out by the time I joined, there were still incidences that profoundly shook me up. The power structures in the military are disconcerting: one day you are given a lot of authority and power and the next day it's stripped away because someone shows up who has one more colour than you. One time I even felt forced to choose between disobeying an order and risking my physical safety. When you have that much power taken away from you and you literally have to put your life in somebody else's hands it's a really big deal. That's had an incredible impact on how I see things and how I empathize with people who don't feel like they have power. Because of my experiences in school and with the military, I'm always attuned to people who feel disempowered and I look for ways to restore their sense of agency.

My whole outlook was affected by my involvement with the military. The experience of being given a lot of power and then having it taken away was humbling, and I find I'm a humble person now. Regardless of how many degrees I have or how many books I've read I still can't say what is best for anyone else. I don't see myself as an "expert:" rather, I often describe myself as a glorified tour

guide. With clients I may show them several different paths and describe what they might find along the way but they still have to decide which path to take. I'm quite proud of working that way because I think it's really respectful. When I was working at the sexual assault centre, many clients who had worked with different counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists told me that treatment was unsuccessful because the professional focused on giving expert advice rather than building rapport. I strongly believe that each person is their own best expert when it comes to their lives.

Another way the military was significant was that it exposed me to people of all sorts of differing views and ideologies, religions, and cultures. Often in the military you're doing very rote kinds of tasks and so there's a lot of time to stop and talk to people and share experiences and opinions. Or you sit and think about things: it's like paid meditation. It helped me to develop an open mind and to be willing to challenge my way of thinking. Now I don't hold rigidly to a particular belief because I know that there's always other ways to see things. What also tended to happen during all the downtime was that many of my comrades would approach me to discuss their problems and dilemmas. I realized that I had been listening to people all my life and that there was possibly something along those lines in my future.

Putting the Vision into Practice. By the time I came to social work I obviously felt passionately about power and control issues but I hadn't yet developed a way of working with people that reflected my convictions. My practicum at the adolescent treatment home gave me the opportunity to try on

some ways of practicing. The focus there was very much on structure and discipline, which I don't disagree with, but I felt that it was sometimes done disrespectfully. One of the rules at the home was that when residents acted up they had to go to bed earlier. One of the kids came up to me and asked whether he could earn a later bedtime by doing extra chores. I thought it was a reasonable idea and so I had him propose it at a meeting with the other staff. Not only did they turn him down because they had tried it before and found it to be a hassle but they were upset with me for "stirring the pot." I think it's important to have rules and boundaries but also to be a cooperative figure. At the treatment home I preferred to sit down and problem solve with the kids rather than simply say no because the rules were the rules. Being unnecessarily authoritative could sabotage the relationship, which I think is crucial in helping kids to take a different perspective.

I developed a relationship with one boy at the treatment home that became a model for how I feel best working with people. This was a kid who was known to be quite violent and unpredictable; many of the staff members were afraid of him. One time we went to the library and he borrowed a c.d. that I wasn't familiar with. When we got back to the home the other staff realized that this c.d. had a lot of derogatory content, which was not allowed. They were quite worried about getting it back because he tended to get violent with staff when he was angry. I went to his room and explained that we couldn't have that kind of music because of the swearing. However, I offered to see if I could make a copy on my computer that edited out the bad parts. He could see I was trying to be reasonable and he

was really good with it. If I had barged in there and demanded the c.d. back he probably would have clashed with me. I think he realized that I would respect him and not impede his freedom as long as he stuck to the rules. He also knew that if the rules were unfair, I would be open to talking about them. I ended up helping this guy with his schoolwork and he got very excited during our social studies discussions about socialism. He was also interested in issues of power and control and I think he was empowered to meet his needs in non-violent ways. Instead of blowing up when he was angry, he would explain that something was not “egalitarian” or he would quote some idea he had been impressed with. It was really neat to see that transformation and to think that I had played a part in it.

Working successfully with that boy had the effect of solidifying my theory about how best to help people. Most of the staff at the treatment home had an authoritarian stance: “we make the rules and the kids follow them, no questions asked.” With the kind of kids who were sent there, it was a recipe for power struggles. I believe that when I am respectful I can help to restore some sense of personal power to that person and that they in turn will be more respectful and responsible. I think this works even when the control is illusory. For example, I would always politely ask the kids to do their chores. A couple of the staff members were very concerned about this. They sat me down and said, “You shouldn’t *ask* them to do their chores because it makes them feel like they have a choice. What are you going to do when they say no?” Now, the rules were very clear at this institution and the residents were well aware of the consequences for not following them. I really didn’t agree that the kids might mistake politeness

and respectfulness for permission to do whatever they pleased. In fact, I believed that they would be more likely to rebel if they were ordered around. One of the main objectives of this home was to teach the kids how to relate to other people. In most situations, if you order people around they will become defensive and less likely to cooperate. So despite my clashes amongst the treatment home staff, I was establishing a way of working with people that reflected my values.

The way I worked with kids at the treatment home was the foundation for how I work with students as a school social worker. I still find that lecturing and coming across as an expert or authoritarian are counterproductive. I prefer to use a rational approach where the students and I ascertain what their goals are and whether their actions are helping or hindering them. My job is not to change people, but to help them find reasons to invest in change. For example, a student's goal might be to get his parents "off his case." I would plug into that goal and encourage him to think about how to get his parents to act differently, which ultimately comes around to his own actions. Hopefully he realizes that he has more power to reach his goal when he is cooperating rather than rebelling. The important part, I think, is that he comes to this conclusion on his own. That's how my clients are empowered.

Reflections on Counsellor Development. I think that an important thing for counsellors is to have diverse life experiences and to be eclectic in their approach. In my work I've run across an incredibly wide array of people and issues, and no one approach would fit for all of them. I think all experiences, personal or professional, teach us something. So if you've worked at McDonald's, been

certified in control theory, or taken a class on Buddhism, it's all beneficial. Each experience widens your perspective and can be incorporated somehow into your work as a helper. The more experiences you have, the better you become at dealing with a diverse clientele and a multitude of issues.

Another reason I think people in the helping professions need to have diversity in their lives is to keep balanced. It's not healthy for life to become all about work. Last week was a perfect example: I worked myself to the bone and now I'm sick. So we need to be good self-regulators. We have to know ourselves and when we need to stop, take a break, and recharge. Luckily, this job affords me the flexibility to say, "Okay, I've had enough. I'm done for the day." Of course, I can't be going home at noon but I can decide not to stay late or to just do paperwork sometimes. And I need to make time for my family and exercise and other hobbies like reading and computer games. Sounds a bit strange, but when I was dealing with the abuse stories day after day, I found it helpful to get out my aggressions by blowing people away on internet games. I find that when I keep my outside life active, I'm a more effective helper. I can be empathic and involved when I'm working with a client and yet not let that carry over into my life outside of work.

I've learned a lot about the need for professional boundaries in the past few years working in the school system. At first I wanted to do everything for everyone. You know, once I had assessed a family's needs, I wanted to be the one to do the family counselling or post-traumatic stress work or whatever was indicated. But that wouldn't be fair to my clients or myself because I would burn

out really fast. Part of my role is to make appropriate referrals and there are many other qualified people in the schools and the community. Wanting to be perfect and able to handle everything is really an ego issue and can lead to professionals making ethical mistakes. So again, I think humility is important: I'm only human and it's okay to ask for help and to admit it when I've made a mistake. I'm also getting better at not owning my clients' outcomes. I can say, "Okay, I've done everything professionally that I can. The rest is up to them." After all, it's their journey and I'm just the tourguide.

### Researcher's Reflections

The experiences that Luke identified as significant in his development as a helping professional, while disparate in terms of life stages and sources, all hold to a similar theme. In school, in the military, and as a novice social worker, Luke was sensitive to power imbalances. As a child, Luke found many of his teachers to be controlling, judgmental, and quick to label. Later, in the military, he was put off by the shifting of authority according to rank. He felt constrained and censured by the authoritarian ideology at his social work practicum placement. Conversely, there were facets in each situation that countered his sense of oppression: a teacher who believed in him, exposure to people with varying beliefs and ideas, and success with a challenging client. I found it interesting that all of the experiences Luke spoke about were so closely connected around the feeling of powerlessness, whether in himself or in others. It is clearly a prevailing concern in both his personal and professional spheres.

In addition to what kinds of experiences contribute to counsellor development, I asked how such experiences come to have their meaning. For Luke, there was a distinct contrast between the feelings provoked by his authoritarian, hurtful teachers and the safety and freedom he felt in Mr. G.'s class. With Mr. G.'s classroom as a model, he began to develop a vision of himself as someone who would empower others. This vision expanded during his time with the military and at the adolescent treatment home. The dominant ideology in all of these settings revolved around authority and compliance while Luke increasingly believed in the importance of free will and self-direction. Luke's feelings of being dominated and misunderstood as a young student led him to have empathy for others who were unable to speak up for themselves. Being a helper became part of his identity early on: one of the few things he enjoyed in school was being a reading buddy to a younger student. Furthermore, his listening and facilitating skills were reinforced at each of these stages. Friends at school confided in him, as did his associates in the military. He made headway with a difficult client at the treatment home where established methods were failing to make a difference. It is likely that each experience built on the previous one, thus developing into a prominent concern in his current work in the schools.

Maria

### Researcher's Introduction

I was happy to include Maria's story in this research project, especially because I believe it adds another perspective to the preceding narratives: that of someone who has retired from a career in school counselling. Maria retired from

her school counsellor position and now works in private practice. She still keeps incredibly busy with a variety of commitments, hobbies, and activities. We met in her home for a single interview: Maria was succinct with her responses and we covered all of my questions in that first meeting. I was also appreciative of Maria's story because she highlighted a dimension not focused on as much by the other participants: growing through and learning from experiences with clients.

Maria's Narrative: "The Outsider"

A Career Overview. I came to be a counsellor in kind of a roundabout way. When I initially went to university, I majored in science and math. However, I moved when I got married and for the first few years I couldn't get work in my field. I decided to look into teaching, thinking that I could at least teach science and math. That was actually quite appealing to me because I was always a people person and research wasn't really my bag.

So I got into a B.Ed. After Degree program and really had fun with it. One memorable experience was teaching grade twelve psychology: the kids were wild and I wasn't firm enough, but they were angels whenever I was being observed. Obviously I was able to connect with them somehow. While I was completing my education degree, there were several professors who took an interest in me. They said, "Really, what are you doing in physics? You should be working with people, with kids." They encouraged me to apply for scholarships and pursue graduate studies in educational psychology, which I did and I've never looked back. I was trained in both counselling and assessment and so there were several career routes open to me.

My first position after I graduated was in educational assessment. Later, I was hired by the school board to work in what was called a reading clinic. They gave me the cases where they believed the child's reading problem had an emotional or psychological basis. After a while the reading clinic was closed down in favour of having resource teachers in each school. At that point I was given the position of school counsellor and that's where I remained until I retired from the school board. Now, although I'm working part-time in private practice, I'm finding (semi) retired life to be very enjoyable and fulfilling.

Current Beliefs and Practices. The biggest chunk of my time as a school counsellor was spent counselling individual students and communicating with parents and teachers. I would also sometimes lead small groups. I used to do a lot more group work with kids. I think it's effective but in more recent years it seemed harder and harder to get kids organized in a group. Maybe it's just that I was getting tired. A small percentage of my time was in the classroom but I never had enough time to do that on a regular basis. There were always crises that came up and so it was difficult to have a regular schedule. The other activity would be networking with other agencies to set up supports in the community.

In terms of issues, I had a lot of referrals for kids whose families were split up. Also, I tended to see children with poor social skills, children who were often in trouble at school, and a smaller percentage of children who lacked motivation and disliked school. Over the years I certainly dealt with some abuse cases, which were difficult because I had to make a report and trust that the experts would help

those kids. Towards the end of my career I was seeing more and more children identified with AD/HD because of the difficulties they encountered in school.

At the time I was trained in counselling the Rogerian approach was prevalent, but I soon discovered that it simply didn't work with children. I think it's good for intellectual people who are well spoken but most children don't have the ability to express themselves in such an abstract and self-directive way. On the other hand, I found my training in solution-focused brief therapy to be a good fit in the schools. It makes a lot of sense to me to look for strengths and to give compliments: it shows people that they already have a piece of the answer to their difficulties. So I would say it's mainly solution-focused counselling that I do, even though it's never as straightforward as it seems to be in training. I've also been trained as an Adlerian parent educator, so some of my approach is Adlerian; however, I find it to be very consistent with solution-focused. In both models, there's an emphasis on building on strengths and looking for positives. Last year I began learning Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy and I've been using that in my practice with some success. I don't believe there's any one therapy that will work with every child. I do agree with the research that points to the relationship between client and counsellor as the most important factor relating to outcome. All theories aside, I'm helpful because I like kids, I relate well to them, and I honestly care about their well-being. I don't necessarily relate as an expert. A facilitator for change is a better description of my role. Someone once said that counselling is like walking with someone on a part of their journey, and that's kind of how I've looked at it.

Some of the positive aspects of school counselling? Well, it can be really exciting and you're certainly needed and valued. That's pretty apparent when a school is calling for you to come over to help with a crisis situation. You get to work with a lot of wonderful people. The friendships I've made with staff members over the years have certainly been valuable. Mostly it's the children. I've worked with some wonderful kids and they made me feel like I was very important to them. There are some drawbacks too, most of which have to do with being one person working in multiple facilities. For example, I disliked driving from school to school in the winter when the roads were terrible, I often had to work in less than decent office spaces, and I commonly felt pulled in a lot of different directions. One thing that was extremely frustrating was working with a child, putting tons of energy into helping them adjust at school, and then all of a sudden finding out they were gone – moved away or pulled or whatever. I could only hope they would continue to get support in their new situation. That's hard, but one thing you have to remember is that you wouldn't encounter many of these children in a community agency. In the schools you can make a difference to kids who would not otherwise have access to counselling.

On Belonging. This is interesting because I recently spent some time thinking about why I became a counsellor. The thing I discovered when I went for my own personal counselling is that, as a child, I always felt like an outsider. Part of that was within my family: I was the eldest of my siblings and we had a large extended family and I tended to get lost in it. The bigger thing was in school. I came from a different background than most of my peers and I had to contend with

a lot of stereotypes. I wasn't bullied or anything but I just felt like the odd man out. I remember never feeling smart enough or good enough in elementary school. I got mostly "satisfactory's" on my report cards and my mother would say, "well, really, you should be getting better than that because you're smart, you know." I was just insecure and it was very painful.

It wasn't that I didn't have any friends. I always had friends, although when I think about it, they were all on the fringe too. We were not the popular or the in-group. But the schools where I grew up were large enough that you always found somebody to hang with. In high school I shone more academically but that feeling of being an outsider stayed with me. At the same time, I must have had pretty good people skills. My friends often confided in me and I even had the school counsellor encourage me to go into teaching. It's kind of funny that so many years later I did.

When I look back on those years now, I'm reminded of Adler's focus on people's intrinsic need to belong. I didn't feel I belonged in my family, I didn't feel I belonged anywhere and I think that coloured my whole life. I realize now that counselling had a draw for me because I wanted to make sure that other kids didn't feel that way, that nobody felt that pain of being on the outside. I thought that by being a counsellor I could prevent kids from experiencing that kind of suffering. Of course they do anyway, so I was pretty idealistic, but I still feel a tremendous amount of sympathy for kids who are left out or bullied.

Besides providing me with the motivation to help children, my childhood experience impacted on the way I worked as a school counsellor. On the positive

side, I could easily empathize with children who were rejected or ignored. I was certainly an advocate for them. I understood their experience and I can think of many special relationships that developed between my students and me over the years. I think those experiences were as important to me as they were to the children I supported. When it happened, I knew I was doing the right thing with my life. Sometimes, though, I would get myself into trouble by getting on my high horse before I knew the whole story. Seeing a child in pain was such an emotional trigger for me that I would go overboard at times. I gradually discovered that trying too hard to help actually gets in the way of helping because you disempower people. I believe I'm most helpful when I give lots of emotional support, emphasize people's strengths, and step out of the way so they can do what's best for them.

A Special Boy: Frustration and Affirmation. There was a boy I worked with who I will never forget... I think I'm going to cry about him. He had a very violent and volatile home life: he saw his mother being routinely beaten by his father. He would have been about ten years old when I started to work with him. He was so bright – he would come to me and say, "I'm going to be just like my father," and that idea really tortured him. Of course we would discuss the fact that he wasn't his father but, inevitably, he ended up getting into lots of trouble at school. I tried to meet with his parents and nothing would happen. I remember feeling very sad and very frustrated that I couldn't do more for him. He really suffered. At the same time, I loved working with him and I knew I was in the right place doing what I needed to do. Because of him I realized this was the right thing

to be doing with my life. I worked with him for about two years and then he went on to high school. I still think a lot about him and I wonder what happened to him. I just hope he made it, made something out of his life.

What I learned from my experience with this boy was that I couldn't rescue him. I alone couldn't fix his problems and make his life all better. I did the best I could with what I had. It was an important lesson because if you believe you have to do it all, you'll never feel successful. This was a case that forced me to redefine my understanding of success. Before that point, I would put a lot of energy into convincing parents that there was a problem and then do a lot of rescuing. I spoke to another therapist, a mentor of mine, about my frustration with this boy's parents. He advised me to go with them instead of against: I could say, "Okay, you're not experiencing this as a problem. At school, we're experiencing this, so what do you think we should do?" At least they might perceive that the school was not condemning them. I learned the importance of being respectful of people regardless of how much I might disagree. It's so essential to make sure it's the client's goals and needs being met, not my own. Working with this young boy taught me to feel okay doing what I could do, no matter how seemingly small.

Planting a Seed. Another boy I worked with early in my counselling career had a profound effect on my outlook. He was referred to me in grade two because of his out of control behaviour. He would hit and kick teachers and was always in trouble. I found out that his father had just walked out on his family and his mother was in a deep depression. It was a pretty horrible situation. Because of his young age he didn't have the ability to clearly express what he was feeling. We

basically played together and I'd give him lots of compliments and sometimes we'd discuss some of his behaviours and anger. I think that the best thing, really, was that I connected with his mother. I would visit their home and do a lot of talking with her. That was the best thing I could do for this little guy because she felt supported and was better able to care for him.

The other factor in this boy's life was Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. His parents were in the process of having him assessed when the father decided to leave. I think his home situation exacerbated the inattention and agitation tremendously: it was a lot worse than it could have been. As my mentor always said, "You have to look at the context." Children with a chaotic home life tend to be anxious and it logically follows that they will be distracted and disorganized. As things settled down for him, I could see that this student was extremely bright. He was missing out on gifted education because his I.Q. score was a couple of points under the cutoff. I called the educational psychologist and had her administer another test and, sure enough, he qualified for the enrichment program. So that was something I was instrumental in doing. And I happen to know that he's continued to have success.

Something this boy's mother told me has always stuck with me. Of course, his progress at school in terms of behaviour was slow: he was very challenging to work with. She had the wisdom to point out that I may never see the results of the counselling I've done with children but that doesn't necessarily mean I've failed. She likened it to planting a seed. I may not be there to see the plant grow but I can have faith that my nurturance will have an impact. It was a timely insight for me

because this was actually one of my first cases as a school counsellor. I had some pretty big ideas about being able to fix everything for the kids I worked with. I think her comment allowed me to ease up on my expectations for myself and to feel that what I was doing was important even when there weren't immediate improvements. In this case, there actually were really apparent changes in this family and I'm sure it had to do with the mom being open to being helped and to the young age of the boy. But it has been helpful to think about her comment when I'm feeling frustrated with a seeming lack of progress.

Reverse Psychology. Another experience that sticks in my mind is working with a certain group of grade eight boys. I forget what we were actually working on but I remember they were trouble. The group was going disastrously: I was doing everything I knew to keep them on track but they just wouldn't cooperate. One boy in particular was ensuring we never got anything done. I was tearing my hair out! Thankfully I took a step back and thought, "Okay, I have to go with this kid and not against him." The next time I took him aside after the group and leveled with him. I said, "You know, I really need your help. I can see how the other kids look to you as a leader. So if we want to really get some good discussion in the group I need your help in keeping the other guys on task." And it worked perfectly! I didn't have any trouble after that. There's something to be said for reverse psychology.

The significance of that incident was that I was stuck in one way of seeing and doing something. The more I tried to control those boys, the more unruly they became. It took a switch in my way of thinking to overcome the problem. And

really, that's what happened in all of the experiences I've talked about. I would be trying something without much success and feeling frustrated. Then I would somehow change my attitude or approach and things would click into place. I can't overstate the importance of having someone to talk things over with in cases like that. I was very lucky to have a mentor. I got to know him when I was working as an educational psychologist and I continued to call him throughout my career about certain cases I was struggling with. See, and in the schools there's not enough of that. There's not enough time spent as a group discussing our successes and failures and questions. I think that's to the detriment of our professional development.

Reflections on Counsellor Development. I think that pursuing professional development is inherently difficult for school counsellors. For one thing you don't physically work with your professional peers: you are the one mental health practitioner amongst staffs who are otherwise teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals. You can't walk down the hall to consult or debrief with other counsellors. As I've mentioned, I minimized that problem by pursuing outside mentorship. Getting the time to attend workshops and conferences is another obstacle. One rule in my school division was that counsellors couldn't have more professional days than teachers, even though they had different roles. Nevertheless, I think it's important to be introduced to new ideas and new ways of doing things, particularly when you don't frequently interact with other counsellors. You need to keep challenging yourself. When it does come to workshops, I prefer those that are focused on one specific topic or skill. One thing

I found totally useless was going to these two-day seminars where we had an hour here and an hour there on a variety of issues. I want to have time to understand the theory, practice the skills, ask questions, and interact with colleagues. That's another key point: all of my most important learning experiences have been interpersonal. Relationship has been identified as the crucial factor in client success and I think that must also be true for the developing professional. I don't think we can grow in isolation.

Developing personally is as important as developing professionally. For instance, when I had my own children I became a much better counsellor. That's not to say that you can't be a good counsellor if you're not a parent but let me put it this way: I had much more empathy for parents once I became one myself. I believe you have to know yourself in this career. There will always be issues you struggle with and experiences that trigger old feelings. The danger lies in not recognizing the personal nature of some of your struggles in work. I don't think there's any endpoint of personal development: it's an ongoing journey.

That being said, I also put stock in something an ex-social worker friend of mine said. He believed that social workers and counsellors shouldn't work at their jobs for more than twenty years. No matter what you do, in the end you can get very burned out. And I know I was tired the last four or five years at work. I just didn't have the same enthusiasm that I had when I was younger. In school counselling in particular, the nature of the work is very demanding. You're itinerant and there's never going to be the money to have a counsellor in every school. Forget it – it ain't gonna happen! I often think of what he said – twenty

years - and I think there's probably some truth in that. I'm still involved in counselling but I find the venue is very different. Of course, it's part-time, I have an office with all my things, and my clients come to me. In private practice the clients are usually strongly motivated and with child clients I always have access to the parents. We often don't see the very needy cases at a private clinic so I guess that's somewhat of a loss. However, personally and professionally, I'm in a space where it's okay to take a step back and explore many of the other challenges life has to offer.

### Researcher's Reflections

Again, I include this section in order to consider what each narrative reveals about my two primary research questions: what experiences contribute to counsellor development and why are such experiences significant? Maria felt, as did the other participants, that her childhood influenced both her decision to enter the counselling profession and her subsequent practice. Her experience of feeling like an outsider in her family and at school was primarily challenging and painful, although she identified other protective factors such as caring friendships and academic success. The other three experiences Maria described all related to her work with clients as a school counsellor. Each of these situations held a particular challenge for Maria, and provoked both negative and positive reactions. The interpersonal nature of these experiences also seems key: in each scenario her relationship with a particular person was the forum for a period of intense professional and personal growth.

Maria's sense of not belonging during childhood and adolescence appeared to heighten her sensitivity towards others. While it seems she was not consciously aware of this shift until going through her own personal counselling, there is support for the suggestion that she was a particularly understanding and empathic youth. She was often the confidante to her friends and her school counsellor tried to steer her towards a career in working with children. Later, several professors also noted her gift for working with people and encouraged her to pursue graduate studies in educational psychology. All of these experiences would likely have reinforced Maria's leanings towards a helping career. Once established in her career as a school counsellor, she continued to be sensitive to the feelings of children on the fringe and was often reinforced by her sense of being in the right place and doing what she was meant to do. At times, this sensitivity also represented a vulnerability: Maria was aware of her tendency to become overly involved and to want to rescue her clients. She managed this through consultation with a mentor and the cumulative effect of experience.

All three of the experiences concerning clients represented challenges for Maria. With her "special boy" she felt she could do little to improve his home situation and this conflicted with her need to make things better. Progress was slow during her work with the boy with AD/HD and family difficulties and she questioned her effectiveness. She became stuck with the group of grade eight boys whose leader was working against her. With reflection and help, usually from her self-chosen mentor, Maria was able to change her perspective and feel more successful. In the first case she learned to be more realistic about her ability to

change life circumstances for some children. In the second scenario she realized the effectiveness of supporting a parent in order to benefit a child and she learned to feel okay with slow progress, knowing that the effects of her work were not always immediate. With the group she experienced much more success once she went with rather than against the oppositional leader. In all cases, Maria learned to appreciate the good she was doing and had the continued sense of being where she was supposed to be in her life.

### Conclusion

The stories of personal and professional development presented in this chapter bring a dimension of lived experience to the trends and stages discussed in the literature review. The four school counsellors and social workers represented here found a wide variety of experiences to be meaningful in terms of their growth as practitioners. In my reflections following each narrative I have focused on these “critical incidents” because they pertain most directly to my questions about what experiences stand out as developmental turning points. To summarize, the experiences that the participants spoke of gained their significance through some combination of (a) evoking intense emotions, (b) coinciding with a readiness to learn, (c) reflecting a goodness of fit with previous experiences and attitudes, (d) providing opportunities for positive reinforcement, and (e) necessitating a cognitive accommodation.

I felt my choice to use narrative methodology was reinforced as it allowed the uniqueness of each participant and his or her meaning-making processes to shine through. Although initially intended merely to build a context for the stories,

the sections on the participants' beliefs and practices as well as their more general reflections on development and well-being add important dimensions to our understanding of helping careers, particularly in school settings. I will touch on some of these issues in the general discussion in the following chapter. I will also address how the results of this study fit with the existing literature on counsellor development and school counselling. Finally, implications for the fields of school counselling and counsellor education will be discussed, as well as suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Themes in School Counsellor Development

While the focus of my analysis was on writing narratives that represented the participants' experiences in a holistic manner, I refer again to Polkinghorne (1988), who argued that a full treatment of a story includes "both the elements that are unique to that particular story and those that can be found, at least in essence, in other stories" (p. 167). The observations that follow are not the results of a systematic thematic analysis; rather, they represent some key points I have learned about development for school counsellors through my conversations with Alyssa, Lucy, Luke, and Maria.

#### Critical Incidents in Development

Childhood. I found it significant that all four participants, without prompting, spoke of the formative influence of childhood on their helping abilities. A common thread amongst the childhood experiences was the orientation towards and empathy for others. From an early age these individuals identified with what others were experiencing, particularly with reference to painful emotions. Not only did they have the inner experience of empathy, but also the desire to ameliorate their peers' distress. The narrators all recalled taking prosocial actions such as listening, comforting, and advocating. The participants attributed this

inclination to a variety of causes. Lucy, Luke, and Maria felt that difficult experiences – being labeled as “bad,” feeling misunderstood, or not fitting in – sensitized them to the similar plights of their peers. On the other hand, Alyssa experienced her difference as empowering from the start, realizing she could be the voice for children unable to speak up for themselves.

The participant narratives would support Farber’s (1985) assertion that people who are attracted to psychotherapy as a profession are usually psychologically-minded and that this propensity develops in childhood. Such individuals have “the disposition to reflect upon the meaning and motivation of behavior, thoughts, and feelings in oneself and others” (p. 170). It is impossible to ascertain whether the narrators had an inborn tendency towards this trait, but they did speak of experiences which heightened their awareness of inner events like thoughts and feelings. They also received positive reinforcement for this orientation in the form of friendship, recognition, and subjective experiences of efficacy and fulfillment. It is noteworthy that counselling was not a first career choice for any of the participants. They did, however, lean towards such human services careers as teaching and policework. It took a more fortuitous combination of encouragement and opportunity to situate them in therapeutic roles.

Challenging/Painful Experiences. The majority of experiences described by the participants as profoundly affecting their development can be classified as challenging, if not painful. The nature of the events ranged from traumatic, as when Lucy’s child was seriously hurt, all the way to stimulating, as in Alyssa’s intensive training program. The commonality amongst these seemingly diverse

experiences is their demanding character. Regardless of the positive or negative dimension, these experiences were not easy: they required the individual to grapple with new information and to come to more comprehensive understandings. In essence, the stories all illustrate the cognitive developmental process of accommodation, whereby new experiences do not fit within one's existing conceptualizations. This necessitates an adjustment of the person's beliefs in order to diminish the dissonance.

This finding has several reference points in the counsellor development research literature. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) noted the influence of painful experiences on their sample: these appeared to be more instructive than pleasant experiences because of their correspondence with the issues that bring clients to counselling. However, this explanation doesn't account for why positive, challenging experiences were also emphasized in the current study. When Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) examined which factors contributed to development over stagnation, they found a positive attitude towards complexity and challenge to be an asset. "This dimension impacts whether or not the individual can tolerate the discomfort and anxiety that accompanies transcending the comfort of the known" (p. 130). This resonated with Skovholt and McCarthy's (1988) critical incident study, in which participants stressed that whether an event became a critical incident depended on their readiness to learn. My finding of the importance of challenging and painful experiences supports the contention that "the interaction between the nature of an event and the readiness of the individual

to accept the challenge to be ‘educated’ results in counselor development” (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988, p. 69).

Theories and research on the processes of counsellor development are also relevant to this discussion. Loganbill et al. (1982) conceptualized development as occurring in successive cycles of *Stagnation*, *Confusion*, and *Integration*. Sawatsky et al. (1994) described how their participants experienced similar phases of *Experiencing Dissonance*, *Responding to Dissonance*, *Relating to Supervision*, and *Feeling Empowered*. Finally, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) labeled such processes as *Moratorium* and *Continuous Professional Reflection*. The general picture in all of these models, which is supported by the current study, is that there are periods of calm when the counsellor experiences competency and when new information fits into his or her existing understandings (assimilation). Then something occurs to offset the counsellor’s equilibrium: new information does not make sense according to what one already knows. In order to reduce anxiety and dissonance, counsellors engage in reflection, consultation, or research that enables them to incorporate the new experience. At the point where this is achieved, the counsellor arrives back at a sense of proficiency, albeit at a more profound level than before. This helps to explain why the narrators in the current study spoke of particularly difficult or challenging experiences as turning points in their development.

The Pitfalls of Empathy. Many of the experiences described by Alyssa, Lucy, Luke, and Maria ultimately increased their empathic capacity with clients. Having experienced painful or challenging circumstances themselves, they could

better understand what others were going through in times of loss and uncertainty. With this increased appreciation for the subjective experiences of clients, the participants were evidently more helpful in terms of both emotional support and interventions. This apparent strength, however, came hand-in-hand with a certain vulnerability. Lucy described her tendency to “hook in” emotionally in situations involving an “underdog,” becoming quite “adolescent.” Similarly, Luke spoke of being “intolerant” when he heard of adults mistreating students. He had to avoid “knee-jerk” reactions and keep his feelings and attitudes in check. Maria would sometimes cause trouble for herself by getting on her “high horse” before knowing the whole story. Seeing a child in pain was an emotional trigger that influenced her to go “overboard” at times. It is notable that this phenomenon related particularly to the participants’ stories of childhood. Awareness of these susceptibilities seemed to be a key factor in managing them. Also, the participants spoke about the benefits of having a mentor with whom to process challenging situations and the importance of adequate self-care and balanced living.

Goldberg argued that such vulnerability is not only inevitable, but a therapeutic strength when tempered with “liberal amounts of compassion and common sense” for oneself and the client (p. 33):

Being involved in the most human of the arts and sciences, the practitioner’s responsive vulnerability is the basis of his/her sensitivity, compassion, and responsiveness to others’ suffering. But as such, it is, by necessity, a double-edged instrument. It is potentially his/her most sensitive tool for responsively attending human suffering, while at the same time, potentially, a wound which may become exacerbated by excessive, painful stress and self-doubts. (Goldberg, 1986, p 33)

In the counsellor development literature as well, this is recognized as common and acceptable so long as the practitioner addresses personal material that could compromise his or her effectiveness with clients (Wilkins, 1997). The key issue is perhaps the degree to which counsellors are aware of the personal issues and vulnerabilities that are triggered in their work.

Recalling stage models of counsellor development, professionals at earlier stages commonly became overinvolved with clients, tended to take on too much responsibility, and had unrealistic expectations for themselves and their clients (e.g., Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). Only with time and experience, at the *Conditional Autonomy* stage, did counsellors reach a full awareness of the impact of personal issues on professional work. Maria's narrative clearly illustrates this point: several of her stories center around her need early in her career to "fix" things for her clients and the attending angst when this was impossible. These same experiences were instrumental in developing a new, tempered vision of her ability and role. Appropriate awareness and professionalism was demonstrated by Lucy when, in the midst of hostile divorce proceedings, she referred on a male client who was invoking resentful feelings in her. Had she been less self-aware, there was the potential to work through her own issues at the expense of the client. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) found that awareness and insight into one's motivations for practicing therapy was conducive to development, while an excessive focus on self-healing and acceptance of responsibility for client change were factors contributing to stagnation or leaving the profession.

## Issues in School Counselling

Remedial Focus. On average, the participants in this study were responsible for the counselling needs of four schools. The vast majority of their workloads were based on referrals for children having various difficulties. Faced with so many children in need of remedial services, the school counsellors and social workers found very little time for preventative activities. Alyssa and Maria reflected on times when it was more possible to conduct guidance activities with classrooms because they were involved in fewer schools. Lucy had to pull back her involvement with program development and facilitation because of the demands on her time. Several quotes from the narratives convey the impossibility of serving the needs of all children: “I’m not so keen on doing that now because I think it would be death by stress;” “too bad we’re so stretched;” “our caseloads are way too high;” “you end up running, running, running to keep up;” “this job is very hectic;” “I never had enough time to do that on a regular basis.”

Obviously the “realistic counselor-student ratio” of 1:250 recommended by the American School Counselor Association for comprehensive school counselling programs is not a reality for these practitioners (ASCA, 1997). Comprehensive school counselling programs are the focus of many recent publications in the field of school counselling (Erford, 2003). The philosophy of such programs is to provide proactive, preventative, and developmental services that address the needs of all students (ASCA, 1997). Remedial and crisis oriented services are to comprise only a small percentage of school counsellors’ responsibilities.

However, without a higher counsellor to student ratio, school counsellors will be too busy “putting out fires” to address the needs of every student.

Lack of Supervision. A second school counselling issue highlighted by this study was the isolation of the participants from their professional colleagues and elders. They lacked the informal support of working in the same facility as other counsellors or social workers. As Alyssa commented, “I wouldn’t have a clue what other school social workers’ or counsellors’ jobs are like and they wouldn’t have a clue about mine.” Furthermore, none of the participants were receiving clinical supervision, which was defined by Loganbill et al. (1982) as “an intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship in which one person is designated to facilitate the development of therapeutic competence in the other person” (p. 4). Luke remarked, “I was plopped into this job without any supervision at all. I had to learn a lot of things through trial and error.” Each of the participants sought out mentors or professional peers outside of the immediate work setting in order to receive the support they needed. Alyssa felt that, unfortunately, this only happened “when the planets align,” and Lucy believed “more of that should be built into this particular job: there needs to be more opportunities to talk with each other and consult and brainstorm.”

The stories of these four school counsellors and social workers provide support for the literature on the lack of clinical supervision as an impediment to optimal professional development. Crutchfield and Borders (1997) cited several potential consequences of inadequate supervision. Without structured guidance, school counsellors can become unsure of their skills and even become less

competent than when they first completed training. Secondly, lack of support may lead to counsellors feeling overworked, isolated, and unhappy, thus rendering them less capable of providing effective and meaningful help to their clients. A third possibility is that new, more effective approaches have been developed since school counsellors initially completed their training. Without ongoing professional development opportunities, practitioners may fall behind on the most up to date treatments.

Fortunately, there is accumulating evidence that more feasible supervision formats, such as group and peer supervision, are benefiting school counsellors (Magnuson et al., 2001). These authors suggested that “practicing school counselors are probably the essential stakeholders for assuring that they receive supervision” (p. 215). In cases where clinical supervision is not provided by the school, school counsellors have the options to enroll in postgraduate courses, engage other practitioners in peer group supervision, or individually contract with a supervisor (Magnuson et al., 2001). Participants in the current study were counteracting some of the pitfalls of inadequate clinical supervision by liaising with other mental health professionals, including other school counsellors and social workers, and updating their skills through workshops and conferences.

The Role: Not Just Counselling Kids. Alyssa remarked that the title “school counsellor” can be deceiving because people often assume that one-to-one student counselling is all that one does. “Individual counselling for students is not always justified. I might be better off working with the parents to deflate some conflict or talking to the teacher about behavioural management.” Lucy felt very

successful when she could create positive changes for a child without ever actually seeing them: “If I can influence a frustrated teacher to see things differently or to try a different approach, the whole feeling of their classroom can improve. It feels good to have an impact on the overall climate of a school.” Luke remarked that he appreciated working with other counsellors, teachers, and administrators because their influence as a team could be much broader. The participants all appeared to agree that the individual support they could offer to a student, perhaps half an hour per week, was beneficial but not enough. In order to maximize their impact, these individuals felt that collaboration with parents, other school personnel, and outside agencies was imperative.

This point calls to mind the counsellor competencies identified by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 1997). The three “C’s” of the role are counselling (individual, small group, and large group guidance), consulting (providing information to other involved adults and case management), and coordinating (managing and evaluating the school counselling program). The narrators in the current study provided plenty of examples of the counselling and consulting functions. While these professionals couldn’t be said to work within comprehensive school counselling programs, due primarily to issues of counsellor to student ratios, there were indications that they did make efforts to define and manage their roles. For example, Alyssa said, “I feel it’s important to inform other school staff about the ways I feel comfortable working: my role, my process.” Through trial and error as well as philosophy about how they were most helpful,

each of the participants had defined for themselves and others the kinds of services that most befitted their role.

Brott and Myers (2002) noted that school counsellors' preparation and actual working environments were often discrepant, requiring the development of personal guidelines for performing the role. They labeled this process the *Blending of influences*, which I found difficult to grasp until I found examples within the participant narratives in the current study. I listened to what these counsellors and social workers did to define their roles (*Structuring*), how they made personal meaning within the role (*Interacting*), and how they evaluated their competencies (*Distinguishing*). The overall outcome of these processes was an emergent professional identity which remained fluid over the career span (*Evolving*). As an example, Luke was intensely involved in structuring activities because of his newness to the role and the lack of clear guidelines. Interacting was central for Lucy because, faced with multiple public opinions on her role (e.g., the "fix-it" mentality), she needed a solid internal conceptualization to guide her. School counsellors, with high caseloads, little supervision, and role ambiguity, must come to a personal understanding of their role and identity.

#### General Considerations in Counsellor Development

Self-Care. The participants uniformly spoke about the necessity of self-care in this career. There were two general components of self-care: attitudes about work and activities outside of work. A healthy attitude about the work included keeping one's hopes for clients in check, realizing that each small step is significant, losing the "rescuer" mentality, and accepting one's limitations. It was

also important to develop professional boundaries: trying to please everyone and taking on every problem would quickly lead to burn-out. Having a sense of humour and being creative were vital aspects of the work for some. Outside of work, these professionals stressed the need for exercise, social support, and outside interests and activities. They also emphasized the importance of knowing and having compassion for oneself. For example, they were aware of issues to which they were particularly sensitive and could appropriately adjust their levels of involvement and self-care. One participant even gave thought to the suggestion that after twenty years in this line of work, regardless of self-care, one would no longer have the energy and enthusiasm to sustain peak performance.

Skovholt et al. (2001) recognized that “the intrinsic rewards often felt by helping professionals can be deeply meaningful and satisfying, but the work is challenging and often difficult for reasons frequently beyond the counselors’ control” (p. 170). They listed seven hazards of counselling that place practitioners at risk for burnout: (a) clients sometimes seek help for unsolvable problems; (b) not all clients have the basic resources for success; (c) clients are sometimes not ready for change; (d) counsellors often have difficulty placing limits on their involvement; (e) constant empathy, interpersonal sensitivity, and one-way caring tend to deplete the practitioner; (f) measures of success are often elusive; and (g) some degree of failure is normative. Alyssa, Lucy, Luke, and Maria doubtless experienced these universal stressors of the counselling profession plus the unique challenges of working itinerantly in schools. Their arsenal of reframing techniques, coping strategies, and self-care practices rivaled any that appeared in

the research literature (e.g., Skovholt et al., 2001; Watkins, 1983). It is important to remain vigilant about self-care practices throughout a counselling career because different challenges present themselves at different stages of counsellor development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995).

Vision of the Profession. A striking parallel amongst the narratives was the participants' use of metaphor to describe what happens in counselling. Generally they described movement away from the need to fix or save clients and towards a vision of empowering them. Lucy's metaphor was that of a "door-holder": as a helper her role was to help clients see all of their options (doors) and then let them decide which one to enter. Luke described himself as a "glorified tour guide" and his explanation of this role is uncannily similar to Lucy's: "with clients I may show them several different paths and describe what they might find along the way but they still have to decide which path to take." Maria related to clients not as an "expert," but as someone who would walk with them on parts of their journeys. All of these metaphors stress the importance of supporting clients and expanding on their resources while refraining from advising or making choices for them.

As these professionals accompanied others on parts of their journeys, so were they involved in their own journeys of personal and professional development. Development entailed not reaching some finite point of expertise and satisfaction, but a continuous process of learning, struggle, and renewal. However, to say that development was continuous does not mean it was smooth or even unidirectional. Indeed, experiences that were advantageous in the long run were sometimes detrimental to professional functioning at the time of their

occurrence. Professional development was inseparable from personal development: indeed, it seemed that knowing and being oneself was critical to an authentic and empathic stance towards others. Furthermore, experiences in work, particularly with clients, contributed not just to professional identity but to an overall sense of self. The processes of reflection and searching for meaning were central to these stories of development: it also took courage and openness to tell them. I thank Alyssa, Lucy, Luke, and Maria for allowing me to be a part of their journeys.

#### Contributions to the Research Literature

In the previous section I referred back to the body of research on counsellor development and school counselling as it related to some general patterns in the current study. Of course, the experiences of four individuals are not enough to conclusively support nor refute any given model. The purpose of conducting a narrative study of school counsellor development was to convey a fuller sense of the lived experience of development for these professionals. I believe this purpose was fulfilled. The literature is full of references to therapists' formative experiences: childhood trauma, family constellation, and psychological mindedness are all proposed as reasons for selecting such a career. Indeed, the narrators all spoke of their "professional" development as beginning with certain aptitudes and skills in childhood. However, each story was unique and it was clear that no singular element accounted for the eventual entry into careers in counselling or social work. But for serendipity, these individuals would be teachers, police officers, or even scientists.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the development and testing of stage models of counsellor development. There are generally agreed upon patterns as practitioners gain experience: we know, for example, that counsellors come to rely less on imitation and that pervasive levels of anxiety subside (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). However, I believe the current study illustrates the difficulty of neatly categorizing practicing counsellors in any particular stage. The unique and idiosyncratic experiences of individual practitioners surely moderate the degree to which they fit within the general picture of a given career point. More importantly, the narratives of Alyssa, Lucy, Luke, and Maria bring real-life, detailed illustrations of the general patterns described in the literature. For example, stage models describe novice counsellors' reliance on client feedback as evidence of success (e.g., Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). Maria's story about working with a young boy with AD/HD and feeling frustrated with a seeming lack of progress demonstrates this trend.

The current study highlights the value of eliciting critical incidents in counsellor development. These descriptions were detailed and information-rich, and augmented the participants' more general reflections on professional development. This type of research was conducted by Skovholt and McCarthy in 1988, but each participant contributed only one, page-long description of a critical incident. I, on the other hand, elicited multiple critical incident descriptions from each participant, with the result of affirming that "development (is) a life-long process, facilitated by the occurrence of numerous critical incidents" (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988, p. 69). It was illuminating to see

how themes from early critical incidents were often echoed in later ones. For example, Luke was sensitized to issues of power and control by his experiences in school. Each successive critical experience built on this theme and its impact on his practice. In this way, the “meta-themes” of counsellors’ lives can be elucidated.

This study also had an exploratory purpose: I wanted to know whether professionals in the specialty area of school counselling demonstrated the same developmental trends as the more general counsellor demographic. This indeed seemed to be the case. The participants described the process of becoming less egocentric and more eclectic, realistic, and confident as they gained experience. In accordance with Skovholt and Ronnestad’s (1995) career span focus, these gains were far from complete at the starting point of independent practice. As expected, however, certain characteristics of school counselling presented challenges to optimal professional development. High case loads and insufficient clinical supervision placed additional stresses on an already demanding role. On the other hand, the participants also valued their independence, the ability to create their roles, and the importance of their presence in the schools.

#### Implications for Future Research

The term “development” has a positive connotation, implying progress to some higher point of achievement and wisdom. The ITP Nelson Canadian dictionary defines the word “develop” as “to grow by degrees into a more advanced, evolved, or mature state” (Green et al., 1997, p. 379). Thus, when the participants were asked to participate in a study on counsellor development, they

likely thought of experiences that positively affected their professional abilities. True to this assumption, even the difficult and painful experiences that were discussed had an ultimately advantageous effect on the participants' careers. More research is warranted on counsellor experiences that hinder development. The body of research relating to professional burn-out, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization addresses this negative side of practice, but doesn't utilize a developmental framework. The counsellor development literature and the current study indicate that a reflective stance and an openness to learning are key factors determining whether a particular experience gains developmental meaning. We need to learn more about counsellors' states of mind in the absence of these factors and how they can be helped.

This study explored subjective and retrospective aspects of counsellor development. A second suggestion for future research is to compare counsellors' subjective experience of development with external indications of competence such as client satisfaction. Hill et al. (1981) used such a design: they had doctoral students in counselling psychology conduct two sessions each year with a volunteer client for three years. The transcripts of the sessions were rated by the three researchers on measures of counselling microskills, counsellor activity level, counsellor anxiety, and overall quality. Furthermore, an in-depth interview was conducted with each of the students, assessing their subjective experiences of development during graduate school. They found significant differences over the three-year period for several of the microskills but not on the measures of activity, anxiety, or overall quality. The qualitative data, however, indicated that the

students subjectively experienced considerable progress. Future studies could expand on this methodology, perhaps including experienced counsellors as well as students, and looking at various external markers of competence.

Few studies have examined the personal and professional development of school counsellors. There is the potential for larger scale studies, like that of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995), to articulate a grounded theory of school counsellor development, taking into account all the variables that make it a distinct specialty. This would certainly be timely in terms of the American School Counselor Association's efforts to define, guide, and regulate this emergent profession. In addition, the more evidence that high caseloads and insufficient clinical supervision are detrimental to school counsellors' professional development, the more pressure there will be on institutions to remedy such deficiencies and thereby improve services provided to students.

#### Implications for the Practice of School Counselling

By the nature of their work, school counsellors and social workers are isolated from their professional peers. Practitioners working in community agencies may realize the normative nature of their anxieties and failures because of the regular opportunities to consult and debrief with other counsellors. Without this support, it is conceivable that school counsellors would attribute these experiences to a lack of aptitude or skill for the work, thus increasing the chances of burn-out or prematurely exiting the career. The participants in this study benefited enormously from even small amounts of consultation and commiseration with other mental health professionals. Most looked to a mentor, or professional

elder, for guidance, even though they had to find this resource for themselves. Thus, it would seem imperative for school counsellors and social workers to seek out collegial and supervisory support by any means possible. In fact, after being interviewed for this study, Lucy decided to implement a peer supervision group with some of her colleagues, from which the feedback has been very positive.

An implication of this study that is relevant for anyone working in a therapeutic capacity is maintaining a reflective stance towards practice. Reflection was the primary means whereby painful or challenging experiences came to have positive meaning for the individuals I interviewed. The narratives provided illustrations of Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1995) mechanism entitled *Continual Professional Reflection*, which entails (a) ongoing professional and personal experiences, (b) a searching process with others in an open and supportive environment, and (c) active reflection about one's experiences. In addition, I would add that adequate self-care practices and social support seem to augment the ability to maintain a reflective outlook. There are several recent books on the topic of self-supervision that guide counsellors and helping professionals through reflective practices (e.g., Kottler & Jones, 2003; Morrissette, 2001). These kinds of resources may be of particular interest to counsellors with little access to formal supervision.

There are other stakeholders in school counselling and social work beyond the practitioners themselves. Graduate program directors, counselling and social work educators and supervisors, school districts, and even students and their families have interests in this role being performed competently. Sutton and Page

(1994) discussed how school counsellors often encounter complicated cases in which students have acute counselling needs. Despite the fact that they are typically instructed to refer these students, school counsellors are often the sole mental health professionals to become involved. This may be the case when community-based services are not available, affordable, or trusted by parents. School counsellors need access to professional development activities and to clinical supervision in order to provide competent support to a variety of clients with a variety of issues. They also need time for professional reflection and to liaise with other mental health professionals. Hopefully with the combined efforts of school counsellors and other stakeholders, optimal professional development will become a priority in the field of school counselling.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMATION LETTER**

Dear School Counsellor,

My name is Chelaine Woodcock and I am currently working on my Master's Degree in Educational Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. I am interested in learning about what kinds of experiences have been particularly important in school counsellors' career development. The kinds of experiences I am looking for are those that have occurred in your personal or professional life, and which have significantly affected the way you think about or practice counselling. For example, perhaps you had an experience as a child or youth that influenced your later choice to become a counsellor. Perhaps there was a mentor during your studies whose impact was profound. Perhaps you worked with a particularly challenging client or family. I am interested in learning about any type of experience, so long as it was important to you.

Participation in my research study would entail meeting with me three times. During the first two meetings, for about 90 minutes each, I will be interviewing you about how you came to your career, what kinds of beliefs and practices you maintain in your current work, and about those significant experiences you've had along the way. Next, I will send you a narrative (overall story) that I will develop from the interviews. During our third meeting, we can discuss your reaction to this piece and decide whether anything needs to be added, removed, or changed.

All information you offer will be kept confidential. You may opt not to answer any question(s) and may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or would like more information, please contact me at my home telephone number (306) 382-4205.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Chelaine Woodcock

## **APPENDIX B INTERVIEW GUIDE**

(to be followed over course of two interviews)

(Rapport and overall life context)

- How did you come to be a school counsellor?
  - When did you realize you wanted to be a counsellor?
  - What is your sense of why you wanted to become a counsellor?

(Details of current beliefs and practices)

- Could you tell me about your current practices of school counselling?
  - What kinds of activities make up your day?
  - What issues do you deal with?
  - What approaches do you take?
  - How do you believe you can be most helpful?
  - How do you think your clients change?
  - What are the positive aspects of school counselling?
  - What are the negative aspects?

(Stories of development)

- Looking back on your life, what stories would you tell in order to explain how you've become the counsellor you are today? - What events stand out to you as significant markers in your development as a counsellor? (elicit details of one story at a time)
  - What changed as a result of this experience?
  - Why do you think this was so significant for you?
  - How was it meaningful in light of your life experiences prior to the incident?
  - How does this experience affect your current counselling beliefs and practices?
  - Is there or was there a downside to having had this experience?

**APPENDIX C**  
**APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF A RESEARCH PROTOCOL**

1. Co-Supervisors:

Dr. Jennifer Nicol, assistant professor, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan

Dr. Brian Noonan, associate professor, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan

Researcher:

Chelaine L. Woodcock, Master of Education Candidate, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan

Anticipated start date of research study: December 1, 2003

Expected completion date of study: April 1, 2004

2. Title of the Study: School Counsellor Narratives of Development

3. Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and understand, within a narrative conceptual framework, how certain experiences act as catalysts in the personal and professional development of school counsellors. Studies that investigate counsellor development across the whole career span are needed, and a narrative approach will contribute to a refreshing new view of counsellor development. Although the current literature contributes greatly to one's knowledge of general patterns and themes in counsellor development, it is difficult to discern what real-life experiences underlie these generalities. Stories have the power to draw people in and to promote an emotional level of understanding that is difficult to achieve through other means. As a further focus in this thesis, I will be studying the development of a specific subgroup: school counsellors. Few researchers have explored the personal and professional growth of practitioners within specialty vocations of counselling, and school counselors are a group who may experience significant impediments to optimal development because of work factors such as role confusion and inadequate supervision. The results of this study will be of particular interest to other practicing school counsellors, counsellors-in-training, and counsellor educators and supervisors. Furthermore, the subject matter could also appeal to other school personnel as well as consumers of counselling services.

4. Funding: The study is not externally funded.

5. Participants:

Between three and five school counsellors will participate in this study. Criteria for participation includes sufficient experience in school counselling to identify with the role (e.g., a minimum of five years), completion of a graduate program with a focus on counselling, and residence in Saskatoon or nearby areas. An information letter describing the study will be circulated among the school counsellors who I encounter in my own work as an elementary school counsellor. These individuals will be asked to pass on the letter to other school counsellors who fit the research criteria. Snowball sampling will continue until a sufficient number of participants have been obtained. Counsellors who are interested in participating will be asked to contact me. It is foreseeable that I have or will have a professional acquaintance with some research participants. However, I would not be in a perceived position of power relative to these individuals.

6. Consent:

I will proceed with interviewing study participants only after obtaining informed consent. Participants will be informed of their rights by means of a Consent Form (see attached).

7. Methods/Procedures:

A qualitative, narrative methodology will be used in this study. Once individuals have expressed interest in participating, an initial interview will be arranged. At that time, informed consent will be obtained. I will be conducting two, 90-minute, semi-structured interviews with each participant, followed by a third meeting to discuss my analysis. An interview guide (see attached) will assist me to cover the main topics and to obtain detailed information over the two scheduled interview times. However, I will also remain open to unexpected directions brought about by participant responses. There will be ample opportunity for open-ended discussion. All interviews will be audiotape recorded and a reputable transcriber will be hired to transcribe the tapes for analysis purposes.

Data collection and analysis will occur simultaneously, allowing for emerging concepts to shape the kinds of questions asked as the research proceeds. I will be keeping process notes in order to keep track of personal reactions, hunches, and any changes to my research plan. This will assist me in describing the research process in my final document, including the role of my subjectivity, which in turn will help readers reach their own conclusions about the legitimacy of my findings.

Member-checks will be an important part of the process, with participants meeting with me a third time to discuss my analysis of the interviews. Once

they are satisfied with how the narratives represent their experiences, participants will be asked to sign a data release form (see attached). In order to provide further feedback and for purposes of clarification, follow-up interviews, telephone conversations, and/or correspondence may be employed with the permission of the participants.

8. Storage of Data:

For the duration of the study, the recordings and transcripts derived from the interviews will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home. At the end of the study, all data that contains identifying information, including consent forms, audiotapes and transcripts, will be securely stored at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years by Dr. Jennifer Nicol, one of the faculty members supervising this project.

9. Dissemination of Results:

The data from this study will be published in the form of a Master of Education thesis. It is also possible that portions may be used in subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.

10. Risk or Deception:

This research project does not include any elements of deception. There is little, if any, anticipated risk associated with this research, particularly since the participants, as counsellors, are likely self-aware individuals who are accustomed to speaking of sensitive matters. I believe that a thorough explanation of the purpose of my research will give participants the opportunity to carefully evaluate their willingness to participate in the study. However, certain personal experiences may be difficult or painful to speak of. At all times, participants are free to decide what they will or will not disclose, and may choose not to answer a question. Furthermore, a list of community resources (e.g., counselling services) will be supplied along with the participants' copy of the consent form, should participants feel the need to further resolve their feelings.

11. Confidentiality:

Participants' identities will be kept confidential. Although I will report direct quotations from the interviews, each participant will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information (such as the name of their employers) will be removed from the report. Participants will be informed that a third party will be transcribing the audiotapes and that this person will also hold any information confidential.

Because the participants for this study have been selected from a small group of people (school counsellors in and near Saskatoon), it is possible that they may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what they have said. Prior to the data being included in the final report, participants will be given the opportunity to review the narrative constructed from their interviews and to alter or delete potentially identifying information as they see fit.

12. Data Release:

Participants will be given the opportunity to review a draft of the narrative constructed from their interviews. They will be reminded of their right to withdraw any or all of their responses. Once participants are satisfied with the written product, they will be asked to sign a data release form (see attached).

13. Debriefing and Feedback:

Debriefing and feedback will occur as part of the research process as I involve participants in the process of discussion, analysis, and reflection. Because of the collaborative nature of the research process, communication with the researcher will be ongoing. Each participant will receive a summary of the thesis once it is completed.

14. Required Signatures:

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Chelaine Woodcock: Master of Education candidate, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan

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Dr. Jennifer Nicol: Co-Supervisor, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan

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Dr. Brian Noonan: Co-Supervisor, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan

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Dr. Vicki Schwean, Department Head, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

15. Contact Information:

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## **APPENDIX D CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “School Counsellor Narratives of Development.” Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask questions you might have.

**Researcher:** Chelaine Woodcock, M.Ed. candidate, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, (306) 382-4205

This study is supervised by Dr. Jennifer Nicol (966-5261) and Dr. Brian Noonan (966-5265) of the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan.

### **Purpose and Procedure:**

The purpose of this study is to understand what kind of experiences contribute to school counsellors’ personal and professional development, and how these particular experiences are meaningful in the context of one’s current counselling beliefs and practices. Through careful attention to your stories, I hope to be able to convey a sense of the lived experience of developing as a school counsellor.

Participation in this study requires meeting in person with myself, the researcher, three times. There will be two interviews of approximately 90 minutes each. You will be asked to reflect on experiences that have been particularly important in your development as a counsellor. You will also be asked to discuss the significance of these experiences with respect to your overall life history and to your current work as a school counsellor. The interviews will be audiotape recorded for transcription purposes. Following this, you will be asked to read a narrative that I create based on the interviews. We would then meet a third time to discuss your response and any further insights. Once you are satisfied with the way the narrative represents your experiences, I will ask you to sign a release form which will allow me to publish the story. With your permission, additional meetings, telephone calls, or correspondence may be employed for purposes of clarification and feedback.

### **Potential Risks:**

Some experiences that come to mind may be of a sensitive nature. It is possible that recalling and speaking of such experiences could result in discomfort. At all times, you are free to decide what you will or will not disclose, and may choose not to answer a question. Furthermore, a list of community resources (e.g., counselling services) is provided with your copy of this form should you feel the need to further pursue any personal reactions.

### **Potential Benefits:**

Your involvement in this study may provide you with the opportunity to reflect more deeply on your personal and professional development. By sharing

your stories, you will assist the researcher in making a contribution to the professional literature in the field of counsellor development.

**Storage of Data:**

At the end of the study, all data that contains identifying information, including consent forms, audiotapes and transcripts, will be securely stored at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years by one of the faculty members supervising this project.

**Confidentiality:**

The data from this study will be published in the form of a Master of Education thesis. It is also possible that portions may be used in subsequent academic publications or conference presentations. Your identity will be kept confidential. Although I will report direct quotations from the interviews, you will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information (such as the name of your school) will be removed from the report. A reputable transcriber will be hired, and will also keep confidentiality.

Because the participants for this study have been selected from a small group of people (school counsellors in and near Saskatoon), it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said. Prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the narrative constructed from your interviews and to add, alter, or delete information as you see fit.

**Right to Withdraw:**

You may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed.

**Questions:**

If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher or supervisors at the numbers provided above if you have questions at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board on (date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Office of Research Services (966-4053). Each participant will be provided with a summary of the thesis when completed.

**Consent to Participate:**

I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**APPENDIX E**  
**DATA RELEASE FORM**

Title of the Study: School Counsellor Narratives of Development

Researcher: Chelaine L. Woodcock, M.Ed. candidate, University of Saskatchewan  
Co-Supervisors: Dr. Jennifer Nicol and Dr. Brian Noonan, University of Saskatchewan

I now give permission to Chelaine Woodcock to publicly release my narrative information, as it has been negotiated over the course of this thesis research project. I am aware of the possibility of being identified from what I have said, given the small community of school counsellors in or near Saskatoon, and I have made any desired changes to potentially identifying statements.

I understand that I am still free to withdraw my information, wholly or in part, from this study prior to signing this consent, without penalty of any kind.

As participant, I have read this final consent for release of information and I am satisfied that I am sufficiently aware of the above issues. I consent to the release of my information.

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Witness Name (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature

