Teachers' Referral Practices: Opportunities for School Counselor Advocacy

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Abstract

Using Consensual Qualitative Research, researchers examined teachers' experiences in the student referral process, specifically how they determined when and to whom a referral should be made. Results indicate that teachers actively work to engage students and families in strong relationships to avoid referrals, that certain behaviors are more likely to result in specific referrals (e.g., externalizing to discipline). Implications for school counselors and school counseling advocacy and limitations of this study are discussed.

Keywords: student referral, school counselor, school counselor advocacy, teacher referral

One in six children in the United States exhibit mental health symptoms and rates of childhood behavioral problems continue to increase (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to further exacerbate children's mental health problems (Racine et al., 2020) and these emotional and behavioral problems create significant barriers to learning (Reinke et al., 2008) and relationships with implications into adulthood (Owens, 2016; Scott et al., 2001). As school counselors are integral in the development of students' academic, career, and social/emotional development, they can assist in the process of ensuring students are referred to the appropriate support services (e.g., special education, academic support, mental health services). Before school counselors can assist in the referral process however, they must first understand teachers' experiences in making referrals (e.g., school counseling, discipline, special education) and how they determine when a referral is warranted.

Teacher Referral Process

Teachers are often the adults in schools who spend the most time with students, and thus are often the school official most familiar with students (Briesch et al., 2012). When students show concerning behaviors in schools, teachers are often the first to provide necessary interventions and support in attempts to avoid elevating these concerns to support outside of the classroom (Briesch et al., 2012; Eklund, 2009). Teachers are therefore an invaluable resource as they serve as the primary connection between students exhibiting concerning behaviors and school-based support services. Researchers found, however, that teachers may not be the most effective method of early identification of student concerns (Duncan et al., 1995; Severson et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2000).

Bias continues to influence the referral process. Researchers found that many students of color are overrepresented in discipline referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) and special education referrals (Zhang et al., 2014). Additionally, many behaviors deemed as behavioral problems are often signs of trauma or mental health concerns (van der Kolk, 2005) that can be assisted by mental health or school counseling interventions (Parker et al., 2021). These referrals impact students' ability to engage meaningfully within the school system worldwide (Cruz et al., 2023). Polirstok and Gottlieb (2006) found in-service trainings on effective classroom management significantly reduced elementary students' referrals to the principal and special education, indicating the importance of teacher training.

Unfortunately, many teachers do not receive training on identifying child mental health concerns (Rodger et al., 2014) and are overburdened with large class sizes, increasing academic demands, and the current demands of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley, 2021). Though the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation requires programs to provide training to ensure success of diverse K-12 students, there is not a specific requirement for mental health education and training regarding referral processes (CAEP, 2022)

Though many students in schools are not diagnosed with a specific disorder, there are a large number of students in need of additional support and help (Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016). Indicators that a student may need additional support include lower test scores, below average performance, and difficulty with math and reading (Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016). Teachers also refer students for support when exhibiting relationship problems, such as difficulty relating to peers, increased dependency on teachers, and communication difficulties with peers and teachers (Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016; van der Veen et al., 2010). Behavioral issues leading to referrals include expressing a problematic attitude and exhibiting externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016). Unfortunately, many students who experience internalizing disorders, including depression and anxiety, are not referred to services within the school system as they often do not create disruptions within the classroom (Splett et al., 2019)

Because of the time spent with students, teachers serve a vital role in the identification and referral of students to the school counselor when displaying concerning behaviors within the classroom (Splett et al., 2018). Teachers refer students to the school counselor for reasons such as academic issues, poor participation in class, behavioral issues, low attendance, and family structure changes (Adams et al., 2007;

Carlson, 1990). Teachers often observe student mental health concerns through their behaviors, both internalizing and externalizing, though teachers are less likely to refer students presenting with internalizing behaviors for school counseling services (Splett et al., 2018).

Implications of Referrals

Many student behaviors can disrupt the learning environment, including emotional outbursts, getting out of one's seat, talking during lessons, and interpersonal conflict (Carragher et al., 2015). These behaviors, while difficult in a class setting, can be associated with mental health disorders and special educational needs (Carragher et al., 2015), including depression, anxiety, and ADHD (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022; Carliner et al., 2017; Willner et al., 2016). These behaviors often correlate with a higher likelihood of incarceration and poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Loyd et al., 2019), further highlighting the need for appropriate referrals to mental health care and counseling in schools.

Previously, researchers examined teachers' experiences in referring students to discipline (Etheridge, 2017) and special education (Burton-Douglas, 2017; Hart & Power, 2022; Holmes, 2017). Few researchers however, explored how teachers determine which types of student behaviors warrant referrals and how teachers distinguish between referral sources. To date, researchers have not explored school counselors' experiences and roles in supporting teachers and students in providing more accurate referrals and upholding school counselors' roles in supporting students' academic, career, and personal/social development.

Purpose

Despite the efforts of school counselors to create multi-tiered systems of support, significant gaps exist in referrals, especially for minoritized students. These disparities "begin in the classroom" (Welfare et al., 2021). Although researchers explored potential factors for teachers to refer students specifically to discipline (e.g., carrying weapons/drugs, disrespectful behavior, defiant behaviors), in a review of mental health and school literature, we could find no research to date exploring how teachers determine when to refer students for services and how teachers determine which type of services are necessary. The purpose of this research project was to explore teachers' experiences in differentiating between types of student referrals. Using Consensus Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill & Knox, 2021), we sought to better understand teachers' processes and experiences in determining which types of referrals students need within their classrooms.

Methodology

Within this project, we aimed to understand the rich descriptions of teachers' decision-making processes and behaviors and authentically portray their experiences in the classroom.

CQR is value laden and complex, allowing for bracketing of biases and expectations through consensus process (Hill, 2012). CQR uses interview-based qualitative methods to study attitudes, beliefs, and internal experiences that are not readily and externally observable (Hill & Knox, 2021).

Research Team

Our research team included four White female individuals. The first author identifies as a heterosexual cis gender woman and school counselor educator. The second author identifies as a disabled queer cisgendered woman and is a counselor education and supervision doctoral student. The third author identifies as a queer woman and is a school counseling master's student. The fourth author served as the auditor and identifies as a cisgendered queer woman and is faculty within the organizational learning department. All authors are employed and enrolled within the same private university located on the east coast of the United States.

Research positionality is an essential element of CQR research (Hill & Knox, 2021) and it is important to acknowledge and discuss our positionality prior to and during data analysis. For example, as school counselors and school counselor educators, we experience working with youth and recognize the detrimental impacts of school discipline practices. As researchers, we aim to effectively capture participants' experiences and decision-making processes in making referrals within the classroom and school setting.

Participants

In alignment with the research protocols of Clark and Amatea (2004) and Cholewa et al. (2017), data was collected through graduate student interviews collected for a class assignment. Graduate students were asked to interview fully licensed teachers about their referral process for a Child and Adolescent Development Course taught by the first author. The first author taught the graduate students ($N = 10$) qualitative interview protocols within their final semester of their school counseling master's program. Interviewers obtained consent from participants and completed semi-structured interviews. The first author provided the questions to students for the interviews, detailed within interview protocols. Prior to data collection, students gained consent to record. Prior to transcription and after IRB approval, the first author gained participant consent.

The resulting sample included eight participants teaching in K-12 schools, including two who identified as male and six who identified as female; two teachers did not respond to the first author's request to consent for research participation. Seven participants identified as White with one participant identifying as Black. Two participants worked at private high schools, four participants at public high schools, one reported working at an alternative high school, and one reported working as a second-grade teacher in a public elementary school.

The present study included eight different schools across the central east coast of the United States. In the United

States, 74.3% of teachers identify as women, 72.3% of teachers identify as White, 12% of teachers identify as Hispanic or Latinx, and 10.1% identify as Black or African American (Zippia, 2022), therefore while our sample lacks diversity it is in some alignment with national trends. Of participants who reported, they had teaching experience from 2 to 27 years of teaching with an average number of 11 years of teaching experience.

Interview Protocol

Interviews were conducted and recorded via phone or Zoom recording. Participants and interviewers arranged an agreed upon time in which the interviewer asked a series of open-ended prompts directed toward understanding the roles and experiences of teachers' referral processes. As outlined by Hill et al. (2005), the first author identified related literature, spoke with others within the target population, and utilized personal experiences to develop the interview protocol. The researchers developed a series of open-ended questions at the beginning of the study (see Appendix). Consistent with CQR research methods outlined in Hill and Knox (2021), researchers completed a literature review prior to determining the scope and methods of existing research to ensure this study would be additive to the field. Questions generated were based on research on teacher referrals, as well as the researchers' professional experience working in schools and previous research.

Consistent with methodology outlined by Hill and Knox (2021), researchers chose a small set of scripted questions, and interviewers were additionally encouraged to ask follow-up probing questions. Interviewers provided the first author with raw audio data from their interviews. This raw data was transcribed verbatim by the second and third authors. All authors except the fourth completed a preliminary outline of interview themes and identified notable characteristics of teacher responses.

Data Analysis

The researchers compiled descriptive data and analyzed qualitative data in alignment with CQR research protocols (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). Characteristics of grounded theory, comprehensive processes analysis, phenomenological approaches, and feminist theorist characteristics are maintained with CQR. However, CQR differs in the structuring of data collection protocols, movement from specific domains to abstract ideas, and use of team consensus throughout the process (Hill et al., 2005). We sought to understand teachers' experiences of student referral processes and factors influencing teachers' decisions to make those referrals through developing a team approach of data analysis, coming to consensus about participant intention and meaning, and continued engagement amongst the research team.

In accordance with CQR's three steps of data analysis, we organized individual responses into domains, constructed core ideas within those domains, and then conducted cross analyses across interviews. In alignment with Hill et al.'s (1997) recommendations, three members of the research team independently reviewed the data and created the initial codes from the interview responses, then they met to discuss and come to a consensus of the domains to use as the preliminary coding protocol. Individually, the researchers applied the coding manual to a subset of the interviews and met again to finalize the domain codes. The fourth team member audited the protocol domains to access for clarity and usability. The fourth team member identified gaps and provided suggestions for the three members in an effort to provide clarity to the protocol and allow for operability.

After reviewing the feedback as a group and coming to a consensus on categories and placement of core ideas (Hill et al., 2005), the researchers finalized the adjustments and applied the protocol to participant responses. The team members agreed on the functionality of the protocol. The fourth author audited the protocol as a stability check to confirm the identified categories (as recommended in Hill et al., 2005), and ensured the excerpts matched the codes, codes aligned with domains, and the domains related to the research purpose. To improve trustworthiness, the first author provided the participants the final domains and results for review.

Results

We identified seven domains that described teachers' experiences of the student referral process. Because the research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, as restrictions were lifted and students returned back to school, COVID-19 became its own unique theme that may not have merged without the context during which the interviews occurred.

The domains were nuanced, as the student referral process is complex and differs between school systems. As we discovered, teachers engage in multiple decision-making processes to both avoid referrals and determine if referrals were necessary, and there were multiple types of referrals available, mostly identified within our participants as referrals to the school counselor, to special education services, and to disciplinary offices. Therefore, many of the domains, while distinct, often overlapped as teachers described their experiences. The six domains included: (a) teacher behaviors to address student concerns; (b) importance of interprofessional relationships in school; (c) teacher perceptions of student behaviors/ student behaviors warranting referrals; (d) school response/programs to mitigate referrals/support students; (e) referral no matter what; and (f) Impact of COVID-19. What also became evident within the interviews is that each teacher cycled through many of the domains to determine the best response for their students.

Behaviors to Address Student Concerns

Participants emphasized the importance of supporting students when they struggled with a myriad of behaviors. They worked diligently to engage students to avoid the referral

process and engage their students within their classes as best they could through multiple teacher-led interventions. Specifically, teachers described the importance of establishing relationships with students and intentionality around supporting students who struggled. Teachers discussed working to understand the student to best prepare the student for next steps, whether that be for a referral to the school counselor or special education referrals, or for graduation to the next grade level. Sarah described her perspective as, "I know every kid is capable 100% of learning, so that's why we need to, like, accomplish or look for any kind of help and look for those expectations and see how we can continue helping those students." Elizabeth described how she would work to establish a relationship with the student to assist in their self-regulation: "if you can place the focus on them, then they can self-regulate themselves." Teachers described working with students to identify other possible supports within the school, even if it was not the teacher themself, to help provide a relationship of support. Peter stated, "I think it's trying to find the person who can get to them best, you know, sometimes it's a counselor, sometimes it's me. Sometimes it's their advisory teacher or their advisor."

Usually, teachers viewed referrals to school counselors, special education, and discipline as a last resort. Additionally, many teachers involved parents and family members in attempts to support students who they identified as struggling within their classes. Susan noted:

> I work very hard to build those relationships with students and the parents so that I feel comfortable…having that conversation with them. I think it's really important as teachers that we try to see our students and our parents as human beings and figuring out the root causes of why a student is behaving that way…And you have to really build those relationships so that you understand.

Importance of Interpersonal Relationships

Teachers recognized the importance of including others to ensure that other perspectives and opportunities were provided. Participants recognized that they may not be seeing the situation or student as accurately, or the behavior may be indicative of a bad day rather than a persistent issue. In these cases, they would reach out to other teachers or the school counselors. Teachers also reached out to other teachers whom they felt may have better relationships with the student, especially those in a high school, who had access to more faculty within their school day. At times, uncertainty crept in, with teachers not knowing how to help other than to provide a referral, not knowing what the school could do without a more formal pathway to assist the student. As John noted, "it was that kind of thing where you don't want to, but…you're stuck between a rock and a hard place, because I feel like I'm not always equipped to deal with behaviors that I see."

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Behaviors/Behaviors Warranting Referrals

Teachers identified different behaviors within the classroom and the types of referrals those behaviors warranted. Interestingly, those behaviors fell into three broad categories: internalizing behaviors (e.g., sadness, depression, feelings of being tired), externalizing behaviors (e.g., anger, power/control, acting out physically), and academic concerns (e.g., struggling to keep up with homework, disorganized assignments/classwork). Participants' responses and referrals largely depended upon those student behaviors. Participants indicated that they were more likely to refer to school counselors for students displaying internalizing behavior, to special education services for academic concerns, and to disciplinary services for students showing externalizing behaviors.

Participants identified counselors as the appropriate referral for social emotional issues. June described a student who would experience periods of depression due to an early life trauma, stating: "One might be where a student is depressed and laying on their desk. That's a behavior and seems to be an emotional behavior. That sort of thing I would refer to the school counselor." Others noted withdrawal from friends and a lack of engagement in activities both within the classroom and outside of academics as behaviors of concern leading to a counselor referral. Many of the teachers also indicated that a student identifying that they did not want to live or discussing suicide led to an automatic referral to the school counselor. Sheri noted her trauma sensitive training and how that assisted her in understanding student behaviors and shifted her focus from discipline to counseling. "I try to avoid more traditional disciplinary actions…I frequently will refer to counseling for any behaviors that seem out of the ordinary."

Not all participants upheld the idea of an almost universal avoidance of traditional disciplinary actions. Those participants who referred to discipline often cited externalizing behaviors as the rationale, with some teachers indicating power struggles and control as a driving force for those referrals. John noted that they would refer for "blatant defiance," while another noted they referred to a student who would "sit at my desk…refused to get up…stole candy…and then threw it in the middle of the lesson." This same teacher referred another student on multiple occasions due to multiple instances of tardiness. For some participants, power struggles between teacher and student warranted a discipline referral.

Other participants noted hitting, stealing, and using vulgar language as warranting discipline referrals. Participants identified that it was not simply that the students disrupted the lessons for themselves, but for the other students in the classroom. Therefore, the disruptive student needed to be removed for the sake of the other students' learning, as Thais noted "I would refer someone if they are endangering the learning of other students." Participants also noted referring students for fighting and if students made references to guns and shooting.

Participants identified reasons for academic referrals as well, centered on student behaviors that impacted academic performance. Peter noted, "they're just not as organized and

they really need help and just getting everything organized." Other participants noted if students continued to not complete their homework or if their grades began to slip, they would bring in academic supports. Sometimes this would include a referral to special education or asking other teachers to assist in providing additional academic support. Sheri noted, "my default is if you're not doing the work, I'm going to assume that is because there is some barrier." She noted, "it's totally different when the kid…is not doing well academically versus a kid who is depressed or sad or crying all the time or sending notes, you know that should be immediately [referred to the school counselor]." Each participant identified referrals to different teams or resources for different student behaviors.

School Programs

Participants also identified programs within the school to avoid the larger disciplinary and special education referral sources. While participants did not avoid sending students to the school counselor, they did attempt to use school programs already in place to avoid disciplinary measures and enrolling children in special education programs. Many participants described the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) used within the school setting, in that if they did not feel they could support the student within their class, they would find other support either in another teacher, program, administrator, or school counselor. John noted the benefits of support and ways in which other school support staff assisted when students struggled. "[I]f they notice that…we're struggling in some area, they can give us suggestions to help us work on our management." Sheri participant noted the benefits of the school counseling, special education, and school nursing programs speaking with teachers at the beginning of the year to provide ideas, supports, and behaviors to look for in students to assist in providing appropriate referrals.

John also described how a student could take a "mindful moment" and enter another teacher's class to calm down. Within this setting, the student would then describe the event or experience in their own words and how they felt about the experience. At times teachers described this as a way for the student to take a break, while others framed the intervention as "the teacher kicked you out."

Some participants noted the presence of a button in their classrooms that they could push to directly contact the office for support if the teacher felt unsafe or if students behaved dangerously. Some described the online referral process, stating that each time they referred a student, the referral would immediately go into the system and the appropriate services would be provided. The school then would provide groups, engage other students who experienced similar issues, or engage students in tutoring or disciplinary measures such as in-school-suspension or detention. Regarding school resources officers, one participant stated the students and the school resource officers maintained great relationships as the school resource officers served as another emotional support for the students, while another participant noted that

some resource officers "are firm and hold to the rules…sometimes that backfires."

Referral No Matter What

All participants identified that certain behaviors and experiences require a referral no matter what. Participants cited child abuse or suspected child abuse as always requiring a referral and response. Students who wrote or spoke of suicidal behaviors and sentiments such as wanting to leave, being finished, or running away were also noted as requiring referrals. Finally, violence would always warrant a referral. Other behaviors requiring referrals largely depended on the school. These behaviors included dress code violations, absences, tardiness, low grades, cheating, or repeated behaviors.

Impact of COVID-19

Each of the participants identified the difficulty of the COVID-19 pandemic in assisting students, gauging their needs, and providing appropriate referrals. Peter noted that "I don't think I've done a good job overall of the social/emotional piece, and I think this year with the hybrid, I think it's kind of been widely accepted like, we're going to be behind." Peter further noted the very real social emotional impacts of virtual and hybrid learning on students "this whole new way of living I think the emotional part we should get more support because the academic is important, but the emotional is too." Alicia noted:

> I think this year has been really challenging for a lot of students and their mental health and wellness. And I think the next couple years are going to be, the counseling and student services departments are going to be incredibly important.

Discussion

These results provide a qualitative description of participating teachers' experiences and perceptions of the student referral process. Participants described six broad domains, including: (a) teacher behaviors to address student concerns; (b) teacher perceptions of student behaviors/ student behaviors warranting referrals; (c) the importance of interprofessional relationships in school; (d)school response/programs to mitigate referrals/support students; (e) referral no matter what, and (f) the impact of COVID-19. These findings are noteworthy, as there is limited qualitative research seeking teachers' voices regarding how they determine when and to whom to make referrals. This study adds empirical research to teachers' decision-making processes surrounding referrals, emphasizing the perceptions and experiences of a sample of teachers, and provides school counselors valuable insight into how to best support students within the school system.

Teachers' Behaviors to Address Student Concerns and Interpersonal Relationships

Within the first domain, participants recognized the importance of working with students to address concerns prior to making any referrals. One of the most identified ways of avoiding referrals included the establishment of strong relationships with students, colleagues, and students' families. Participants described the importance of establishing relationships with students to avoid the need for discipline referrals and to identify when referrals for school counseling and special education services were warranted. When students feel respected, trusted, and safe within the school and with their teachers, students are more likely to succeed (Goodenow, 1993; Sterrett, 2012).

Teachers engage in relationships with students substantively (via provision of content, material, and assignments provided by the teacher), pedagogically (teachers' theoretical approach to providing and communicating subject matter), and interpersonally (through empathy, warmth, and personal engagement with students; Ang, 2005; Hughes, 2011; Munns, 1998). Relationships between teachers and students go beyond simply avoiding referrals as described within this study and impact the ways in which students gain knowledge about themselves, develop prosocial and goal-directed behaviors (Wentzel, 2009), and increase academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 2012), personal autonomy, school engagement, and positive peer relationships (Meyer & Turner, 2002; Ruzek et al., 2016). These relationships can be strained however, due to student behaviors, as well as the high levels of stress placed on teachers, such as high academic expectations, large class sizes, and performance-based standards (Bottiani et al., 2019).

Participants also noted the value of relationships with fellow teachers and school counselors. The importance of relationships are not new to school counselors. The American School Counseling Association ([ASCA], n.d.-a, n.d.-b) recognizes the importance of school counselors' collaboration with teachers to assist in supporting teachers for student success. Chowela et al. (2017) found teachers enjoyed consultations with school counselors but preferred when school counselors sought out initial relationships with the teachers and the engagement felt relational and conversational, and when collaboration occurred in an effort to help the child from a shared perspective. As participants in this study noted, it is important to know that teachers are not alone, and this sentiment was echoed by teachers in Chowela et al.'s (2017) study.

Another way to further school counselor and teacher consultation is through the provision of tangible skills to engage with students that can enhance the relationship. Morrison and Helker (2010) adapted Child Centered Play Therapy (Landreth, 2012; Ray, 2011) and Child Parent Relationship Training (Landreth & Bratton, 2019) to create Child Teacher Relationship Training in an effort to assist teachers in relationship building with students through provision of alternative responses and ways of understanding student behavior. School counselors can provide teachers with alternative interventions, ways of responding that are empathic, developmentally appropriate, and engage student's mental health and trauma needs that can also enhance the relationship between the teacher and student.

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Behaviors/ Student Behaviors Warranting Referrals

Participants identified several behaviors that warranted referrals. Participants indicated that referrals to counseling occurred after students demonstrated a lack of interest in school or sudden changes in behavior, such as withdrawal and peer relationship problems. Researchers found teachers often miss students in need of mental health care when presenting with internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression, as often these behaviors do not create disruptions within the classroom (Splett et al., 2019). Splett et al. (2019) found teachers indicated increased likelihood of referrals to mental health when the student displayed externalizing behaviors (Splett et al., 2019, 2018). Participants in this study however indicated many externalizing behaviors deemed as disrespectful and disruptive required discipline referrals. Internationally, researchers found teachers reporting and identification of attention and externalizing behaviors remained stable across country, demonstrating the impact and perceptions teachers may hold for these behaviors. In fact, many teachers who leave the profession cite behavioral concerns as a reason for leaving, indicating the impact on teachers and their lack of confidence in handling such experiences (Ingersol, 2002).

As identified by Polirstok and Gottlieb (2006) in service teacher trainings reduce the number of student discipline and special education referrals. Schools could offer additional training and supports to assist teachers in recognizing and managing students' externalizing behaviors. Additional, CAEP could include classroom management, anti-oppressive, and mental health trainings into their standards to ensure all teachers receive training to address such needs. Potentially, through additional training and supports, students can be directed to necessary services and teachers may experience less stress and burnout.

Participants identified different behaviors warranted different referrals. The results aligned with some of the previous research surrounding disciplinary and special education referrals. While most participants avoided referrals when possible, they identified they would refer students to the school counselor if they displayed sad, quiet, or withdrawn behaviors, the special education or academic support teams if students' grades slipped, if they no longer completed assignments, or displayed disorganization academically, and to disciplinary teams when the behaviors reflected power/control struggles, defiance, or externalizing behaviors. While all teachers indicated a concern for their students and a desire to assist them, these underlying themes remained. Unfortunately, each of these behaviors can be indicative of larger social/emotional problems that may be better suited for the school counselor or mental health intervention.

As stated by Nelson and Roberts (2000), disruptive or externalizing behaviors often are described by both educational professionals and mental health professionals using phrases such as antisocial, challenging, defiant, noncompliant, aggressive, and acting out behaviors. While externalizing problems can become distractions within the classroom and make it difficult to teach a large group of students with diverse needs (Pollack et al., 2015, these behaviors may be symptoms of a larger mental health issue or an indicator of trauma (van der Kolk, 2005). School counselors can provide psychoeducation for teachers regarding the ways in which trauma can influence student behavior and assist teachers in referring students with these behaviors to the school counselor rather than discipline to further support the students' mental health needs (van der Kolk, 2005). These behaviors can also be incredibly stressful and overwhelming for teachers (Klassen & Anderson, 2009). School counselors can also work with teachers and administrators to identify ways to alleviate teacher stress and increase wellness and mental health.

There is potential for bias in all types of referrals. While the participants within our study did not focus on the race, gender identities, or ethnicities of the students they referred to, it is important to note that researchers continue to identify minority students as over-represented in both discipline referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) and special education referrals (Zhang et al., 2014). These disparities are important to explore as the ways in which one's views of externalizing behaviors, issues of power and control, and lack of academic understanding can be filtered through a lens of bias without awareness.

School counselors hold a unique position in the school system, wherein they are able to impact systemic change through working with families, individual students, teachers, staff, and community members from a social justice perspective (Clark & Breman, 2009; Mitcham et al., 2009). As noted by Shell (2020) the social justice framework for school counselors offers "a compelling rationale for counselors to use their influence, training, and skills to benefit" underserved students within the school system (p. 85). When working with teachers, school counselors can explore the ways in which culture and language can influence how students engage with classroom material (Morgan et al., 2018). Using school data, school counselors can identify alarming trends in referrals and work to identify underlying causes of student behaviors to find better support for students, teachers, and families, exploring behavior through an anti-racist and anti-oppressive (Gardner & Mayes, 2013), developmental, and trauma informed lens (Gaskill & Perry, 2014).

Regarding special education services, school counselors serve with special education staff and support students with different learning styles and abilities (ASCA, 2016). Within the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors work to assist all students, both disabled and non-disabled, to reach their full potential (ASCA, 2016). Through active inclusion on the special education teams, school counselors can advocate for students and address any potential bias or mental health concerns that may arise.

School Supports

Participants noted the many ways in which their administrations provided within-school supports for students and teachers to avoid referrals. While many of the supports focused on academics (e.g., tutoring) and disciplinary issues (e.g., going to another teacher's room, having a cool down area), counseling issues seemed to be contained within the school counseling offices. Many schools now implement software to track students' discipline referrals and information from behavioral risk assessments to identify students who would potentially benefit from preventative programs and targeted interventions (Bradley et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). These programs can provide ways in which to provide early interventions for struggling students and assist students before full referrals are required, however some researchers identified some potential biases within these service referral systems as well.

Though this tracking process is aimed to assist schools in identifying and providing services for students (Irvin et al., 2004; Sugai et al., 2000), researchers found that bias can influence which students receive office discipline referrals. Skiba et al. (1997) found that 66% of the discipline referrals came from just 25% of the teachers, and Putnam et al. (2003) found that while almost 70% of the staff referred students for discipline once or twice, a disproportionate number of teachers and staff sent numerous office discipline referrals. These results are nuanced, as determinants of referrals may be impacted by teacher age, self-perception, lack of support, and increased stress (McGoey et al., 2014). Multiple aspects influence the ways in which teachers engage with and interpret student behaviors, and as academic standards and teacher demands increase (Ahmed et al., 2017), school counselors may work with administrators to provide breaks, outlets, and stress relief for teachers to avoid their stress influencing their perceptions of students.

This data is vital and provides opportunities for school counselors to work with teachers on their understanding of students, potential biases, and alternative ways to work with students who experience difficulties within the classroom. Again, in alignment with Shell (2020), school counselors can utilize the data and their role in systemic support and as social justice advocates (ASCA, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, 2016). School counselors hold a "unique opportunity to be an important part of the solution" (ASCA, n.d.-b). By engaging with teachers who engage in the most referrals and assisting them in shifting their perspectives of student behaviors, and by providing psychoeducation on mental health, behaviors, and the role of trauma, school counselors may better serve students within the school system. These benefits would help students not simply in a specific class or during a specific year, but in subsequent years to come.

Referral No Matter What

Participants noted that the schools in which they worked identified student behaviors that would always warrant a referral. These include suicidality and child abuse to protect the child and align with teachers' roles as mandated reporters (Brown & Gallagher, 2015). These behaviors are characterized as extremes and guidelines on mandatory referrals are described as aimed at protecting the students' safety.

Participants also identified other behaviors warranting referrals, which centered primarily within disciplinary action, including cheating, violence, and issues such as dress code violations and tardiness. Losen et al. (2015) identified increasing trends in school suspensions since 1972, with rates doubling for white students and tripling for Black students due in part to zero tolerance policies (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; see also Losen & Whitaker, 2018). These policies can include truancy, weapons, and dress code violations (Skiba et al., 2014) and can negatively impact student experiences. When these violations and referrals result in exclusionary discipline such as detentions and suspensions, student behaviors often increase as opposed to decrease (Perry & Morris, 2014). Regardless, teachers continue to make the referrals that their schools require while working diligently to avoid referrals and recognize the negative impact of exclusionary discipline on reducing student behaviors (see Perry & Morris, 2014).

Zero tolerance policies can place students at risk for school dropout (Dupper et al., 2009), substance abuse, increased sexual behavior, and violence (Farchi et al., 1994), as well as propagating the school to prison pipeline (Skiba & Noam, 2001). To move away from these exclusionary practices, school counselors can support the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support, wherein students receive evidenced based, proactive, and comprehensive services (Goodman-Scott et al., 2015, 2016). Engaging in classroom management strategies and using school counseling and mental health supports both within and outside of the classroom can assist in schools moving away from zero tolerance policies that are harmful for students, as well as foster the more collaborative classrooms (Goodman-Scott et al., 2015, 2016) that the participants within this study sought.

Role of COVID-19

The final domain identified within this study included the role of COVID-19. Each of the participants noted the ways in which COVID-19, online schooling, and the lack of contact negatively influenced teacher-student relationships, student academic performance, and student social-emotional development. COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate an already growing mental health crisis in the school system (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000). As recognized by participants within this study, students are struggling within the classroom and while schools resume in person activities, students and teachers alike are still reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academics and personal/social development. The COVID-19 pandemic is a mass trauma unlike any other in living history (Horesh & Brown, 2020).

School counselors can utilize their role as advocates to seek out additional funding for more mental health support within schools, recognizing that prior to COVID-19, a reported one in six students exhibited mental health symptoms (CDC, 2020) and most children do not receive mental health care support outside of the school system (Burns et al., 1995; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000). Marginalized communities are most impacted by both the mental health crisis in schools and COVID-19 (Racine et al., 2020), and often schools within these communities lack the resources to support student, family, and community needs (Larson et al., 2017; Racine et al., 2020). Although the recommended number of school counselor to student ratio is 1:250, the actual ratios averaging 1:415 (ASCA, n.d.-a), many school counselors do not have the ability to meet the needs of all students who require support, just as teachers cannot address all the mental health and academic needs of students. School counselors and teachers alike can begin to advocate for the inclusion of more mental health supports, more school counselors, and more funding to ensure that students receive the mental health care necessary to allow for academic success. Within the policy level, increased screening for student mental health concerns and mental health training for teachers, staff, and administrators can better ensure students are provided the necessary care within the school system and reduce unwarranted referrals to discipline and special education.

Implications and Future Research

The results of this study provide valuable insights into how and why teachers make student referrals. Due to the large repercussions of the referral processes (e.g., school-to-prison pipeline, academic difficulties, school dropout), it is vital that school counselors understand how teachers determine when and to whom referrals should be made. With this information, school counselors can then provide valuable resources and support to teachers, students, and systems in place to better identify supports for students who may otherwise be provided referrals to sources that do not meet their identified needs.

School leaders can leverage school counselors as partners with teachers and schools to provide psychoeducation on trauma, student behaviors, behavior management, and the role of mental health supports. Additionally, school counselors can engage in school-wide discussions on the role of implicit bias and assist in the recognition and reduction of race, gender identity, and other demographic linked discrepancies in discipline and special education referrals. Additional discussions on the detrimental impacts of exclusionary discipline practices are also warranted. Welfare et al. (2021) outlined the ways in which existing research around certain stages of the school-to-prison pipeline rarely intersect with school counseling literature, despite school counselors having a significant opportunity to advocate for change in ways that disrupt the flow of this pipeline.

Limitations

All studies include limitations. Within this study, limitations include the use of a convenience sample. Graduate student interviewers knew the teachers they chose to interview, so the students themselves therefore used convenience sampling to determine the participants. Hill et al. (1997) assert that in CQR "it is crucial to recruit participants who have some depth of experience with the phenomenon" being studied. For this study, using participants known to the researchers helped ensure the participants would have the experience needed to provide rich data. Still, convenience samples are thought to disadvantage the generalizability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2019).

The sample was within the recommended range of participants for CQR (Rivas & Hill, 2021), and mainly included teachers from high school programs, although the high school programs did vary. However, this may also present a challenge to generalizability of results to other school levels due to the under-representation of teachers from elementary and middle school settings. In addition, participants identified as primarily female and White. This shows low diversity in gender expression and racial identity, although the demographics of participants is representative of the teaching profession (Zippia, 2022). Although participants working in a variety of settings were pursued, the majority of respondents worked within public high school settings. Additionally, as the researchers used known contacts and are currently completing internships in the Washington, DC, area, the geography of respondents was largely limited to the same region. In understanding the limits of transferability, this data may not be generalizable to every school level and program, nor to every geographic location since teachers and school environments can differ.

In addition, each interview was given by a different graduate student who received limited but not comprehensive training in CQR interview protocols. As such, the interview format and questions necessarily varied. The variability of interview protocols is not inherently considered a limitation within CQR research (Hill et al., 1997), but the lack of robust training in qualitative research interview skills for the interviewers may have limited the utility of data collected.

There is always a potential for researcher bias to impact results. An essential component of CQR includes bracketing procedures and multiple checks to limit bias (Hill et al., 1997). By engaging in robust bracketing procedures, identifying various researcher perspectives, and using an external auditor, the researchers worked to minimize bias in interpreting results consistent with CQR guidelines (Hill & Knox, 2021; Hill et al., 1997). However, no procedure can eliminate potential for bias. The researchers also acknowledge that their shared identities as white, female-presenting academics may indicate a homogenization of perspective that could limit the effectiveness of bias-checking within the research team.

Conclusion

School counselors are tasked with ensuring the healthy and effective functioning of the entire school system (Adams et al., 2007), and have an ethical responsibility to collaborate with teachers and administrators about warning signs of student distress (ASCA, 2016). Welfare et al. (2021) outlined the ways in which school counselors should serve as a "resource and consultant for administration, teachers, staff, students, and parents with issues related to the disciplinary process," and note that school counselors are well situated for this task (p.18).

Discussions on development, culture, mental health, and the role of trauma can further teachers' and administrators' understanding of student behaviors. This may lead to appropriate referrals to the school counselor and/or mental health supports, lower inappropriate referrals to discipline services, and may better serve students in their academic, personal/social, and career development.

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Appendix
Interview Protocol

Demographic Data
What area is your school located in? (e.g., Urban, east coast?)
What type of school are you employed in (e.g., Title 1/ affluent)?
How large is your school? How diverse is your school?
How long have you been teaching? What grades do you currently teach?
How do you identify (race, gender)

Interview Questions
What are your experiences in making student referrals?
Which behaviors do you believe warrant referrals?
How did you determine when a referral was needed?
How did you decide where you refer the student (school counselor, discipline, special education)
What do you use in your classroom to avoid referrals?
How often do you make repeat referrals (is it several referrals for one student or one referrals across students)
What support is provided to avoid referrals?