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Labor Experiences of Public High School Counselors: Neoliberalism, Productivity, and Care

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**LABOR EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS:
NEOLIBERALISM, PRODUCTIVITY, AND CARE**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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PROFESSOR GABRIELA MORALES**

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Introduction

In 2019, public educators have united forces across the country as they demand for better working conditions within their schools to ensure their ability to properly serve students. Both the LA and Oakland teacher strikes garnered national attention as their demands included better pay for teachers, the reduction of class sizes, and the hiring of more counselors and other forms of support staff such as librarians and nurses.^{1 2} While advocating for public education reform through the use of strikes is no new trend³, the demands of these strikes are unique as they command attention towards the lack of school counselors in public schools. In the past, education reform movements have consistently ignored the realities of the public school counselor position, and counselors' inability to effectively make use of their professional training and education.

The American School Counselor Association states that counselors “help all students in the areas of academic achievement, career and social/emotional development, ensuring today’s students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow.”⁴ The school counselor position at the high school level is particularly difficult as high school counselors are responsible for advising, supporting, and guiding students through the complexities of adolescence and steering them towards post-secondary education or careers. That amount of responsibility can be expected of counselors for 250 students at a

¹ Jennifer Medina and Dana Goldstein, “Los Angeles Braces for Major Teachers’ Strike,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/07/us/teacher-strike-lausd-utla.html>.

² Valerie Strauss, “Why Oakland Teachers Are Striking: ‘You Can’t Feed the Minds of Our Students by Starving Their Schools’” *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/02/21/why-oakland-teachers-are-striking-quite-simply-you-cant-feed-minds-our-students-by-starving-their-schools/?utm_term=.97487cbf4d39.

³ Katie Reilly, “The History of American Teacher Strikes—And Where Los Angeles Fits In,” *Time*, January 10, 2019, <http://time.com/5498897/history-american-teacher-strike-los-angeles/>.

⁴ “Role of the School Counselor | American School Counselor Association (ASCA),” accessed September 25, 2018, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/administrators/role-of-the-school-counselor>.

time, as is the recommended caseload by ASCA. However the reality is even more daunting as the national average of students per high school counselor in the U.S is 482.⁵ Needless to say, school counselors are desperately understaffed in U.S. public high schools, and their incredible workload is far from ideal.

Inflated caseloads are one important reason why high school counselors are not able to do the work that is expected of them for each student on their caseload. While counselors set high expectations for themselves, they constantly face major difficulty achieving their mission in schools, which results in their inability to properly serve their students.⁶ In my own public high school experience, I never got to know my counselor, and she never made the effort to get to know me. Our relationship was a purely logistical one. I visited her office a couple times a year so she could sign various forms, she wrote my college recommendation letter as was required by the Common Application, but beyond that, we knew very little about her each other. I left high school having no idea what counselors really did every day, seeing as they were not properly supporting myself or my peers. In my own education career exploration in the last few years, I have often wondered what it would be like to be a high school counselor.

I started this thesis with a basic question: What are counselors actually doing everyday? It soon morphed into a more formal research question asking what are the conditions of their work, and why are they unable to properly complete all aspects of their profession that are expected of them? In my preliminary research, I quickly found that the secondary sources available to me could not comprehensively answer these

⁵ “National Association for College Admission Counseling- State-by-State Student-to-Counselor Ratio Report,” accessed September 26, 2018, <https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/Research/state-by-state-student-to-counselor-ratio-report2/>.

⁶ John Bridgeland and Mary Bruce, *2011 National Survey of School Counselors: Counseling at a Crossroads* (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2011), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED527749>.

questions. The majority of research on school counselors studies their careers through quantitative data.⁷ With this limited data, I was unable to form a clear picture of what exactly was going on in their offices everyday, and how it was affecting counselors' perceptions of their own work. I wanted human perspective. After my first phone call with a counselor, I quickly learned that she was completing many kinds of labor on a daily basis and I wanted to know more about the specifics of these labors and why they were so important to her work. My research question became: What kinds of labor are counselors practicing on a daily basis and how does it affect their own perceptions of their job? While starting my ethnographic research, I simultaneously learned about the neoliberalization of public education and I started to notice how neoliberal qualities were evident in the culture of public schools, and particularly the social processes of the school counselor position. This brought me to one final research question: In what ways does neoliberalism rely on school counselors' work while simultaneously making their job immensely difficult?

Counselors' inflated caseloads are just one impact of decades of budget cuts within the U.S. public school system.⁸ This defunding of public education is a result of the neoliberalization of many U.S. public sectors that has taken place in the past decades. Neoliberal influences on public education are evident in the following: the privatization of public education, the creation of the test-taking industry, and the years of failed federal education reform efforts, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. These

⁷ Wei-Cheng J. Mau, Jiaqi Li, and Kimberly Hoetmer, "Transforming High School Counseling: Counselors' Roles, Practices, and Expectations for Students' Success," *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research* 6, no. 2 (January 1, 2016): 83–95.

⁸ "A Punishing Decade for School Funding," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 27, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/a-punishing-decade-for-school-funding>.

privatizing efforts have instilled intense regulatory practices and accountability measures for public educators.⁹

The high number of students on a counselor's caseload is not the only reason why their jobs are so difficult. In fact, in this thesis I explore how the diverse kinds of labor that are demanded of them make it impossible to fulfill all expectations of their profession. I argue that the unique forms of labor that they must perform on a daily basis are in large part due to particular processes of neoliberalism. These include the privatization of public goods, the economic focus on deregulation, and the emphasis on self-management, individualism and productivity.

These processes have significant impacts on the ways public high school counselors conduct their work. In order to maintain the formal functioning of their schools, public high school counselors are asked to complete many forms of *bureaucratic labor*. These forms of work, are crucial for counselors to carry out under the regulatory nature of the public school system. These complicated forms of bureaucracy not only impact what counselors spend their time on, but also influence how counselors perceive their own work.

Alongside these bureaucratic demands, students compete with counselors' time for in-person advising and support, which requires the counselor's frequent performing of *care labor*. As counselors attempt to fulfill both forms of labor asked of them, they find themselves in a constant pattern of feeling unproductive. In effect, school counselors' labor is exploited as they nevertheless try to keep up with the overwhelming workload in order to best support their students and keep their schools functioning.

⁹ Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (Basic Books, 2016).

Incorporated Theories

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is hard to define, not only because of the complex nature of the theory, but because the qualities and functions of neoliberalism have evolved over time, indicating unique impacts on many aspects of the way we understand our world today.¹⁰ Marxist scholar David Harvey describes the neoliberalization of the U.S. as a “series of gyrations and chaotic experiments.”¹¹ Theorists Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom argued that these experiments were an attempt to “construct the right blend of state, market, and democratic institutions to guarantee peace, inclusion, well-being, and stability.”¹² In his foundational work, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, published in 2005, Harvey introduces the basic concepts of neoliberal theory:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.¹³

The neoliberal focus on individual freedom has impacted the pressure that counselors face in their work, as I discuss in this thesis. Economic neoliberalization attempted to find the balance described by Dahl and Lindblom through deregulation and privatization. According to Susan L. Robertson, deregulation can be defined as “the removal of the state from a substantive role in the economy, except as a guarantor of the free movement of capital and profits.”¹⁴ Deregulation has influenced U.S. public

¹⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2005), 70.

¹¹ Harvey, 13.

¹² Robert A. Dahl, Charles Lindblom *Politics, Economics, and Welfare* (Routledge, 1953).

¹³ Harvey, 2.

¹⁴ Susan L Robertson, “‘Remaking the World’: Neo-Liberalism and the Transformation of Education and Teachers’ Labour,” n.d., 6.

education reform efforts and I explore its impacts in this thesis. Harvey uses privatization to describe intentional efforts of making both public sectors of government and the state marketable by using free-market business practices on previously-public goods. Free markets mobilize the competition of private business enterprises to control and define the economy.¹⁵

If these concepts sound commonplace, it is because within the last thirty years they have not only become deeply immersed in the functioning of our economy, the government, and the way that many of our public systems work, but also in a widespread social ethos and the goals of broader society.

Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.¹⁶

The neoliberalization of our modern world, while it is influential in actual policy impacts in the U.S. and worldwide, is equally powerful in its creation of a discourse that normalizes values of self-management, individual free choice, productivity, and transparency, just to name a few. Neoliberalism is most commonly linked, in the U.S. context, to the 1980s, during Ronald Reagan's presidency. President Reagan is known for the creation and enforcement of many "policies to curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage."¹⁷ In these policies, the state was used as a tool for the neoliberalization of the world, to create and preserve an institutional framework

¹⁵ Harvey, 3.

¹⁶ Harvey, 3.

¹⁷ Harvey, 1.

appropriate to such practices. These developments created more access to competition and the free market, and gave more freedom to individual choices.

In the terms of this thesis, these changes included the individualized, business control of public education. However, these free-market developments have not had the beneficial impacts on our education system that theorists and politicians hoped they would. Instead, our public education system acts as an example of the contradictory realities of the neoliberalization of our economy. This contradictory nature of neoliberalism is a focus of my first chapter, where I provide context and examples of these contradictions, such as the deregulation of education paradoxically instilling more regulatory practices for public schools.

Individuality as quality promoted by neoliberalism asserts a hegemonic understanding that individuals are directly connected to their own ability to succeed.

While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being...Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings rather than being attributed to any systemic property.¹⁸

In this thesis, I analyze the dominating values of individualism in various ways. First, individualism compels people to feel responsible for their own success, meaning that if they work hard enough, are productive enough, or can properly demonstrate their ability to self-manage, they can achieve whatever they want to. I will discuss this aspect of individualism in relation to both students and counselors' perceptions of their own success. This notion of individuality blatantly ignores the ways that systematic oppression continually, and deeply harms low-income people of color and other marginalized identities, and their ability to achieve societal notions of success.

¹⁸ Harvey, 66.

Additionally, individualism misleads people to believe that the pathway to success is the demonstration of themselves as exceptionally unique in talent or intellect, in comparison to those around them. This value of individualism relates to my own analysis of the neoliberal influences on students' perception of themselves, and how they impact students' reliance on counselors. Lastly, I use the term individualism as it relates to the notion that individual, one-on-one interactions and care are the superior way for counselors to support their students.

Neoliberalism in Education

There are a plethora of previous works that have detailed how aspects of neoliberalism, such its privatization efforts and enforcements of free-market capitalism, have affected what we understand as public education and the conditions for students' education, and teachers' jobs.^{19 20} Joseph Cleary outlines neoliberal influences on high schools in his article "Neoliberalism inside two American high schools" and discusses how neoliberalism creates competition among schools in the same county, under the same local control. Cleary details how this competition creates winning and losing schools, as if they are their own individual entities regardless of the fact that they are within the same school system. Cleary also argues that the competition created between the schools in the same county is unfair from the start, as specific schools are situated in very different economic positions. Cleary proves how the competitive nature of the county that pins these schools against each other, as well as the ignorant assumption of a level-playing field, both represent real time impacts of these individual, free-market

¹⁹ Douglas Loveless Ed. et al., *Deconstructing the Education-Industrial Complex in the Digital Age* (IGI Global, 701 East Chocolate Avenue Suite 200, Hershey, PA 17033).

²⁰ Carol J. Greenhouse, *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism* (Philadelphia, UNITED STATES: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

competition aspects of neoliberalism.²¹ I will use this work to contextualize how individual schools are situated within their school systems. However, I will further this argument to discuss the real life impacts of these treatments of schools as winning or losing schools, in how it affects not only what resources, such as funding, that schools receive, but also how it affects the job conditions for those educators within the schools.

This thesis also incorporates research done by Lesley Bartlett, Marla Frederick, Thaddeus Gulbrandsen, and Enrique Murillo. In the *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* article *The Marketization of Education: Public Schools for Private Ends*, they argue that

the resurrection of neoliberal logic and the naturalization of economic uses of schools at this particular historical moment have elevated business involvement and conservative designs on education policy development while inhibiting democratic debate and marginalizing other claims on the public resource of education.²²

This journal article informs my own argument as I expand on how the business practices involved in public education have changed how the school functions, which impacts the conditions of work for public educators. My own ethnographic research uses this larger anthropological conversation about this marketization of public education, and its implications on social processes and cultural understandings within school communities. While they focus in this article more specifically on its impacts on low-income families of color, I use their neoliberal and critical-discourse analysis to set a foundation for my own research.

²¹ Joseph Cleary, "Neoliberalism inside Two American High Schools," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 3 (April 3, 2017): 325–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1081090>.

²² Lesley Bartlett et al., "The Marketization of Education: Public Schools for Private Ends," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 5–29, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2002.33.1.5>, 7.

Education Labor

There is a plethora of scholarship that discusses conditions of work in for public educators, and studies this kind of work under the conceptualization of different labor practices. This past research primarily focuses on teachers and their emotional labor practices. One foundational piece of research that analyzed caring relationships in schools is Lynn Isenbarger and Michalinos Zembylas' "The emotional labour of caring in teaching."²³ They conceptualized how *emotional labour* was an important aspect of the complexity that comes with being a caring teacher. Research that then has built upon these primary discourses around emotional labor in education include discussion about teacher burnout, the emotional labor practiced by teachers in specific kinds of classes, such as physical education, and studies of "teachers' emotional labour and their discrete emotional experiences," among many.^{24 25} Previous anthropological research specifically can also be found about emotional labor in classrooms and how it influences students' ability to learn.²⁶

This research is foundational for my own project as they analyze forms of labor within education, and help me attempt to differentiate between different kinds of labor that counselors practice on a daily basis. While there is plenty of research studying teachers' labor, the same cannot be said for school counselors. For this reason, I

²³ Lynn Isenbarger and Michalinos Zembylas, "The Emotional Labour of Caring in Teaching," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 120–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.07.002>.

²⁴ Mikyoung Lee and Stephen van Vlack, "Teachers' Emotional Labour, Discrete Emotions, and Classroom Management Self-Efficacy," *Educational Psychology* 38, no. 5 (May 28, 2018): 669–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2017.1399199>.

²⁵ Ye Hoon Lee, "Emotional Labor, Teacher Burnout, and Turnover Intention in High-School Physical Education Teaching," *European Physical Education Review* 25, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 236–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X17719559>.

²⁶ Lesley Bartlett, "Women Teaching Class: Emotional Labor in Brazilian Literacy Classes," *Anthropology of Work Review* 22, no. 3 (2001): 22–26, <https://doi.org/10.1525/awr.2001.22.3.22>.

differentiated between two forms of labor that are paramount to the counselors position:
bureaucratic labor and *care labor*.

Bureaucratic Labor

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on the labor that counselors do every day to fulfill regulatory, accountability practices, which arguably reflect neoliberal influences on public high schools. In this thesis, I use the term *bureaucratic labor* to refer to work that public high school counselors must do in order to keep their school functioning within their greater county or district. These kinds of work are necessary for any school to complete in order to meet all of their requirements as defined by both the county/district and the state. Examples of these kinds of work required of counselors include, but are not limited to proctoring standardized tests, creating and enforcing attendance intervention plans for students with multiple absences, communicating with parents, teachers and students through email, inputting of grades into transcripts for new students, and making presentations about college-access for students in classes multiple times throughout the year. In my discussion and analysis of this labor I reference secondary sources that study audit culture as they inform my own understanding of the implications of counselors' bureaucratic labor. For example in *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, Marilyn Strathern defines what she means by audit culture:

The concept of audit in turn has broken loose from its moorings in finance and accounting; its own expanded presence gives it the power of a descriptor seemingly applicable to all kinds of reckonings, evaluations and measurements. In this volume, audit (in its expanded sense) is the immediate starting point for an

anthropological enquiry into some of the impacts of new ways of practising, or performing, ‘accountability.’²⁷

This process of enforcing methods of “accountability,” is especially important for my argument in this chapter as the term relates to demands put on counselors in the neoliberalized public high school. Strathern is arguing the ways in which audit work, including practices of measurement and accountability, is becoming foundational aspects of work in which it did not used to be. Strathern’s ethnography helps me situate my own argument in previous anthropological theory about accountability and audit culture’s impact on public institutions, such as our public school system.

Care Labor

The third chapter of this thesis discusses the care labor that counselors perform on a daily basis for the students on their caseload. In order to properly analyze their labor as *care labor*, it is first important to define exactly what care labor means. Amidst the large quantity of research studying care labor, many academics still find it very difficult to define, and to commit to a single definition.²⁸ I myself had a difficult time toggling between different forms of labor that seemed to indicate similar types of work. There are many terms used to describe work that require use of emotion, such as affective labor, emotional labor, or care labor. In this thesis, I have decided to use the term care labor as particularly defined by Mignon Duffy, Randy Albelda, and Clare Hammonds in “Counting Care Work: The Empirical and Policy Applications of Care Theory”:

²⁷ Marilyn Strathern, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, 1 edition (London New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

²⁸ Paul Leduc Browne, “The Dialectics of Health and Social Care: Toward a Conceptual Framework,” *Theory and Society* 39, no. 5 (September 1, 2010): 575–91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-010-9120-6>, 576.

We integrate insights from a number of theoretical traditions across a range of disciplines to identify four defining criteria: (1) the activity contributes to physical, mental, social, and/or emotional well-being; (2) the primary labor process of the activity involves face-to-face relationship with those cared for; (3) those receiving care are members of groups that by normal social standards cannot provide for all of their own care because of age, illness, or disability; and (4) care work builds and maintains human infrastructure that cannot be adequately produced through unpaid work or unsubsidized markets, necessitating public investment.²⁹

This definition is suited for my thesis perfectly for reasons that notably correspond to the four different aspects of care labor that they detail. First, counselors are responsible for helping students' social-emotional learning processes.³⁰ Second, their care labor most often takes place in their offices, where students can visit the counselors for individualized care. Third, counselors work with students under the age of 18, who fall into a group of people who are assumed to not be able to provide for themselves. Lastly, their work maintains the structure of the school by keeping the schools' students in their classes and on track to graduate, as well as keeping them mentally healthy. With this definition, alongside the theory work that they describe in this article, I will assess counselors' relation to their labor and situate their specific care labor within larger arguments about care work and its exploitative and complex nature.

Methodology

I developed my curiosity about counselors' work into a thesis project after getting to know a Florida high school counselor, Ms. Harris, this past summer. While getting to

²⁹ Mignon Duffy, Randy Albelda, and Clare Hammonds, "Counting Care Work: The Empirical and Policy Applications of Care Theory," *Social Problems* 60, no. 2 (May 1, 2013): 145–67, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2013.60.2.145>, 147.

³⁰ "Office of Human Resources - Montgomery County Public Schools," accessed April 7, 2019, <https://montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/personnel/classification/descriptions/description.aspx?fn=1051-337>.

know her, I got to hear more about what it is like to be a public high school counselor and became increasingly interested in the conditions of her work. After she very graciously spoke with me about my project, I decided to reach out to other counselors across the country. I got in contact with these people in a variety of settings. I reached out to people I knew from my own high school and I reached out to parents of friends who are counselors. I also approached counselors at a high school college fair where I was representing Scripps College as an Admission Ambassador, and I used networks in the Scripps Office of Admission to find counselors to speak with.

I interviewed eleven people for this project. Of the eleven I interviewed, seven of them were counselors, one a principal, another a teacher, one a vice chair of her county's school board, and lastly, an Americorp member serving as a college coach. These counselors and public educators work in states all over the country including California, Florida, Connecticut, Maryland, Washington, and Massachusetts. The schools are situated in diverse kinds of counties/districts, ranging in socio-economic status. Getting to speak with educators all over the country in separate high schools helped me to understand various perspectives and how the counselor position ranges based on the socio-economic status of the school. The open-ended nature of the interviews enabled me to hear from the counselors themselves and get their own perspectives. The majority of these interviews were done over the phone, some via skype. I also conducted two interviews in person in California.

In addition to my eleven interviews, I conducted a focus group with a full high school counseling team of a California public high school. I attended one of the team's weekly meetings and was able to ask them my own set of questions and allow for a group

conversation. I started out by asking my regular interview questions, and let the conversation go where they wanted it to, as they all provided their own unique perspectives and answers to my questions. This group conversation enabled me to find the connections they all share in regards to their unique positions within the school.

Alongside these forms of ethnographic research, I conducted some participant observation as I shadowed one of my interlocutors, Ms. Roberts, for one day in her Maryland high school. I was able to observe her office, watch how she interacted with her employees, and learn about her daily duties within the context of her own work. This was a helpful experience as I was able to better visualize a typical day for a counselor, feel the pace and intensity of the work, and better understand other counselors' perspectives from my interviews.

It is important to recognize and acknowledge that public high schools all over the country are incredibly distinct and diverse. It is impossible to attempt to summarize or generalize all of the schools in one county, let alone all of the schools in one state or in the country. It would be similarly problematic to make generalizations about the public high school counselor job experience. I can only speak of the interviews with seven counselors and the focus group of eight counselors, which goes without saying, is a very small pool of interlocutors.

Despite this limited number, the diversity of the schools helped me to understand a wide variety of counselor experiences. I was also able to speak to a counselor from a vocational technical high school, which provides more options for post-secondary job opportunities than a traditional public high school. I was also able to speak to counselors who have different positions within their own teams: head counselors, resource

counselors, counselors with students of all grade levels on their caseloads, counselors of just one grade level, etc. While the small sample size is not enough to make a generalization regarding the conditions of school counselors' work across the U.S., my interlocutors' narratives offer the varying kinds of counselors' own perspectives through which we can question a simplistic understanding of counselors' work. In order to keep my informants safe and protect their confidentiality, in this thesis I use pseudonyms for all of their names and have not included their school name nor the town in which their school is located.

In recruiting interview participants, I got to witness firsthand the intensity of the counselor job. There were many moments in which counselors had to reschedule our interview because something came up in their work day. Some counselors were late to our phone calls because they were busy dealing with an emergency situation in their school. Many counselors would not answer my emails for weeks, and there are several emails I sent that were never responded to. I found myself getting frustrated with counselors for their lack of timely responses, and was disappointed that I was not getting as many interviews as I had hoped. I then realized that this was part of the problem, that I was just another layer to their already complex days. In the end, I often felt guilty reaching out to them because I did not want to waste their time or distract them from their already incredibly overworked days at school.

Outline of this thesis

To understand the broader conditions of high school counselors' work, this thesis starts with a chapter that outlines the neoliberalization of the public school system through various hegemonic discourses. I explored the ways in which reformers miscalculated what could save public schools and how the test taking industry and the privatization of public schools reflect international trends of neoliberal influence. I studied how these influences are reflected in the daily life of a school counselor in the ways that they are constantly asked to switch back and forth between performing different forms of labor. I explored how these forms of labor are often in competition with one another.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I began to focus more directly on examples of bureaucratic labor that counselors are required to uphold and complete in order for the school to function properly and best serve their students. I demonstrate how these forms of labor are specifically necessary under demands of the school that reflect individualized, free-market practices. Counselors' bureaucratic labor is crucial for the student to succeed and survive, but only because the public school is situated in a neoliberal context, not actually because it is what counselors think is best for their students. I examine the ways in which this labor impacts their perceptions of their work and their ability to feel productive.

After studying bureaucratic labor in detail, I wanted to better understand the complexity of the care labor that counselors frequently perform for their students. The third chapter of this thesis explores the ways that care labor is often only used in response to emergency or crisis situations. I explore how their care labor fulfills counselors, but

simultaneously contributes to their perceptions of constantly feeling behind or unproductive in their work. This exploration highlights the cycle of exploitation that counselors find themselves in as they strive to do the care labor that gives meaning to their work and supports their students, but also harms their ability to manage their workload.

Chapter 1: The Neoliberalization of Public Education and Its Impacts on Counselors

Introduction

To exist within a public high school in the U.S. as a student, staff, or teacher is to welcome the complex bureaucracies and systems in place that represent the national economy's obsession with regulation and accountability. In this chapter, I argue how the neoliberalization of the U.S. public high school has changed the functioning of the school to be less student centered, and more focused on systems of education as a whole. These changes have impacted the ways in which high school counselors are able to do the work that they strive to do for their students. This chapter will set out the foundation for subsequent chapters as I explain the types of labor that are necessary of counselors for the functioning and upkeep of the school under the current system. I also describe the types of labor that are being demanded by the students, although not recognized or valued by the school.

I argue that these neoliberal influences represent how problem solvers and reformers miscalculated what would make children successful. In doing so, the very forms of bureaucratic regulation that they believed would fix our school system are in fact preventing the change needed. As a result, counselors are at the nexus of what the students ask for and what the school needs. While both what the school and student's demands may ultimately be in the student's best interests, these demands are in competition with one another for the counselor's time, making counselors have to switch between forms of labor at any second. Counselors are expected to be doing primarily *intentional* services in their offices, meaning work that helps keep students on the right track towards graduation and post-secondary opportunities, through both social-

emotional guidance and academic advising. However, their days in reality are largely filled with *responsive* services, as they react and respond to different crises that come up involving specific students or the school as a whole. These demands put on counselors make them completely overworked. This chapter seeks to outline these miscalculations by reformers and their direct impacts on the general conditions of the public high school counselor's work.

Privatization of Public Education

The privatization of public education is an impact of divisive reform trends over past decades in the United States.³¹ Privatization essentially refers to the shifted use of public money for private means. The privatization of education in the U.S. has intensely defunded public schools without even producing better results, through various modes such as the charter school movement and federal reform.³² This defunding has had obvious effects on the qualities of public schools. Public educators are often paid minimally.³³ Support staff are limited.³⁴ In an interview, a teacher in LA told me there are not enough computers or desks for all of her students. These problems are the result of a decreasing lack of money put towards public education.³⁵

³¹“Why the Movement to Privatize Public Education Is a Very Bad Idea,” Washington Post, July 14, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/07/14/why-the-movement-to-privatize-public-education-is-a-very-bad-idea/>.

³² Jennifer Medina and Dana Goldstein, “Los Angeles Braces for Major Teachers’ Strike,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/07/us/teacher-strike-laUSD-utla.html>.

³³ “‘I Work 3 Jobs And Donate Blood Plasma to Pay the Bills.’ This Is What It’s Like to Be a Teacher in America,” *Time*, accessed April 13, 2019, <http://time.com/longform/teaching-in-america/>.

³⁴ Corrie Stone-Johnson, “‘That’s Not in My Job Description!’: Personnel Management in the Accountability Era,” *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* 18, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 294–308, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458915606767>.

³⁵ “A Punishing Decade for School Funding.”

I was first exposed to the privatization of education in middle school, but at that time I did not quite understand what I was learning. *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary that explores “failing” public schools in the U.S., moved me to tears as I got a glimpse of just how little public education was serving its students. The documentary argues that charter schools are the best options for students to escape poverty and seek a quality education in the U.S.³⁶ However, I did not realize at the time, how misguided I was by the documentary’s subtle, but powerful, messages that promote the privatization of public education. In *The Death and Life of The Great American School System*, Education historian Diane Ravitch describes this documentary as “anti-public school, anti-teacher, anti-union.”³⁷ Ravitch argues how privatization, in the form of the charter school and “choice” movement, “is stealthily advancing an undemocratic agenda, cloaked in deceptive rhetoric, that the public is not aware of and does not understand.”³⁸

Ravitch credits the destructive problems with our current public education system to the recent federal “reform” movements that place an emphasis on there being a “choice” of where people can go to school, through schools like charters and vouchers. There are two main problems here: reform movements take money from public spending and put it towards private efforts, and federal government education efforts focus on enhancing competition as a way for increasing proficiency in school. Both problems have impacted our education system. Ravitch explains that “the money for choice schools is

³⁶ “Waiting for ‘Superman’ (2010) - IMDb,” accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1566648/>.

³⁷ Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (Basic Books, 2016).

³⁸ Ravitch, xvii.

taken away from the schools that enroll a majority of students, reducing their budgets and causing them to lose teachers, services and programs.”³⁹

In 1991, Minnesota established the first ever charter school. Charter schools are of no cost in the same way that public schools are, they use tax money like public schools do, but there is one catch. Charter schools are not required to adhere to the same rules and regulations as public schools. Charter schools attend to a much smaller population of students, and they are given the freedom to try out different ways of educating students. Many charter schools in the U.S. are started by people with great intentions, and have incredible success in the work that they do with their students, as is outlined in *Waiting for Superman*.⁴⁰ However, they can lead to dangerous territory because charter schools can be started by anyone who can get authorization from the government.⁴¹ Charter schools can be started by corporations, parents, teachers, and even non-profits. For this reason they are far less predictable and regulated, and it is hard to control who starts these schools. Corporations have taken on a savior complex through the creation of charter schools regardless of their lack of on-the-ground experience. Private enterprises believe it’s their responsibility, “that the private sector is inherently more innovative and effective than the public sector.”⁴² It is true that some charter schools do tremendous work for students who attend the school.⁴³ However, most charter schools are performing just as poorly as their public school counterparts.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ravitch, xix.

⁴⁰ “Waiting for ‘Superman’”, 2010.

⁴¹ “What Is A Charter School?,” Information Station, <https://informationstation.org/video/what-is-a-charter-school/>.

⁴² Ravitch, xix.

⁴³ “Report on 41 Regions,” accessed April 20, 2019, <http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php>.

⁴⁴ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, xix.

These new developments in public education directly relate to the free-market investments central to neoliberalism and have shifted the focus of public schools to be centered around their competition with other schools. For example, in the state of Michigan, the “choice” phenomenon can be better described as a public money-wasting business: “the state encourages schools and districts to compete for funding by attracting students; as a result, every district spends \$100,000 or more to market its wares and poach students from neighboring districts. Millions are spent to lure students, with no evidence that it produces better education.”⁴⁵

Between 2008 and 2011, federal reform policies, pioneered by Florida governor Jeb Bush, implemented the process of giving public schools letter grades. This was supposedly implemented as reform effort, however these grades given to schools more often “closely correlate with family and community wealth.”⁴⁶ Ms. Harris, a counselor in a Florida public high school expanded upon this policy when explaining her personal mission as a school counselor:

Our main job is to get them across that stage in four years. One, because we want kids to have a productive life and move out into the world as they should. But the other reason, and I will be very blunt about this, is because the state of Florida has a graduation check that they do and your graduation rate plays very heavily into your schools grade. Every school gets a grade in Florida every year, ABCDEF. The better your grade, the more money your school is eligible to receive. It’s kind of hilarious to me, because you would think it would be opposite, the failing school really needs the more money, but that’s not how they do it.

This emphasis on free-market, self-producing efficiency is evident in neoliberal education policies like that of Gov. Bush. It makes the specific schools within a county responsible for their own success and takes away the collectivist nature of a county. It stratifies the schools within the county and continues to put competition at the forefront

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ravitch, xxx.

of their schools' missions.⁴⁷ As a result, staff in Ms. Harris' school have to gear their attention to competing for those kinds of resources, taking their attention away from the students' needs. This not only changes counselors' motives, but also puts more pressure on their work. Instead of schools receiving better funding to help make their goals, they are essentially told to compete for the funds, even though the funding is what the schools need in order to make them more competitive.

Commodification of Public High School Students

The commodification of students in public schools is a pressing issue in education systems all over the world, including the U.S.^{48,49} Commodification in this particular sense of the word describes “the process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in term of commodity production, distribution, and consumption.”⁵⁰ Commodification is the process of understanding someone as if they were a product or a marketable item. In public school systems all over the world, students are commodified by the test taking industry. Standardized tests, often created by private corporations, reduce individuals with unique emotions, complex learning abilities or disabilities, and particular identities and family backgrounds, to a single score. This test taking industry assumes all students think the same way and that they have had the same access to kinds of education that would prepare them for the test.

⁴⁷ Bartlett et al, 6.

⁴⁸ Nafez Dakkak, “Obstacles towards Curriculum Reform in the Middle East – Using Jordan and the UAE as Case Studies,” n.d., 10.

⁴⁹ Judith A. Cochran, “Disillusionment with Higher Education in the Middle East and the United States,” *Forum on Public Policy Online* 2011, no. 3 (2011), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ969857>.

⁵⁰ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, UK ; Polity Press, 1992), 207.

Standardized testing is proven to excessively harm low-income, students of colors' ability to excel in school.⁵¹ Standardized testing is less of a measure of intellect, but rather represents a student's access to proper training and tutoring. Regardless, standardized tests are frequently utilized in public education to measure a student's intellect or a school's ability to properly educate their students.

Additionally, standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT are often required for college applications. If students are not set up for success on these tests, their college access opportunities are significantly lower. Colleges use these test scores to not only admit their students, but also to select who they want to advertise their school to. Colleges have the ability to "purchase" students based off of their testing scores.⁵² When a student takes a test through College Board, they have the option to fill out a box of information that can be given to colleges who might be interested in admitting them depending on their test scores. Colleges and universities can access that information, including the student's email or mailing address, by buying the information of students from a select range of test scores that the college defines. The commodification of students is unmistakable within this aspect of the test-taking industry.

The concept of "education reform" masks what really is the privatization of education. It equally masks the ways in which test taking industries take advantage of low-performing schools and instill test-taking processes that only stratify students more.⁵³ These industries were supported and funded by both President Bush's 2001 education

⁵¹ Graham B. Slater and C. Bradford Griggs, "Standardization and Subjection: An Autonomist Critique of Neoliberal School Reform," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37, no. 5 (October 20, 2015): 443, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2015.1091259>.

⁵² "College Board Search — Pricing and Payment Policies — The College Board," accessed April 13, 2019, <https://collegeboardsearch.collegeboard.org/pastudentsrch/support/licensing/pricing-payment-policies>.

⁵³ Slater and Griggs, 438.

reform policy, No Child Left Behind, and President Obama's 2009 education reform policy, Race To The Top. No Child Left Behind aimed to close "the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers."⁵⁴ By NCLB, "high-stakes testing was officially mandated nationwide."⁵⁵ Race To The Top was aimed at "adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace...building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction."⁵⁶ However, when policies are repeatedly legislated by politicians and not educators with on the ground experience, the results are likely to be unsuccessful.⁵⁷ These education policies created more forms of regulation for schools and homogenization of students, which only stratified students more.

Individuality is less valued within standardized assessments. The commodification of students follows "the naïve assumption that all children will progress at the same rate if exposed to the same standards and tests."⁵⁸ Students in these schools are not assessed on their critical thinking skills, but instead are all forced to demonstrate their knowledge in a uniform way.⁵⁹ One of my interlocutors, a vice chair for a school committee in Massachusetts described test taking as one of the most pressing issues for

⁵⁴ "The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001)," Laws, December 6, 2010, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>.

⁵⁵ Pepi Leistyna, "Corporate Testing: Standards, Profits, and the Demise of the Public Sphere," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2007): 59–84, 64.

⁵⁶ "Fact Sheet -- Race to the Top," Pamphlets, August 8, 2011, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/factsheet.html>.

⁵⁷ Leistyna, "Corporate Testing," 62.

⁵⁸ Ravitch, xxiv.

⁵⁹ Leistyna, "Corporate Testing," 73.

her constituents: “Our kids are essentially taught to a test and it’s impeding their critical thinking skills and really preparing them for jobs that are going to be obsolete in the future.” Not only is there no room for individuality within these standardized tests in terms of how a student demonstrates their intellect, but the tests are reducing a student’s ability to critically think for themselves. It is important to note that this lack of individuality is an obvious contradiction to neoliberal discourse. Enterprises that support the founding aspects of neoliberal theory, such as individuality, have paradoxically implemented policies that take away students’ individuality and instead homogenize them.

This commodification of students has changed the purpose of education: “it has created a booming and politically powerful ‘education industry,’ where the big prize is profits, not educated citizens.”⁶⁰ Students are reduced to numbers that define the success of the school or county/district they are in. These numbers only help the functioning of the school within the neoliberalized system of public education, instead of actually helping their students.

Impacts on Public High School Counselors

The commodification of students has impacted what counselors perceive to be effective and productive work. High school counselors, among other public educators, are left responsible for navigating and controlling the complexities of what the school and its students need. These counselors are handling an overwhelming workload. Getting a glimpse of their day-to-day work experiences left me with a stronger understanding of how busy a day in the office is for my interlocutors. It was immediately clear to me that

⁶⁰ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, xx.

counselors have to make use of a variety of skills and work experience on a daily basis. These skills require different kinds of labor. They are expected to switch between modes of labors at any moment, including bureaucratic and care labor. This is a common thread in many of my interlocutors' explanation of their day-to-day activities. In order to get a better understanding of their days, it is important to outline three counselors' days from start to finish to show the diversity in labors they perform daily, and the intensity in all of their days.

A Day in the Life of Ms. Roberts

Ms. Roberts is the head counselor of a public high school in Maryland. Her counseling team separates their caseloads by grade and alphabet. Ms. Roberts is one of two 9th grade counselors, and additionally oversees a portion of the students with disabilities who attend the school. The other six counselors split up the rest of 10th—12th grade students, separated by alphabet. No counselor has more than 250 students on their caseload.

Ms. Roberts started her day with a meeting with all of the other department heads in the school, discussing updates from each of the different departments. In this meeting she shared informative updates she had received from a countywide meeting with other high schools' head counselors the day before. After this hour long meeting, she spent an hour on a new equity initiative by the county that will take place in her school within the next year. She presented this initiative to her colleagues to share her understanding of what it will look like in their school. After this presentation, she met with two other colleagues in the school to preemptively start the master scheduling for the next school year. She later described this daunting task as an equally exciting puzzle to work through with her colleagues. At 10:15 am this meeting ended, and Ms. Roberts had a chance to turn on her computer and manage any communication

responsibilities of hers, which include responding to any emails that could have come from parents, students, teachers, and administration the night before, or calling back anyone who might have left her a message over the phone while she was out of her office. She then met with a teacher in the school who had some concerns about students who needed schedule changes due to their language abilities.

Once the teacher left her office, Ms. Roberts had a chance to return to her in-person communication responsibilities with students. She took a look at which students had attempted to visit her office the day before when she had been out of the building for the countywide counselor meeting. She promptly called those students down to her office one at a time to talk through what had brought them to her office. This first meeting took place with a student with high levels of anxiety, who was looking for a change in her schedule. After speaking with the student Ms. Roberts agreed with the students' concerns and changed her schedule to the higher-level class that the student was requesting. She then immediately brought in the next student, who was also looking for a schedule change to a more difficult class. After taking a look at the student's transcript, Ms. Roberts decided that it would be a good change in his schedule. Next, she called a new student's brother, who the student had recently started living with, as she came from a "very tumultuous background." She talked the brother through how the school could best support this student.

Another counselor in the office then approached Ms. Roberts to say that a student had come to her office to let her know that she thought her friend might be suicidal. Ms. Roberts then called that friend to the office to have a conversation with the student to assess if she needed to be referred to the crisis center. She had a conversation with the student and then called the student's father and had a conversation with him. She let the father and daughter have a private conversation in her office. They ultimately decided that she did not need to be referred to the crisis

center, but that she should seek counseling. Other students immediately came to her office following the intervention to ask for more schedule changes. She then answered a few emails, and then it was time for her to start our interview.

Evidently, there was a lot going on in Ms. Roberts' day. She was responsible for controlling a myriad of interactions, such as dispersing information she had learned from the county wide level to her colleagues, meeting with students who desired a change in their classes, responding to a variety of emails, and taking control of a crisis intervention with a student who was suspected to be suicidal. These tasks require the ability for Ms. Roberts to communicate effectively with professionals in her field, with high school students, and with demanding or concerned parents. She communicates with others in person and over the phone or computer all day. This requires Ms. Roberts' ability to handle one task at a time, as they all demand unique skills, including taking on unexpected situations and changes in schedule with ease, and generally accepting that your day will not turn out the way you intended it to.

A Day in the Life of Ms. Harris

Ms. Harris is the 11th grade counselor at a public high school in Florida. Within her four person counseling team, each counselor is in charge of a whole grade level, with around 450 students on each counselor's caseload. Ms. Harris started her eventful day in school at 7:15 am by leading the varsity cheerleading practice, as she is the varsity cheerleading coach for the school. She then got back to her office and checked in with a parent who she had been in contact with because the student's father was near death from a stroke that had taken place earlier in the week. Next, she met with the principal of her school to discuss the decision to remove one of the cheerleaders from the team for disciplinary purposes. After this, she and the three other counselors met with the county's

graduation coach to discuss ways in which they could further motivate students to graduate within four years. They discussed the possibility of organizing an information night at their feeder middle schools focused on graduation requirements to inform students about graduating high school even before they start.

She then described how she “sat down and started answering emails of which I have like roughly 1000 right now, that’s no joke I really do.” One of these emails required calling back a parent who had a question about access to her child’s transcript. She then met with one of the other counselors on her team because they run the Chick-Fil-A Leadership Academy, where they choose high achieving students who are non-conventional leaders to promote how to be productive leaders in their school community.

After this meeting ended she had multiple students visit her office: “As soon as Ms. Gliddon walked out the door I had a student come to talk to me about his geometry class... then as soon as he walked out the door another student walked in and it was my student whose dad is going to be taken off life support tomorrow.” The student was very visibly upset when she came to visit Ms. Harris. Ms. Harris talked this student through the grieving process and gave her a book to look through that explains how grief looks different for everyone. The student asked to read the book while in Ms. Harris’ office. Ms. Harris agreed, “so I sat there and answered emails and she sat there and read and cried her eyeballs out.”

Immediately after this, another student was sent to her office very upset and communicated to Ms. Harris that a different student on her caseload, his sister, had attempted to commit suicide the night before. Ms. Harris did not expect to receive this kind of information about her student who showed her no genuine concern regarding mental health prior to this event. As the brother’s counselor was busy at that moment, Ms. Harris had to be the one to counsel him through this experience.

Next, she met with a student who had requested information about a school specific test taking process. However, the conversation quickly changed gears when Ms. Harris

brought up an observation that she made about the student's relationship with her father. Ms. Harris had noticed some concerns during the student's parent teacher conference a few weeks before. This opened the opportunity for the student to become emotional and the conversation developed into a tearful, meaningful one about the student's relationship to her father. While the student was extremely emotional throughout this breakthrough, she left the office feeling much better in the end.

Ms. Harris' day was exceptionally hectic. The majority of her day was spent counseling just three students who each had heavy concerns weighing on them, one of which was not even on her 450 student caseload. However, as soon as one stepped out the door, her next tasks included trying to communicate professionally with parents, attempting to respond to all of her emails filled with demands and questions, and collaborating with multiple professionals in her school community. She ended her day by saying, "No day is alike and you never know day-to-day what's coming in." When I described my amazement at the diversity of work she had done in a day, she simply responded that "everybody goes to the school counselor for everything. That's the bottom line, we have to know a little bit of everything to help them."

A Day in the Life of Ms. Jacobs

Ms. Jacobs is the head counselor at a magnet public high school in California. She works with three other counselors who split up the 1700 students at her school by alphabet and grade level, alongside a school psychologist who works with students with disabilities as well as with students dealing with more extreme mental health issues. Ms. Jacobs started her day by checking in at her office, where she described being rushed with a few students coming to see her.

These students then made her late to her presentations that she was completing in 10th grade classes throughout the school. These presentations included

“career exploration” conversations, discussing what education levels are needed for the kinds of jobs the students might want. After her presentations, Ms. Jacobs found herself “coming up to the counseling office and walking into a 51-50 situation where we had a suicidal student. I had to meet with them, calm them down, and make plans about who was going to come to campus to pick her up to bring her to get a medical evaluation right away.” She had other meetings scheduled at those times, but because of the emergency, she had to cancel and push back those meetings.

This then brought her to the 4th period of the day, where she attempted to catch up on what she had missed due to the presentations in classes alongside the incident with the suicidal student. She also began calling a few students to her office, and had a few minutes to begin getting ready for the facilitation of the Plus Forum, a program that would be led by Peer Leaders Uniting Students, a group on their campus. At the end of our interview she stated, “I don’t think that there is ever down time anymore, I am lucky to be able to clean my office once a month to get stuff out of the way.”

Ms. Jacobs is yet another example of the hectic calendar for a school counselor. She started her day by dealing with student demands and questions, which immediately set her behind schedule. She was then forced to calmly insert herself and take control of a crisis intervention with a student who had revealed that she was suicidal. This sends her into to catch-up mode all day, with unrealistic expectations of getting done all she wanted to.

One of the most common threads in each of the three counselors’ days is the fact that they all had to deal with crisis situations, all of which dealing with a potentially suicidal student or a student who had attempted suicide. None of them seemed

particularly phased by these emergencies and it was made clear to me that they had all developed the ability to calmly take control of a crisis situation. Counselors have to be ready to be open for a conversation with students and are expected to find immediate solutions and further steps to take for their students. This requires their ability to be flexible putting aside what they might have been working on and coming back to it in their next free moment. It is also important to note how the low numbers of counselors on both Ms. Harris and Ms. Jacobs' counseling teams indicate some the volume and intensity of their work. They both had to step in on crisis situations because of a lack of other available counselors. Small counseling teams are a result of the defunding of public education, which is just one impact of the neoliberalization of public education.

As Ms. Harris described, by the halfway point in her day she had a chance to attempt to respond to her a portion of email inbox of 1000 unread emails, many of which are from parents of students. Other interlocutors, including Mr. Liu, a public high school counselor in California, relate to the overwhelming demands from many parents. School counselors also have to meet with a variety of professionals in the school community such as administration, graduation coaches, teachers, and principals to explain certain situations within the counseling department and to receive explanations about what is going on outside of their office.

Ms. Jacobs and Ms. Roberts both shared similar sentiments of working with difficult administration. Other interlocutors also described the trouble of working with a constantly changing administration, which requires counselors to often work under people who might not understand what it is that the counselors actually do. Ms. Jacobs described how because of frequent changes in administration, "now it's my job to not

only do all of my job, but also to teach my supervisor how to supervise us just because they're not coming in with the knowledge of this information beforehand." The lack of administrative support is an important issue for the counselors I interviewed.

There is a clear lack of normalcy or routine in their day-to-day experiences. While those were typical days in their office, it was apparent to me that the next day would most likely look completely different. This is unique within any 9-5 job, even within jobs in the school system like teachers. I was amazed at how many different kinds of skills counselors have to have mastered in order to successfully and smoothly complete their days amidst the inevitable bumps and unexpected changes within their schedules.

Ms. Jacobs explained that

everyday is one of those things where you have a plan and you know you're not going to get to everything, because something will happen unexpected. I think going into that, you're a guidance counselor, it's like what does your job encompass, well I do everything from patching somebody socially emotionally to sending transcripts and anything in between.

Ms. Roberts echoes this similar sentiment by stating, "basically what happens is you know the things that you allot for that day, but when emergencies come up and they don't necessarily get done, they get pushed to the next day or to that afternoon."

Counselors are constantly given more work, such as mindlessly proctoring daylong tests for students, because there is a lack of understanding, even within other staff in the school, of the true pressure and demands of what counselors do. The intensity of their workloads can sometimes even result in the school counselor staying late in order to get their tasks done. These kinds of labor are not only extremely time and energy consuming, but in order to get through a day, counselors must be comfortable switching back and

forth from one type of labor to another that require different skill sets. When I asked how she is able to manage her workload, Ms. Jacobs responded,

I mean I don't think you could do this job if you're not flexible and aren't able to take transition easy...you need to be able to drop anything your doing to address anywhere from a minor situation to an extreme situation and handle that in a manner, and still be expected to go on with your day on a normal basis.

Ms. Harris describes the work as “very heavy stuff, and the next person walking into your office may just want to talk to you about where they want to go to college and you have to switch. You have to switch, you have deal with the rest.” Not only are they expected to go on normally with their days after difficult and emotional interventions with students, but they are also counted upon to continue to be “productive” and to make up for the “missed time” on their work. In addition to their heavy workload with diverse kinds of labor, these labors are loaded with preconceived notions and ideas about what kinds of work are considered productive and what are not.

As stated in a Boston Globe op-ed, “Simply put, counselors matter. In many cases, they may be the only staff member responsible for understanding each child as a whole person.”⁶¹ Because this is not taking place in other parts of the school, under the demands of testing and lack of focus on emotional learning and preparation because of the standardization of learning, counselors have a whole lot more work. Not to mention the fact that if a counselor is the only one who wholly understands a student, they have 400 students to understand. For this reason, their jobs are incredibly difficult, and only made more difficult when the pressures of the neoliberal high school continually have negative impacts on students.

⁶¹ Jessica Lander. “Why School Counselors Matter,” (The Boston Globe), November 23, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2018/11/23/why-school-counselors-matter/FueD3N5wJvIKdDWLj2aiyJ/story.html>.

Conclusion

Many of my interlocutors discuss their eagerness for individual connection with students on their caseloads. However, under the current demands and conditions of their job, they are not doing a good job achieving the goals they set out to do which is to support students through academic, college and career, and emotional counseling. The U.S. public school system currently enforces the belief that education reform can be achieved through homogenous, large-scale, for-profit changes, rather than localized decisions about what local students need. As a result, counselors' days are filled with bureaucratic labor that fulfills these regulations for the school. However, counselors are additionally performing care labor as they help navigate students through the complexities of high school and adolescence. These competing forms of labor put counselors in an uncomfortable position of managing two kinds of needs that are unbalanced. Chapters two and three of this thesis study more deeply these two forms of labor and how they impact counselors' perceptions of their own work.

Chapter 2: Bureaucratic Labor Required of Counselors

Introduction

As argued in this first chapter, the neoliberalization of public education has impacted public high school counselors' conditions of work. As outlined by three interlocutors, their workdays are filled with different kinds of labor. This chapter explores different examples of *bureaucratic labor* and its implications. I argue that many examples of the bureaucratic labor required of counselors uphold and perpetuate the regulatory practices that neoliberal influences have implemented within the public high school. The types of work described in this chapter reflect contradictions of neoliberal influence including the emphasis on individuality and deregulation, and reinforce neoliberal influences of transparency and efficiency.

This chapter studies various parts of the counselor position that are indirect services to students. Indirect services to students include any kind of work that the counselor does that may help the student, but does not involve direct contact with student. While these indirect services are helpful to the student and important to the counselor position, I argue that many of these services are important and helpful only under the current regulated and monitored system. These are services that the counselors themselves may not genuinely believe the students need if it were not for the complex bureaucracy of the public high school. In this chapter, I argue that the bureaucratic labor expected of them makes counselors feel unproductive in their work, and impacts what work the counselors believe is most important to do. This chapter also explores the lack of understanding of what counselors do or need from both the school administration and the county/district perspective.

As stated in my introduction, I use the term *bureaucratic labor* to describe work that someone does to uphold the physical functioning of an organization within a greater system. For example, public educators' bureaucratic labor includes the fulfillment of work that allows the school to function within the greater county/district. For high school counselors, this work is often similar to administrative tasks, such as computer and data analysis work. Bureaucratic labor is absolutely necessary in the running of any public school, in order to ensure that it meets the regulations expected of them at a county, state, or national level. Regardless of the importance of bureaucratic labor, neoliberal-influenced policies have had contradictory effects on the the counselor's work conditions, as evidenced by the increased forms of regulation and lack of individual freedom in the counselor role.

Certainly administrators and teachers were aware that their schools were under surveillance. School report cards, national rankings, admission numbers, test scores, and compliance with a slew of regulations were now determinants of success, however fragile. But the monitoring that was occurring seemed to be both virtual and located in the interstices of their very practice and identity. Furthermore, there emerged an odd feeling of powerlessness at the very moment of being assured one was autonomous and independent. Something unsettling was happening, and yet teachers and teacher educators were told that the introduction of new practices was for their own good and that the practices would empower them.⁶²

Forms of accountability and regulation, as will be described throughout this chapter, are changing basic functions of public schools. This chapter studies these forms of monitoring, specifically in relation to the work conditions for counselors and the ways that it makes my interlocutors feel.

⁶² Taubman, *Teaching By Numbers*, 64.

Example of Counselors' Bureaucratic Labor

Emails

One necessary quality of a school counselor is their ability to constantly communicate with different kinds of people. Not only are they advising students, but counselors are also in frequent communication with parents, as they are often the most accessible adult in the school for the parent to reach out to via email. Parental demands affect many of my interlocutors, including Ms. Harris who describes constantly feeling a sense of dread and guilt about not being able to respond to all of the emails she has. She mentioned how there are “always parents emailing about this, that, and beyond. It could be a number of things, like when school pictures are.” While parent-counselor communication is requirement in some counselor job descriptions, like that of Montgomery County’s, it is important to examine why counselors are the staff that parents contact in relation to their student.⁶³ Counselors take up many forms of work that do not neatly fit into roles of other public educators. As one of my interlocutors put it, counselors are “the dumping ground” or the “jacks of all trades.” In reality, most people do not actually understand all that counselors do. As an alternate example, people have a general understanding about what it is that teachers do on a daily basis. There is a clear picture that comes to mind when someone imagines a teacher doing their job. However, there is less of a defined understanding about counselors, as evidenced by my own interest in this project, by counselor representations in movies and television, and by

⁶³ “Office of Human Resources - Montgomery County Public Schools,” accessed April 21, 2019, <https://montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/personnel/classification/descriptions/description.aspx?fn=1051-337>.

reports on counselors.^{64 65} This makes it easier for people outside of a counseling team to pile requests or demands onto counselors.

The intense demand for email responses is something that is particularly frustrating for Ms. Harris:

Especially if someone is in my office crying, I'm sorry if your email had to take the backseat to the kid. That's the more frustrating part of the job is they don't see what my days look like, they think I'm slacking off but it's not true. It's just that there are days when I can barely even look at my computer.

Counselors are positioned as a liaison for many people. For this reason, they are heavily relied on by both administration, parents, and students. Many of the counselors I interviewed have close working relationships to their school's administration, because of both close office proximity and because administration frequently seeks out counselors to help them on their own projects. My interlocutors described that administration does not rely on teachers in the same way. For this reason, counselors pick up a lot of extra responsibilities. Because school administrations work closely with their school counseling teams on different projects, it gives off the impression that the administration understands the everyday duties and schedules for counselors. However, there are no observation hours for the counselors I interviewed as there are for teachers in their schools. This means there is no one coming by their offices at various points throughout the year evaluating the kinds of work that they are completing. Counselors are neglected by their own administrations as they are not taking an interest into trying to better understand counselors' workload.

⁶⁴ *Easy A*, accessed April 21, 2019, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1282140/>.

⁶⁵ Corrie Stone-Johnson, "'That's Not in My Job Description!': Personnel Management in the Accountability Era," *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* 18, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 294–308, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458915606767>.

The emails are an aspect of the job that many counselors feel pressured to uphold. Mr. Liu described how he distinctly felt this pressure at the high school in California where he was formerly employed, which had an affluent student body. He described the kinds of demands and extraneous questions he would receive from parents and the stress he felt to accommodate them. Mr. Liu stated how invested particular affluent parents were in their kids' schools because "if you have a home in that district you're paying extra taxes for education, so you feel like you have a stake in that school." Ms. Matthews, a public high school counselor, described similar pressures at her affluent, high-achieving public high school in Connecticut. She stated "we're expected to answer an email within 24 hours, so we want to make sure our families feel heard and respected... I think that that is challenging." Often times, these emails consist of questions or requests that are either out of the counselor's range of ability, or could be answered by a simple google search. Nevertheless, counselors feel pressured to respond and believe it is a part of their job, no matter what the question is.

Corporate training exercises intentionally mold compliant yet risk-taking employees, or 'flexible bodies,' who thrive upon instability and labor intensification (Martin, 1994). Schools reinforce these identities by teaching students the values of multitasking, reskilling and conforming to industry demands and market vicissitudes (Monahan, 2005).^{66 67 68}

The pressure that counselors feel due to both their "instability and labor intensification," allows the school to keep their parents content as counselors overexert their energy to fulfill parents' requests. Seeing as communication to parents is a formal

⁶⁶ Aaron Kupchik and Torin Monahan, "The New American School: Preparation for Post-industrial Discipline," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27, no. 5 (November 2006): 617-31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690600958816>, 620.

⁶⁷ Torin Monahan, *Globalization, Technological Change, and Public Education* (Routledge, 2013).

⁶⁸ Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Beacon Press, 1994).

requirement for some counselor positions, counselors' jobs depend on their willingness to respond to parental concerns or questions, no matter how outrageous or simple they are.

Inputting of Grades

One of Ms. Harris' responsibilities includes inputting grades into transcripts for new students who start at their school from outside of the county. This is a tedious task that includes hand entering every single grade they have on their previous transcripts into the computer. Ms. Harris described how easy it is to fall behind on this task because of its tedious and time-consuming nature, and the way the transcripts can quickly pile up. Ms. Harris described how relieving it feels when she completes the inputting of new student grades.

I took a day recently where I said my only goal is to get through these folders, get them into the system and get them filed away. And now I'm down to three, so I felt really good after meeting that goal at the end of that day. I was so intentional about getting it done.

This task absolutely has to get done in order for the student to be put into the school's system. Ms. Harris had to dedicate a entire day at work to manually inputting the grades into transcripts. The inputting of grades is a perfect example of the time-consuming, but necessary administrative labor that school counselors have to complete. Because there are not enough paid staff in the school, this type of labor was most likely handed to a counselor as they are someone who frequently refers to transcripts throughout a student's four high school years to ensure that they can graduate on time. Just because they analyze and keep track of these transcripts does not mean that they should be completing a task like the manual inputting of the grades. It is worth mentioning that this task is technically considered "inappropriate" by the American

School Counselor Association model.⁶⁹ For a whole day, Ms. Harris spent all of her time completing an inappropriate task for the counselor job because if she didn't do it, no one else would, and the student's future would be at stake.

This represents the fact that Ms. Harris' time is taken up having to manage data more than manage the students' actual academic career. The school needed the students' inputting of grades to be done in order for it to function properly for the student. For these reasons, if Ms. Harris cares about the success of the school, and the success of the student, she is forced to dedicate her day to inputting those grades. However, this is not the work that she was trained to do nor is it the appropriate kind of work for her to do within her professional realm.

What is particularly interesting to note here is that even though it is not work that she was trained nor wanted to do, she described completing this as a great feeling. She explained how the completion of this task, which can tangibly be accomplished in a full day's work, marks the end of a good work day. The demands of this bureaucratic labor make it so that she feels "productive" only when finishing the administrative need. This puts the counselor in a difficult position. If the counselor does not get their work done, they will fall behind, and will not leave work feeling good about their day. However, when the counselor is not "getting their work done," it is because they are spending time directly serving their students as individual students visit their office for a plethora of possible reasons.

Ms. Harris' need to input new students' grades is an impact of the defunding of public education. Ms. Harris' school may not be able to afford to hire a separate

⁶⁹ "Careers/Roles | American School Counselor Association (ASCA)," accessed April 21, 2019, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors-members/careers-roles>.

administrative staff who is better suited for this kind of task or another counselor to lessen the workload. As a result, not only is time taken away from the appropriate and direct services Ms. Harris can provide to her students, but she begins to place more value, and assess her ability to be productive on the pressing administrative task at hand. For this reason, I argue that the neoliberalization of the public high school, as seen through the defunding of public education, affects not only the conditions of the counselor's work, but also the ways in which they view their own productivity.

Test Proctoring

Another influence of the neoliberalization of the public high school, as was already argued in the first chapter, is the standardization of public schools, most significantly through the increase in testing for students. The increased use of standardized tests has significant impacts on both students and teachers. Teachers have to teach to the test instead of teaching what they think is valuable to students. Students have to learn to the test instead of developing their own unique critical-thinking skills. However, students and teachers are often not the only people affected by standardized testing within the public high school. For a vast majority of the counselors I interviewed, an important aspect of the counselor position is that they are in charge of proctoring standardized tests.

The proctoring of standardized tests reflects arguments about neoliberal theory and audit culture proposed by both Harvey and Strathern. Harvey discusses how neoliberal theory promotes the marketization of often non-marketable goods:

It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and

capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace.⁷⁰

Harvey stresses the importance of the creation of technologies that support these forms of marketization. The implementation of databases and technologies also requires the learning of how to use and incorporate those systems into professions that did not once utilize them. These technologies or database systems have impacts on people who have to learn how to use them and keep up with their updates. The proctoring of test is itself a system that has to be carefully managed and maintained in order to accurately assess each student and make sure the testing process runs smoothly. Mr. Liu mentioned this kind of bureaucratic labor required of him, alongside other school staff, when describing the management of standardized tests in his school:

For example, yesterday we had an SAT day where the whole entire school was given a PSAT or SAT. So in order for that to happen... it's a lot of labor, and the custodial staff and administration help with that so I didn't go around moving chairs and stuff... But at the end of the test, all the boxes come in with everyone's tests and they need help sorting and boxing them up... which is manual labor. That's what we did for 3 or 4 hours yesterday and that's fine... in order to make a school run you just have to do what you have to do.

This is an important example of many staff in the public high school coming together to do work that is not tied to their own professional realms, but is necessary in order to maintain the functioning of the school. It is physical, administrative labor that is engrained to many counselor jobs. While some interlocutors wish they did not have to do it, as Mr. Liu stated, it is just something that has to get done. It is also clear that the proctoring and organizing of tests is an incredibly tedious project, as it took three to four

⁷⁰ Harvey, 3.

hours out of Mr. Liu's day. Ms. Harris also described the time-consuming nature of managing and proctoring standardized tests:

Yesterday, Ms. Gonzalez and I tested kids from 8:30-11:00 am and then from 11:45-2:00 pm, giving them the PERK test which is a graduation requirement... We do a lot of the AP testing too, so those are days when you probably won't get to your office at all, maybe only 30 minutes.

This testing not only takes up large amounts of these counselors' time, but it is work that a valued professional has to prioritize over their own individual tasks. The proctoring of tests is also unavoidably an instance in which school counselors perpetuate the presence of the test-taking industry within public schools, whether they believe in standardized testing or not. Proctoring the standardized tests is a crucial task for the general functioning of the school. Therefore, if school counselors care about the operations of the school and the success of their students, they have to do this work. The proctoring of tests is an example of their own work, among other school staffs' work, continually creating space for neoliberal influence in public schools, and taking space away from counselors to do the actual advising work that they are capable of.

In-Class Presentations and Attendance Intervention Plans

Another task required for many counselors is in-class presentations for students discussing a variety of topics relating to college and career exploration, deadlines for the college application process, etc. Many of the counselors I interviewed discussed how time-consuming these presentations often are. Ms. Roberts disclosed her problem with having to do specific presentations that she did not see fit for the students at her high school school:

So we have this program Naviance, and Naviance has all these little tasks and pathways that you can do. They're now requiring that you [the counselor] do lessons with our students in the classroom... Right now counselors are supposed to go into

classrooms at every grade level, every quarter, to do these Naviance lessons with kids. That's sixteen times that counselors need to get in the classroom...then we also do a personal body safety lesson so that's another classroom time. Now you're at seventeen times that counselors are going to classrooms in a year, plus what we think we need to do in terms of applying to college. We go in in the spring to talk with juniors, we go in in the fall to talk with seniors, we work with ninth graders on college planning, plus you have the rest of the job with counseling. So the issue is that the county throws this stuff our way and says go do it when I'm not sure that's the best thing for our school anyway.

These Naviance lessons are an example of the county regulating the schools and making decisions for the counselors who might not actually agree that those presentations are helpful for their students. What I find particularly significant about this quote is when Ms. Roberts differentiated between what the county thinks and "what we think we need to do in terms of applying to college." In this moment, Ms. Roberts made a clear separation between what the county thinks students need, versus what the counselors think students need. This regulation of public education takes up large amounts of time that the counselor cannot get back, and all for work that the counselors themselves do not see fit. By Ms. Roberts completing these tasks, not only is she taking away time from the valuable work that she, as a head counselor with decades of experience, believes is important work, but she also is supporting the regulatory practices of the county.

Taubmann states

it seemed as if valuable, although perhaps vulnerable, professional judgment and wisdom were being replaced by a measurable, defensible, and supposedly neutral process, in which educators and students were themselves constructed in terms of quantifiable outcomes.⁷¹

These problems stem from neoliberal influence in the public school system, through the standardization of testing and the homogenization of policies for schools in each county. However, they in fact represent a contradiction to neoliberalism, as they

⁷¹ Peter Maas Taubman, *Teaching By Numbers : Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education* (Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203879511>, 89.

take away counselors' ability to make decisions for themselves and for the students on their caseload. Instead, counselors are given countywide policies that they might not even agree with.

The enforcement of in-class presentations by the county also indicate increased forms surveillance within public institutions:

Where audit is applied to public institutions—medical, legal, educational—the state's overt concern may be less to impose day-to-day direction than to ensure that internal controls, in the form of monitoring techniques, are in place. That may require the setting up of mechanisms where none existed before, but the accompanying rhetoric is likely to be that of helping (monitoring) people help (monitor) themselves, including helping people get used to this new 'culture'.⁷²

Strathern exposes the complexities of introducing new kinds of work, such as the Naviance presentations, to an already functioning school system. Now, the high school counselors in Ms. Roberts' county have to prepare for and perform presentation that are implemented as a form of "monitoring" the school. These presentations are an example of mechanisms of monitoring that impact counselors' time and energy.

More examples of monitored mechanisms within audit culture are the attendance intervention plans required of Ms. Roberts and the other counselors in her county. After a student on her caseload is absent five times, Ms. Roberts is required to create an intervention plan for the student. This process includes finding a time to meet with the student, creating the actual intervention plan, and talking the student through their next steps. This was a generally new task for the counselors within Ms. Roberts' counseling team when I shadowed Ms. Roberts for the day at her school. The attendance intervention plans were the talk of the office, as the counselors were incredibly frustrated that their time was being wasted implementing plans that they did not think were necessary after

⁷² Strathern, *Audit Cultures*, 3.

five absences. In response, the counselors met with the administration of the school to fight for policy changes so they would not have to complete the plans.

Resisting the work itself takes both labor and time as was evident when I spent time with Ms. Roberts in her office. She showed me her email threads with other counseling teams in the county as she attempted to get responses from other counselors to prove to her own administration, who did not trust her judgment, that these attendance plans were unnecessary and only distracted counselors from more important tasks. She cared so deeply about alleviating stress for herself and her other counselors that she was emailing back and forth with the principal, trying to prove that other high schools were not implementing this policy. However, she knew that she would have to talk to the county in order to see a change in policy. Clearly, there was a lot of labor involved in trying to convince her administration that she was right, just so she could go to the county to convince them that she was right, too. Not only do the actual attendance intervention plans take time, but so does trying to resist them.

It is troubling that Ms. Roberts, a head counselor with decades of experience, has to fight with her administration and the county on topics such as counseling students about attendance, which is a part of her own expertise. She argued that “part of the issue is that the county tends to throw roadblocks...people make decisions from the central office who aren’t necessarily in schools, and haven’t been in schools for a long time.” Ms. Roberts revealed this lack of understanding from a county perspective, as is described in the next section.

The Administration and County's Lack of Perspective

Despite close working relationships between counselors and administrators, it was made clear to me that counselors often feel misunderstood or unsupported by the administrators of their schools. Some administrators set high expectations for their counselors, which explains why counselors receive many different kinds of tasks from administration. For example, when I interviewed the principal at a public high school in California, he made it clear that he expects a lot from his counselors.

I believe that our guidance counselors need to be Jack and Jill's of all trades. At one second you're a mental health therapist, the next time you're a technical expert at our database system and you're able to change a class or use prior achievement data to make an informed decision about placement... I expect our counselors to go to our school dances, I expect our counselors to hang out with kids and to help supervise at break at lunch, and by immersing yourself in the culture of this school and immersing yourself in students.

Mr. Schuman lays out his expectations for counselors to switch back and forth between forms of labor very clearly. This statement marks a disconnect between himself and his counselors. It is important to note that public high school counselor positions do not require therapy licenses. It is simply not a part of counselor credential programs. If he expects his counselors to be therapists, he is misinformed and expecting work that they cannot offer. Another aspect of the counselor job, which my interlocutors described to be more complex than they expected, is the data analysis and computer work required of them. This is another example of their principal expecting a task that counselors cannot be expected to have mastered.

In a focus group with California high school counselors, one of the counselors touched on the impacts of fast turnover rates for administrators:

When new administration comes in they don't always know the work that a counseling team does, so often times they might be more quick to be reactionary rather than to

just sit back and ask questions and allow the counseling team to show them the work that they do. Sometimes that causes some strife between administration and counseling because there's a lack of communication, and a lot of time it's because the right questions aren't being asked. Sometimes it doesn't look like a supportive administration team to the counseling department. But we all want the same things, it's just there's a breakdown in communication, and right when you get to the point that an administrator understands the role that a department plays, in a new one will come in.

Communication is crucial in order for counselors to be able to advocate for themselves and have their work understood by their administrators. However, when administration does not give counselors the chance to express their own opinions, relationships are damaged and there is little advocacy for counselors. The counselor here points out how change is slow because once a new administration begins to understand the counselors, another one takes their position and it repeats the cycle of counselors having to advocate for themselves until they are finally trusted.

Ms. Jacobs similarly expressed frustration about the lack of understanding of counselors, but at a district/county level.

We barely have time to get the stuff that we need to in the day-to-day basis done yet alone document every moment or every thing that we do. So a lot of times there's not a lot of tangible evidence to show how supportive a campus is but typically once counselors are removed its one of those, like oh wow yeah, we need a counselor on campus again.

Here, Ms. Jacobs is discussing the fact that there are no administrators or officials observing counselors' work. For this reason, she states that the only way that they could understand the importance of what counselors are doing every day is by the counselors themselves documenting every task. However, this puts all the more responsibility on counselors and none on administrators or county officials to take the time to understand just what is going on in counselors' offices.

Because of this lack of understanding, counselors are often grouped in with teachers, regardless of the fact that they do completely separate jobs. An example of this is that counselors are on the same contract as teachers. This is important because, first, it means that they receive the same salary as teachers. Second, it implies that teachers' time spent with students is the same as counselors' time spent with students. Teachers are evaluated by the amount of time they spend in their classroom. Because counselors are recognized as teachers contractually, they are also evaluated by their "classroom hours," which do not exist because counselors do not have classrooms. Third, counselors are not recognized in their contract title, which symbolically signifies the invisibility of counselors within the high school's eyes. While for the most part this mainly affects contractual logistics, Ms. Wilson expressed clear frustration at the ways in which their contracts affects her daily tasks and her time available to do the work she wants to do:

Sometimes we get tied to doing teacher professional development that has nothing to do with our lives. Yesterday I wasted an hour of my life doing teacher development that had nothing to do with me so because we're not tied to a bell, we're not tied to students... Most of the time an administrator doesn't know the role of a counselor so they don't know what to create or how we could utilize a staff professional development day, but all they need to say is 'hey you tell me what you're department needs and we will support you,' instead they don't have those conversations, instead they just throw us in with the teachers because they don't know where to put us.

The lack of communication here hurts not only the counselor's ability to get the work that they find important done, but also damages the relationships between administration and the counseling team. It demonstrates administrators' inability to trust counselors to make decisions regarding their own work.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to outline different examples of bureaucratic labor that counselors perform on a daily basis. These examples of bureaucratic labor include, but are certainly not limited to emailing, proctoring standardized tests, creating and enforcing attendance intervention plans, and making in-class presentations throughout the year. These kinds of work are important because they 1) distract counselors from providing for direct services to students, 2) represent impacts of neoliberal influence within the public high school, 3) make counselors assess their productivity based on their administrative work and less on their direct work with students, and lastly, 4) represent a lack of understanding, respect, or trust from the county/district and the school's administration. Through forms of surveillance, the implementation of technologies, and the lack of individual authority or control given to counselors, their work conditions represent neoliberal influence and the powerful changes made to the school system through audit culture. This bureaucratic labor makes it hard for counselors to find time for direct services for students, which often involve care labor. Care labor will be the focus of the third, and final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Counselors' Investments in Care Labor

Introduction

Growing up in the U.S., based on media I consumed, I assumed that my school guidance counselor was someone that I could, and would, go to when I wanted someone to listen and talk through problems.⁷³ However, in my own high school experience, I did not find my counselor available to me for that kind of emotional support. I never visited my high school counselor to tell seek any social-emotional guidance. Because of this experience, I assumed that other high schoolers felt similarly about their relationships to their counselors. However, in doing this thesis, I have quickly learned that this is far from the truth. One of the most demanding parts of the occupation is the *care labor* required daily of school counselors. The counselors I interviewed spoke of all the reasons for which students frequently visit their office, ranging anywhere from requesting a change in their schedule to having a mental breakdown.

Counselors' care labor is incredibly important not just for the students, but also for the counselors. It is labor that is often the most energy-demanding, but is concurrently the most fulfilling for counselors. Because of the many indirect services, which are often bureaucratic labor, that take up a lot of counselors' days, most of the care labor that they perform is a responsive service. This means they perform care labor when a student comes to them with a certain problem or crisis, rather than intentionally performing it by reaching out to the student. This differentiation between responsive and intentional service is important to the analysis in this chapter because counselors' responsive services are often less recognized by others in the school. Counselors take control of situations that come to their office by responding to them regardless of if they expected to

⁷³ *Glee*, accessed April 16, 2019, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1327801/>.

do that work or not. In this chapter, I argue that counselors' care labor are often band aid solutions to a larger, complex problems about mental health in schools.⁷⁴

The care labor needed of counselors in response to students' crises or conflicts can often keep them from completing the bureaucratic labor that the school demands of them. However, when I asked my interlocutors about their favorite parts of being a counselor, they all mentioned their passion for working directly with students. Because the individual connections to students are important to counselors, they work extremely hard at making themselves available to the students, regardless of what the student might ask of the counselor. When they are met with students' emergencies, counselors attempt to support the student in the best ways they know how because it is the only time they can perform care labor.

What is remarkable about the care labor described in this chapter is that counselors never refuse to perform the labor, even when it may fall out of their professional realm (seeing as they are not trained therapists). When counselors push themselves to perform the care labor in every moment that a student asks for it, their job becomes even harder because it can cause them to feel unproductive, as it takes their time away from their bureaucratic labor. For this reason, their care labor not only fulfills the counselors, but also adds to their stress as they are pressured by neoliberal discourses such as productivity and efficiency. As our society increasingly adopts self-managing neoliberal influences, counselors' care labor becomes all the most important to helping students manage themselves in school. These neoliberal values, I argue, exploit counselors' care labor. This chapter also explores gender dynamics within two

⁷⁴ "Mental Health In Schools: A Hidden Crisis Affecting Millions Of Students," NPR.org, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/08/31/464727159/mental-health-in-schools-a-hidden-crisis-affecting-millions-of-students>.

interlocutors' counseling teams, and the way it impacts the amount of care labor that female counselors have to perform.

Care Labor Theory

As stated in the introduction, research on care labor accurately describes some of the complex work of public high school counselors. Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds define *care labor* as one-on-one care that helps someone who cannot be held responsible for taking care of themselves and maintains the greater system within which they are situated.⁷⁵ Whether recognized or not, the care labor of counselors maintains the neoliberal high school as their labor can not only saves students' lives, but also keeps students on track to graduate.

Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds describe other important aspects of care labor theory that relate to the complexities of the counselor position. They describe the exploitative nature of care labor due to the distinct relational qualities associated with the work, and how investment in these relationships can mean unintentionally working more hours and increasing forms of labor exploitation. In addition, they explore the deep values of care labor in the ways that it often impacts more people than just the "direct recipient," and even supports greater communities of people.⁷⁶ They discuss the ways that care labor's "market price fails to reflect the true usefulness of the service because many benefit who do not pay."⁷⁷ In this sense, care labor is worth more than can be quantified, measured, or even appreciated. Another important aspect of care labor is its relationship to productivity, and the ways that assessments of productivity often do not accurately

⁷⁵ Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds, "Counting Care Work," 147.

⁷⁶ Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds, 150.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

represent care labor that is performed.⁷⁸ For counselors whose jobs are already misunderstood, these inherent qualities of care labor make their job, and their own perceptions of them, even harder.

In this chapter, I use the term *care labor* to relate counselors to their relationships with morality. In Elana Buch's "Senses of Care," Buch discusses home care worker relationships to their jobs and their perceptions of morality.⁷⁹ Buch thoughtfully examines the difficult boundaries of performing the necessary amounts of care labor and when excessive care labor becomes exploited by analyzing home care aides' performing of these kinds of labor. From the perspectives of home care workers, she describes how, "workers regularly exceeded their official job descriptions."⁸⁰ When seeing the living situations of disabled seniors, home care workers often do more than is expected of them in order to make their employers lives more safe and comfortable. Bush states

While workers' relationships with and subsequent commitments to clients can contribute to their own exploitation (e.g., when they work extra hours without pay), they also play a key role in workers' experience and understanding of themselves as moral persons and "caring selves."⁸¹

These home care workers unintentionally perpetuate their labor exploitation because it helps them feel content in their work as a caring presence for seniors. Home care workers' desires to empathize begin to control their work and can put them in dangerous, exploitative situations where they perform care labor excessively. This relates to the counselor experience, as is explored in this chapter, in the ways that counselors

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Elana D. Buch, "Senses of Care: Embodying Inequality and Sustaining Personhood in the Home Care of Older Adults in Chicago," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 4 (2013): 637–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12044>, 638.

⁸⁰ Buch, 638.

⁸¹ Buch, 639.

push themselves to best perform care labor even when there is a lot going on or when it falls outside of their professional training.

Buch also describes how the separation between the laborers and their employers often makes it hard to form a similar understanding of the work that's going on:

Yet those who control workers' labor, including older adults, agency personnel, and policy makers, are not similarly positioned to develop empathic knowledge of the embodied toll exacted by home care labor and magnified by the instability produced by low wages and lack of benefits. Through the daily, intimate labor of paid care, hierarchies between persons become embodied by workers and incorporated into their subjectivities, thus reinforcing broader processes of stratified reproduction.⁸²

As this was already discussed in chapter two, counselors and their relationships with administration are often complex, and a source of distress due to a lack of understanding of what is going on everyday for the counselor. Buch explores how a lack of communication and a the physical separation between employers and their home care workers' actual locations of work make it easier for their care labor to be exploited or misunderstood. Similar complexities are evident in the counselor role, as education representatives at the county/district level are unable to get an intimate understanding of the care labor that counselors perform due to their lack of physical proximity to the labor, and their lack of interest in evaluating the labor.

There is a consistent demand for care labor from staff within the public school system. Both teachers and counselors form close relationships with their students that are crucial to learning, as David Brooks argues in his NYT opinion piece, "Students Learn From People They Love." Brooks discusses his own experiences discovering the importance of social-emotional learning within the classroom in his experience as a professor. He describes a time when he was emotionally vulnerable with his students and

⁸² Buch, "Senses of Care," 647.

states “that unplanned moment illustrated for me the connection between emotional relationships and learning.”⁸³ Using Antonio Damasio’s own theoretical work, Brooks argues that “emotion is not the opposite of reason; it’s essential to reason. Emotions assign value to things. If you don’t know what you want, you can’t make good decisions.”⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ However, the homogenization of education through the implementation of the test-taking industry has made it so social-emotional learning processes are hard to find in schools. As stated in earlier chapters, the defunding of public education has made it so that there are less professionals in the school to go through these learning processes with. For the teachers and counselors that are in schools, their jobs are more difficult as they have to navigate heavier caseloads or class sizes, the difficulty of teaching to standardized tests, and the time it takes proctor those tests.

While counselors do not directly teach in the classroom, they are a tremendously valuable resource for students who are looking for social-emotional guidance and support. However, amidst caseloads averaging nationally at 482 students, it is nearly impossible to properly support that many students.⁸⁶ For this reason, that kind of social-emotional learning and development that all students need is not being adequately provided to them, by teacher or counselors. The following two case studies study a plethora of situations in which both Ms. Roberts and Ms. Harris performed care labor, and the ways that their labor impacts their own perceptions of their work.

⁸³ David Brooks, “Opinion | Students Learn From People They Love,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/opinion/learning-emotion-education.html>.

⁸⁴ Brooks.

⁸⁵ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Reprint edition (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁸⁶ “National Association for College Admission Counseling- State-by-State Student-to-Counselor Ratio Report.”

Ms. Roberts Case Study

Ms. Roberts is the head counselor of the counseling team at her high school in Maryland. On the day of our interview, Ms. Roberts described walking into a crisis situation, where a student's peer claimed they were suicidal:

I went and pulled that student from her class and I had a long conversation with her, and I had to make a decision about whether or not I thought she needed to be referred to the crisis center, which is usually what we do with kids who are suicidal...She was willing to have a conversation with her father about getting herself some help...I called dad and then I talked to dad for a little while and shared my concerns with him, and I asked him if he wanted to talk with her...I let them talk alone and in the meantime I went next door to the other counselor to say 'hey this is what I'm doing, I wanna make sure you think this this is the right thing.'

Many counselors I interviewed separate the different kinds of work they do into two categories: intentional and responsive services, the latter is exemplified in the anecdote above. During my focus group with high school counselors in California, one counselor differentiated between the two kinds of services.

Where we want to spend the majority of our time is in doing intentional services for students so that we can be preventative. What administration and parents sometimes want is to spend the majority of our time in responsive services, which is what we refer to as random acts of guidance; someone walks in the door and now you have to switch gears and do this, or a parents calls and you have to switch gears and do that. So we have to center our programs around what our needs are for our students so we frontload our service before the need rises so we spend less time putting out fires and more time doing intentional guidance for students.

In Ms. Roberts' situation, she is "putting out the fire" that was posed in front of her, without warning, with her care labor. She provided next steps to solve the problem in the moment by providing emotional support to the student. There was no time set aside in her schedule that day to support this student, or to prepare for an emergency situation like this, but she had to respond as soon as it was clear that there was something wrong.

This labor was necessary because someone had to respond to this situation. However, counselors often prefer to perform care labor through intentional services in order to prevent crisis situations like these from happening. For example, Ms. Roberts expressed how she wished she could run support groups for students, as a form of intentional care labor, rather than just reacting to emergency situations. However, in the current position counselors are in, they are not given the time to intentionally enact these services.

It does not take someone with highly advanced social skills to know that when someone is threatening to hurt themselves, immediate responsive action should be taken. However, Ms. Roberts' responsive service is important because while it helped one individual student, it did not help her in achieving her other tasks for the day. She did not come to work that day with the intention of solving a problem like that, and she continued to move on with her day as soon as she found next steps to solve the problem. She is forced to continue her day without letting that stressful moment affect her ability to complete the rest of her work. Not only do moments like that increase stress as they keep her from doing the rest of the work she was originally planning to do, but also the care labor will not be recognized as "productive" work.

Productivity increase in the care sector are limited (and pressures to increase productivity may be undesirable for outcomes), making the care sector an economic laggard compared to other sectors. The foundational importance of paid and unpaid care work to sustained economic growth and societal well-being requires government support to address these inherent imbalances.⁸⁷

School counselors are in complex positions because only a portion of their job needs their care labor, while other portions of the job require bureaucratic or other forms

⁸⁷ Duffy, Albelda, Hammonds, 150.

of labor. These different kinds of labor are then compared to each other as if their productivity can be similarly measured. If Ms. Roberts compared her care and bureaucratic labor in relation to their productivity or efficiency, it would negatively impact the care labor that she performs. She would not be able to provide the individual care that she does currently if she prioritized the *efficiency* of her care labor over the *quality* of it.

Ms. Roberts also mentioned another example of a responsive service that used her care labor in response to the passing of one of her school's teachers:

So I got a call Monday night from the principal saying 'Hey, Mr. Dennis passed away, I need you to come in early tomorrow we need to plan.' So I texted all the counselors and psychologists and said this just happened I need you guys to come as early tomorrow as possible. So I got in at 6:30 on Tuesday morning and he [the principal] had already come up with what to do, which is that he wanted to make an announcement at 8am, and for any students who were concerned go down to the auditorium and then the counselors would be down there to talk to them. So that's what we did and we were there for an hour and a half probably with students. And then I was also checking on teachers, so again that was a day where I had allotted time to get work done and I wound up staying until 5:30 on Tuesday.

This is a moment in which the unfortunate nature of her job means that she is always a stand in for emergency situations. This passing was unavoidable, but is another moment where her need to perform care labor as a responsive service makes her job consistently stressful, as she is never able to fully know what is coming for her on any given day. Regardless, the school depends on her stepping in to do that work, which only takes away her time from being able to implement more intentional services for students. This care labor is less tangible because it cannot be easily documented in the way that her bureaucratic labor can be. It is a form of cheap labor because, while schools cannot hire

the sufficient amount of therapists due to a lack of funding, they know they always have counselors to rely on.

Ms. Roberts herself does not fully recognize her own care labor retrospectively. After providing this anecdote, Ms. Roberts stated “again that was a day where I had allotted time to get work done and I wound up staying until 5:30 on Tuesday.” Here, she is differentiating between the responsive services she provided and the work she originally planned to do. She stayed later, not just because she needed to do in order to complete her tasks, but also so she could end her day feeling “productive.” Her care labor helped maintain the basic functioning of the school amidst many people’s grief, but because it did not fit the constraints or expectations of her work necessarily for that day, it was not given the recognition it deserved.

She made it clear, both during our interview and throughout the day that I spent in her office, that care labor leaves her feeling fulfilled with her work.

Today was great, I got to see six kids today. That rarely happens maybe once a week do I get to see six kids in a day, so yeah I’m doing much more administrative work and that’s partly because of my role and I’m in charge, but also because of the counselor job... I think that we don’t get to spend enough time with kids for sure. But today I will leave feeling very invigorated because I got to meet with kids.

Clearly, the individual connections she gets to form with her students mean a lot to her own perceptions of her work. She values the care labor she’s doing, and especially enjoys when it can be intentional care rather than responsive care. The care labor she performs is a big the reason why she enjoys the work she does. Because of the value she places on her care labor, it is difficult to notice the ways in which it can be unintentionally exploited by staff who expect counselors to handle responsive services.

Ms. Harris Case Study

Ms. Harris is another example of a counselor that deeply values her care labor. She has a 450 student caseload at her high school in Florida. She is currently the 11th grade counselor, but because her counseling team divides up the students by grade, she will follow her caseload through their four years of high school. However, as I heard from those who used to attend her high school, she is a popular counselor for many students, even those who are not on her caseload. Her dedication to many of the students at her school does not come at an easy price. She works hard to complete the bureaucratic labor that her school expects of her, while also attempting to wholeheartedly support each student who comes into her office on a daily basis. By performing this care labor generously, she finds fulfillment in her role in school, but also makes the job harder on herself.

When Ms. Harris described her day in the office during our interview, she described when she cared for a student whose father was put on life support.

She was really upset...all of a sudden she just felt really overwhelmed...I talked to her for a while about that and tried to tell her that all those feelings are normal, that it was normal to feel overwhelmed and the best thing to do was to feel all the feels... I have this really good book about that [grief] and it's actually a kids book...I was showing her the pictures and she said 'Would it be ok if I sat here and read this?' So I sat there and answered emails and she sat there, read, and cried her eyeballs out. When she was done she looked up at me and said 'That helped me so much' and I said 'Well I'm really glad.' She said 'Is there any way you would let me check it out and take it home to my sister?' I responded 'Of course you can,' so she took it home for her sister to read. So you can see where there's a lot of different aspects to my job and anything can walk in.

In this moment, according to Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds' definition of care labor, Ms. Harris was performing care labor with this student by providing a student under the age of eighteen individualized care that supported her wellbeing as well as

maintained the infrastructure of the school, by ensuring that someone was able to support their student who needed that assistance.⁸⁸ Ms. Harris provided a space for the student to go within the school to openly share her grief and be met with support and guidance. She was open to having that student stay in her office as long as she needed to. As she describes, the student stayed in her office as Ms. Harris answered emails. In this moment, Ms. Harris was simultaneously completing two forms of labor, both bureaucratic and care labor. She worked on her administrative demands while also attending to her grieving student. Ms. Harris willingly performed more care labor than was necessary by allowing the student to stay in her office. Therefore, Ms. Harris demonstrated her dedication to the student's well-being. In this moment, Ms. Harris performs care labor similarly to home care workers in Buch's "Senses of Care" whose labor is often exploited because of their own desires to best help the seniors they worked for and because of their feelings of morality.

Similar to Ms. Roberts' care labor, Ms. Harris' care labor in this moment is a responsive service. It is not possible for Ms. Harris to meet with every student on her caseload to discuss all of their social-emotional issues. Therefore, she performs care labor mainly as a responsive service to students who visit her office unexpectedly. She cannot know about all of her students' problems or what they are going through until a crisis or conflict is brought to her attention.

Ms. Harris then described another moment she had with a student:

Oh I forgot this, Ms. Watts came to get me this morning because one of my students tried to kill herself last night. We don't know why, her brother came in this morning... just weeping his eyes out saying that she was in the hospital because his mother got the pills away from her. They had to call the police, take her into a mental facility, and put her on a psych hold. He's traumatized

⁸⁸ Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds, 147.

and his counselor was tied up at the moment, so Ms. Watts came to get me so I had to go tend to him for a while. So this is my day, there are days where you literally cannot get any work done.

Ms. Harris made evident the normalcy of these crisis moments when she forgot to mention this part of her day until the end of our conversation. She performed her care labor in order to support the student who was not even on her caseload. It is important to point out that she ends this story by saying, “there are days when you literally cannot get any work done.” Regardless of the care labor she gave to the students, she does not count it as “work.” Because she was giving this care labor as a response to an emergency for one of her students and not because she intentionally sought to give the student that labor, she does not count it as something she got “done.” In addition to the work she is doing to fulfill her formal role as an 11th grade counselor, she is also dealing with situations like this that present itself without warning. This care labor becomes a reality of her “work,” even if she, or the school, does not recognize it as work.

Ms. Harris’ differentiation between her “productive” bureaucratic labor and her valuable care labor represents the powerful neoliberal influences within the school in a variety of ways. First, the defunding of public education means that counseling teams are understaffed, which increases the amount of both bureaucratic and care labor that counselors have to do. The increased intensity of both forms of labor makes it so that the counselors have to work especially hard manage their workload. Second, neoliberal discourses that emphasize “productivity” and “efficiency” make it so that counselors constantly stress over how to get as much work done as possible, even if it is not the work that they necessarily believe in. These kinds of work include the attendance intervention plans or the proctoring of standardized tests as are described in the second

chapter of this thesis. Third, the increased amount of regulation within schools increases the bureaucratic labor that counselors have to do. By having more tangible, bureaucratic tasks that can be monitored alongside demands for more “efficient” work, counselors feel the pressure to complete those tasks in order to maintain the functioning of the school. These tasks takes their time away from being able to perform intentional care labor.

This was not the end of Ms. Harris’ day. In fact, she went above and beyond to check in with more students, which in effect made it harder for herself:

A girl came in today to ask me about getting her form for the PERK test...I said ‘Can I share an observation I had at the meeting?’ I said ‘Maybe there’s something else going on with you and your dad, I don’t know what it is, but I sense there’s some real tension.’ And then she lost it...I said ‘Well do you want to talk about that?’ And she goes on...so that was another part of my day today. Not all of the stuff I do is bad. That made me so incredibly happy, she left with a smile on her face I was like ‘take a deep breath, when you walk out this door you just took the first step in changing the direction of where you were going’ and she looked over her shoulder smiled at me and said ‘Thank you Ms. Shumpert’ and I said ‘Thank you for being willing to talk and deal with your feelings, you did all the work not me.’

This was a moment of intentional care labor because she raised the emotional conversation with the student instead of the student asking for the labor. Ms. Harris did not have to do this labor, she actively brought that out of the student. She then worked with the student through this emotional development. It is impressive that she was able to do this after having worked with two other students through other emotional moments that day. She also mentions that it made her “incredibly happy” to work with this student. Even if she will not count this care labor as a task the she was able to complete, that moment made her feel good because she knew that she was helping that student. This is why she became a counselor, to be that form of support for students. After sharing that story she described how this work makes her feel.

Even though there's a lot of emotional stuff, not all of it's bad, some of it leaves you feeling super warm and fuzzy, and you're like 'I love this job this is why I do it!' because that kid has walked out feeling a whole heck of a lot better than she felt walking in. So I don't want it to sound like it's all heavy, that was really heavy, but it was heavy in a really good way. It turned out to be really positive, yeah every day comes with some drama, but it's not all bad.

Ms. Harris values this care labor because it makes her feel good, and because, in these moments, she is able to fulfill the purpose that she hoped to as a school counselor. However, under the current conditions of her job, most of her care labor is done through responsive services, rather than intentional labor. She is not afforded the time to proactively perform this labor because of the high number of students she has, and the high loads of administrative kinds of work she has to complete. Therefore, when an opportunity to help a student comes up, Ms. Harris puts all her energy into supporting that student in the best ways that she knows how, even if it means she has to overexert her care labor or risk her ability to complete her other work. Ms. Harris' situation is representative of other counselors I interviewed who described the heavy demands of care labor, especially for those with significantly higher caseloads.

These neoliberal influences on the counselor position have impacted the reality of the counselor role, but have not changed the perceptions that outsiders have about what it is that counselors do. For this reason, people who want to do that kind of social-emotional support work that is often assumed of counselors still enter the profession, without understanding the bureaucratic barriers that stand in the way of their care labor. When I shadowed Ms. Roberts at her high school, a few of her fellow counselors mentioned how they wished they had known how much "computer busy work" they would have to do as a high school counselor. This represents the way that neoliberal influences have become so ingrained to what we all understand to be foundational aspects

of our society, which makes it harder to notice their impacts. The counselors' work is different because of regulatory policies and the implementation of standardized testing, but it is not different *enough* to change who decides to become counselors.

Neoliberal influences make it so that Ms. Harris' care labor through responsive services is not just her normal, but is also what fuels her, because she gets to feel like she is having an impact on the student. It is the work that Mr. Harris connects to her own perceptions of morality, similarly to how Elana Buch describes morality in "Senses of Care." Buch states, "Home care workers articulated a sense of their own moral value as stemming from their willingness and ability to prioritize others' bodily needs and desires over their own."⁸⁹ In the case, Ms. Harris is similarly prioritizing her students' needs over her own bureaucratic labor regardless of how it might impact her ability to get the rest of her work done.

While her care labor is work that fuels her, it is also makes her feel unproductive. The care labor that keeps Ms. Harris happy in her job is also the labor that makes her feel constantly behind on her other tasks. Mr. Harris' perceptions towards the "productiveness" of her care labor represent my other interlocutors' relationships toward their care labor. The other counselors I interviewed described their care labor as rewarding and meaningful, but also similarly described that labor in conflict with the other demands of their job. Their descriptions of their care labor taking away from their ability to "get things done" demonstrate how the neoliberal values of "productivity" and "efficiency" negatively impacts their perceptions towards their own labor. Counselors' care labor keeps them from facing burnout while at the same time keeps them from feeling satisfied with their work each day. Counselors are stuck in a cycle of exploiting

⁸⁹ Buch, "Senses of Care," 644.

their own labor to fulfill themselves, which then only makes them more stressed. Their schools depend on counselors' labor exploitation in order to maintain a functioning of the school as a safe and supportive place for students to be.

Gendered Dynamics of Care Labor

Another interesting facet of the counselor job is the gendered dynamics of counseling teams. In the year 2017, females made up 73.3% of high school counselors in the U.S.⁹⁰ The uneven balance of gender representation in high school counseling teams provides an interesting opportunity to further this analysis of care labor. Of the seven counselors I interviewed, two were male and five were female. While I personally did not notice any striking differences between the ways in which the male counselors and the female counselors discussed their own day-to-day experiences and labor practices, a few counselors mentioned gendered dynamics within their teams. Both Ms. Matthews and Ms. Jacobs referenced some of their male counterparts' inability to step into crisis moments with students where care labor was needed. Ms. Matthews stated, "we have one [male] counselor and he is awesome at college [advising], you can ask him any question about college and he knows it. But as soon as a girl came in crying he would pass her off to somebody else." Here, Ms. Matthews is implying that the male counselor in her office was less willing to give the student his responsive care labor. It is interesting in this case, to think about those counselors who he passes that student off to. Someone is making up for his lack of care labor, adding to another counselor's load. This relates to Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds' discussion of care labor as inherently "feminine."

⁹⁰ "Counselors | Data USA," accessed April 23, 2019, <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/211010/#demographics>.

The notion that care work involves a unique labor process embedded in relationship and emotional connection builds on a feminist tradition in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and economics that identified care as the “feminine” antithesis to the “masculine” values of individualism, competition, and rationality that pervade capitalist society.⁹¹

These preconceived notions about care labor make it easy to naturally exploit female counselors’ care labor. This adds another complex layer to both male and female counselors’ relationship to their labor. Ms. Jacobs mentioned a similar situation which took place with a male counselor on her team. She described walking into a situation with a student who said she was suicidal when she arrived back at her office: “We had a situation because the counselor that she was meeting with was a male, and she just wasn’t feeding into him as much as someone would hope to. So she opened up a little bit more to me.” Here, Ms. Jacobs stepped into the situation because the student was more willing to discuss her feelings with Ms. Jacobs. The gender dynamics in these two scenarios impact the counselors’ own perceptions of their ability, or lack thereof, to provide the substantial care labor needed. These patterns of passing care labor onto female counselors increases the chances of labor exploitation for those female counselors who take on the care labor of their male counterparts.

Conclusion

This chapter explored examples and implications of counselors’ care labor that they perform daily for their students. Counselors perform this labor through responsive services, as they are viewed by both students and staff as someone who can be relied on to provide care labor in crisis or emergency situations. Counselors value the care labor that they provide for their students, as is exemplified by both Ms. Roberts and Ms.

⁹¹ Duffy, Albelda, and Hammonds, 148.

Harris' anecdotes of supporting their students and staff in school. However, neoliberal values have poisoned our public school system and manipulated reform efforts, which try to fix systemic issues by regulating and monitoring public education and by emphasizing the importance of productivity, transparency and efficiency. These impacts make counselors compare the "effectiveness" of their care labor to the "effectiveness" of their bureaucratic labor, which only makes them feel unproductive and inefficient their care labor, no matter how important they think the care labor is. It's additionally making them feel trapped in their work and in a cycle of exploitation that the school benefits off of. The school takes advantage of counselors' supporting of students and simultaneously maintaining the bureaucracy of the school by reinforcing perceptions of efficiency and what it looks like to be productive. These chances of labor exploitation are even higher for female counselors within counseling teams where gendered dynamics increase the care labor that those female counselors have to perform.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the realities of the public high school counselor position and counselors' own understanding and perceptions of their labor. Based off of the varied counselor perspectives that I studied through my interviews and participant observation, students come into counselors' offices unloading their trauma because there are not enough therapists for the students to go to. There are not therapists for students to go to because public high schools have faced years of defunding as a result of the privatization of public education. Privatizing education, alongside homogenizing education through the increased enforcement of standardized testing, also changes the kinds of work that educators have to do in public schools. For counselors, these changes demand more *bureaucratic labor* and an emphasis on how to *efficiently* or *productively* complete work that is demanded of them. These tasks, such as the proctoring of tests or regulatory practices that monitor both the student and counselor often come from the county/district level, where those representatives only understand counselors' labor from a distance. In the meantime, counselors continue to maintain the proper functioning of their schools by overexerting themselves as they support the mental health needs of their students, which exploits their *care labor*. These two competing forms of labor, bureaucratic and care, trap counselors in a cycle of exploitation, as they constantly attempt to properly serve each student through the proper amount of social-emotional care, regardless of how it will make them perceive their own abilities to be productive and "get work done."

Counselors' Visions for Progress

In every interview I completed with a high school counselor, I asked whether or not they felt overworked in their current positions. Ms. Roberts stated “I feel like counselors have a lot on their plates, so that I don’t think I feel like the staying late [past school hours] makes me feel overworked, but I think that just the scope of our jobs makes me feel like we’re overworked.” Mr. Liu responded “I definitely felt like I was overworked at my last school because the demands from my community were too inappropriate or unreasonable.” Even Ms. Johnson, who has a caseload of under 200 students at her affluent Connecticut high school, disclosed “I feel like I could definitely use an extra day to really do the job I want to do with all my students.”

After asking this question in my interviews, I would open up a conversation with my interlocutors about what kinds of changes could be made to make the counseling position more stable and effective. In my focus group, answers included “More counselors, smaller caseload, more pay, a component in administrator’s credentialing programs...one whole class on counseling so they have an understanding of what counselors do and the ASCA national model.” They also discussed how observation hours of counselors would be helpful for their administrators to see both the intense pace of the counselor job and what kinds of work counselors are doing each day. Ms. Jacobs stated that that for counselors, she would appreciate “having somebody at the district office that has background knowledge within counseling, that has been in the shoes of a counselor, that could be there to help develop program support that could be our main go to.” Ms. Harris hopes for a smaller caseload in order to lessen the demand for each counselor. She also wants to see a change in her labor demands by uninvolving

counselors in the proctoring of standardized testing. In general, my interlocutors expressed their desire for administrators and county/district level representatives to make an effort to understand what counselors actually do every day. The counselors I spoke to hope that this effort could help lessen their workload once decision-makers (both administrator and county/district level representatives) can see the kinds of pressure that counselors are under.

Ways to Continue This Research

There are many ways to further topics studied in this thesis. The size of counseling teams and counselors' perceptions of their labor can depend greatly on the school's socio-economic status. While I did not incorporate these complexities into my analysis of counselors' labor, there are many important implications of the affluence of a high school. This would be an interesting way to continue this research and to pull out distinct and varying perspectives of counselors at different kinds of high schools.

It is important to note that while counselors are deeply affected by neoliberal influences, they are not the only public educators in the high school who feel their impacts. There is no shortage of information about teachers' relationships to these impacts within the classroom, which is why I hoped to highlight the understudied perspectives of school counselors in this thesis. However, I think it would be equally interesting to study how other the working conditions of administrators in public high schools are also impacted by the neoliberalization of public education and the ways it influences their own perceptions of their labor.

Final Thoughts

When I asked a principal of a California high school if he thought his counselors were overworked, he responded,

Do I think or do they think? Haha I'll be honest I think no of course not, but do they think so? Of course, of course, of course. And here's what I'm going to come back to and this applies to everyone, I would argue this is one of the reasons why we struggle in this country as public educators really to garner the complete and unequivocal support of the public, is that we as public educators whine and complain about how hard we work constantly.

This response illustrates his lack of understanding of what counselors are faced with in school every day. This lack of communication between administrators and counselors has negative implications on counselors' day-to-day realities as they are not only overworked, but are also misunderstood. This impacts counselors' own perceptions of their effectiveness as a counselor. However, the reality is that the demands put on counselors do not set them up for success, as the expectations set for counselors are unattainable and only ensure that the counselor will not be able to properly serve each student on their caseload. Each student who seeks an education through the U.S. public school system deserves access to the forms of support and advising that they need to graduate and seek post-secondary opportunities. However, the current realities of the counselor role make it difficult for the counselor to provide the proper guidance that they themselves wish they could.

It is imperative that we listen to counselors and honor the ways they hope to improve their day-to-day realities. Labor exploitation of counselors not only negatively impacts their perceptions of their work, but also negatively impacts students' access to a safe and supportive school environment. Teacher strikes in both LA and Oakland are fighting to see these counselors and students' realities improve. Just as Keith Brown,

president of the Oakland Education Association argued, “you can’t feed the minds of our students by starving their schools.”⁹² If we want to properly feed the minds of students, we have to set public educators up for success in their professions.

⁹² Valerie Strauss. “Why Oakland Teachers Are Striking: ‘You Can’t Feed the Minds of Our Students by Starving Their Schools’” *The Washington Post*. February 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/02/21/why-oakland-teachers-are-striking-quite-simply-you-cant-feed-minds-our-students-by-starving-their-schools/?utm_term=.97487cbf4d39.

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