

**SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' VIEWS ON SEXTING AMONG STUDENTS**

by © Courtney Cribb

A Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Education (Counselling Psychology)**

**Faculty of Education**

Memorial University of Newfoundland

**May 2018**

St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

## **Abstract**

Sexting is a relatively recent phenomenon that involves the sending, receiving and sharing of sexually explicit photos through cell phone messages and online social media platforms (Chalfen, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012). Research has demonstrated that some youth are engaging in sexting and that this behaviour affects schools and school professionals. The present study was designed to explore school counsellors' views on their experiences with student sexting. A qualitative research design was employed and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants. Results from this study were divided into three major themes: Prevention and Preparation, School Counsellors' Roles, Responsibilities and Introspection and School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting. School counsellors' are in a unique position to support students. More research is necessary to establish effective sexting prevention and intervention strategies for students and proper training for school counsellors, staff and parents.

*Keywords:* sexting, students, school counsellors, schools, sexually explicit photos

## **Acknowledgments**

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the participants for their time and unique perspectives for this research. Thank you for providing rich and valuable insight into your counselling world and allowing me to gain research experience by sharing your voices.

A special thank you, to my supervisor, Dr. Greg Harris for your patience, support, encouragement and guidance. I have been extremely lucky to have a supervisor who cared so much about my work, and who responded to questions and emails so promptly. It has been an absolute privilege to work with you. Thank you for facilitating an exceptional learning experience.

I would also like to extend profound gratitude to my family and friends. Thank you for your unwavering love, support and encouragement. Thank you for walking alongside me every step of the way and being my biggest cheerleaders and motivators. Your kindness, positivity, comfort and understanding were most appreciated.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Chapter 1: Review of the Literature	1
Scope of the Issue	1
Sexting, Gender and Culture	4
Personality, Pressure and Attitudes	6
Cyberbullying	8
Influences and Time Spent Online	10
Other High Risk Behaviours	12
Relationships and Belonging	13
Awareness of Risks	14
School Counsellor Role	15
Professional Views	17
Intervention Programs and Their Efficacy	19
Conclusion and the Current Study	21
Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods	23
Purpose	23

Goals	24
Qualitative Inquiry	25
Tenets of Phenomenology	27
Participant Perspectives	29
Methods	29
Sampling	29
Sample Size	30
Recruitment	30
Ethical Considerations	32
Data Collection Methods	32
Interviews	32
Ethical Implications with the Interviews and Interview Data	34
Data Analysis Strategy	35
Transcription	35
Ongoing Analysis	37
Coding	36
Categorizing	36
Analyzing	37
My Role as Researcher	38
Trustworthiness Features	39

Summary	41
Chapter 3: Participant Backgrounds and Results	42
Participant Backgrounds	42
Results	42
Theme 1: Prevention and Preparation	43
Preventative Measures for Students	43
Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors	47
Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness	50
Advice for Parents	51
Theme 2: School Counsellors' Roles, Responsibilities & Introspection	54
Reactions and Impacts	54
Confidentiality	56
Risk Assessment	57
Intervention	59
Collaborations	61
Theme 3: School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting	62
Pressure	63
Cyberbullying	65
Trust	67
Gender, Age and Relationships	68

Attitudes, Influences and No Exceptions	71
Split Second Decisions and Belonging	73
Concluding Thoughts	75
Chapter 4: Discussion	77
Theme 1: Prevention and Preparation	77
Preventative Measures for Students	77
Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors	81
Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness	82
Advice to Parents	83
Theme 2: School Counsellors' Roles, Responsibilities and Introspection	85
Reactions and Impacts	86
Confidentiality	87
Risk Assessment	88
Intervention	88
Collaborations	89
Theme 3: School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting	90
Pressure	91
Cyberbullying	92
Trust	94
Gender, Age and Relationships	95

Attitudes, Influences and No Exceptions	97
Split Second Decisions and Belonging	100
Concluding Thoughts	102
Chapter 5: Limitations and Recommendations	103
Limitations	103
Recommendations for Future Research	104
Final Summary	106
References	107
Appendix A: Research Recruitment Document	119
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form	121
Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Questions	126



## **Chapter 1: Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of sexting among students by exploring school counsellors' views. Throughout this study, the term 'sexting' will be generally defined as the sending, receiving or forwarding of sexually explicit messages including pictures, videos and text (Chalfen, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). Such messages are transmitted through cell phones, emails, social media outlets like Facebook or Snapchat and video streaming ports like YouTube (Chalfen, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). Sexting is a relatively recent phenomenon and the body of literature continues to grow as the use of technology and hand held devices increases among youth (Temple et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). Strassberg, Cann and Velarde (2017) convey the significance we place on new communication systems, particularly those of the current 'adolescent and young adult' generations. Technology is an important piece of our daily lives providing many benefits, for instance, the ease at which we can access information and communicate with others. This has become a staple component in the lives of adolescents as they continue to grow and develop in a world very much shaped by their virtual interactions. More specifically, their communication across social media and online messaging including the dissemination of sexts.

### **Scope of the Issue**

A recent Canadian study surveyed 800 young adults between the ages of 16-20 on the subject of sending and receiving sext messages (Johnson, Mishna, Okumu & Daciuk, 2018). The following statistics were identified for those youth. Four out of ten youth have

sent a sext message and two out of three have received one. Of those sending demographics, 26% accounted for adolescents aged 16, and 55% for youth aged 20. The survey explored the sharing of sext messages, in particular those for which permission was not obtained. Overall, 46% of youth shared sexts that they received, with the act being more common among boys at 53% and girls at 40%. In addition, 42% of youth acknowledged that upon sending a sext it had been shared with others. The sharing of sexts was most commonly represented by sharing that occurred in person or the forwarding of messages. Less common was the sharing of a sext by posting it to an online platform. The survey indicated that factors such as gender stereotypes, peer pressure and moral disengagement were associated with the willingness of boys and girls to share sexts that they receive. Young adults conforming to traditional gender stereotypes were more likely to have shared a sext, and this was especially true for boys. It was indicated that 35% of youth attributed blame to the girl for sending a picture to a person she was not in a relationship with. Moreover, peer pressure was associated with expectations among peers to share sexts. A strong belief in their friends' willingness to share a sext demonstrated higher instances of sharing. Moral disengagement referred to the attitudes that youth adopt in order to explain certain behaviours. In this survey, they examined rejection of danger, justification of behaviour, shifting responsibility, and blaming the victim. The presence of these attitudes was associated with sharing of sexts for both boys and girls. For instance, of those that have shared a sext, nearly 50% placed blame on the sender (Johnson et al., 2018). According to this recent survey, it is more common for youth to receive a sext rather than send one. It was also noteworthy that 93% of adolescents believe their friends have sent a sext, however the findings show that 41%

have done so (Johnson et al., 2018). Therefore, the beliefs that adolescents hold, even though possibly inaccurate, may be influencing their decisions. Furthermore, while a portion of young adults may not be participating in sexting, there is still a portion that are. The most troublesome aspect may be the possibility of having a sext shared or forwarded to others. In addition to the seemingly improper attitudes that adolescents hold in respect to those sending and sharing sexts, was unfair stereotypes placed on girls and boys (Johnson et al., 2018).

Comparatively, Steeves (2014) conducted a survey involving 5,436 Canadian adolescents from grades 7-11 or roughly 11-17 year olds, with access to a cell phone. Adolescents were questioned regarding their sexting practices including the sending, receiving and forwarding of messages. Of those with access to a cell phone (87%), 8% had sent a sexually explicit photo of themselves to another person and 24% had received a sext. Of the adolescents that had sent a sext, slightly less than a quarter reported that their sext had been forwarded. Older adolescents that have sent sexts were more likely to have had them forwarded than younger adolescents. Some gender differences were noted as it was more common for boys to have their sext shared, have received a sext that was forwarded and to forward a sext they were sent (Steeves, 2014). It is evident that sexting is a behaviour that some youth are engaging in. As youth, they require guidance and knowledge to assist in their decision making.

Upon review of the literature, many topics surfaced including associations of sexting with gender, personality attributes and attitudes, pressure to sext, cyberbullying, influences and time spent online, sexual risk behaviours, other high-risk behaviours, relationships and belonging, awareness of risks, the role and views of school counsellors

and other professionals, and the efficacy of existing programs. These areas are explored in detail below.

### **Sexting, Gender and Culture**

Many studies considered the differences among sexting of boys versus girls. A common theme that appeared throughout studies was that more boys ask for sext messages and more girls are asked to send sext messages (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013; Temple et al., 2012). This result was supported by a study conducted by Wood, Barter, Stanley, Aghtaie and Larkins (2015); however, significance was only noted for youth in England. A study by Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg and Livingstone (2014) compared sexting across 20 European countries and found no differences among the sexting behaviours of boys and girls. However, when countries were compared individually there was some distinction between genders and sexting incidents. It is thought that these differences may be the result of comparisons between traditional cultures and non-traditional cultures. For example, in Italy, Cyprus and Germany, more males participated in sexting, however in Denmark, Finland and Norway, more females participated. Comparably, Wood et al. (2015) found that more females from Norway and England revealed sending sexts compared with males and males sent more than females in countries like Cyprus and Italy. Having said that, Dake, Price and Maziarz (2012) concentrated on adolescents in the United States and “found no difference in sexting by gender” (p.12). Therefore, the consideration of cultural context may be important when concentrating on sexting behaviours in certain cultures (Baumgartner et al., 2014). In older students, it was found that males were more likely to sext through text messages, which coincides with other studies suggesting that as students

get older they are more likely to participate, or have had experiences of participating, in sexting behaviours (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Wood et al., 2015).

A study by Ringrose et al. (2013) demonstrated the 'sexual double standards' that can exist across males and females practicing sexting. Applying feminist theory, Ringrose et al. (2013) interviewed 35 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15. Data was collected by means of individual interviews, focus groups and observing the online profiles of participants. Ringrose et al. (2013) discovered the gender differences among perceptions of sending and receiving a sext. The boys that were interviewed described that they were more likely to 'collect' images of girls and share them rather than send a sext themselves. In contrast, the girls described message exchanges in which boys asked for sexually explicit photos and girls either used excuses to decline or sent a sext. It was explained that some girls keep a folder of pictures that they choose to distribute rather than taking a picture in real time. In this research, the more pictures the boys acquired, the more they gained popularity among their peers. Whereas girls known for sending sexually suggestive photos of themselves were not respected and were sometimes shamed for doing so (Ringrose et al., 2013). Even the boys that possessed the pictures did not respect the girls that sent them willfully. Girls were rated based on values ascribed to their bodies, typically their 'breasts and bum'. Boys were rated based on the quality of images they received from girls (Ringrose et al., 2013). It is important to note that these were casual exchanges between individuals corresponding on a messenger application and not individuals in romantic relationships.

Similarly, the results of a qualitative study by Walker, Sanci and Temple-Smith (2013) also indicated a sexting double standard. Sexting was seen as a positive

contributor to boys' reputations as opposed to a negative contributor for girls. Girls were degraded by both boys and girls based on their willingness to participate in sending sexually explicit messages. Boys on the other hand were praised, and approved of, for getting girls to sext and for showing friends pictures they received (Walker et al., 2013). In this research, both girls and boys noted experiencing pressure. Girls noted feeling pressure primarily from boys to send sext messages while boys communicated that they felt pressure from their peers to obtain and share images of girls. Girls may be threatened or coerced into sending a picture and boys may be ostracized or called names if they do not participate (Walker et al., 2013). Boys sometimes use their reputation as a method of manipulation in which they send a sext of their private parts to a girl. This can create a pressure for girls to send a sext back (Walker et al., 2013). Additionally, the interviews by Walker et al. (2013) noted that while some girls commented on feeling shame or discomfort in being asked for pictures or sending pictures, boys also expressed similar feelings in the role they play, especially when it came to distributing or broadcasting girls' photos.

### **Personality, Pressure and Attitudes**

The pressure to engage in sexting has appeared across studies and often in connection to societal attitudes. Walrave et al. (2015) found that adolescents felt more willing to sext when perceived social pressure was apparent. The intention to sext was related to attitudes and what is seen as socially acceptable. In addition, those that identify on a personal level with those that engage in sexting practices may be more likely to also engage in that type of behaviour. Especially when it has become normalized within youth culture. A study by Delevi and Weisskirch (2013) found that certain personality traits

lead to sexting, such as being outgoing, overanxious and disagreeable. Similarly, Bobkowski, Shafer and Ortiz (2016) found that how adolescents portray themselves online is associated with their personality and how extroverted they are, how they feel and see themselves in a sexual context and how much they engage in media that displays sexual content. Factors seen to be associated with sexting behaviours include peer pressure, attitudes, and previous transgressions. These factors were linked to sending one's own picture or video as well as pictures and videos of others (Lee, Moak & Walker, 2016). A study by Walker et al. (2013) also noted the apparent pressures that some adolescents feel to sext. It has been suggested that it is more common for girls to feel pressured to do so (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Likewise, a European study found that girls often send texts due to feeling pressured by their partner or to prove their commitment (Wood et al., 2015). Strassberg et al. (2017) found that males that had received a sext were 10 times likelier to have sent a text. The likelihood for females was even higher suggesting that individuals that are sent a sext may feel obligated to return the act. It might also indicate an agreement between senders to ensure that both individuals participate in the exchange (Strassberg et al., 2017).

Interestingly, Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones and Wolak (2012) found that of the 149 youth that disclosed sexting behaviours, 28% of those that sent sexts and 25% of those that received texts had emotional responses of shame, distress and fear. As the study of 606 high school students by Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita and Rullo (2013) suggested, youth that admit to taking part in sexting also acknowledge the risk and possible legal ramifications of such behaviour. Of those sending sext messages (1 in 7), even though they consented in the transmission, they felt bad about doing so. A third of those that had

never taken part in sexting reported a positive attitude towards the behaviour, which may be a predictor for such behaviour in the future (Strassberg et al., 2013). Thus, positive attitudes may be a sign of future sexting and negative feelings can internalize after taking part in the act. Strassberg et al.'s (2017) most recent study indicated that there were mixed views among students regarding whether sexting is immoral. Of the 656 students surveyed, almost a quarter of students reported sexting as acceptable behaviour and those that had sent a sext were most likely to suggest that it was fine. Correspondingly, in a study by Lenhart (2009), there was a wide range of sexting attitudes among participants. It ranged from acceptable behaviour to illegal, disrespectful and inappropriate behaviour that could damage a person's reputation. Some associated the act of sexting to be parallel with flirting. Some believed it to be happening regularly among youth while others said that it was uncommon (Lenhart, 2009). Therefore, the levels of experience and knowledge around sexting behaviours varied across participants. This disparity could be related to varying interests and social groups among young adults.

### **Cyberbullying**

Just as adolescents can feel pressure from others to participate in sexting, these practices can lead to experiences of cyberbullying. Messages can be forwarded on to others and the effects of such actions can be intense. For example, the forwarding of sext messages without the person's consent has led to many undesirable consequences such as suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In addition, girls from Norway and England reported that sharing of sext messages had a negative impact on them (Wood et al., 2015). Strassberg et al. (2013) identified that nearly 40% of 606 high school students had received a sext and 20% had sent a sext. As such, the forwarding of sext messages may



be an issue as approximately 25% of those sexting also confessed to sending it on to at least one other person (Strassberg et al., 2013). Hinduja and Patchin (2010) identified bullying and cyberbullying as causes of increased suicidal ideations in a study involving middle school students in the United States. This increase was indicated for both victim and offender. Having said that, thoughts of suicide were more probable among victims than offenders. Also significant was that non-white participants identified as experiencing higher instances of suicidal thoughts when compared with white participants in the sample. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) did report that it is doubtful that cyberbullying alone would be the sole reason for suicide to occur. However, it is important to note that situations involving cyberbullying can have dire impacts on those already struggling with other life challenges, for example, social and emotional issues.

A 2015 Canadian survey of youth aged 12-18 indicated that cyberbullying is still a significant problem for many adolescents (Li, Craig & Johnson, 2015). Of the 800 youth surveyed, 42% reported being cyberbullied in the past month and 60% reported that they saw cyberbullying happening. Adolescents that reported at least one incident of online bullying were also significantly more likely to bully others online. This was true for both boys and girls of all ages included. Willingness to intervene when someone was being cyberbullied depended largely on the relationship with the victim. Chances increased when the target was a close relative, friend or significant other and decreased with strangers or someone not well known. An additional Canadian study explored adolescents' cyberbullying experiences. The study included 1001 adolescents from across the country between the ages of 10 and 17 (Beran, Mishna, McInroy & Shariff, 2015). The results demonstrated that for adolescents the chances of being cyberbullied are 1 in 7

and the possibility of being a cyberbully are 1 in 13. Students that had been cyberbullied scored significantly lower on areas such as self esteem, anxiety, risk, drug use, physical injury, relationships, eating disorders and anger than their non-cyberbullied counterparts. An additional comparison found that they were also more likely to experience other types of victimization and partake in various types of cyberbullying and bullying acts (Beran et al., 2015). Overall, to a large extent, instances of cyberbullying among adolescents are not rare or abnormal.

The link between texting, sexting and cyberbullying is evident and it has been suggested that while adolescents are still developing they are not able to discern the dire consequences that may be a possibility when sending pictures and messages into the cyber world (D'Antona, Kevorkian & Russom, 2010). Therefore, more education and instruction is needed on how students can protect themselves as they continue to use technology as a part of their everyday lives. Adolescents need to be better equipped to deal with pressure and handle situations, which can escalate quickly, should they press 'send' (D'Antona et al., 2010).

### **Influences and Time Spent Online**

The general use of technology and cell phones is a concern as those engaging in more time online may be more likely to participate in sexting. For instance, in a study by Jonsson, Priebe, Bladh and Svedin (2014) of 3503 Swedish youth, it was found that 1 in 5 adolescents had participated in some form of voluntary online sexual disclosure. Those that frequented online sites more often than their peers were more likely to have participated in such behaviour. In addition, this behaviour was associated with poorer emotional health and unsatisfactory parent-child relationships (Jonsson et al., 2014). In a

European study, predictors of sexting included how much time individuals spent on the Internet, as well as, their age, and how much they crave for excitement (Baumgartner et al., 2014). Similarly, Rice et al. (2014) stated that their findings show that those that generally engage in more texting are also more likely to engage in sexting. When looking at middle school students, those that received sext messages were also more likely to have sent a sext message. A study by Schubert and Wurf (2014) indicated that the increased use of, and exposure to, technologies, as an everyday facet of adolescent lives, has become normalized. These media outlets have created new and different ways for adolescents to “explore their sexuality” (p. 204). When Garcia-Gomez (2017) interviewed girls about their sexting practices, part of their justification to sext involved the influence of individuals online. They indicated that they enjoyed posing seductively; emulating the sexually attractive women they see online.

In a 2012 study by Rice et al., they looked at the sexting behaviours of a group consisting of 1839 youth ranging from 14 to 17 years old. At the time of the study, almost 75% of students possessed their own cell phone and admitted to regular use. Around 15% of participants said they had sent a sext, while 54% said they had received one. Correspondingly, students that identified as having friends partaking in sexting practices were “17 times more likely to have sent a sext themselves” (p.670) than those that did not identify as knowing people that sext. In addition, there were significant findings to suggest that those participating in sexting are also more likely to be sexually active (Rice et al., 2012). Rice et al. (2012) suggested that these findings may be linked to the influence that peer attitudes and behaviours have on each other. Thereby suggesting that

if sexting is seen as standard behaviour among friends then others are more likely to participate.

### **Other High Risk Behaviours**

When focusing on sexting, which can be considered a risky behaviour, it was noticeable throughout studies that there are links between sexting and other high-risk behaviours. Studies indicated that boys and girls that had participated in sexting were more likely than their non-sexting peers to have had sexual intercourse (Rice et al., 2014; Temple, 2012). Additionally, sexting among boys and girls was associated with other dangerous sexual activities such as concurrent sex partners, and for girls it was also associated with activities such as using drugs, alcohol and being promiscuous (Mitchell et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012). Similarly, another study demonstrated associations between sexting and “high risk sexual behaviours”, psychological issues and use of “alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana” (Dake et al., 2012, p.13). In a more recent study, sexting was linked with alcohol and uninhibited behaviours (Temple et al., 2014). Although sexting may have associations with other sexual activities, Temple et al. (2014) were not able to link it to poor emotional health. Non-protected sex had been thought to be associated with sexting (Dake et al., 2012), however, Rice et al. (2014) found that sexting was associated with both condom and non-condom use among a study of 11-13 year olds. However, the young age of these participants may warrant concern for risky sexual behaviours as they have become sexually active at such a young age (Rice et al., 2014). Likewise, Sevcikova (2016) established a link between sexting and a “sexually active life, even in younger adolescents” (p.160). Additionally, Sevcikova’s (2016) study supported previous links of sexting and alcohol use and also found a link with emotional

problems. Emotional problems were associated with increasing sexting behaviours in all ages across 11-16 years and for both boys and girls (Sevcikova, 2016).

### **Relationships and Belonging**

Sexting takes place among individuals in committed relationships, casual relationships that can sometimes be sexual in nature, and among peers sometimes for a joking purpose (Burkett, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). Girls may send provocative pictures of themselves to other friends for opinions and not in a sexualized way; however, these pictures can sometimes be passed on or viewed as sexually suggestive (Burkett, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). Delevi and Weisskirch (2013) found sexting more common among older students that were in committed relationships. They also stated that for older females, sexting was contingent on the degree of commitment with greater commitment being necessary. On the contrary, Wood et al. (2015) found quite the opposite where those involved in committed relationships, regardless of gender and age, did not report sexting within their relationships. These differences may be indicative of culture differences as one study was European and one was American.

Lenhart (2009) presented the results of a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center. She described three contexts in which sexting occurs. The first represented committed relationships in which sexting may be practiced “in lieu of, as a prelude to, or as a part of sexual activity” (p. 6). The second was described as an exploration context for individuals that are “not yet sexually active” (p. 6). The third context involved sexting as one component within a sexual relationship. Many of the respondents defended their sexting actions as not a big deal or typical teenage behaviour that is okay because everyone is doing it (Lenhart, 2009). Participants described instances in which pictures of

girls were shared due to a break-up. They explained how boys sometimes send sexts as a way of encouraging girls to do the same. This may occur as a first step when a boy is sexually interested in a girl (Lenhart, 2009). Other times, individuals interested in each other, both send sexts as an even trade. As such, sexts were described as a “form of relationship currency” (Lenhart, 2009, p.8). However, Lenhart (2009) did note that not all participants had engaged in sexting behaviour.

With regards to relationships and belonging, a study by Garcia-Gomez (2017) discussed that there are multiple motivating forces at play when it comes to girls participating in sexting. While individual interest was identified, “sexting as a means of relating to young men” and “sexting as a means of relating to other young women” (p.396) were also determined to be factors. The data demonstrated the willingness of girls to participate in sexting in order to maintain a relationship and keep their boyfriend happy (Garcia-Gomez, 2017). Garcia-Gomez (2017) also commented on the change that occurs when girls commit to a relationship, suggesting that they tend to put their partners’ needs ahead of their own. They denoted love as a positive justification as well as the fact that other girls are doing it. As such, girls may be using sexting as a means to establish bonds in peer and romantic relationships (Garcia-Gomez, 2017). On another note, Dake et al. (2012) identified a link between sexting and emotional health issues such as depression. They suggest that this association may represent attempts to achieve belonging.

### **Awareness of Risks**

One of the main realizations from Strassberg et al.’s (2017) study of high school students in a United States school was that students are continuing to participate in sexting behaviours even though they are aware of the risks involved. Strassberg et al.

(2017) commented on the hope that once adolescents are aware of the risks they are taking when engaging in sexting exchanges they will cease to take part. However, as their findings show, this is simply not the case. This study had been completed four years prior at the same school, therefore Strassberg et al. (2017) had anticipated a decrease in sexting activity because of greater awareness of risks. The school had implemented school assemblies to educate students regarding the 'risks of sexting'. Despite that, the behaviour among students had not changed (Strassberg et al., 2017). In fact, if anything, Strassberg et al. (2017) noticed that younger adolescents had become more familiar with, and were engaging in, sexting behaviours, as opposed to four years earlier. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2018) evaluated Canadian adolescents' behaviour in terms of sharing sexts when they were aware of its legal implications. They indicated that the awareness that sharing sexts is a crime was not sufficient in deterring adolescents from participating in the behaviour. These findings may suggest that sexting behaviours are complex and involve powerful variables such as peer pressure, belonging needs and personality characteristics. It is also important to note that while certain variables may be associated with sexting behaviours and suggest that some students may be more susceptible, sexting appears to be a behaviour that does not solely target vulnerable individuals.

### **School Counsellor Role**

The position of school counsellor is comprised of an assortment of roles. Paramount to their job is the consideration of students' personal and social difficulties (Coy & Sears, 2000). Counsellors offer an array of services with the goal of helping students face their challenges in healthy and effective ways. These services include individual counselling, group counselling, career counselling, crisis support, assessment,

consultation and referrals (Coy & Sears, 2000; Nugent & Jones, 2009). Wittmer (2000) describes an effective counsellor as portraying certain personal characteristics. These characteristics include being attentive, genuine, understanding, respectful, knowledgeable of culture, and skilled in counselling techniques. Some fundamental counselling skills involve active listening, using open-ended questions, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings and summarizing (Nugent & Jones, 2009). School counsellors can help teach these skills to other staff members to assist in building relationships with students. Counsellors must be skilled at gathering information, assessing information, employing appropriate interventions, making ethical decisions and maintaining confidentiality when it is suitable to do so (Nugent & Jones, 2009). School counsellors are responsible for conducting themselves in a professional manner and always acting in the best interest of the student. Nugent and Jones (2009) suggest that school counsellors play an important role in the educational and developmental growth of students. They are responsible for providing students with interventions, programming and support that is effective. One part of their duty is to ensure that strategies and techniques employed to help students have been evaluated and have demonstrated their benefits. Another element is to operate from a collaborative stance in which they utilize the strength of others and listen to other voices in order to provide a quality counselling program that is well rounded and impactful (Nugent & Jones, 2009).

In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, school counsellors follow certain standards of practice. While the government outlines these standards as guidelines to reflect upon throughout professional decisions, they are not specifically tied to their roles and responsibilities as school counsellors (The Standards of Practice, 2014). Nonetheless,



these nine standards represent a level of professionalism that is recommended for individuals working in this role. The standards include a comprehensive school counselling program, education system, student development, assessment, diversity, counselling, career counselling, crisis intervention and ethical responsibilities. Many of these standards are relevant to working with students around behaviours and challenges, such as incidents involving sexting. For instance, as a school counsellor, the aim is to help develop the whole student, which may involve utilizing appropriate intervention strategies. In terms of diversity, the school counsellor considers, and is sensitive to, the aspects of human diversity including gender, culture, ability, family systems, race and sexual orientation (The Standards of Practice, 2014). The literature has shown that many of these aspects have connections with sexting behaviours. Crisis interventions include appropriate interventions and collaborating with others in order to respond to a crisis situation in the best possible way. Counselling may involve individual or group counselling contexts and ethical responsibilities such as respecting students by obtaining informed consent and adhering to confidentiality legalities (The Standards of Practice, 2014).

### **Professional Views**

Literature pertaining to the professional views and roles of individuals working with students on the topic of sexting was scarce. An interview with an American school superintendent, Dr. Riggle, discussed his views on student sexting and how incidents should be approached (Schneider, 2009). He voiced his belief that students try to lessen the seriousness of sexting behaviours by making light of them. He noted that when adolescents are detached from the individual in the sext the easier it is for them to justify

sharing the message. Dr. Riggle's thoughts towards punishment were more complicated. He suggested that consideration for ramifications depends largely on the individual case. He recommended a middle ground, where a student receives appropriate punishment for their actions but not serious enough to damage their futures. Dr. Riggle's main concern was that students learn from the situation how to make better choices and become responsible adults. In terms of dealing with the phenomenon of sexting, he identified strategies that are in place within schools in his district. Education regarding safe internet use and sending text messages in a safe way were mentioned as well as teaching students about respect for one another. However, in the event that a sexting incident is reported he explained that the school will investigate. Protocol for schools involves confiscating the phone and calling authorities who can then examine the contents of the phone. Regardless of whether punishment occurs, he said that a conversation with the student and their parents or guardians is an essential aspect and helps provide an educational piece to safe online interactions. Dr. Riggle mentioned the importance of approaching sexting from a community standpoint in which all key parties like police and parents are informed and involved. This is essential for creating and maintaining a safe environment for all students (Schneider, 2009).

While teacher and administration views on sexting were unavailable, there was some research on teacher views of bullying and cyberbullying. Stauffer et al. (2012) reported findings from an online survey completed by 66 American high school teachers. With respect to attitudes towards bullying and cyberbullying, the greater part of teachers indicated that bullying does not make kids stronger or prepare them for life and can have longstanding results. However, one quarter of teachers disagreed with those statements.

When asked about implementation of an intervention program, 42% agreed there was a need, 49% were unsure and 9% did not feel it was needed. These contradictory beliefs may be related to teachers' experiences with unsuccessful intervention programs.

Relating to strategies, some were seen as less beneficial than others. For instance, teachers viewed classroom lessons, school assemblies, professional development for teachers and the development of policies all targeting bullying behaviour as not particularly useful. Strategies that were suggested by teachers as advantageous included educating students about resisting cyberbullies, limiting access to technology, such as no cell phones during class time, as well as, educating and involving parents (Stauffer et al., 2012).

### **Intervention Programs and Their Efficacy**

Although literature about sexting intervention programs in schools is currently nonexistent there were some studies outlining the effectiveness of implemented anti-bullying and cyberbullying programs. A study by Palladino, Nocentini and Menesini (2016) evaluated the efficacy of a peer-led evidence based program targeting bullying and cyberbullying, called NoTrap! (third edition). The study performed two trials and focused on high school students. Peer educators were recruited and trained with prevention and intervention techniques. The study compared an experimental group (with NoTrap! training) and a control group (no training). They looked for reduction levels across four areas: bullying, victimization, cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Overall, the study found the proper implementation of the NoTrap! Program to be an effective strategy in the reduction of bullying and cyberbullying. The experimental group had significant reduction across all four areas when compared to the control group. These

differences were maintained in the six month follow up. Based on Palladino et al.'s (2016) evaluation of the program, they claim that NoTrap! meets the criteria for efficacy and somewhat meets the requirements for effectiveness based on its ability to hold up in real-life situations.

Williford et al. (2013) conducted a study of the KiVa antibullying program to determine its effectiveness on cyberbullying and cybervictimization. The study focused on elementary and middle school students. Teachers were provided with step-by-step guides for classroom lessons. Lessons were different for elementary and middle school students. Elementary students received two one hour lessons each month and middle school students received lessons based on themes delivered four times a year. The lessons focused on victim compassion, bystander interventions, and the group dynamics involved in bullying (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). The program also provided an informational guide for parents that focused on bullying prevention and reduction at home. Williford et al. (2013) found that the KiVa program's effectiveness in dealing with cyberbullying is largely impacted by age. There was a decrease in cyberbullying for students within the elementary grades but nothing of significance in middle school students. However, KiVa was effective for cybervictimization, with less reports in the experimental group than the control group. This finding was not related to gender or age. As such, Williford et al. (2013) suggest that the efficacy of the KiVa program is dependent on age. Therefore, when it comes to cyberbullying and cybervictimization, while elementary students may benefit from implementation of the program, it is less likely that middle school students will see the same benefits.

## **Conclusion and the Current Study**

Young people have always explored their sexuality and technology has now provided new and different means of doing so (Mattey & Mattey Diliberto, 2013; Walker et al., 2013). While this may be true, it is also important to note that such behaviours while not new in their entirety have taken on a much different form, one that comes with what might be considered more serious consequences (Siegle, 2010). The beliefs expressed in Walker et al. (2013) suggested that these views can be complex and different people and professionals can see sexting differently. Nonetheless, it is clear that sexting is occurring among youth. It is also evident that sexting behaviour has implications for schools and school counsellors as the literature depicts suggested relationships across gender, cyberbullying, societal influences, time spent online, belonging, sexual behaviours and other high-risk behaviours. These relationships impact youth and necessitate deeper understanding and knowledge surrounding such impacts. As a result, it is essential to gain further understandings in all avenues, specifically around those that work with students on sensitive topics such as this. Gaining insight into school counsellors' views on sexting among students can help to learn more about sexting behaviour and determine the significance of these relationships. It may also enable schools to develop better ways of approaching and educating students about sexting, ensuring protective measures, and identifying those at risk of sexting and other high-risk behaviours.

In summary, the current literature review demonstrates that there are significant findings related to student perspectives on sexting behaviours. However, literature depicting perspectives of others that interact with students and their sexting behaviours is

largely unaccounted for. While student viewpoints on sexting dynamics is an integral piece of understanding the sexting phenomenon, I believe other viewpoints are essential in order to get the ‘whole picture’. Studies exist of students’ attitudes, trends in their behaviours and they make suggestions regarding what this might mean for schools and school professionals. Yet little has focused on the actual views, opinions and feelings of school professionals’ about providing comfort, support and interventions to those very students.

Due to this apparent gap in the literature, I felt an important perspective to be gained was from school counsellors. How do school counsellors’ view this behaviour? What are their thoughts and feelings about these encounters? What do they see as important aspects of sexting to consider? Answers to questions like this may provide greater awareness about what students need in connection to sexting and what supports and interventions might be most helpful. Listening to school counsellors’ voices might stimulate a different conversation, one that proves beneficial to students and schools alike. For these reasons, I chose to conduct a qualitative study prioritizing the views of school counsellors’ and their contribution to the sexting phenomenon. The next chapter will present the methodology and methods for the current study.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods**

In this chapter, I provide rationalization for, and background on, the methodology and methods used in this study. To start, I review the purpose, goals and motivations for choosing a qualitative research design, including the central tenets underlying my qualitative framework. Next, I examine the methods utilized including sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations applicable to this study. To end, I present my role as researcher and discuss my own personal interest and motives related to this study and to bring awareness to any potential impacts my background may have on the research.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to understand school counsellors' views and perspectives on student sexting behaviour. The aim was to dive deeper into the phenomenon of sexting by taking into account individuals that have direct experience with this topic. As the insights of adolescents and young adults have been previously considered in understanding the underpinnings of this phenomenon, this study sought to gain another perspective by focusing on school counsellors' perspectives on student sexting. By gaining further insight and information from school counsellors schools may be better prepared to deal with such behaviour. How professionals such as school counsellors view and perceive the sexting behaviour of students is important for the health and well-being of schools and their students.

Van Ouytsel, Walrave and Van Gool (2014) state the consequential impacts of student sexting behaviour, suggesting, “sexting constitutes a serious school-safety issue” (p. 204). This behaviour can have dire effects on students' mental and physical well-

being. With the increased use of personal devices among students and the surge in social media outlets, the aftermath of a sext can be extensive (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). While the act of sexting is certainly not exclusive to school settings, it is not uncommon for the ramifications of such behaviour to seep into schools. As such, school counsellors often find themselves involved in these situations (Van Velsor, 2009). Van Velsor (2009) states, “Enhancing student personal/social development is at the very heart of school counselling” (p.51). For that reason, how school counsellors perceive the behaviours of students is significant, especially in matters involving sexting.

Moreover, while it appears obvious that schools and counsellors will encounter sexting behaviours in one form or another, the stance that counsellors occupy during those times is largely undetermined. Studies like Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) provide information as to why students’ sext, the policies that should be in place and prevention programs to address such behaviours. However, there is a lack of information from counsellors as to their level of preparedness and their thoughts, feelings and experiences in managing such incidents. Therefore, this study aims to provide preliminary research into the insight and practical knowledge that counsellors hold when it comes to managing the sexting behaviours of students.

### **Goals**

Approaching this study, the main objective was to acquire a greater understanding of how school counsellors’ see and behave towards sexting behaviours among students. With this in mind, the study aimed to focus on how counsellors describe the impacts of such behaviour. I attempted to comprehend their unique perspective by looking at various aspects involved in their job. These aspects include training and preparation,



collaborations, confidentiality, risk assessments, interactions with bullying and the increased use of personal devices within schools.

More specifically, this study involved one primary research question that guided the study, as well as seven sub-questions to address various focus areas:

1. What are the perceptions of school counsellors towards student sexting?
2. How do school counsellors' describe the impact sexting has on students and schools?
3. How are school counsellors' impacted by sexting among students?
4. Do school counsellors feel prepared and equipped to handle incidents involving sexting behaviours?
5. Do school counsellors assess for risk when working with students around sexting and how do they feel about having to breach confidentiality?
6. How do school counsellors collaborate with teachers, administration, and other professionals like educational psychologists in dealing with issues involving sexting behaviours?
7. How do school counsellors' describe the interactions that exist between sexting and bullying?
8. What are the strategies currently in place for dealing with an increased use of personal devices in schools?

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

The methodological choice for this study was a 'basic' or 'generic' qualitative design that is informed by the tenets of phenomenology (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). I was interested in learning more about the phenomenon of sexting from the perspectives of school counsellors.

While the major tenets of my epistemological beliefs can be framed in phenomenology, it would require more extensive skills and research experience in order to follow a phenomenology research methodology. As a beginning researcher, operating from a generic qualitative inquiry base allows me to ask questions and seek answers without becoming too engrossed in the facets involved in a particular theoretical framework. Patton (2015) suggests that the interpretive framing can vary and still allow for qualitative research to occur. As such, wanting to learn more about the views and perspectives of school counsellors in connection to student sexting behaviour or as Patton (2015) says, the “practical questions of people working to make the world better” (p.154) can be done without committing to a particular type of qualitative inquiry. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conduct such a level of research in a generic capacity at this time while still identifying major tenets that helped guide and shape this research.

Morrow (2007) contends that the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to investigate the experiences of individuals in a way that sufficiently accounts for the intricacy and wholehearted essence of their reality. Thus, as Morrow (2007) states, “It is also the most useful approach to understanding the meanings people make of their experiences” (p. 211). For this particular subject area, I was really looking to grasp how counsellors feel about working with students around this topic and managing difficult situations that arise.

According to Merriam (2009), a foundational aspect of qualitative research is that it believes reality is “holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing” (p. 213). As such, each participant brings their own explanation of how they have experienced a certain phenomenon. An individual is the “instrument for data collection” as Merriam (2009) contends, “interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and

interviews” (p. 214). In order to fully comprehend things from their point of view, I needed to go directly to the source. Creswell (2012) states, “In qualitative research, we identify our participants and sites on purposeful sampling, based on places and people that can best help us understand our central phenomenon” (p.205). I deliberately focused my attention on school counsellors because of the direct correspondence they have with students on a regular basis. In addition, the emphasis was geared towards those working with adolescents. School counsellors are often at the forefront of school situations involving emotional and social difficulties among students. Therefore based on the growing trend in sexting behaviours among students, it would seem apparent that they would have their own views on this phenomenon. Qualitative inquiry focuses more on general interviews and allowing the voice of the individual to be heard without restriction (Creswell, 2012). As such, “The intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p.206). For that reason, gathering information directly from the source of those with direct experience in this area creates room for deeper consideration and awareness of a distinct angle within the phenomenon of sexting.

### **Tenets of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology can be described as an investigation into the way in which people view, understand and interpret happenings in their lives (Rawlings & Cowell, 2015). In order to make sense of their lived experiences, people attach meaning and purpose to these events (Hays & Wood, 2011; Rawlings & Cowell, 2015). As phenomenology seeks to gain a deeper understanding surrounding individuals’ experiences and their explanations of a particular phenomenon, it is appropriate to use the principles of this

approach to assist in the generic design used for this study (Raffanti, 2008). The phenomenon of interest involves school counsellors' perceptions of the sexting practices that occur among students. By examining the experiences that school counsellors have in working with students around this phenomenon, a more in-depth level of comprehension may be achieved (Hays & Wood, 2011). School counsellors are in a position to connect with students in meaningful ways in response to sensitive topics and incidents like sexting (Simcox, Nuijens, & Lee, 2006). Therefore, this study endeavors to look at school counsellors' that have experienced such interactions as a way to better understand this new phenomenon and how it affects students and schools. Obtaining an introspective view of the phenomenon through the eyes of professionals that have worked with sexting, embraces a different perspective, one that is meaningful and important in gaining a complete understanding of this phenomenon. Individuals think, analyze and ascribe significance to events in their lives, especially those in which they have direct contact with (Hays & Wood, 2011). Understanding the significance school counsellors ascribe to the sexting phenomenon within the school context may be an important piece as these individuals work with students on a daily basis. They are also professionally trained to deal with topics such as this and therefore their insight and perspectives carry weight and impact the students they work with (Simcox et al., 2006). Each phenomenon is multifaceted; therefore qualitative research lends itself to a more exploratory depth of various facets (Morrow, 2007). In this instance, it is the lens through which counsellors observe and experience the how and what, compared to studies that focus on the student lens and the why (Morrow, 2007).

## **Participant Perspectives**

The perspectives of participants' are at the very essence of my entire study. It is how they view and interpret their experiences that allow a deeper level of exploration to occur. Morrow (2007) affirms that interviews are a valuable tool within qualitative research. They are a personal method that allows a richness of information and understanding to be seized. Ultimately, I wanted to understand sexting from the very individuals that guide, manage and support the social and emotional health of students on a daily basis.

## **Methods**

### **Sampling**

As the main intent for this study was to gain further understanding of sexting through the perception of school counsellors, purposeful sampling was an appropriate method for participant selection (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) describes purposeful sampling as deliberate selection of individuals or sites that will facilitate insight into the phenomenon of choice. I also used a convenience sampling method as I chose to target school counsellors working with adolescents (junior high and high school) from a particular location, Newfoundland and Labrador (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, I targeted school counsellors that have at least one direct experience with student sexting, either in an individual or group context. Since phenomenological studies focus on individuals "that have direct experience with the phenomenon rather than simply those who have perspectives on the experience" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291), this was a consideration in participant selection. I chose this criterion, as I wanted to ensure that participants had firsthand practical experience in working with this phenomenon. In

addition, I targeted counsellors with at least one direct experience but did not define or restrict the type of sexting incidents. I wanted to remain open to the various representations or occurrences involving sexting. As such, I hoped to gain different points of view on the sexting behaviours of students (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, participants that chose to take part in the study clearly did so because of their own proclivity towards sexting.

**Sample Size.** Within qualitative research, the number of required participants have a tendency to vary across studies. While there is no defined or set number, my goal was to interview between five to ten people (Creswell, 2012). Morrow (2007) suggests that adequate data, rather than a specific number of participants, determine the sample size. Upon completion of five interviews I believed that data saturation had been reached. Morrow (2007) contends, “Qualitative methodologists often use the redundancy of data and theoretical saturation to determine sufficiency of data” (p. 217). Although the addition of more voices and views is always beneficial, the data that had been gathered was satisfactory. In the current study, I was seeing redundancy in my interviews such as repetition of words and ideas across responses. Words such as pressure and trust and ideas concerning loss of control and lack of forethought. There were patterns of similarity exposed in how participants answered the questions, with recurring ideas and notions being presented.

### **Recruitment**

To gain approval to conduct research involving school counsellors I first contacted the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD). In compliance with the district’s research checklist I forwarded all requested information

regarding my study and all supporting documentation. Upon review of my study and documents formal permission was granted by the district. I then emailed the president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association (NLCPA) to gain approval for contacting counsellors that are members within the NLCPA. Upon permission from the Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association (NLCPA), counsellors were recruited via a recruitment email sent out through the listserv (Appendix A). The email identified the purpose of the study, an invitation to participate and also included the informed consent form for individuals to review (Appendix B). Individuals interested in participating in the study were then free to contact me.

Once the first recruitment email was sent out via the NLCPA, six interested individuals contacted me through email. Subsequent to those emails, I endeavored to set up interview times to take place over the phone and outside of working hours. Of the six individuals that initially responded to the recruitment email, five replied to set up an interview. As the informed consent form was sent out in the original recruitment document, I reminded and encouraged participants to review the form before our interview time. At the beginning of the interview, participants were provided with a summary of the informed consent form to ensure they understood, and were aware of, all key components. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and oral consent was obtained from each individual. Participants also consented to the use of direct quotations and to be audio-recorded. Since all interviews were conducted over the phone, I accepted oral consent and noted the date and time that it was given on a hard copy of the informed consent form.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical protocols for conducting qualitative research, as well as those outlined by Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) were followed closely. An ethics certificate was obtained from Memorial University's Research Ethics Board. Richards and Schwartz (2002) suggest primary ethical considerations in qualitative research include anonymization, confidentiality, and informed consent. Participants' rights to privacy were respected by the coding of all identifying characteristics. Participants were given a pseudonym and their place of work was made anonymous. All data was reported in aggregate form, to attempt to conceal all identities. No other personal information was necessary for this research. The subject of confidentiality was addressed in the informed consent form and reiterated before the interview began. The informed consent form explained the purpose and goals of the study, the participant role, possible risks and benefits and how results would be presented. It also provided participants with my contact information, along with that of my supervisor and ethics board (Sanjari, Bahramneshad, Fomani, Shoghi and Cheraghi, 2014). All data collected was stored in secured filing cabinets and on a password protected flash-drive. Both the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD) and the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University (ICEHR) approved all documents used in this study.

## **Data Collection Methods**

**Interviews.** Data collection consisted of one-on-one phone interviews conducted outside of working hours (Creswell, 2012). Interviews ranged from 40-60 minutes in length. Interviews are a primary data collection method for qualitative studies as they



allow for participants' real and lived accounts of their experiences to be documented (Wilson, 2015). Patton (2002) explains that we "cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions" (p.340) therefore we must ask people questions in order to find out. If we want to gain access to another person's perspective, then we must interview them (Patton, 2002). In an effort to ensure that data was documented properly, all interviews were audio-recorded, with permission acquired by participants. As sexting is a sensitive subject and because counsellors operate under confidentiality agreements with their students, no direct student documentation was requested.

In terms of interview questions, the focus was on counsellors' experiences, as well as, their thoughts, feelings and interpretations of those experiences (Groenewald, 2004). Using open-ended questions in an interview enables the researcher to address specific aims, however as participants are individually different, the researcher was open to making changes and/or following the direction of the participant (Merriam, 2009; Raffanti, 2008). This flexibility opens the possibility of gaining insight into areas not previously considered (Groenewald, 2004).

As the interviews were semi-structured, I approached the interviews with fifteen prepared questions (Appendix C). These questions were asked in the same order, using the same words unless alternate wording was necessary. In some cases not all questions were asked, if I felt the participant had already answered it. At times, additional questions were posed for clarification or further information. As Flick (2008) states, the notion behind semi-structured interviews is to prepare and carry out a guided set of questions in a fairly consistent manner. While flexibility is still present, using a stable method can be advantageous in the data analysis stage (Flick, 2008).

I chose to use semi-structured questions for the interviews to help maintain concentration on the topic and purpose at hand. Open-ended questions allow for a larger amount of data for each question, therefore providing me with richer information and details regarding sexting (Patton, 2015). My supervisor assisted in the generation of the questions to ensure they were truly open-ended and that I was asking what I wanted to ask. I learned that some questions warranted similar answers. For instance, my first question focused on their experiences and views on student sexting and then question five also asked them to describe their experiences with student sexting. I learned early on that if I felt participants provided enough information in the first question I would often rephrase it by asking them if they had any other experiences to add. This enabled me to encourage new and different information from what they had already given in question one. As I went along I made notes of ways to probe for further information. I asked participants at the end of each interview if they had any questions, if there was anything I had missed or anything they felt should be added to check that essential things were covered. I listened to the audio-recordings of each interview after they were finished for feedback. This helped me to discern how well I was asking questions and paraphrasing for clarity. It also helped me to hear how participants were responding so that I could edit questions or include more probes (Merriam, 2009).

**Ethical Implications with the Interviews and Interview Data.** At the start of each interview before audio recording began, I informed participants that they would be given a pseudonym. I did not use any of their names throughout the interview time and if any identifying information was provided within the interview I omitted it from my transcription to protect their anonymity. No personal identifying information was

requested during the interview of the participant or any students they have worked with. Technical issues in data collection suggest that information gathered must be secured throughout the study (Tite, 2010). The audio-recorder was kept in a secure filing cabinet along with the transcripts that I had printed from my home computer. No identifying information was put in the documents and files on my computer were password protected.

All data was stored in secure locations at the researcher's residence during the data collection and analysis stages. Once the study was complete, all data was moved to the supervisor's office and stored in secure and locked filing cabinets. The only individuals with access to the data include the researcher and supervisor. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. After this time has elapsed, all data will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

**Transcription.** First, I immersed myself into the data by repeatedly listening to the audio recordings. I completed a 'verbatim transcription' of each interview and reviewed them individually (Merriam, 2009). Before reading the first transcript I reviewed the purpose of the data by re-reading the research questions. This helped me to be more mindful of what I was looking for. I chose to transcribe my own interviews thereby allowing myself to become well acquainted with the data. I found this helpful, as even during transcription I was aware of the possible trends and patterns that were emerging. I was able to reflect upon this as I continued to transcribe. Then, upon re-reading the transcript I was able to make notes and comments regarding the data in the

margins of the transcript. I also kept a separate notebook in which I recorded comments of my ideas, feelings, and thoughts for each transcript (Merriam, 2009).

**Ongoing Analysis.** Ongoing reflection and analysis occurred as I repeatedly read transcripts and wrote down notes, ideas, interpretations and questions. Morrow (2007) suggests that working with the data repeatedly is necessary in reaching a deeper understanding of exactly what composes the data and how it is connected. In addition, Merriam (2009) proposes that ongoing analysis can be an enlightening aspect of the process and in contrast, data without it can be intolerable and obscure.

Similar to the steps described by Merriam (2009), Microsoft Word was used for ‘data preparation’ which involved transcription, ‘data identification’ or the coding and categorization phases, and ‘data management’ which refers to organization and retrieval of similar data pieces (Merriam, 2009). Further analysis involved noting ideas and interpretations of the findings and applying a critical assessment (Creswell, 2012).

**Coding.** The next step involved coding. I began the process of coding by organizing the data in word documents. I placed the data for each interview into a table format. I organized the questions and responses and left a column for data identification. Data identification involved giving shorthand names to pieces of the data for easier retrieval (Merriam, 2009). A combination of words, phrases and colors were used.

**Categorizing.** Next, category construction occurred. From the coding information, categories began to form. Based on the recurring patterns that spanned across my data, I then began to sort and name categories. I sorted notations by creating a computer file for each category. Then I copied and pasted items that fit into that category. As there were many categories constructed from the data, I combined and reduced

categories to develop three working themes. A smaller working number of themes enabled easier communication in discussing the findings (Patton, 2015). Initially I found it difficult to name the themes that had emerged. Merriam (2009) explains that these themes “are responsive (answers)” to my research questions and therefore the names must be “congruent with the orientation of the study” (p.184). I renamed the themes multiple times until I was satisfied that the names coincided with the study.

**Analyzing.** To analyze the data a basic “inductive and comparative” (Merriam, 2009, p.175) strategy was used. Merriam (2009) describes meaning making to be the goal of data analysis. Essentially it is organizing and gathering what people have said so that you can gain insight and understanding. These developments create the findings of the study. Ideally, generating these findings and analyzing them allow the research questions to be answered (Merriam, 2009).

Phenomenological studies typically entail assembling participant communications into groups. These groups are organized according to meaning, which are then classified as themes (Tite, 2010). This might also be referred to as ‘horizontalization of the data’ as the researcher identifies statements from participants that provide an accurate description of their experience of the phenomenon (Tite, 2010). Individual statements are valued and are collected and arranged to signify the main encounters (Tite, 2010). Subsequently, ‘textured descriptions’ are constructed in connection with the main themes and provide a rich account of experiences. Quotes from the participants are included to enhance validity of the statements.

### **My Role as Researcher**

As a current graduate student in the counselling psychology program my background includes education in both psychology and education. I have experience in the education field as both teacher and counsellor, therefore there is an underlying understanding and subjective connection to school counsellors. In addition, there are personal interests regarding the sexting behaviours of students as I have had direct experience with incidents among students as both teacher and counsellor. I did my best to adopt an unobtrusive approach in communicating with counsellors. I recognize that building a rapport with participants is an important duty as this is necessary in obtaining perspectives and information around sensitive topics such as sexting (Lester, 1999). In addition, I really wanted to collaborate with participants as ‘co-researchers’ (Raffanti, 2008). While I tried to remain objective in an attempt to secure data that is honest and real without injecting my own influence, I also recognize the importance of subjectivity in qualitative research (Tite, 2010). As such, I believe that full objectivity cannot be achieved as prior knowledge and perceptions cannot be avoided completely. However, during the interview process and data analysis I made an effort to employ the concept of “bracketing” in which I attempted to conceal “pre-existing knowledge” and “assumptions” (Wilson, 2015, p.39) regarding sexting. This method encourages the opportunity to gather and collect data in a more objective way. Therefore allowing the process to truly gain the thoughts and experiences of the participant alone (Wilson, 2015). Although I have experience as an educator, the position of student is my current capacity. Therefore, I did not feel that any power dynamics were present in terms of researcher over participant. Also, I felt that the personal pathway and understanding of the

counseling field was helpful in establishing a relationship with participants, as an appreciation and genuine interest were present.

### **Trustworthiness Features**

‘Validating findings’ is an essential component in completing research (Creswell, 2012). To ensure that data and explanations are an authentic representation of the study, specific strategies were utilized (Creswell, 2012). In order to substantiate findings I engaged in comparing the interview content with the notes I had taken during and immediately after each interview, as well as engaging in ongoing conversation with my supervisor about my results and my study. Also, I compared the interview material with the literature that is applicable to this phenomenon.

Additionally, I ensured an external audit was conducted. This involved a review that was performed by someone that was external to the research study. The individual evaluated the entire study and asked key questions to ensure the researcher had performed all the necessary duties and procedures (Creswell, 2012). Since these measures were completed, it is believed that the level of trustworthiness of the study was strengthened.

Furthermore, to address credibility, the parameters of this study are clearly defined as only addressing the experiences and views of school counsellors as they relate to sexting among students. Therefore, the findings of this study do not claim to also have knowledge surrounding the experiences and views of other individuals such as parents, school administration or students (Creswell, 2012).

Dependability can be described as the ability for another to replicate the study (Tite, 2010). Accordingly, the participants in this study are school counsellors as identified by the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District and the

Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association. As most schools have only one full-time counsellor, sites varied with the counsellors involved. That being the case, it would appear that replication of these conditions could be obtainable. Last, confirmability refers to justifying the findings by looking at the subjectivity of the researcher (Tite, 2010). As subjectivity is noted as being a central component of qualitative research, this study corroborates the pre-understandings that exist. Although I aimed to conduct data collection and analysis with as much objectivity as possible, the presence of subjectivity is not ignored. Therefore, the incorporation of detailed memos and side notes were important pieces in adding to the confirmability of this study. These strategies attempt to create a balance between the objective and subjective so that accurate findings can be presented to readers (Tite, 2010). As such, subjectivity is present and can be seen as a key piece in understanding qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). Consequently as subjectivity can be seen as limiting to collection and analysis, with strategies in place, it can also be seen as a strength.

I employed the reflexivity strategy to address my own bias and assumptions. I maintained a self-reflective journal throughout the course of data collection and analysis. This journal was a collection of my experiences and reactions of the research process. As such, it brought about greater awareness and clarity of my own self-understandings (Morrow, 2005). Throughout the interview stage of data collection, I strived to obtain a fair and accurate representation of participants' voices. I asked participants for clarification and/or to elaborate on their responses. I wanted to ensure that I was extracting the meaning they intended and to understand more deeply the truth of their realities (Morrow, 2005).



**Summary**

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a thorough account of the intentions and objectives for this research. As such I have identified my own epistemological beliefs in conjunction with the justification for employing a qualitative framework. As well, I have highlighted the details of the chosen research methods for this particular study and illustrated both my position and background in order to be forthcoming about any potential bias. As a result, I hope that I have presented all motivations clearly so that the reader can make their own decisions without prejudice. In the next chapter I will provide information regarding the backgrounds of participants and report the findings of this study.

### **Chapter 3: Participant Backgrounds and Results**

This chapter presents background information of the participants that were interviewed for this study, followed by the major findings of those interviews.

#### **Participant Backgrounds**

There were five participants in this study all of which identified as school counsellors and were employed within the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District at the time of data collection. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, no identifying information will be provided. However, I will provide some basic information to inform readers of the overall context of which data was obtained. All participants were female and the average experience working with students in the counseling field was six years. Most have experience with both junior high and high school students in this capacity. There was a mixture of experience working with students from urban and rural contexts within Newfoundland and Labrador. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Pseudonyms were selected randomly by me and are in no particular order: Claire, Maggie, Anna, Tessa, and Rachel.

#### **Results**

This section focuses on presenting the results of the interviews. I organized the results based on three main emergent themes with accompanying subthemes. The three dominant themes that surfaced during data analysis are as follows:

1. Prevention and Preparation
2. Roles, Responsibilities and Introspection
3. School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting

Each theme is presented and analyzed below. First, prevention and preparation focuses on the prevention levels currently in place for students and preparation focuses on how equipped schools, school counsellors and parents are to deal with student sexting. Second, roles, responsibilities and introspection emphasize the position that guidance counsellors take in working with students displaying sexting behaviour. Third, perceived aspects of student sexting behaviours discuss the main features of sexting that these school counsellors have experienced.

### **Theme 1: Prevention and Preparation**

This first theme brings attention to prevention and preparation specific to sexting that is occurring in schools. Participants were asked about the amount of education that students are receiving, how prepared they feel as counsellors, and whether they believe schools are equipped to deal with sexting events. Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had any sexting specific advice for parents or school professionals. The responses were overwhelmingly targeted to address parents. Thus, the four subthemes I identified include: (1) Preventative Measures for Students, (2) Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors, (3) Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness and (4) Advice for Parents.

**Preventative Measures for Students.** This initial subtheme concentrates on the design and implementation of education for students to address the phenomenon of sexting. Throughout the interview process participants were asked directly whether they feel schools are providing education and taking part in prevention to assist students in learning about sexting.

To what extent schools are providing prevention and education varied across participants, with all agreeing that some prevention is happening. Anna commented, “It’s certainly something that we’re trying to have some education around.” Noting that the topic is deserving of attention and proper education. Comparably, Maggie denoted,

A lot of what we do is around education and trying to educate students to watch the decisions that they make when it comes to media. So a big piece of our role in that respect is around education and trying to prevent it.

Tessa’s sentiments also reflected the use of preventative actions but expressed some frustration, “So I feel like there’s a lot of... we’re pretty proactive, but it doesn’t make any difference.”

One educational and prevention measure that presented itself throughout the interviews was called Digital Citizenship. Participants described digital citizenship as lessons targeting safe social media use that are mandated from the school district. All schools within the district are responsible for ensuring that students receive the education as implemented through specific lessons. The lessons are to be taught to students once a year. It was developed as part of the Safe and Caring Schools Initiative. Anna described the instructional piece as having a “sexting portion” that is taught. Tessa expressed her views stating, “It is some lessons and what I’ve been hearing is that we do this every year, the same thing every year.” She added, “From my understanding it’s not changed up, they’re [students] not interested” and “it doesn’t catch their [students] attention at all.” Similarly, Maggie’s thoughts supported this as she said, “I think we need to put more effort into coming up with presentations that really are good and really are effective and research proven to work.”

When asked about feeling prepared to deal with addressing sexting behaviour with students, Anna reverted back to the education topic signaling that she feels more prevention is needed. She indicated, "...I do feel like it should almost be a part of some sort of course or curriculum that every student is going to get." Suggesting that an educational piece taught once during the year is not enough, Anna added, "It just has to be something that we're drilling home all the time" and "it definitely has to be engaging for the students." Sentiments of having education pieces embedded within the curriculum were echoed across all participants. Equivocally, Rachel asserted, "Really it needs to be embedded in the curriculum, not just a onetime shot."

When asked about other specific prevention components, the use of "posters around school", "awareness campaigns" and having police officers take part in school assemblies aimed at social media use were mentioned. All of these things were mentioned as measures that have been utilized in the past but are not necessarily regularly implemented or in place at present. Additionally, these preventions primarily target safe social media use that often addresses the idea of sexting but are not typically specific to sexting. Claire acknowledged this stating,

I mean I know that you get... there was the police coming in and they would do presentations for the kids on sexting but a lot of it would be about digital citizenship and digital literacy stuff. So they would talk about how once you put something out there it's there, it's digitally imprinted and there's no way you can change it and take it back. ...So in that way there's been some education but I don't know of anything that I've been privy to that has been specific to sexting.

It's been mentioned in other presentations we'll say but very briefly. It's not been a specific piece.

Anna pointed out that prevention and education can be challenging with time constraints interfering,

So we're trying to be more preventative and reactive but it comes down to time as well... that whole education piece. There's so much on our plate as guidance counsellors, there's not much time to be doing that developmental guidance piece, which is unfortunate.

Perhaps an aside to Anna's point, Rachel mentioned that education seems to happen more after an incident has taken place. Rachel expressed, "I think when something happens, in the ones [schools] that I've been in, when something happens, there's a lot more education. But I think it needs to be built into the curriculum."

Moreover, Claire commented that the preventative education in schools is occurring "minimally" and "not nearly enough." Claire also expressed the belief that the education piece needs to be embedded in the curriculum in a way that is engaging for students today.

Some of the books kids are using now are 20 and 30 years old... and the kids learn different and the big piece we're missing now too – how that information is delivered. It can't be a pen and paper type task. Like I know that Bridge the gAPP has an app and stuff and I'm not even sure, like I'm sure an app would be helpful but I feel that it needs to be very interactive type...real life situations, hit hard, hit home... delivery is huge.

Maggie also targeted the delivery of the digital citizenship lessons, “With every lesson plan, it’s not as simple as just providing power points and away you go.” She added that teachers are not being provided any training on how to implement the lessons properly. Maggie was of the belief that “The message that one class is getting is guaranteed going to be different from that of another class.” She argued that executing lessons in this way is not effective but that mandates from the district demand schools use any method to satisfy requirements. She affirmed, “They’ll be done but maybe not in the best way possible.”

In short, while all participants acknowledged that the aim is to provide greater awareness and education when it comes to sexting, all felt that more education and prevention should be happening in schools. As such, there was much to be said regarding the digital citizenship piece with most conceding to the shortcomings associated with the mandate.

**Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors.** The second subtheme examines participants’ dialogue as it relates to preparation in terms of dealing with sexting incidents within their role as school counsellors. In this, all participants discussed an unavailability of training specific to sexting. They acknowledged a commitment to learn and a welcome invitation to the opportunity to acquire training. Moreover, while participants admitted feeling capable in dealing with situations, they accredited most of their competence to others in the field and dealing with situations on a very trial by error basis.

Reflecting on her feelings towards managing situations involving sexting among students, Anna said,

It is part of the job unfortunately, the more situations I deal with the more...well, I guess the more confident I become in what the protocol is for the follow up. Like after we had the police come in I understood a little bit more about the legal ramifications.

In becoming prepared to address such behaviour, Anna acknowledged, "Yeah, like I've definitely done my own research into the area because of different situations that I've had to deal with." Her personal research involved speaking with police officers, social workers and other guidance counsellors in the field. All participants indicated that in the beginning they relied on their own research abilities and others in the profession for support. Rachel stated, "You need to do your own training, whether you apply through PD (professional development) or whether you research it on your own." Rachel admitted feeling unprepared during her first encounter with students' sexting. Similar to Anna, Rachel felt more prepared and confident "after a lot of communicating with colleagues" and "researching" on her own. Similarly, Tessa acknowledged "mentorship" as a key role in her preparation and both Tessa and Claire contributed their "own research" and practical learning as important aspects. Tessa indicated, "The first time I dealt with it isn't the same as how I deal with it now." Like the other participants, Maggie appreciated supportive individuals and conducted her own research. She visited organizations within the community to heed information and support. She explained, "Those that kind of had experience with it and knew... I guess also knew the legal aspects in terms of sexting and legal responsibilities."

Most participants considered themselves to be more prepared now than when they first started or encountered sexting situations. In addition, they pointed out that they were



unaware of any professional development opportunities geared towards sexting. With regards to training, Anna stated, “I don’t know if there is a whole lot of professional development in it. I haven’t heard.” Claire reiterated, “As per any training on how to deal with it, there’s never been any that I know of. Not specific to that.” Noting the importance of continued learning and professional development, she added, “I’ve not had anything in terms of specific training for it. Do I feel equipped? Ah, yeah, I can trudge my way through it. Do I need to learn more? Absolutely.” Correspondingly, when Tessa was asked if she felt prepared now she responded, “Probably more, well for sure more than I did. But I would definitely... if I knew there was training out there for me to learn how to deal with it differently, better, whatever, I would take that in a heartbeat.” Maggie shared the interest of the others in procuring specialized training in the area. Not having received any particular training in the area she reflected,

I don’t think there’s ever an end to the education I could learn, if I could ever get a chance, if there was ever a course out there or training... I’ve never heard of one, but if there was a training on how to address this with students, I certainly would love to take it... I could be doing something completely wrong in the way that I do this, I could probably learn something a lot better...there’s been nothing to actually train us as responders in how we respond to individuals who’ve done it on an individual basis as opposed to a whole school preventative basis.

In summary, participants were cognizant of the shortage of professional development available for school counsellors that centers on the topic of sexting. Even so, all participants put forth the value in being conscientious in their work, seeking

support from more experienced colleagues, and a desire to provide the best possible support for students.

**Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness.** The third subtheme focuses on school preparation. Shifting from examining their own level of preparation, participants were asked whether they feel schools are equipped to handle sexting situations. Some uncertainty was expressed across participants.

Rachel and Claire both indicated feeling as though schools are not equipped. Rachel explained this stating that “it’s a learning curve” and that “some schools don’t have as many incidents as others.” She pointed out that once it happens, schools have to figure out how to deal with it and that “depending on the student and depending on the interactions, your approach is different.” In addition, Claire voiced her opinion,

Teachers are not equipped to deal with it; the school is not equipped to deal with it. Often times the administrators are not equipped to deal with it, it’s the guidance counsellors that end up dealing with that. Particularly if it’s after the fact and the kids are pretty messed up as a result of it or that its just happened and it's pretty raw, but as for schools being educated enough to deal with it... no.

Anna responded, “Umm, I guess we’re equipped to a degree” but then went on to identify a problematic area involving incidents that occur outside of school. She said,

We do have an issue with it because to be honest sometimes this stuff happens outside of school hours...because we would get complaints about this happening out overnight like someone sent a picture to so and so...and okay what are you guys going to do about it as a school.... Eventually it does bleed into school so we

have to deal with it regardless but there are situations where we have just referred parents to police.

Maggie also expressed apprehension regarding how equipped schools are, stating that she feels they are “a little bit” but not as much as she feels necessary. Maggie conveyed concerns similar to Claire with respect to individuals dealing with these issues when they do happen. She said, “I really don’t think that there is much... much out there for schools in terms of how to deal with it once it happens.” Tessa mentioned her school being “better equipped than we were” indicating that their way of dealing with it has developed over time. She also indicated that she’s unsure whether it is “the right way or the wrong way” as “no one has told us any different.”

**Advice for Parents.** The fourth subtheme focuses on one of the biggest re-emerging notions, which had to do with parental involvement. Participants pointed out disengagement between parents and the sexting behaviours of their children. When participants were asked what advice they would give to parents or school professionals regarding the practice of sexting among students, almost all responses solely targeted parents.

Maggie noted that her school tried to incorporate an information session aimed at providing education to parents about safe social media use for their kids, but that few parents signed up. She identified this disconnect as the “biggest struggle” adding “it is falling to the school to deal with these situations and we can’t engage the parents to take that active role in wanting to be aware. It’s having drastic effects on their own children.” Comparably, Anna presented concern around the knowledge level of parents with regards to social media stating that parents “don’t have the knowledge base” and “don’t have the

understanding of the apps and of the technology.” As such, she feels that this gap is “making it harder for them to check up on their kids.” Rachel discussed parental awareness and the need for parents to realize their responsibility in all of this, “A lot of parents think well it’s not my phone it’s their phone and we would say to them well it’s actually your phone because you pay the bill.”

Parental awareness was a key theme throughout participant responses. All focused their attention on parents with the main messages consisting of having conversations, monitoring cell phone and online activity, consistent involvement in what their children are doing and helping them understand the ramifications of actions like sexting.

Tessa, Anna, Maggie and Rachel concentrated on parents taking responsibility for the phones students are using and encouraged parents to closely monitor all activity. Rachel suggested that the biggest thing is that “parents are in the know” and encouraged parents to talk to their kids and tell them that they will be monitoring their phones. Anna’s advice coincided as she said,

My best advice is that... I think sometimes parents feel like they can’t invade their children’s privacy or they shouldn’t... I don’t wanna look at my child’s phone, that’s his phone or that’s her phone and I don’t want her to think that I’m checking up on her and really at the end of the day, to me, it’s more important to make sure that your child is safe.

Tessa and Maggie echoed this advice. Tessa replied, “Very few parents are open with checking phones. I think a lot of parents are well there’s no issue, I want to keep that trust so I’m not going to touch. And then a lot of times that issue happens.” Maggie pointed out the legal responsibilities stating to parents, “The devices that they are using to

send these things are legally yours, as a parent you can be held legally responsible for that information.”

Additionally, all participants centralized on the importance of parental awareness and keeping conversations open. Tessa exclaimed, “Keep talking. Keep talking about it.” Likewise, Claire said,

Educate your kids. Have conversations. Make sure that they’re well aware of the ramifications before they hit that click on that camera...parents need to be aware that it’s happening even though they think it’s not happening, they need to be aware that it is happening.

With regards to continuously having conversations with kids, Rachel maintained, “I know... that’s not always easy but it’s very important.” Anna said,

Yeah and I think that sometimes we get so busy with our own lives that we kind of forget about that piece, that open communication with your kids is so important...staying connected because it’s very easy to disconnect from what’s going on in your kid’s life and that’s definitely when we, you know, see issues.

Maggie stated, “Become involved with your children no matter what age they are, become aware and involved in what they’re doing, what they’re sending, aware of what they’re doing online.”

Simply put, participants addressed some present challenges that exist between parents and children when it comes to sexting and online activities. They called out for greater parental awareness, involvement and scrutiny when it comes to behaviours involving the digital world.

Overall, this theme signified participants' views on the education, preparation and awareness that exist among students, schools, and parents, as well as their own, as it applies to the area of sexting.

### **Theme 2: School Counsellors' Roles, Responsibilities & Introspection**

The second theme to emerge encompasses the main roles and responsibilities for school counsellors as it pertains to student sexting engagements. Throughout the interviews participants discussed matters involving confidentiality, risk assessment, how they intervene in situations involving sexting and whether they collaborate with other professionals. They also relayed their personal emotions and opinions as they relate to their job and supporting students in unwelcome and unpleasant sexting situations. The following are subthemes I identified within this theme: (1) Reactions and Impacts, (2) Confidentiality, (3) Risk Assessment, (4) Intervention and (5) Collaborations.

**Reactions and Impacts.** This first subtheme analyzes how participants described their thoughts and feelings about sexting behaviours and the impacts of working with students around these behaviours. All responded with unfavorable views towards the sexting practices among students.

Two participants stated experiencing actual physical reactions when they hear or are brought information regarding a sexting incident. Claire conveyed that her “stomach sinks” and that often by the time it reaches her it means that the situation has “escalated” and “the student is unable to cope.” Maggie reported that she starts to “cringe” and gets a “stomach ache” when she hears. She noted the seriousness of such behaviours stating,

Once you've made that choice...there's nothing anyone can do to change it. If this goes out...there's nothing I can do. I can sit and talk to you but there's nothing

you can do and there's nothing I can do to stop the repercussions. Once it's set in motion, it's on its course...I think that it's a dangerous practice but I think it has such huge implications for society and for students who grow up in the world thinking it's not such a big deal.

Rachel also commented on the seriousness of sexting stating that it is "challenging" and that she has had incidents with students as young as "Grade 6." Anna reacted saying that it is "super concerning" and that she becomes "worried for students and their well-being." She added,

What scares me the most is that we try to share with the students that once you send something out into I guess the interspace world, it's gone forever, and it's permanently there, and there's nothing you can do about it. So, I think there's a naivety that students have that they think, no, that person's never going to do that. I trust them and then that's not the case, which is unfortunate.

For Tessa, the biggest piece she noted was "the lack of self-respect" involved. She explained,

The girls are so quick to send a picture to be liked...and a lot of times it's to older boys, so you know that need to be wanted or noticed by the older guys. That's what I think bothers me the most.

Most of the impacts participants described involved what they can do from their position to help students once an incident has occurred or is occurring. Generally speaking, participants spoke about individual counseling. Maggie described dealing with it when it turns into "crisis mode" and "trying to help people through the repercussions of that decision." She explained how repercussions cannot be changed and so it is important

to help students “move forward.” In addition to that she said, “I can certainly educate and then hopefully try to help a lot of people to make better choices.” Similarly, Claire spoke about counseling those involved to help them in “understanding the seriousness of what they’ve done” while “trying to rebuild the confidence and self-esteem.” Anna asserted, “There is an education piece for me that I have to do through individual counseling if a student comes to me with that issue.”

Tessa’s response focused on her own experiences, which have involved incidents in which girls are most affected by sexting. She expressed, “I want to do more to empower the girls. For them to take control of their own self-esteem, their own bodies, their own feelings about their bodies and to need less boys, or to need less attention from the boys.”

In brief, sexting does affect participants as they display apprehension and concern for the welfare of students involved in sexting incidents. They accept their position as school counsellors and try to respond in proactive and caring ways.

**Confidentiality.** This subtheme centers on the matter of confidentiality as it relates to counselling and sexting. Confidentiality refers to keeping information private. School counsellors are bound by their contract and their ethical responsibilities to respect an individual’s confidentiality. Students may entrust counsellors with information that they prefer to remain undisclosed. However, there are limits to confidentiality or times at which counsellors are obligated to breach confidentiality. Participants were in agreement when it came to confidentiality. All said that they ensure students are aware of their rights to confidentiality when meeting with a counsellor as well as the limits that this entails.



Anna explained that any conversation she has with a student always begins with informed consent. She said her spiel includes something like

I can keep something confidential unless I feel that you are in danger, someone else is in danger or if there's any physical, emotional, sexual abuse that's occurred...and I would consider sexting to be a situation where students are at risk... so I consider that a situation where I would make a phone call whether it be to the parents or the social worker.

Other responses were similar, and Tessa's response was in agreement with Anna's, stating that she believes sexting to be "damaging" therefore she would breach confidentiality. Claire explained that if a situation is serious enough to involve the police,

Obviously I'm going to encourage that the parents be aware, usually in those cases the students are pretty open, cause... at that point they're either ready to do something about it and have this person stopped or they just want it to go away.

Most participants mentioned that they would breach confidentiality, by calling authorities and/or informing parents or caregivers if the situation necessitated it. They communicated that each situation is unique therefore responses often depend on the students and what is happening.

**Risk Assessment.** This subtheme looks at the concept of risk assessment. As situations involving sexting can have adverse effects on students, participants were asked specifically about risk assessment and whether they consistently assess for risk in situations involving sexting. Risk assessment in this context refers to direct questioning of students to address whether they are at risk for suicide.

All participants answered that they would assess for risk. Most elaborated that it really depends on the situation and the students. Rachel identified that she would assess for risk if she felt there was a “concern for risk.” For instance, she mentioned if she noticed “symptoms of depression” in a student that was dealing with a sexting incident. In a case like that, she said that she would assess the student because it becomes possible there could be a risk. Likewise, Maggie indicated that she often does a “preliminary assessment”, as she said, “you can often tell with students”, and will then do a “formal assessment” if she feels it is necessary. Implying that often with counsellors, how they react is very much a personal judgment call.

Tessa, Claire and Anna communicated that they typically assess for risk. Anna responded saying, “I usually will ask and assess risk and make appropriate phone calls depending on what the student says.” Claire mentioned that for her, risk assessment occurs “98% of the time.” She explained, “Usually when it comes to me it’s at a crisis situation. It’s either just happened or it has happened in the past and the student is really freaked out about where it goes from there.” Claire described dealing with situations in which students have been identified as at risk. She indicated that students have said things like “I just want to die, I just want this to end. I’m so embarrassed. I can’t believe this went this far, I can’t believe he did that to me.”

In brief, participants acknowledged the individual nature of each sexting encounter. Students’ respond differently to challenging events, with some students being more affected than others. Nonetheless, most participants did concede that sexting can be particularly detrimental and would heighten their consideration of suicide risk.

**Intervention.** How and when counsellors intervene in situations involving sexting may be an important aspect of how students learn to navigate the perils of their actions or the actions of others. As such this subtheme concentrates on participants' responses when asked to discuss if, and how, they intervene in situations in which they learn sexting is happening.

Most indicated that they would intervene if it was brought to them or they were made aware of the situation. However, it was also mentioned that each case is individual and therefore how you intervene in one situation may change or be different in another. For instance, Claire explained that she would intervene, "particularly if it's in a bullying" way. She added that it depends on the circumstances, for example if a student reports that someone "sent a nude picture" then she would "have a conversation" with that student. However, if a student does not want to disclose what has happened or does not want to talk about it then she will not force the matter. She mentioned that it is "a duty to protect" and she explained,

I can't force the student to tell me this is what they've done or this is what they're involved in but I can say you know it has come to my attention and I'm a little bit worried about this... and I wanna make sure you're informed, I wanna make sure you're making good decisions.

Anna indicated that she always assists students that are dealing with, or going through, a sexting situation. She said, "We'll definitely support the students during and after." She explained this further:

I find that we have to intervene if the students are both in our school. If one of the individuals is outside of the school then we would do some counselling with the

student around what they can do. If both students are in the school or if there are multiple students within the school that an incident has occurred around then we'll do an education piece...through either counselling, individual counselling, or having a couple students in with me to do some relationship counselling.

Rachel and Tessa both mentioned the use of counselling and check-ins with students. Rachel explained, "We would figure out what the student needed going forward... counselling or check in... it really did depend on the kid." Likewise, Tessa responded saying; "Yeah I would do check-ins with the student to make sure they're okay." Adding,

If I knew one student in particular was impacted more than others then I would definitely meet with that one person. A lot of times I meet individually anyways and then we pull a group together unless I know... it depends on the situation really...most times it's individual and if one person is more impacted than another then it's definitely individual counselling for that person.

Maggie recounted instances of situations where other staff members have brought it to her attention or when students "have stepped forward with concern." She described an example of mediation,

Usually we make it private...as school counsellor they come to my office so no one really knows why they're coming...because students come to my office for a million different reasons. I usually start the conversation with, do you know why I wanted to speak with you today...and they usually say well yeah. So we start to talk about it and then we move on from there in that session around what was

going on in that moment... what led you to that kind of decision and then we try to look at other more effective decisions that would prevent that in the future.

Participants acknowledged the role they play in supporting students going through difficult situations involving sexting. They demonstrated how and when intervention can be warranted. Interventions ranged from informal conversations and check-ins to individual and group counselling.

**Collaborations.** This subtheme examines how school counsellors pool resources in order to perform job requirements. Working in such an individual role, I wanted to find out whether school counsellors rely on other professionals or utilize the expertise of other professionals to assist them in dealing with sexting incidents. Participants were asked to describe how they collaborate with others in the school or counselling field around sexting behaviour.

Most mentioned collaborations with other counsellors, involvement with administration and outside agencies such as social workers and police. Maggie stated, “I do have a couple other school counsellors that I talk to for thoughts, suggestions and different things.” She also mentioned police involvement suggesting that it is more “to provide support rather than ramifications.” Claire indicated, “There’s a lot of consulting that happens” between teachers, counsellors, educational psychologists and “other SEOs involved in the district.” Rachel explained how teachers are usually involved in the educational aspect of sexting but not usually in “specific situations with students.” She also noted that other mental health professionals and outside agencies would sometimes be involved, as well as, the “educational psychologist... depending on the student.” She added, “I think a lot of times... in Newfoundland...we need to work on being more team

based. For example, in a lot of those situations it's not just the child impacted it's the whole family and the community."

Anna explained that she involves administration when outside agencies like the police or social workers need to be contacted or when it might be "a discipline issue." She explained, "Whenever I have a situation where you know a student comes to me with a sexting situation and they either feel like they're in danger or someone is going to send something that they sent them." She added, "...Very often I'll ask the student's permission and likely they'll want them involved anyways because they'll be worried about what's going to happen as a result of what is done." Similar to Maggie, Anna also commented on the involvement of police in the matter,

One thing that I did get the impression of is that they're not looking to punish a young girl that sent a picture of herself even though technically they're sending child pornography. They try to say to students...yes it is illegal and there could be ramifications of it but... they would rather a student come to them and say look I made a mistake and try to help them.

All in all, this theme revealed participants' duties as school counsellors with attention to the sensitive aspects involved in dealing with sexting, how they operate and how this type of work impacts them personally and professionally. Evidently, there is much to be considered by school counsellors when working with students in connection to sexting.

### **Theme 3: School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting**

The third theme centralizes on several considerations that accompany the sexting behaviour that school counsellors encounter when working with students about sexting.

This theme was more complex as many of the aspects were intertwined. Nevertheless, certain features were repeated throughout participant interviews indicating the significance of their presence. While it was difficult to narrow subthemes in this category, the following were areas I identified as most prominent: (1) Pressure, (2) Cyberbullying (3) Trust, (4) Gender, Age and Relationships, (5) Attitudes, Influences and No Exceptions, and (6) Split Second Decisions and Belonging.

**Pressure.** The first subtheme discusses participants' restatement of the notion of pressure when it comes to students participating in sexting. Most participants specifically mentioned the word 'pressure' during their interviews revealing that they feel many of the students they have worked with have been pressured to send a sext(s). They described a direct pressure in which students are blatantly asking other students to take a sexually explicit photo of him or herself and send it to them. In addition to employing pressure to their request, some are sending threats if the other student does not comply.

Anna gave reference to students receiving a "direct pressure." She said, "I think that they're hearing send me nudes of yourself, send me pictures I'm not going to tell anybody, I'm not going to show anybody." Claire disclosed that in her experience "There seems to be a lot of pressure from the male to the female to be sending nudes." She noted that she has not worked a lot with male students; typically it is the female students that approach her when something is happening. She also stated,

They don't beat about the bush. They actually ask, can you send me a picture of your vagina or can you send me a picture of your breasts. And of course they're using the slang words for those... but often times it is they're pleading. I've seen

texts where they're pleading, please send me a text of your boobs or your tits or sometimes, it's really vulgar... it's not nice.

In addition, Claire gave an example of the pressure she has witnessed between students. She explained how one student she works with just recently got a boyfriend and is extremely excited about this new relationship. She was aware of the new courtship but was then informed by the student's best friend that she was being pressured to sext. This has placed her in an awkward position because she is bound by confidentiality but is also concerned for the well-being of the student. She described that she is "skirting" around the situation,

Ok... I know you got a new boyfriend because I was privy to that information but you know I'm just having the conversation about respecting yourself and everything but on the other side in my other ear from the best friend I'm hearing that there is an extreme amount of pressure...like daily, hourly...texting saying please c'mon now, maybe tonight you can just do it.

Maggie recounted, "I've certainly seen some pressure." She described a situation in which a boyfriend had asked for a picture and the girl's friends were encouraging and telling her to send him a picture. She relayed, "I see it within the couples, not every couple but certainly some couples. I see the messages where it's like, just c'mon send me one of those pics." Similarly, Rachel spoke about "peer pressure." She said,

Yeah like I don't know that at that age... I mean I don't feel like at that age they're doing it because they want to experiment or anything like that... I think they're doing it because they want to fit in and everyone else is...there is a lot of pressure at this point in time.



She explained this further saying,

Because there's so much peer pressure...it's a challenging time for kids anyways... figuring out who they are and a big part of it is fitting in and I think that at that age... I've seen it really hurt kids... I think that at the end of the day that's what we're trying to avoid.

In short, participants recognized that some students are using persuasion and influence to elicit sexts from others. How that pressure is perceived is an important component in determining how students will respond. It is also indicative of what students are being faced with and the possible coercion that may be the root of some of these incidents.

**Cyberbullying.** This subtheme analyzes the discussions of participants in identifying sexting behaviours that are interconnected with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can be defined as victimization that occurs through technology mediums. Essentially it is bullying that happens online. As such, there have been situations in which sexting has been extremely hurtful with messages being forwarded on and used in malicious ways.

Claire described this in a general sense indicating,

Usually the females are coming in saying oh I sent a picture to my boyfriend and that's when it causes huge problems cause as we know grades 7, 8, 9 and 10 and even 11 and 12 they're not staying together... so when they break up the boys sometimes get vindictive and those pictures go on to all of their buddies or what have you.

She added,

They do the actual texting and then those conversations are screenshot...they're screenshot and they're sent onward and then of course they are misconstrued...other students are getting their hands on them or females are getting their hands on them...actual fights have been caused by it cause you know somebody gets wind of something or somebody gets a picture that they shouldn't get and then there's, oh we'll meet you down in this section or meet me down in the smoking place or meet me on the parking lot at three or what have you... so there has never been a good outcome from sexting or texting in any way shape or form.

Tessa described a case in which “the girls were threatened if they didn't send a picture then they would find a nude picture on the Internet and say it was them and spread it around.” In this particular case, the threats were activated and pictures were sent around placing those girls in a predicament. Additionally, Tessa explained that the police were involved and girls were interviewed. She said,

Half the girls I spoke to denied it. They don't want the embarrassment of and even the girls I spoke to originally denied... until I kind of like, I think I know the difference of that and anyways they came around... but they're embarrassed and they don't want to have their phone taken away because there's going to be some consequence at home... and they don't want the boy to get in trouble because they still like the boy.

In sum, participants believed that sexting can be used as a coaxing method, as a form of manipulation, to ruin reputations, and to hurt another person. These cyberbullying situations can be difficult for students to maneuver. The online world can

take away students' individual power and control if students are placed in these troublesome predicaments.

**Trust.** This subtheme considers the trust that occurs between senders and receivers in a sexting exchange. Participants repeatedly mentioned the word trust, suggesting that it is a large part of the problem in sexting practices. Through their discussion they demonstrated that adolescents are quick to put their trust in someone they believe cares about them at a certain point in time or someone they feel would never try to hurt them. Unfortunately, things change and they are sometimes left in a very vulnerable position.

Tessa indicated that the "amount of trust" between individuals is a concerning aspect within the whole phenomenon of sexting. She commented,

You're going out with a boy for two weeks and you're going to marry that guy and you've got the name of your kids picked out...you send the pictures because oh we're going to be together forever and ever...but two weeks after that.

She denoted that "a lot of times, it is forwarded on." She explained that there are times where there's a breakup between a girl and a boy and the pictures that were sent during the relationship are kept at bay but she also admitted, "I've seen so many times where when they break up and it's sent on because you're mad at the partner or whatever."

Rachel reflected,

I just think that you're so young at that point in time and my concern is that you're so young and there's nothing wrong with being... I guess trying things or being open minded or experimental or whatever but when you're that age it's that you don't necessarily trust the people that you're with long term.

Similarly, Anna referenced students trusting someone at a “particular moment in time” because they believe “that relationship is going to either last forever and that they can trust that person or that that person is never going to betray them.” She further explained that then

A few months down the road, maybe a few weeks down the road, they have a falling out and then they have sent pictures of themselves to this person who they’re not on good terms with and...they’re fearing is going to distribute that to whoever they want.

She expressed it as “a naivety” in which students place their trust in others and think, “that person’s never going to do that.” Then unfortunately, “that’s not the case.”

**Gender, Age and Relationships.** When it comes to the sexting behaviours of students’ age, gender and relationships were mentionable items during interviews. For that reason, this subtheme focuses on these three characteristics. For most of the participants it is most common to see and deal with incidents involving females. To further explain, situations in which females have sent someone a sexually explicit photo of themselves and then those photos are forwarded on to others. Participants also noted how consenting relationships play into sexting practices and the effects sexting is having on the age of student participants.

Tessa described the sexts females are sending as photos of private body parts such as “top shots” or “boob shots”, often without the girl’s face or head in the picture. The most common situations involve exchanges from girls to boys, which as a result are shared among others. Exchanges between boyfriend and girlfriend in consenting relationships are also popular among students. This seems to be apart of normal

behaviour as they put their trust into the people they are with. However, many of these incidents occur once a relationship dissolves and pictures are sent around in a harmful way. Most participants also indicated the seriousness of such activities and how the behaviour seems to be trickling younger and younger.

Tessa explained that much of what she encounters involves “junior girls.” For Tessa, junior refers to students in junior high, which typically includes grades 7, 8, and 9. However, most of what she witnessed included girls in grades 8 and 9. She did note that initially she was dealing with it mostly across high school girls, grades 10, 11, and 12. She has noticed that over the “last many years” the behaviour is “getting younger.” She explained, “So the issues that we’ve only had in senior high are now creeping down into the junior high (8 and 9) and even they’re starting now in 6 and 7.” Comparatively, most of Maggie’s experiences have included females’ sexting to their “boyfriend or significant other.” She mentioned, “Usually I’ve seen it as a way to impress or a way to ... a lot of cases it’s a gift for their boyfriend...to make them feel better that day or whatever.” She also addressed the topic of age stating, “That’s what blows my mind... is that issues that I was dealing with in my previous school at grade 9, I’m now dealing with these same issues in grade 6 students.” She went on to say, “I’m just like oh my goodness this is scary. It is because it’s just the realization that things are getting younger and younger.” Rachel reported that these behaviours are considered “common place” and are often occurring between those in “consenting relationships.” Similarly, Tessa mentioned,

I know that boys have sent girls pictures...but I don’t know if it was because they were asked for pictures or and there’s also the relationship piece too. Boyfriend

and girlfriend are just sharing pictures and that's quite common... that's very, very common.

As opposed to the others, Anna communicated,

Since I started full time in the high school setting... definitely have seen a lot of situations where students are sending nude pictures of themselves over text or over social media. I've had multiple situations where that has happened. I've seen it in the junior high setting as well when I was there but maybe not as much as I'm seeing it at the high school level.

Interestingly, she also explained a situation she encountered involving individuals in a relationship. A picture had been forwarded and the girl divulged that she had previously sent a photo a couple years earlier and also recently one to her current boyfriend. Anna explained, "We did question the boy who she had sent the picture to and he indicated that no I didn't send out her picture because I've already deleted it." He went on to explain that they "had made a deal" and each sent a picture so that "if they ever broke up or if there was ever an issue they both had a picture." However, the photo the girl had sent in a previous year had been kept by at least one individual and was being used against her again at this time.

While most of the experiences identified by participants involved the sending of sexts by females, some participants did note the involvement of males in sexting. Tessa stated,

It's important to know that boys do it too and ask for pictures too and I think that's important because a lot of times when people think about sexting they think it's just boys asking girls. That's a big one because boys can be just as vulnerable.

Likewise, Anna indicated,

What I'm also seeing now is a pattern of boys are also sending pictures of themselves to girls as well of their private parts or whatever. That it's not just girls, which I think might be a misconception that it's always the girl sending a picture of themselves to a boy. But there's some vice versa happening as well.

All in all, participants are attentive to how gender, age and relationships interact and take part in sexting practices. While participants addressed that they predominantly work with girls around sexting, it was recognized that boys are also participants in sending sexts. It was noteworthy that participants pointed out how the age of students' sexting has decreased in recent years. While not all participants have dealt with incidents involving younger students, they did recognize that an increase in personal devices does include younger users.

**Attitudes, Influences and No Exceptions.** This subtheme discusses perceived attitudes of students and influences that may be impacting their decisions to sext. Throughout the interviews, participants weighed in on how students perceive and feel about sexting. They addressed how carefree attitudes and social media influences might be making individuals more perceptible to this behaviour. Interestingly, some participants noted that there are no exceptions when it comes to sexting. Anyone can be influenced or receptive to participating.

Claire reflected, "Like they seem to think that the sexting – ah it's no big deal." She said that students are not open about their sexting behaviour and won't "admit" it "until it really affects them." She explained that students talk about the behaviour like it is insignificant and harmless saying, "Oh like miss that's usual, that's like first base now

miss, you don't need to worry about that." Students are unable "To see the seriousness of it, they don't see how it's an invasion of their body...it's like a kiss basically...that's their perception of it." Claire expressed that students are not aware of the magnitude of their decisions until it personally "affects them" and "causes issues." To students "that's usual, normal, acceptable behaviour." In like manner, Maggie said that students "Don't realize the impact of that message until the picture has gotten out" and that it "has to become an issue to affect them." She said that students do not see the danger in their actions and do not consider sexting a "big deal" until a sext becomes public. She considered, "Other than that I don't think...if their sexting wasn't to become public or a friend of theirs, they would never see it as an issue." She also stated the realization, "It's an issue that isn't going away and it's not getting smaller, it's getting bigger." Tessa also weighed in stating that students "Only regret it when someone finds out."

Anna mentioned the impact that outside influences may be having on students. I think they're seeing a lot of things on social media and they're seeing a lot of things on TV. They are unrealistic expectations and they're seeing a lot of celebrities out there – you know – sex tapes and nude pictures of themselves, posting on social media half naked pictures of their private parts... and they start to think well this is the norm, this is the expectation, this is what I should do. Rachel was of a similar opinion stating that, "Popularity and outside influences are playing into it." She continued, "Are you doing it for you or are you doing it for somebody else? There are so many other factors to what's going on... it scares me to hear."



Additionally, most participants emphasized that sexting behaviours do not discriminate amongst students. While certain attitudes and factors may influence which students choose to take part in sexting, ultimately, participants noted that any student is susceptible to this type of behaviour.

Tessa asserted, “Those involved in sports, involved in this, involved in that, strong academically, makes no difference. It can be anyone.” Comparably, Claire remarked, “So even the best kid who knows that it’s wrong and knows that it probably won’t end well...probably do so to keep the boyfriend happy...and good kids from good families.” Rachel described a situation in which a girl got caught up in a sexting incident. She explained, “She was like a wonderful kid and the impacts that it had on her were... she isolated herself... she ended up really struggling in her life for a period of time...that type of thing was very, very detrimental to her.”

In short, while participants acknowledged that some students may be more vulnerable than others, it is the entire student population that should be targeted regarding sexting behaviours. That regardless of social position or academic performance, any youth or young adult may be impressionable. Students may see sexting as normalized behaviour and therefore have certain expectations regarding what is appropriate behaviour between friends, individuals and romantic partners. As such, an inability to take possible ramifications seriously until a sext has gone wrong may be setting students up for distressing experiences.

**Split Second Decisions and Belonging.** Split second decisions can be a precursor for unfavourable consequences in high-risk situations. As sexting can be considered risky behaviour, particularly for adolescents and young adults, the fact that these decisions are

often impulsive is concerning for school counsellors. In addition, participants noted the apparent need for belonging that is visible among students. This desire for belonging may be influential in increasing a student's willingness to text even when the risks are obvious.

Maggie asserted that one-second decisions can become life altering, "It's tempting but it's also way too accessible...and the regrets are... you can't change that, it's one second." She mentioned the role of social media and the need to belong to someone. "Our use of social media of... I wanna belong or my boyfriend asked for this or it's his birthday, I'm gonna do this...your life can very much be changed and altered." Tessa echoed Maggie's sentiments,

I find that our generation of teenagers now, there's a need to have somebody. I feel like so many of them...it's not okay to be alone. They need somebody, some appreciation, some validation, somebody to tell them that they're pretty, cool, sexy, whatever.

Comparably, Claire also mentioned "split second decisions" and "the need to belong",

It didn't need to happen and had that student only been aware of the damage it could cause...because really ultimately they make the decision in a split second and they take the picture and in a split second it's sent. It's not until afterwards that they realize the ramifications of what they've just done, particularly if it goes onward. I find that a lot of it is actually connected to them wanting to belong or wanting to belong to somebody else.

Rachel explained her concerns about students that are vulnerable.

My fear is for the girls and the males that are being victimized by it who didn't necessarily think something, especially the ones with lower self-esteem. They send the pictures because they really want someone to like them and then the picture goes viral and they're severely impacted.

Anna referred to student sexting behaviours and attachment issues. She suggested that in many cases there is an "attachment concern from an early age." She explained,

Whether one of the parents has left the home and is not in the picture any more or the student had to leave the home for various reasons... there is a detachment from a parent or both of the parents.

Anna explained that in the cases she has been involved with she has observed "a link" between students involved in sexting incidents and home situations in which "one or both of the parents are not in the picture or the relationship between the principal figures has been strained, it seems like it's just more likely to occur. It's just what I've noticed."

Altogether, this theme described a variation of factors that may contribute to the sexting practices of students. Participants indicated the roles that these factors have played in their own experiences working with students. As such, these characteristics may be fundamental in obtaining a greater understanding and in providing effective support and education to adolescents and young adults.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This chapter has presented and explored the results of the study. Primarily the results displayed the views and experiences of five school counsellors as they relate to the sexting behaviours of students. Three predominant themes were presented with underlying subthemes. The first theme analyzed participants' perspectives on the

prevention and preparation that is occurring across school professionals, students, parents, and within schools. In the second theme, I analyzed the reactions, impacts and introspections provided by participants with regards to encountering and supporting students involved in sexting incidents. Within the third and final theme, I analyzed the perceived aspects or characteristics associated with student sexting practices as identified by participants. The next chapter will provide a discussion of these themes.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

This chapter will provide an assessment of the major findings presented in the results chapter as well as discussion of the primary research question and sub-questions. Furthermore, the literature will be revisited to demonstrate connections between the results and previous studies. The discussion will adhere to the organization of the preceding chapter with a similar focus on the three major themes and their subthemes.

1. Prevention and Preparation
2. School Counsellors' Roles, Responsibilities and Introspection
3. School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting

### **Theme 1: Prevention and Preparation**

To start, I discuss participant perspectives on sexting prevention and how prepared schools are to address sexting. Resembling the results section, the following four subthemes are considered: (1) Preventative Measures for Students, (2) Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors, (3) Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness and (4) Advice for Parents. Moreover, this theme most related to the following sub-questions: (1) Do school counsellors feel prepared and equipped to handle incidents involving sexting behaviours? (2) What are the strategies currently in place for dealing with an increased use of personal devices in schools?

**Preventative Measures for Students.** The biggest piece of prevention mentioned by participants was the development of the Digital Citizenship sessions derived from the Safe and Caring Schools Initiative (Safe and Caring Schools, 2017). All participants recognized this initiative as a current requirement within schools but went on to reveal its associated drawbacks. While the mandate is more specifically geared towards safe media

use in general, with a built in sexting component, participants in this study tended to see some degree of ineffectiveness with this approach. Participants raised some concerns about this digital citizenship approach such as some of the lesson content being insufficient to address sexting behaviour and difficulty engaging students in the curriculum delivery. Research has shown that such challenges are not uncommon when targeting middle and high school students (Smith, 2016). Smith (2016) reviewed multiple anti-bullying intervention programs that have been developed over the last 30 years. His analysis showed that while programs are seeing some favourable outcomes, this is mainly among primary and elementary school students. Smith (2016) suggested that schools pick and choose intervention strategies that fit their current situation. Ringrose et al. (2012) suggested that adolescents prefer dialogue and observing footage that is realistic, relevant and current to their lives. Films that elicit emotion and have shock value can be particularly thought provoking for youth (Ringrose et al., 2012). However, Ringrose et al. (2012) suggested that schools must be careful to use material and films that are “gender sensitive and non-moralizing” (p.55) and do not shame the victim as this has been seen in some sexting resources. Moreover, a study by Allen (2005) considered adolescents’ views on how to improve their sex education. Students identified interactive and practical lessons as most engaging. Participants in the current study highlighted the significance and importance of effective education for students in order to be able to effectively address sexting behaviours. Participants felt that improvements could be made on how sexting education was happening in their schools.

Participants noted that prevention work was important in schools, however as acknowledged by two participants, such prevention work is often inhibited by time

restraints. Participants seemed to view time restraints and even access to students as substantial challenges in ensuring students are receiving adequate and appropriate preventive measures around sexting behaviour. Furthermore, participants pointed out that if these lessons are only provided once a year and not delivered to students in engaging ways then such lessons run the risk of not being as effective as they need to be. A study by Cross et al. (2016) explored the effects of implementing a school-wide Cyber Friendly Schools Program (CFS) to target cyberbullying. Teachers were responsible for implementing nine modules, however time restraints were identified as a challenge and on average only three out of nine modules were covered. Therefore the shortage of time and attention available for implementation of additional education can have an impact on the effectiveness of the program (Cross et al., 2016).

Participants insist that topics such as sexting need to become embedded within the curriculum so as to become part of regular education and conversation. Schultze-Krumbholz, Schultze, Zagorscak, Wolfer and Scheithauer (2015) assessed the effectiveness of a cyberbullying program called Media Heroes. They found that implementation of the longer version consisting of 10 sessions had a stronger impact than the version with only four sessions. Johnson et al.'s (2018) study of Canadian adolescents indicated that general sexting lessons or lessons geared towards sharing sexts did not lower sexting rates. In fact, those that had received education lessons were more likely to sext. This may indicate that schools are more likely to implement a lesson when an incident has occurred, therefore sexting education might be more effective as a regular topic in school curriculum.

In addition, participants felt that individuals providing sexting education to students would benefit from specific training on delivery and implementation. Cross et al.'s (2016) study demonstrated that teachers require proper education about cyberbullying as many noted "lack of confidence" (p.175) as one of the main reasons for not implementing all modules. In addition, Ringrose et al. (2012) pointed out that some teachers may feel embarrassed discussing matters like sexting. This discomfort warrants concern, as it is important for students to have open dialogue opportunities with adults to discuss issues involving sexuality (Ringrose et al., 2012).

My next sub-question was answered through participants talking about their experiences with prevention in schools. Participants talked about how prevention programs such as education for safe social media use in the form of assemblies, posters, or lessons, have been used to address students' increased use of personal devices in schools. However, while these strategies were identified, the effectiveness of such measures is still largely unknown. Research has shown that whole school programs are less effective than programs targeting smaller groups of students (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2010). Consequently, research is suggesting that sexting education target small groups including groups divided by gender (Johnson et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012). The opportunity to separate genders may help address gender dynamics and stereotypes, while smaller numbers may help increase comfort and awareness of actual sexting statistics (Johnson et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012).

Participants in the current study identified the importance of more prevention and also the importance of structure and clarity regarding policies and strategies to curb dangerous use of personal devices in schools. Hachiya (2017) denoted that administration



does play an important role as they do have a responsibility to educate themselves and their staff on the legal implications, protocols and most effective strategies for dealing with sexting. Without proper education, Hachiya (2017) suggested that schools run a risk of causing unintended harm should a sexting incident not be handled in the most appropriate manner. Therefore, more information is needed in order to determine which strategies are most advantageous in addressing the overwhelming presence of personal devices in schools.

**Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors.** All participants reported they would like availability of professional development opportunities targeting student sexting behaviour. Although each participant had dealt with sexting among students on multiple occasions, none had received instruction on how to provide prevention or support to students beyond their general counselling education. Research shows a lack of training, interventions and programs specific to sexting. Johnson et al. (2018) recommended “more targeted support” (p.48) for educators and parents in order to properly address sexting with students. Participants in the current study felt that sexting has become a serious and common activity among students. As such, they highlighted the importance of training in this area.

It is notable that all participants in the current study reported taking initiative to learn more about sexting behaviour such as through research and support from other professionals in the field. As part of this study, I was interested in knowing whether school counsellors feel prepared and equipped to handle sexting incidents among students. Participants reported feeling more prepared now in their role to deal with sexting matters, upon their own learning. However, it is important to note that

participants acknowledged a lack of current professional development opportunities and that they noted some concerns for addressing student sexting behaviour in the most effective manner.

In general, school counsellors receive training in “crisis prevention and intervention, problem solving, and positive behaviour supports” (Aldridge, Davies & Arndt, 2013, p.14). As such, school counsellors have a broad-range of knowledge that may be helpful in counselling and supporting students affected by sexting (Aldridge et al., 2013). However, training that is specific to sexting and the current technology that students are using would be beneficial for school counsellors and school professionals (Ringrose et al., 2012). Ringrose et al. (2012) suggested that mediation through technology should become a fixed part of training for teachers and mental health professionals, as well as more education on the connections between students’ real and virtual lives.

Currently, there is a shortage of research with regards to counsellor preparation for sexting and school personnel prep for sexting. Accordingly, offering school counsellors professional development in this area may help counsellors feel supported and further prepared to prevent and address such behaviour.

**Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness.** Participants felt schools could be better prepared to address student sexting. According to participants, some schools have experienced more sexting incidents than others and the circumstances of each situation may differ. Nonetheless while some preparation is present, participants recognized that more preparation is necessary. Notable was the call for more training for all school professionals, including teachers and administration. Research shows that 50% of school

personnel do not feel equipped to deal with incidents like cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2015). Comparatively, research also shows that youth are often hesitant to report instances of cyberbullying to adults. They feel that adults are unable to understand or help the situation (Li et al., 2015). Studies like Aldridge et al. (2013) indicated that schools should develop protocols to follow involving steps like reporting sexting incidents to administration. Despite that, providing educators with knowledge and training specific to sexting may help them feel more comfortable in confronting sexting issues (Johnson et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012). Accordingly, the effectiveness of intervention programs for bullying has been linked with proper training of school staff (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Be that as it may, Johnson et al. (2018) advised that resources created for educators need to be evaluated for their effectiveness before implementation.

**Advice to Parents.** A knowledge gap between parents and children was identified as an obstacle when it comes to technology use. This gap may be creating an environment in which children are able to participate in sexting behaviours unbeknownst to their parents. Participants urged parents to become more involved in the digital practices of their children, including more conversations, monitoring, and education. They called for parents to become more aware and educated on the subject of sexting and social media use, as well as, to become part of educating their own children on the risks involved in online socializing.

In a study by Mishna, Saini and Solomon (2009) students reported that they ‘find ways around’ their parents and school rules with regards to technology. Their findings revealed that, “The students unanimously depicted adults as oblivious to the cyber world...” (Mishna et al., 2009, p.1225). Mishna et al. (2009) contend that the disparity

that exists between adolescents and their parents' technological knowledge can limit the protection parents provide. This gap can increase the dangers youth encounter when using technology.

School counsellors and schools can play a role by opening communication between school and home, providing education to parents and incorporating programming that includes parent supports (Johnson et al., 2018). Research shows that while many youth had rules at home regarding respect online, many did not have any rules about sexting (Johnson et al., 2018). Ringrose et al. (2012) found that youth expressed more interest and comfort in discussing topics like sexting with their parents rather than teachers. In addition, two out of three adolescents communicated a desire for parents to discuss and take interest in their online lives with only one out of three disregarding parental views of online safety (Ringrose et al., 2012). Two thirds of youth that faced disputes online sought assistance from their parents and found it useful (A Guide for Trusted Adults, 2017). Therefore providing parents, teachers and counsellors with proper education, useful interventions and ways to support students is essential in opening the line of communication with adolescents (Li et al., 2015).

Ultimately, it is apparent that there are improvements that can be made to better address the topic of sexting. Research proven effective strategies for educating students, school staff, parents and community members are necessary moving forward. The important role that all stakeholders have in contributing to the awareness, education and support of student sexting practices seems imperative for the safety of all involved.

One participant mentioned the power of teamwork in these situations. That is, suggesting that schools, parents, and community members need to work together in order

to manage, support and help reduce the harmful incidents of sexting that are occurring. Cross et al. (2016) contend that schools alone are not responsible for managing behaviours like cyberbullying, it is an endeavor for the whole community. Similarly, research extends implications and recommendations of greater awareness and knowledge of sexting for parents, school staff and the general public (Johnson et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012).

Aside from parents, teachers may be the next important adult in an adolescent's life (A Guide for Trusted Adults, 2017). Ringrose et al. (2012) suggested that teachers can gain credibility by being knowledgeable about the technology youth are using. As important figures in the lives of youth, parents and teachers need to be able to discuss sexting behaviours (Johnson et al., 2018). Important members such as school counsellors, principals, law enforcement and mental health professionals can help guide and support each other as well as parents and teachers by obtaining more sexting specific education (Aldridge et al., 2013). Together, they can provide students with the tools and guidance to face sexting issues.

## **Theme 2: School Counsellors' Roles, Responsibilities and Introspection**

Within this section, I discuss the major duties of school counsellors when addressing student sexting. The subsequent five subthemes are considered: (1) Reactions and Impacts, (2) Confidentiality, (3) Risk Assessment, (4) Intervention and (5) Collaborations. In conjunction, these subthemes address the following sub-questions: (1) How do school counsellors' describe the impact sexting has on students and schools? (2) How are school counsellors' impacted by sexting behaviours among students? (3) Do

school counsellors assess for risk when working with students around sexting and how do they feel about having to breach confidentiality?

**Reactions and Impacts.** All participants reported having a negative reaction towards student sexting, with two participants describing feelings like a “sinking stomach.” Despite participants reporting such negative feelings regarding sexting incidents, they do recognize that it is part of their job. As such, they try their best to move forward with students in the best way possible. Therefore, while their reactions are never positive, they try to use their knowledge and insight to provide a supportive approach. It is these personal impacts that seem to prompt school counsellors to take charge and help students deal with problematic experiences.

Nugent and Jones (2009) described empathy as a key component in the client-counsellor relationship. When school counsellors are sensitive to the feelings of their students and recognize the impacts that experiences like sexting can have on student well-being, this can enable greater understanding. Expressing and experiencing genuine feelings of distress speaks to participants’ ability to empathize with their students. The fact that participants recognize the immense feelings and repercussions that can accompany sexting incidents is essential in effectively supporting students (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Part of their role is to guide students through dealing with emotional and social challenges. Helping students move forward by developing life skills such as decision making, evaluating risks, and taking responsibility for their actions can all be applied to working with students around sexting behaviours (Coy & Sears, 2000).

**Confidentiality.** Participants described how the subject of confidentiality is incorporated into their work with students and how they feel about having to breach

confidentiality. All participants demonstrated how the limits of confidentiality are an important discussion piece in their sessions with students. Additionally, most participants recognize breaching confidentiality as a sometimes-necessary part of their job. Breaching confidentiality may mean that counsellors report the incident to authorities, administration, parents and/or social workers. These results are consistent with the findings of a study of Canadian school counsellors from Nova Scotia. Confidentiality and its limits were noted as vital components when beginning a counselling relationship with a student (Lehr, Lehr & Sumarah, 2007).

Some participants indicated the serious and harmful impacts of sexting to justify their reasons for breaching confidentiality. Others explained that they often remind students of their legal responsibilities and inform them that they will be breaking confidentiality. A study by Moyer and Sullivan (2008) found that among school counsellors the decision to break confidentiality was associated with the level of danger of risk-taking behaviours. Behaviours considered of higher intensity increased the likelihood of breaching confidentiality (Moyer & Sullivan, 2008). Two participants mentioned that students that find themselves in these situations are quite often open to involving others, as they are desperate for help. Also, one participant remarked about contacting social workers. This is indicative of the fact that some students involved in sexting incidents may not reside at home with their parent(s). This may be an important point to consider in the prevention and education of student sexting behaviours.

**Risk Assessment.** The next part of my sub-question was answered as participants discussed the ways they assess for risk when working with students around sexting. Participants deemed sexting as destructive behaviour that can have terrible consequences. For this reason, all participants confirmed that the occurrence of a sexting situation would call for greater attention to suicide risk among those involved.

Research shows that certain behaviours can have extensive emotional impacts on students. A study by Nordahl, Beran and Dittrick (2013) identified the psychological impacts that cyberbullying can have on children and adolescents. Cyberbullying has been linked with depression, anxiety and externalizing behaviours. This is important information for school counsellors as they must be aware of the effects certain behaviours may have on students (Nordahl et al., 2013). Similarly, Dake et al. (2012) and Sevcikova (2016) found connections between sexting and emotional health problems. For Dake et al. (2012) this included the presence of suicidal ideations and attempts, symptoms of depression, cyberbullying, and being a victim of physical violence. As a result, the emotional vulnerability of students is an important aspect to consider when evaluating risk in sexting situations, as is understanding connections between emotional health issues and increased engagement in sexting.

**Intervention.** Participants discussed intervention strategies and situations in which it is appropriate to intervene. All suggested that they would intercede in situations in which students report that they are involved in a sexting incident. If parents' call to report an incident then it is likely they will recommend that they contact authorities. However, counsellors will still step in to support the student(s). Situations, such as, other students reporting a sexting incident they are aware of can be more complex. Counsellors



must approach those involved with respect and caution, considering what the student(s) need moving forward. For some students, support may not be required, however for others individual counselling, check-ins, and group counselling may be appropriate and necessary interventions. Furthermore, depending on the effects of the sexting encounter, separate referrals to outside agencies may be required for some students (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Nordahl et al. (2013) suggested that school counsellors are in a unique position to guide and support students affected by behaviours such as cyberbullying. They are also in a position to assist the school in developing strategies necessary for prevention and response to these behaviours (Nordahl et al., 2013). School counsellors should use their leadership to advocate on behalf of students and for interventions that will best serve students, parents and school staff.

**Collaborations.** Participants provided answers for the sub-question concerning school counsellor collaborations with others. Participants identified collaborations mainly involving administration, other school counsellors, educational psychologists and outside agencies. Outside agencies include, but may not be limited to, social workers, police officers, and mental health professionals. For instance, within school, one participant pointed out that administration play an important role if the situation involves a discipline issue. An outside agency like the police are often involved for support purposes rather than ramifications, however they do bring awareness and knowledge of the legal side of things. In this type of role, counsellors appear to rely on the knowledge and resources of others in their field and those that can also support students with negative sexting experiences. As there may be many facets involved in sexting incidents and the impacts can be far-reaching, it may be necessary to get help from various individuals. Nugent and

Jones (2009) suggested that the problems individuals face today are complex and often do require the expertise of distinct individuals. Counsellors often serve as a connection between discovering what students need and the services that can meet those needs.

Van Velsor (2009) suggested that an important aspect of the school counsellor's role is to engage in active collaboration with others such as teachers, administration, parents and students. Throughout their training, counsellors become well acquainted with the importance of relationship building. They develop skills such as active listening, demonstrating empathy and collaborating (Skelton & McBride, 2016). These skills may be particularly useful in helping to bridge contact between schools, homes and communities. Similarly, Nordahl et al. (2013) encouraged school counsellors to reach out for assistance from other adults, like parents. This can create a more community-based level of support. Van Ouytsel, Walrave and Van Gool (2014) suggested that collaborating with outside professionals to provide education to students may be beneficial. A study by Allen (2005) indicated that students prefer engaging in discussions about sexuality with professionals that are knowledgeable and comfortable with the topic. Therefore, this may also apply to the topic of sexting.

### **Theme 3: School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting**

Within the final theme I discuss various characteristics that school counsellors perceive as part of student sexting behaviour. Six subthemes were identified during data analysis to describe features that may constitute, are interconnected with, or have an impact on, the sexting behaviours of students. They are as follows: (1) Pressure, (2) Cyberbullying, (3) Trust, (4) Gender, Age and Relationships, (5) Attitudes, Influences and No Exceptions, and (6) Split Second Decisions and Belonging. They will be

discussed in more detail below. Additionally, this theme considers the two remaining sub-questions: (1) How do school counsellors describe the impact sexting has on students and schools. (2) How do school counsellors describe the interactions that exist between sexting and bullying?

**Pressure.** Participants recounted scenarios involving pressure in which students had been pestered, threatened and sometimes manipulated into sending sexts. From participants' experiences with students, they have witnessed more pressure from boys to girls, with boys sometimes begging for a sexually explicit picture. This pleading can be seen within romantic relationships. In relationships it may be common for an equal exchange, with the boy sending a sext and the girl reciprocating. Additionally, participants had observed situations in which girls were threatened, and upon noncompliance, sexually explicit photos were sent around with their face superimposed on another's body. These consequences can be damaging to an individual's reputation and may influence another person's willingness to send a sext due to intimidation.

These findings correlate with a study by Lippman and Campbell (2014) in which girls felt pressure to sext. Girls often worried if they did not send a sext then boys would not talk to them or like them anymore. As such, sending a sext was seen as something you had to do in order to maintain interest from boys. This pressure may leave girls feeling as though they have no other options to impress or flirt with boys. The girls in this study added justification to this pressure and behaviour by normalizing it. This is similar to findings from Walker et al. (2013) indicating compelling views about the pressure present with sexting. They explained that girls often feel "coerced, threatened or bribed" (p.699) into sending sexts. As well, they mentioned how boys keep the images and

exploit girls when the situation does not go how they want or if relationships dissolve. Also concerning, a study by Wood et al. (2015) found that around a quarter of girls from England engaged in sexting as a result of pressure from their partner. Of those girls, nearly all reported experiencing negative effects. Dake et al. (2012) found a relationship between sexting and physical abuse by a partner. This may suggest that some individuals feel pressured to sext because they do not want to upset their partner. Likewise, in a European study, boys and girls from all countries included were “twice as likely to send a sext if victim of emotional partner violence or online partner violence” (Wood et al., 2015, p.157).

It is noteworthy that Walker et al. (2013) found that boys can also experience pressure from their same-sex peers to display or forward images. This act can have positive or negative consequences on their popularity depending on how they choose to behave. Moreover, a study of South Korean youth noted the importance that peer pressure plays in sending and forwarding sexts, suggesting it as a primary reason for youth participation (Lee, Moak & Walker, 2016). Likewise, results from Walrave et al. (2015) indicated that as peer pressure increases so does adolescents’ willingness to participate in sexting. They noted that peer pressure has a particularly strong influence when those peers are seen as important individuals in their lives.

**Cyberbullying.** It is difficult to find a consistent definition of what constitutes cyberbullying. In a general sense, it is known as hostility that is intentionally aimed at an individual through the means of technology (Kowalski et al., 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). Cyberbullying may include practices such as receiving hateful or offensive messages from another person, being called hurtful or negative names online, receiving

sexts that are unwanted, being threatened online, having someone post something personal about you online or having someone pretend to be you online or in a message (Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009). In the current study, participants described situations in which sexting had been used for revenge and in cruel and unkind ways. Forwarding sexts was seen as particularly damaging as it breaks trust and attempts to taint or ruin reputations. Sexting had been used to manipulate others and to intentionally cause pain. Participants explained outcomes involving angry ex-boyfriends forwarding pictures, individuals labelling and forwarding fake photos to destroy a reputation, and physical altercations.

A study of Peruvian youth indicated that the presence of cyberbullying increased the probability of girls sexting (West et al., 2014). These findings support a study by Mishna et al. (2009) that described different forms of coercion. For instance, boys were described as threatening girls to send sexts or else they would divulge all their secrets. They also described behaviour between friends in which someone becomes mad and disloyal and attempts to ruin the other's reputation. D'Antona et al. (2010) described these behaviours as harmful as they aim to disseminate lies and private messages to bring about humiliation. Besides, once information or pictures have been spread, the truth of the matter becomes irrelevant (D'Antona et al., 2010).

The forwarding or sharing of sexts appears to be the main component in the connection between sexting and bullying. A study by Strassberg et al. (2013) found that nearly a quarter of participants that had received a sext had forwarded it on. They pointed out that it was more common for males to share sexts than females. Once a sext is forwarded, there is a complete loss of control as it is unknown how many recipients will

obtain the message. Strassberg et al. (2013) explained that this could be especially damaging to an individual's psychosocial health. This connection exists because as a sext is forwarded, those present in the messages can become the target of much ridicule and harassment by their peers (Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013). The results of a study by Wood et al. (2015) indicated that forwarding of sexts had negative effects on girls, particularly those from Norway, England and Italy. Boys on the other hand, communicated only positive effects. This may be an indication of the differences that exist between the gender dynamics involved in sexting. In addition, Dake et al. (2012) reported an association between bullying and dating abuse, suggesting that adolescents may be experiencing pressure to sext from romantic partners.

Meanwhile, the results of a study by Jonsson et al. (2014) suggested that, "youths with experience of voluntary sexual exposure online were more likely to both engage in online harassment and to be victims of online harassment themselves" (p.187). They indicated that boys were more likely to engage in sexually explicit presentations of themselves online, suggesting their willingness to "take risks and test their boundaries related to sexuality" (p.187). These findings are interesting as how boys behave within the cyber world may impact or influence the behaviours of girls.

**Trust.** Adolescents and youth are known for their inability to anticipate potential risks (Dake et al., 2012). As such, participants conveyed concern for the confidence that students' place in others. Sending or receiving a sext imparts power and responsibility of those sexts onto other individuals. While an individual may trust that their boyfriend, girlfriend or friend would never misuse that power, they are often unable to consider the possibility that their current situation might change. All of these exchanges are built on

trust, however, people can, and do, take advantage of others in vulnerable positions. Walrave et al. (2015) suggested that adolescents feel that the trust that exists in a relationship is greater than the risks that may be involved. As such, they are willing to take the chance for the good of their relationship (Sevcikova, 2016). Doring (2014) explored the messages of sexting campaigns and found that many do not consider that it is common for adolescents to explore their sexuality. She explained that youth do impose the trust of their relationship onto their sexting behaviours, however targeting students by condemning their trust of another individual may not be sending the right message (Doring, 2014).

**Gender, Age and Relationships.** The results demonstrate that participants oftentimes deal with sexting from the perspective of a girl. Typically they are more privy to situations involving girls and therefore have the most experience working with girls. However, participants did note that boys participate in sexting; they simply do not encounter as many incidents with them. Typically they observe boys asking girls to send a sext or boys sharing sexts. These findings are similar to Temple et al.'s (2012) study in which it was significantly more common for boys to ask for a sext and girls to be asked. Accordingly, Temple et al. (2012) found girls to be more bothered by being asked than boys. Results obtained from both Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) and West et al. (2014) relayed significant gender differences in sexting behaviour, again with more males involved in sexting. As mentioned in the literature review, Baumgartner et al. (2014) related gender differences to country traditionalism. Boys engaged in sexting more than girls in traditional countries, such as Cyprus, Germany and Italy, whereas girls sexted more in Denmark, Finland and Norway. Boys and girls had comparable sexting behaviours in

countries like the Netherlands and Czech Republic. On the contrary, some studies did not report any differences between genders for sexting practices (Dake et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2016).

In terms of age, the findings indicated that participants were concerned about younger students participating in sexting behaviour. Many noticed that sexting issues ever only seen in high school have now made their way to adolescents as young as grade six. As such, they expressed worry and fear that these behaviours along with the increase in children using technology will continue to get younger. This correlates with a study by Mishna et al. (2009) in which adolescent participants divulged their own proof that online communication is becoming part of a much younger generation. They provided examples of their younger siblings assessing technology on a daily basis. Nonetheless, across studies it was most common for older teenagers to engage in sexting (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2015), as was also reported by school counsellors' in the current study. However, while age was a significant predictor of having received a sext message, it was not always a predictor for sending sext messages (Rice et al., 2014). On another note, one study found sexting among younger girls to be associated with emotional and behavioural problems (Sevcikova, 2016). In contrast, while some sexting behaviours among younger boys were also associated with emotional and behavioural problems, the results were more varied, with popularity within same-sex peer groups playing a bigger role (Sevcikova, 2016).

Students' sexting within the context of a relationship accounted for many of the situations encountered by participants. This coincides with a study by Mitchell et al.



(2012) in which the most frequent motivations for sexting included as a joke or prank, as affection within a current relationship or as a way to establish a relationship with someone. Comparably, Wood et al. (2015) identified partner requests, reciprocating sexts from a partner, “to feel sexy/be flirtatious” (p.155) and for a prank as the most common reasons that boys and girls participate in sexting. Notably, in both England and Norway, girls were twice as likely as boys to report their reason as because their partner requested it. In addition, of the 401 girls from England, 43% reported engaging in sexting in order to prove their commitment to their partner. Wood et al. (2015) indicated that sexting for this reason had negative impacts on 74% of those girls. Relationship victimization was also identified as this increased adolescent engagement in sexting. Concurrently, Walrave et al. (2015) indicated that it was more common for adolescents involved in a romantic relationship to report more favourable views and attitudes towards sexting when compared to single youth.

**Attitudes, Influences and No Exceptions.** The results in the current study established that participants perceive student attitudes and influences as contributors to their willingness to participate in sexting. They pointed out that while certain factors like vulnerability and attachment may also contribute to sexting behaviours, any student is susceptible. In addition, the belief that there are no exceptions to the adolescents that participate in sexting may have something to do with the overall attitudes expressed by youth and the influences supplying a sense of normality.

Correspondingly, Wolfe et al. (2016) found that the average number of text messages sent and received throughout a regular day by adolescents is positively linked with sexting. They noted socializing as a predictor; therefore the more teens interact with

one another through a technology medium the greater the chances are for sexting to occur. This may indicate that social influences are at work. Additionally, the more that teens use their phones for social media related purposes or during school hours, there is an increased risk for sexting. As such, routine activity influences the likeliness that a sext will be sent or received. Results from Dake et al. (2012) corroborate this finding as they found that “in general, the more time spent texting, the more likely students were to engage in sexting” (p.9). West et al. (2014) reported an association between excessive texting and sexting except that it was only significant for boys. Similarly, Baumgartner et al. (2014) found significance between adolescents that use the Internet more regularly and engagement in sexting. They also found higher levels of sensation seeking to have a significant association with sexting. As such, students that text at least 100 times a day are more likely to report sending and receiving sexts (Rice et al., 2014).

Accordingly, when students are aware that their friends are sexting they are more likely to also participate in sexting (Rice et al., 2012). Vanden Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont and Roe (2014) found that both self-perceived other-sex popularity and a need for popularity increased odds for participating in sexting. In fact, as girls’ need for popularity increased, they were twice as likely as boys to participate in sexting. This increase was also noted for girls’ same-sex popularity suggesting that when girls have lower popularity among their same-sex peers, they are more likely to take part in sexting practices. Wood et al.’s (2015) study linked sexting with positive attitudes. They pointed out that more than half of the adolescents that had engaged in sexting reported positive feelings about the behaviour. For instance, positive feelings were experienced by 91% of boys from England versus 41% of girls. As such, it was much more common for girls

from England, Italy and Norway “to report negative feelings after sending a sexual image than boys” (p.154). Lee et al. (2016) found those exhibiting positive attitudes towards sexting behaviours, regardless of gender, were more likely to engage.

Additionally, Van Ouytsel et al. (2017) determined that “positive attitudes towards sexting with a romantic partner” (p.293) plays a role in an adolescent’s willingness to participate in sexting behaviours. Those that have a positive view of sexting within a committed relationship are more likely to engage in such exchanges. Moreover, they found peers’ opinions of sexting to influence participation. If adolescents believe their friends have a positive attitude towards sexting then this also increases the likelihood of their engagement. What’s more, Van Ouytsel et al. (2017) examined associations with attitudes and engaging in sexting with individuals beyond a relationship status. They reported that adolescents are more likely to engage in sexting outside the constraints of a romantic relationship when their attitudes reflect a positive stance of such behaviour. Nonsocial reinforcement also influenced the probability of sexting outside relationship statuses as adolescents may seek practices that elicit pleasure and thrill. A study by Walrave et al. (2015) demonstrated that certain elements contributed to adolescents’ inclination to sext. For instance, if adolescents believe others are sexting, they want to gain popularity or they believe that they resemble those that are sexting, then they will likely also engage in it. Walrave et al. (2015) suggested “perceiving oneself as being similar to these individuals or wanting to resemble this kind of person, increases likelihood” (p.804). In addition, those exhibiting approval towards sexting practices show a greater willingness to participate. As such, attitudes are of importance as they may predict future behaviour. This coincides with the findings of the current study and creates

a cause for concern as many of the student interactions described by participants indicated that sexting was not considered a big deal by students unless something extensive happened to them personally.

Interestingly, Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) demonstrated a significant connection between sexting and “sensation seeking, depression and experiential thinking styles” (p.1389). Logical thinking styles decreased the chance of adolescents participating in sexting. A study of adolescents by Bobkowski et al. (2016) discovered that as “sexual self-concept increased, the intensity of sexual self-presentation also increased” (p.69). This was also related to an increase in media use for sexual purposes, which may represent social media influences. Males had a tendency to display their profiles in a more sexualized way. This difference might be linked with the evidence of a sexualized double standard between genders as presented by studies in the literature review (Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Thus, how males and females act and present themselves can be received differently. While male reputations may gain more popularity, females may be shamed for presenting in a way that is considered too sexual. Nonetheless, Bobkowski et al. (2016) asserted that, “sexual self-concepts, sexual media diets, and extraversion” (p.73) play a part in how adolescents display their profiles online.

**Split Second Decisions and Belonging.** The findings of participant interviews indicated opinions towards adolescents making impulsive decisions and engaging in sexting to secure a sense of belonging. One participant associated sexting and attachment, suggesting that students that sext are more likely to have detachment issues with their parents. Parents may or may not be in the picture, but there is an indication that the relationship between one or both has been damaged.

A 2014 study by Temple et al. discovered that adolescent sexting had connections with impulse attributes and substance use. Mishna et al. (2009) found a link between sexting and emotionally troubled youth. They inferred that this association might exist as adolescents that are emotionally distressed may be utilizing sexting to gain acceptance and feel wanted by someone. Correspondingly, of significance was the fact that girls more frequently admitted to sexting as a means to get attention from their partner. This was true of girls from Bulgaria, England and Norway (Wood et al., 2015). This may indicate that some girls are doing it as a way to belong or to impress their partner.

In terms of attachment, one study showed significance between adolescents of divorced or separated parents and sexting behaviours (Vanden Abeele et al., 2014). Jonsson et al. (2014) also found this connection, however it was only significant for girls. They indicated that while background factors did not have an effect on engagement in sexting, the parental status of teenage girls did. They noted an increase in sexting when girls resided with only one parent or split their time between two. Jonsson et al. (2014) concluded that these findings might relate to attachment and signify that parental figures play an important role for girls. Thus, they suggested that the increase in sexting might be caused by a need or want to belong. Interestingly, West et al.'s (2014) study noted that when parents set rules regarding sexting, it decreased sexting odds of both boys and girls. However, when parental care was not as present or adolescents viewed their parents as not caring about their sexting behaviours, the probability of engaging in sexting increased for both boys and girls. Moreover, Dake et al. (2012) discerned a significant association between sexting and adolescents residing in homes without both parents. In addition, they found an association with emotional health variables and sexting. Emotional health

included variables such as having been cyberbullied, suicidal ideations and attempts, physical abuse from a partner, and feelings of hopelessness in the past year. Individuals with emotional health challenges may be more vulnerable and therefore more easily led into partaking in sexting exchanges. Dake et al. (2012) suggested that individuals experiencing emotional difficulties may be more susceptible to sexting practices as they yearn to be wanted by another individual.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This chapter has provided a discussion of the current study's findings and how they relate to the current literature. It is evident that sexting incidents are impacting students and schools. There are still many unanswered questions and areas of concern regarding the sexting behaviours of students. From the perspective of school counsellors this study has provided new insight into the various dimensions that constitute sexting among students. Participants provided a different viewpoint regarding the consideration of specific aspects that may contribute to sexting practices such as pressure, attitudes and wanting to belong. They also identified areas, like education, training and communication, which they believe require more research and attention in order to target sexting behaviours more effectively.

## **Chapter 5: Limitations and Recommendations**

This chapter identifies the limitations of the current study, provides recommendations for future research and a final summary of the study.

### **Limitations**

The current study does have limitations. The study is based on a small sample, consisting of only five female voices. The sampling method limited participation to school counsellors from Newfoundland and Labrador. Although there was a mixture of experience from urban and rural backgrounds, not all areas were represented. Therefore, while the perspectives of these five participants add much merit and additional knowledge to sexting research, the findings of this research are not generalizable and should be carefully considered in terms of transferability. As sexting is a research topic that continues to grow and develop, the position that school counsellors hold in regard to sexting is respectable and significant. As such, the current study has offered preliminary research into this aspect.

In addition, one-on-one interviews were conducted over the phone. While this method supported convenience and anonymity, it was more challenging to obtain a complete understanding of participant responses. Non-verbal communication is harder to detect and observations cannot be made in the same way as in-person interviews. Also, while I attempted to paraphrase and question certain words or responses provided by participants, it is possible that I interpreted some things differently from their intention. However, this can be seen as a limitation to all personal communication as we each apply our own understandings and explanations to new information.

Another limitation relates to my interpretation of the results. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are very much an individualized understanding. How I chose to organize, decipher and analyze the data was based on personal preference and was shaped by my insight and convictions. It is therefore reasonable to assume that another researcher might have approached and organized the data in a different way. Therefore, the findings of this study are subjectively influenced and must be received as such.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research on the subject of sexting is an expanding field. The consideration and exploration of professional views in connection with sexting among students is limited. It seems that the current study is one of the first to examine the views of school counsellors in this capacity. Thus, it is apparent that more research is needed at this time. In addition to the perspectives of school counsellors, more research is necessary to explore additional professional views such as teachers, principals and other mental health professionals working with students around sexting.

Although many studies have focused on sexting behaviours through a student lens, there are still aspects that require more research. For instance, some studies have identified powerful variables such as attitudes, personality characteristics, pressure and wanting to belong as contributing to sexting behaviour (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Garcia-Gomez, 2017; Johnson et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013; Wood et al, 2015). However, more research is necessary in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how these variables are influencing and affecting youth and how schools can effectively target these aspects. Belonging and attachment was mentioned by



participants in the current study, as well as in studies by Dake et al. (2012), Jonsson et al. (2014) and Vanden Abeele et al. (2014). While there appear to be some associations between sexting, status of parental figures and a need for affection, these dynamics need to be further explored. These associations may have implications for parents, guardians, social workers and counsellors. In the current study, participants perceived trust as an important aspect of student sexting, however there is little research that focuses on this facet. It would be interesting for studies to explore trust and intimacy as it relates to sexting among youth to determine if these variables do indeed play a significant role in sexting engagement. In addition, some studies indicated cultural differences across sexting behaviours (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2015). This may be an important consideration when creating and implementing interventions, therefore additional research is needed to determine the implications culture may have on educating students around sexting.

As sexting behaviour has entered schools, proper education, response interventions and collaborations are necessary. However, effective resources, interventions and strategies are still undetermined. Research is needed to evaluate resources and programs specific to sexting so that schools can implement research proven strategies. Research should consider educational strategies that confront gender dynamics, stereotypes and sexual double standards (Johnson et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Due to the apparent pressures that students face, they require efficient training and education to help them resist these difficulties. Education must focus on prevention efforts as well as appropriate responses for when a sexting incident has occurred, for both students and staff. Moreover, research should examine the

differences between small group sexting education and large group instruction, as well as, whole school interventions. Also important is the consideration of sexting education that is separated by gender (Johnson, et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012). Exploring the effectiveness of group size, group format and strategies such as assemblies, posters and lessons targeting sexting appears to be an important step in subsequent research. In addition, it appears there is little professional development and training specific to sexting for school counsellors and other school professionals. Therefore, more research is also necessary to determine effective and proper training strategies.

### **Final Summary**

In this study, my primary goal was to determine school counsellors' perceptions of student sexting behaviours. This research was guided by one primary research question and seven sub-questions targeting aspects of school counsellors' roles and self-analysis for which preliminary and exploratory responses were obtained. I adopted a generic qualitative research approach and interviewed five school counsellors. The findings indicated that sexting is perceived as an issue within schools and that more prevention and preparation are necessary to address the needs of students. Participants recognized the importance of a collaborative approach in working with sexting behaviours and identified multiple aspects that may contribute to student sexting behaviours. Overall, participants provided valuable insight and information on the phenomenon of sexting, however further exploration is essential at this time.

## References

- A guide for trusted adults: Practical tips and tools for supporting girls and young women navigating life online. (2017, February 7). Retrieved from <http://ywcacanada.ca/data/documents/00000543.pdf>
- Aldridge, M. J., Davies, S. C. & Arndt, K. J. (2013). Is your school prepared for a sexting crisis? *Principal Leadership*, 13(9), 12-16.
- Allen, L. (2005). 'Say everything': Exploring young people's suggestions for improving sexuality education. *Sex Education*, 5(4), 389-404.  
doi:10.1080/14681810500278493
- Baumgartner, S. E., Sumter, S. R., Peter, J., Valkenburg, P. M., & Livingstone, S. (2014). Does country context matter? Investigating the predictors of teen sexting across Europe. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 34, 157-164.  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.041
- Beran, T., Mishna, F., McInroy, L. B. & Shariff, S. (2015). Children's experiences of cyberbullying: A canadian national study. *Children & Schools*, 37(4), 207-214.  
doi:10.1093/cs/cdv024
- Bobkowski, P. S., Shafer, A., & Ortiz, R. R. (2016). Sexual intensity of adolescents' online self-presentations: Joint contribution of identity, media consumption, and extraversion. *Computers in Human behaviour*, 58, 64-74.  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.009

- Burkett, M. (2015). Sex(t) talk: A qualitative analysis of young adults' negotiations of the pleasures and perils of sexting. *Sexuality & Culture, 19*(4), 835-863.  
doi:10.1007/s12119-015-9295-0
- Cassidy, W., Jackson, M. & Brown, K. N. (2009). Sticks and stones can break my bones, but how can pixels hurt me? Students' experiences with cyber-bullying. *School Psychology International, 30*(4), 383-402. doi:10.1177/0143034309106948
- Chalfen, R. (2009). 'It's only a picture': Sexting, 'smutty' snapshots and felony charges. *Visual Studies, 24*(3), 258-268. doi:10.1080/14725860903309203
- Coy, D. & Sears, S. (2000). The scope of practice of the high school counsellor. In J. Wittmer (2nd ed.), *Managing your school counselling program: K-12 developmental strategies*, pp. 56-67. Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Cross, D., Shaw, T., Hadwen, K., Cardoso, P., Slee, P., Roberts, C., Thomas, L. & Barnes, A. (2016). Longitudinal impact of the cyber friendly schools program on adolescents' cyberbullying behaviour. *Aggressive Behaviour, 42*(2), 166-180.  
doi:10.1002/ab.21609
- Dake, J., Price, J., & Maziarz, L. (2012). Prevalence and correlates of sexting behaviour in adolescents. *American Journal of Sexuality Education, 7*(1), 1-15.  
doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2013.10.007

- D'Antona, R., Kevorkian, M., & Russom, A. (2010). Sexting, texting, cyberbullying and keeping youth safe online. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(4), 523-528.  
doi:10.3844/jssp.2010.523.528
- Delevi, R. & Weisskirch, R. S. (2013). Personality factors as predictors of sexting. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 29(6), 2589-2594.  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.06.003
- Doring, N. (2014). Consensual sexting among adolescents: Risk prevention through abstinence education or safer sexting? *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 8(1). doi:10.5817/CP2014-1-9
- Doyle, C. (2016). Qualitative Research Notes 6100: Campus Fall 2016. Memorial University of Newfoundland. St. John's, NL, Canada.
- Flick, U. (2008). *Designing qualitative research* (Qualitative Research Kit). London: SAGE Publications. doi:10.4135/9781849208826
- Garcia-Gomez, A. (2017). Teen girls and sexual agency: Exploring the intrapersonal and intergroup dimensions of sexting. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(3), 391-407.  
doi:10.1177/0163443716683789
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 42-55.
- Hachiya, R. (2017). Dangers for principals and students when conducting investigations of sexting in schools. *The Clearing House*, 90(5), 177-183.  
doi:10.1080/00098655.2017.1366796

- Hays, D. & Wood, C. (2011). Infusing qualitative traditions in counseling research designs. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 89*(3), 288-295.  
doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2011.tb00091
- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2009). *Bullying beyond the schoolyard: Preventing and responding to cyberbullying*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (Corwin Press).
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2010). Bullying, cyberbullying and suicide. *Archives of Suicide Research, 14*(3), 206-221. doi:10.1080/13811118.2010.494133
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2010). Sexting: A brief guide for educators and parents. Cyberbullying Research Center, 1-4.
- Johnson, M., Mishna, F., Okumu, M. & Daciuk, J. (2018). *Non-consensual sharing of sexts: Behaviours and attitudes of canadian youth* [PDF file]. Ottawa: MediaSmarts. Retrieved from <https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/publication-report/full/sharing-of-sexts.pdf>
- Jonsson, L. S., Priebe, G., Bladh, M., & Svedin, C. G. (2014). Voluntary sexual exposure online among swedish youth – social background, internet behaviour and psychosocial health. *Computers in Human Behavior, 30*, 181-190.  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.08.005
- Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N. & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin, 140*(4), 1073-1137. doi:10.1037/a0035618

- Lee, C., Moak, S., Walker, J. T. (2016). Effects of self-control, and social learning on sexting behaviour among south korean youths. *Youth & Society*, 48(2), 242-264. doi:10.1177/0044118X13490762
- Lehr, R., Lehr, A. & Sumarah, J. (2007). Confidentiality and informed consent: School counsellors' perceptions of ethical practices. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 41(1), 16-30.
- Lenhart, A. (2009) Teens and sexting: How and why minor teens are sending sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images via text messaging. Pew Research Center, 1-16. Retrieved from [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2009/PIP\\_Teens\\_and\\_Sexting.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Teens_and_Sexting.pdf)
- Lester, S. (1999). An introduction to phenomenological research. 1-4. Retrieved from <https://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/F50603E0-41AF-4B15-9C84-BA7E4DE8CB4F/0/Seaweedphenomenologyresearch.pdf>
- Li, J., Craig, W. & Johnson, M. (2015). *Young Canadians' experiences with electronic bullying* [PDF file]. Ottawa: MediaSmarts. Retrieved from <https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/publication-report/full/young-canadians-electronic-bullying.pdf>
- Lippman, J. R. & Campbell, S. W. (2014). Damned if you do, damned if you don't... if you're a girl: Relational and normative contexts of adolescent sexting in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 371-386. doi:10.1080/17482798.2014.923009
- Mattey, B. & Mattey Diliberto, G. (2013). Sexting – It's in the dictionary. *NASN School Nurse*, 28(2), 94-98. doi:10.1177/1942602X12473840

- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Mishna, F, Saini, M. & Solomon, S. (2009). Ongoing and online: Children and youth perceptions of cyberbullying. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*(12), 1222-1228. doi:10.1016 /j.chilyouth.2009.05.004
- Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., Jones, L. M. & Wolak, J. (2012). Prevalence and characteristics of youth sexting: A national study. *Pediatrics, 129*(1), 13-20. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-1730
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 250–260. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250
- Morrow, S. L. (2007). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: Conceptual foundations. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*(2), 209–235. doi:10.1177/0011000006286990
- Moyer, M. & Sullivan, J. (2008). Student risk-taking behaviours: When do school counsellors break confidentiality? *Professional School Counselling, 11*(4), 236-245.
- Nordahl, J., Beran, T. & Dittrick, C. J. (2013). Psychological impact of cyberbullying: Implications for school counsellors. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 47*(3), 383-402.
- Nugent, F. A. & Jones, K. D. (2009). *Introduction to the profession of counselling* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.



- Palladino, B. E., Nocentini, A. & Menesini, E. (2016). Evidence-based intervention against bullying and cyberbullying: Evaluation of the notrap! program in two independent trials. *Aggressive Behaviour, 42*(2), 194-206. doi:10.1002/ab.21636
- Patchin, J. W. & Hinduja, S. (2013). Cyberbullying among adolescents: Implications for empirical research. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 53*(4), 431-432.  
doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.07.030
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Raffanti, M. (2008). Leaders “sitting beside” followers: A phenomenology of teacher leadership. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, 3*(1), 58-68.
- Rawlings, E. & Cowell, N. (2015). Educational psychologists’ experience of taking part in group supervision: A phenomenological study. *Educational & Child Psychology, 32*(3), 51-64.
- Rice, E., Craddock, J., Hemler, M., Rusow, J., Plant, A., Montoya, J. & Kordic, T. (2018). Associations between sexting behaviour and sexual behaviours among mobile phone-owning teens in los angeles. *Child Development, 89*(1), 110-117.  
doi:10.1111/cdev.12837
- Rice, E., Gibbs, J., Winetrobe, H., Rhoades, H., Plant, A., Montoya, J. & Kordic, T. (2014). Sexting and sexual behaviour among middle school students. *Pediatrics, 134*(1), 21-28. doi:10.1542/peds.2013-2991

- Rice, E., Rhoades, H., Winetrobe, H., Sanchez, M., Montoya, J., Plant, A. & Kordic, T. (2012). Sexually explicit cell phone messaging associated with sexual risk among adolescents. *Pediatrics*, *130*(4), 667-673. doi:10.1542/peds.2012-0021
- Richards, H. M. & Schwartz, L. J. (2002). Ethics of qualitative research: Are there special issues for health services research? *Family Practice*, *19*(2), 135-139.
- Ringrose, J., Gill, R., Livingstone, S. & Harvey, L. (2012). *A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': A report prepared for the nspcc* [PDF file]. London, UK: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Retrieved from [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44216/1/\\_Libfile\\_repository\\_Content\\_Livingstone%2C%20S\\_A%20qualitative%20study%20of%20children%2C%20young%20people%20and%20%27sexting%27%20%28LSE%20RO%29.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44216/1/_Libfile_repository_Content_Livingstone%2C%20S_A%20qualitative%20study%20of%20children%2C%20young%20people%20and%20%27sexting%27%20%28LSE%20RO%29.pdf)
- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, *14*(3), 305-323. doi:0.1177/1464700113499853
- Safe and Caring Schools (2017, October 25). Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/safeandcaring/>
- Salmivalli, C. & Poskiparta, E. (2012). Making bullying prevention a priority in finnish schools: The kiva antibullying program. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2012*(133), 41-53. doi:10.1002/yd.20006
- Salmivalli, C., Poskiparta, E., Ahtola, A. & Haataja, A. (2013). The implementation and effectiveness of the kiva antibullying program in finland. *European Psychologist*, *18*(2), 79-88. doi:10.1027/1016-9040/a000140

- Sanjari, M., Bahramnezhad, F., Fomani, F., Shoghi, M. & Cheraghi, M. (2014). Ethical challenges of researchers in qualitative studies: The necessity to develop a specific guideline. *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine*, 7, 1-14.
- Schneider, H. M. (2009) School superintendent dr. michael riggle, a school's role in handling sexting incidents. *Children's Legal Rights Journal*, 29(4), 92-92.
- Schubert, A. & Wurf, G. (2014). Adolescent sexting in schools: Criminalization, policy imperatives, and duty of care. *Issues in Educational Research*, 24(2), 190-211.
- Schultze-Krumbholz, A. Schultze, M., Zagorscak, P., Wolfer, R. & Scheithauer, H. (2016). Feeling cybervictims' pain - The effect of empathy training on cyberbullying. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 42(2), 147-156. doi:10.1002/ab.21613
- Sevcikova, A. (2016). Girls' and boys' experience with teen sexting in early and late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 51, 156-162.  
doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.06.007
- Siegle, D. (2010). Cyberbullying and sexting: Technology abuses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Gifted Child Today*, 32(2), 14-16, 65.
- Simcox, A., Nuijens, K. & Lee, C. (2006). School counsellors and school psychologists: Collaborative partners in promoting culturally competent schools. *Professional School Counseling*, 9(4), 272-277.
- Skelton, S. & McBride, D. L. (2016). Social justice: Do canadian school counsellors play a role. *Canadian School Counselling Review*, 1(1), 20-28.
- Smith, P. (2016). School-based interventions to address bullying. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri*, 4(2), 142-164. doi:10.12697/eha.2016.4.2.06a

- Stauffer, S., Heath, M. A., Coyne, S. M. & Ferrin, S. (2012). High school teachers' perceptions of cyberbullying prevention and intervention strategies. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(4), 352-367. doi:10.1002/pits.21603
- Steeves, V. (2014). Young canadian in a wired world, phase III: Sexuality and romantic relationships in the digital age [PDF file]. Ottawa: Media Smarts. Retrieved from [http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWIII\\_Sexuality\\_Romantic\\_Relationships\\_Digital\\_Age\\_FullReport.pdf](http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWIII_Sexuality_Romantic_Relationships_Digital_Age_FullReport.pdf)
- Strassberg, D. S., Cann, D. & Velarde, V. (2017). Sexting by high school students. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour, 46*(6), 1667-1672. doi:10.1007/s10508-016-0926-9
- Strassberg, D. S., McKinnon, R. K., Sustaita, M. A. & Rullo, J. (2013). Sexting by high school students: An exploratory and descriptive study. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour, 42*(1), 15-21. doi:10.1007/s10508-012-9969-8
- Temple, J. R., Le, V. D., van den Berg, P., Ling, Y., Paul, J. A., & Temple, B. W. (2014). Brief report: Teen sexting and psychosocial health. *Journal of Adolescence, 37*(1), 33-36. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.10.008
- Temple, J. R., Paul, J. A., van den Berg, P., Le, V. D., McElhany, A., & Temple, B. W. (2012). Teen sexting and its association with sexual behaviours. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medical Journal, 166*(9), 828-833. doi:10.1542/peds.2014-1974
- The Standards of Practice for Guidance Counsellors (2014, June). Retrieved from [http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentssupportservices/Guidance\\_Counsellor\\_standards\\_Oct\\_3\\_2014.pdf](http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentssupportservices/Guidance_Counsellor_standards_Oct_3_2014.pdf)

- Tite, R. (2010). ED 6466 Qualitative Research Methods Course Notes. Retrieved from <https://online.mun.ca/d2l/le/content/227830/Home>
- Vanden Abeele, M., Campbell, S. W., Eggermont, S. & Roe, K. (2014). Sexting, mobile porn use, and peer group dynamics: Boys' and girls' self-perceived popularity, need for popularity, and perceived peer pressure. *Media Psychology, 17*, 6-33. doi:10.1080/15213269.2013.801725
- Van Ouytsel, J., Ponnet, K., Walrave, M. & d'Haenens, L. (2017). Adolescent sexting from a social learning perspective. *Telematics and Informatics, 34*(1), 287-298. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2016.05.009
- Van Ouytsel, J., Van Gool, E., Ponnet, K. & Walrave, M. (2014). Brief report: The association between adolescents' characteristics and engagement in sexting. *Journal of Adolescence, 37*(8), 1387-1391. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2014.10.004
- Van Ouytsel, J., Walrave, M. & Van Gool, E. (2014). Sexting: Between thrill and fear - how schools can respond. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 87*(5), 204-212. doi:10.1080/00098655.2014.918532
- Van Velsor, P. (2009). School counsellors as social-emotional learning consultants: Where do we begin? *ASCA Professional School Counseling, 13*(1), 50-58.
- Walker, S., Sanci, L. & Temple-Smith, M. (2013). Sexting: Young women's and men's views on its nature and origins. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 52*(6), 697-701. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.01.026
- Walrave, M., Ponnet, K., Van Ouytsel, J., Van Gool, E., Heirman, W., & Verbeek, A. (2015). Whether or not to engage in sexting: Explaining adolescent sexting

- behaviour by applying the prototype willingness model. *Telematics & Informatics*, 32(4), 796-808. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2015.03.008
- West, J. H., Lister, C. E., Hall, P. C., Crookston, B. T., Snow, P. R., Zvietcovich, M. E., West, R. P. (2014). Sexting among peruvian adolescents. *BMC Public Health*, 14(1), 1-7. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-14-811
- Williford, A., Elledge, L. C., Boulton, A. J., DePaolis, K. J., Little, T. D. & Salmivalli, C. (2013). Effects of the kiva antibullying program on cyberbullying and cybervictimization frequency among finnish youth. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 42(6), 820-833. doi:0.1080/15374416.2013.787623
- Wilson, A. (2015). A guide to phenomenological research. *Nursing Standard*, 29(34), 38-43.
- Wittmer, J. (2000). *Managing your school counselling program: K-12 developmental strategies* (2nd ed.) Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.
- Wolfe, S. E., Marcum, C. D., Higgins, G. E. & Ricketts, M. L. (2016). Routine cell phone activity and exposure to sext messages: Extending the generality of routine activity theory and exploring the etiology of a risky teenage behaviour. *Crime & Delinquency*, 62(5), 614-644. doi:10.1177/0011128714541192
- Wood, M., Barter, C., Stanley, N., Aghtaie, N., & Larkins, C. (2015). Images across Europe: The sending and receiving of sexual images and associations with interpersonal violence in young people's relationships. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 59, 149-160. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.11.005

## Appendix A: Research Recruitment Document



Faculty of Education

Graduate Programs  
St. John's, NL Canada A1B 3X8  
Tel: 709 864 8553 Fax: 709 864 4379 [www.mun.ca](http://www.mun.ca)

September 25, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Courtney Cribb, and I am a student in the Department of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a research project called School Counsellors' Views on Sexting Among Students for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Greg Harris.

The purpose of this study is to understand guidance counsellors' views and perspectives on student sexting behaviour. To add to the growing literature around this phenomenon, this research will focus on the views and perspectives of school counsellors in connection with student sexting behaviours. It is the hope that by gaining further insight and information regarding these behaviours as experienced by school counsellors that schools may be better equipped to deal with incidents involving such behaviours. It is the belief that how school counsellors view and respond to the sexting behaviours of students is important for the health and well being of the schools and their students.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in an interview in which you will be asked to answer questions pertaining to your views and perspectives as they relate to student sexting behaviours. Participation will require one interview session that will occupy a maximum of one hour of your time and will be held over the phone, outside of working hours. Individuals that participate in the study will be entered in a draw at the end of data collection for a gift card valued at \$25.00. Participation in this study is not a condition of employment and will not be reported to the NLESD or school principals.

I am interested in obtaining participation from individuals that have at least one direct experience (one-on-one or in a group format) working with a student(s) that has been involved in sexting incidents and/or participated in sexting behaviours. If you have experience and are interested in participating in this study, please contact me to set up a

phone interview. If you know any other school counsellors who may be interested in participating in this study, please give them a copy of this information.

If you have any questions about me or my project, please contact me by email at [k43cnc@mun.ca](mailto:k43cnc@mun.ca) or by phone at 709-567-0092.

Thank-you in advance for considering my request,

Courtney Cribb

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr.chair@mun.ca](mailto:icehr.chair@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.



## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Form**

Title: School Counsellors' Views on Sexting Among Students

Researcher(s): Courtney Cribb, Counselling Psychology Masters Student, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, k43cnc@mun.ca

Supervisor(s): Dr. Greg Harris, Professor, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, gharris@mun.ca

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "*School Counsellors' Views on Sexting Among Students.*"

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Courtney Cribb, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

### **Introduction:**

My name is Courtney Cribb and I am a master's student in the Counseling Psychology program at Memorial University of Newfoundland. As part of my Master's thesis I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Greg Harris.

### **Purpose of Study:**

The purpose of this study is to understand guidance counsellors' views and perspectives on student sexting behaviour. To add to the growing literature around this phenomenon, this research will focus on the views and experiences of school counsellors in connection with student sexting behaviour. It is the hope that by gaining further insight and information on this topic schools may be better equipped to deal with incidents involving such behaviour. It is the belief that how school counsellors view and perceive the sexting behaviour of students is important for the health and well being of the schools and their students.

**What You Will Do in this Study:**

You will be asked to provide your insight, views and perspectives on working with students that have participated in sexting behaviour.

**Length of Time:**

Your time commitment will include a phone interview that will be roughly 1 hour in length.

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

You may inform the researcher that you no longer wish to continue by contacting the researcher via email or telephone to notify them of your withdrawal. If you choose to withdraw **during** data collection, the researcher will retain any data collected from you, **unless you indicate otherwise. Once data collection has ended you may no longer withdraw. As the data will be aggregated and anonymous it will no longer be able to be removed.**

**Possible Benefits:**

Briefly describe any potential benefits to:

- a) **As a participant, you** may gain further information and insight into the sexting behaviour of school aged students. As such, this insight and information may be useful in informing your practices.
- b) The **scientific / scholarly community and/or society as a whole** may also benefit from the addition of information regarding the sexting behaviour of students as viewed and experienced by school counsellors. This information may help to inform and prepare others in the education community regarding how to better understand and address such behavior.

**Possible Risks:**

As sexting can be perceived as a sensitive topic, you are free to stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable or skip any questions. Although questions will focus on sexting behaviour, the researcher will not ask for specific information about any individual students. All personal information provided to the researcher will be protected and anonymized including your identity and place of work.

**Confidentiality:**

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure.

The researcher will respect your right to privacy as a participant by coding all identifying characteristics. All personal information such as your name and place of work will be made anonymous. No other personal information will be necessary for this research.

Although the data from this research project will be included in a report, and potential publication, the data will be reported in aggregate form, so as to reduce the possibility to identify individuals. Moreover, the consent forms will be stored separately from the interview data, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Although we will report direct quotations from the interviews, you will be provided with a pseudonym, and all identifying information such as name and place of work will be removed from our report. However, due to the relatively small and defined sample, you may be recognizable to informed readers based on what you say.

**Use, Access, Ownership, and Storage of Data:**

As the interviews will be audio-recorded, the tapes will be kept in a secure and locked cabinet. The data will be stored on a password protected external hard drive and kept in a secure and locked cabinet. Consent forms will be stored in a separate cabinet that is also secure and locked. All data will be stored in secure locations at the researcher's residence during the data collection and analysis stages. Once the study is complete, all data will be moved to the supervisor's office in which it will be stored in secure and locked filing cabinets.

The only individuals with access to the data include the researcher and supervisor.

Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. After this time has elapsed, all data will be destroyed.

**Anonymity:**

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

As a participant, you will be provided with a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview so that no identifying information will be provided within the interview transcripts. Participant consent forms will be secured separately from interview data. All data will be aggregated after collection so no identifying characteristics will be evident in the report or publication.

Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity. You will not be identified in publications.

**Reporting of Results:**

- The data will be included in a thesis and may be published.

- The data will be reported using direct quotations, however the data will be compiled in aggregate form.
- Upon completion, my thesis will be available at Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II library, and can be accessed online at:  
<http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/search/collection/theses>.

**Sharing of Results with Participants:**

Once the study is complete and the final report is ready, the researcher will make access available by sending out the report via the same list serve used for recruitment.

**Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Courtney Cribb, [k43cnc@mun.ca](mailto:k43cnc@mun.ca), 709-567-0092

Dr. Greg Harris, [gharris@mun.ca](mailto:gharris@mun.ca), 709-864-6925

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

**Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation **during** data collection, any data collected from you up to that point **will be retained by the researcher, unless you indicate otherwise**.
- **You understand that your data is being collected anonymously and therefore cannot be removed once data collection has ended.**

I agree to be audio-recorded	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
I agree to the use of direct quotations	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
I allow data collected from me to be archived in a secure and locked filing cabinet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

**Your Signature Confirms:**

- I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits.
- I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me a little bit about your experiences and views on student sexting (please keep in mind to not tell me any specific details about any students you have actually worked with)
2. How do you feel about sexting?
3. How do you feel when you hear about students' sexting?
4. How does this behavior impact you as a school counsellor? What are your thoughts about young people sexting?
5. How would you describe your experiences of sexting among students?
6. How do you feel about dealing with sexting incidents? How did you become prepared to address such student behaviour (e.g., training, mentorship, readings)? Do you feel prepared to work with students around such behaviour?
7. Do you think schools are equipped to deal with such incidents?
8. Do you feel that schools are educating students about sexting?
9. Do you intervene in situations in which you learn sexting is occurring? How so?
10. Do you assess for risk among students that are sexting?
11. How do you address the subject of confidentiality in such situations?
12. How do you collaborate with others such as teachers, admin or your educational psychologist around sexting behaviours?
13. Do you see any prevention happening in schools (or in your own work) around student sexting?

14. What advice would you give to parents or school professionals around student sexting behaviour?

15. What do you think is needed going forward to address student sexting behaviour in NL schools?