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A National Study on Crisis Intervention: Are School Counselors Prepared to Respond?

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Abstract

There are frequent publicized reminders of the need for professional school counselors to be knowledgeable and competent in crisis intervention strategies. School counselors are charged with intervening when students experience a crisis, whether it is a normal developmental milestone or an unexpected tragic event. This research presents the results of a survey of professional school counselors regarding their perceptions related to being prepared to intervene in various types of crisis situations. The results indicate a need for additional training in crisis intervention in order to increase the level of competence of professional school counselors.

Introduction

Crises are dealt with routinely in the life of a professional school counselor. Some are large. Some are small. Some impact only one student, while others may impact an entire district. Some can be resolved in a short visit, and others will have long-term effects. Crisis can be defined in many ways and is often dependent upon the perception of the individuals involved and the resources available to those individuals. A fight with a friend or breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend may be seen as a crisis by an adolescent and may result in the inability to focus on academic endeavors. The family pet being hit by a car before school can be devastating for an elementary student. Those are the types of routine crises to which a professional school counselor responds on a routine basis in order to assist students in returning to the educational environment.

Horrific events like the Sandy Hook and other school shootings gain a tremendous amount of national attention, as they should. Although the reality is the vast majority of professional school counselors are unlikely to ever deal with such a random act of violence on their campus. However, they are very likely to have to deal with the death of a student, parent, or faculty member; a suicidal student; or some other type of crisis event that impacts their campus. And yet, how prepared are they to handle these more significant events?

Review of Literature

The purpose of crisis intervention in a school setting is to provide immediate assistance, minimize distress and chaos, and assist in returning to a normal educational environment as quickly and efficiently as possible (Brown & Trusty, 2005). Well-planned and developmentally appropriate interventions can reduce the negative psychological effects, which in turn reduce the academic impact of a crisis. James and Gilliland (2013) defined crisis as:

the perception or experiencing of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person's current resources and coping mechanisms. Unless the person obtains relief, the crisis has the potential to cause severe affective, behavioral, and cognitive malfunctioning up to the point of instigating injurious or lethal behavior to oneself or others. (p. 8)

The four commonly agreed upon categories of crises are: developmental, existential, situational, and ecosystemic (James & Gilliland).

Developmental crises are those events that are related to the normal maturation process and occur with transitions in life. Examples related to school counseling would be starting school, moving from one grade level to another, graduation, or entering puberty. For some students, these transitions are exciting and much anticipated. For others, the transition may be more difficult resulting in an abnormal response and requiring additional support from the professional school counselor. Existential crises are those that are related to issues of purpose, meaning, values, and responsibility (James & Gilliland, 2013). For adolescents, this can be connected to identity development as they strive to determine who they are, where they fit in, and what they are suppose to be in life. It may also occur when they come to realize their values are in conflict with those of their family or friends. Developmental and existential crises are not likely to create significant challenges for the professional school counselor and are dealt with on a routine basis. These challenges call upon basic helping skills that would provide support and skill development for the student as they work through the crisis. These types of crises are individual in nature and require an individual response (James & Gilliland, 2013).

A situational crisis is one that results from an unanticipated and unpredictable event such as an accident, crime, suicide, sudden illness, death, or fire. This type of crisis is "random, sudden, shocking, intense, and often catastrophic" (James & Gilliland, 2013, p. 17). The crisis could be limited to one student, a small group, a grade level, or a whole school. An ecosystemic crisis is a natural or human-caused event that impacts a large segment of the population or environment and has a negative psychological impact (James & Gilliland, 2013). Weather related disasters, earthquakes, war, terrorist attacks,

epidemics, or severe economic conditions would be examples of ecosystemic crises. Situational and ecosystemic crises are the types of events that should be prepared for through pre-service training, continuing education, and school crisis response plans.

Educational leaders have been encouraged for a number of years to have school crisis plans in place; and yet, for at least 15 years the literature continues to report on significant problems including outdated plans, failure to include community safety personnel, failure to adequately train school personnel, failure to routinely practice drills, and being reactive rather than proactive (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; National Association of Attorneys General Task Force on School Safety, 2007; Studer & Salter, 2010). Schools that do have plans in place should include clearly identified roles of each member of the crisis response team (Adamson & Peacock, 2007). Auger, Seymour, and Roberts (2004) suggested that proper preparation includes team members who are knowledgeable regarding behavioral responses to trauma and can provide rapid and appropriate intervention strategies. These same authors suggested that school counselor preparedness is often overlooked in school crisis response plans. Fein (2003) reported the roles school counselors were asked to perform during a crisis were often not congruent with the training they had received.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2005) identifies the leadership role of professional school counselors in school crisis preparedness and response. In addition, ASCA issued a position statement in 2007 stating “the professional school counselor’s primary role is to facilitate planning, coordinate response to and advocate for the emotional needs of all persons affected by the crisis/critical incident by providing direct counseling service during and after the incident” (para. 5). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards (2009) identify numerous student learning outcomes related to crisis assessment and intervention. A number of state certification and licensure standards include training in crisis intervention. And yet, a review of the literature suggests that school counselors are not receiving the level of training necessary to fulfill the roles expected of them as a part of a crisis intervention and response team (Allen et al., 2002; King, Price, Telljohann, & Wahl, 1999).

Purpose of the Study

Given the limited amount of research on the topic, the time elapsed since the last published research, and the new focus on crisis training in the 2009 CACREP Standards, additional research is needed to determine if school counselors continue to report inadequate training in the area of crisis intervention. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of professional school counselors related to their preparation to intervene in various types of crises that could occur on a school campus.

Method

School counselors who were participants at a national conference were asked to complete a survey regarding how prepared they were to handle a crisis situation. The survey instrument was designed by the authors of the study and included 12 situations that would be considered a crisis in a school setting. Those situations included: attempted

suicide, completed suicide, death of a teacher, death of a student, teen pregnancy, natural disaster, man-made disaster, school shooting, sexual assault on campus, gang violence on campus, infections/contagious disease outbreak on campus, and accident resulting in injuries to students occurring on campus. The survey participants were asked to rank their perception of their level of preparation to handle the 12 different types of crises on a 5-point Likert scale with the following descriptors: 5=very prepared, 4=prepared, 3=somewhat prepared, 2=not very prepared, 1=not prepared at all.

The sample participants were comprised of 61 females and two males. Of these participants, 52 indicated they were white, two indicated they were Hispanic, and eight indicated they were black. The school counselors were asked about the number of school counselors in their school; the average number of school counselors in a school was 2.13. The age ranges of the school counselors were reported as 39.7% under age 30, 46.7% between the ages of 30 and 39, 11.1% between the ages of 40 and 49, and 1.6% over the age of 50. The average number of years of experience for school counselors in this study was 2.76 years. The demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Statistics of Participants

Gender		Racial Identification				Age			
Male	Female	White	Hispanic	Black	Other	<30	30-39	40-49	>50
2	61	52	2	8	0	39.7%	46.7%	11.1%	1.6%

Results

Participants were asked to rate how prepared they were to respond to specific crisis situations using a 5-point Likert scale. For each of the 12 crisis situations, percentile rankings were calculated based upon the number of school counselors responding to each of the Likert rankings. In addition, mean scores were calculated for each of the scenarios. Of the 63 participants, none of the situations received more than 8 responses indicating that the individual felt prepared or very prepared to handle the crisis. The vast majority of the responses to all off the scenarios were either somewhat prepared or not very prepared. The range of mean scores for all 12 scenarios was 2.06 – 3.0. The top three crisis situations in which the school counselors felt most prepared to respond were teen pregnancy, sexual assault on campus, and death of a student. The three areas in which the school counselors reported being least prepared to intervene would be infections/contagious disease outbreak on campus, a school shooting, and gang violence on campus. The percentile rankings and mean scores for all 12 crisis situations are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

For a number of years, research has pointed to the need for an increase in the level of crisis intervention training for school counselors (Allen et al., 2002; King et al., 1999). This research was designed to investigate whether or not the deficit in training had been addressed. From the results of this study, it appears little progress has been made. The

majority of the respondents report being not very prepared in 6 out of the 12 crisis situations. The teen pregnancy crisis is the one situation in which schools are mandated to have some type of intervention program in place. If the school counselor were assigned to a high school campus, this would not be a very unusual situation with which to have to intervene and is likely to have had experience. Due to the at-risk nature of adolescent behavior, a high school counselor may also have experienced the death of a student, which had higher reports of feeling very prepared or prepared.

Table 2

Percentile Rankings and Mean Scores for Crisis Situations

Crisis Situation	5 Very Prepared	4 Prepared	3 Somewhat Prepared	2 Not Very Prepared	1 Not Prepared at All	Mean
Attempted Suicide	3.2	3.2	49.2	44.4	0.0	2.49
Completed Suicide	0.0	6.3	36.5	57.1	0.0	2.49
Death of a Teacher	0.0	4.8	34.9	60.3	0.0	2.44
Death of a Student	3.2	7.9	27.0	61.9	0.0	2.52
Teen Pregnancy	3.2	9.5	71.4	15.9	0.0	3.00
Natural Disaster	0.0	3.2	55.6	41.3	0.0	2.62
Manmade Disaster	0.0	3.2	36.5	60.3	0.0	2.43
School Shooting	0.0	1.6	27.0	66.7	4.8	2.25
Sexual Assault	1.6	0.0	52.4	46.0	0.0	2.57
Gang Violence	1.6	1.6	31.7	65.1	0.0	2.40
Infections/Contagious Disease Outbreak	0.0	3.2	23.8	49.2	23.8	2.06
Accidents Resulting in Injuries to Students	1.6	1.6	69.8	27.0	0.0	2.78
Total Mean for Rating	1.2	3.8	43.0	49.6	6.8	2.50

Implications for the Counseling Profession

While many graduate programs offer specific courses in crisis counseling, some of these topics are not routinely covered in other content courses. Thus, graduates who did not take a course in crisis counseling may not have the knowledge and skills to begin to address certain situations without assistance from colleagues or additional training. Age and experience may also be a factor in a counselor's self-assessment regarding readiness to handle certain situations. Those school counselors who are already working

in the profession may want to set professional development goals that include increasing their level of competence in crisis intervention through continuing education opportunities.

The results of this study can be used to consider areas in which training programs can provide students with additional information regarding crisis situations. Also, programs may want to consider how they can provide students with hands-on experiences in handling difficult situations and cases to facilitate personal and professional growth in their ability to be prepared. The use of training clinics during practicum may be a factor in assisting students to be prepared to handle crisis situations.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There were limitations with this study. First the sample size was small and mostly female. Participants were only those who attended a national conference and not every counselor attends these conferences. This could have led to counselors attending this conference having unique characteristics that those who do not attend do not possess. The average length of time in the profession for participants was slightly less than three years. It would be interesting to see if there are differences between counselors who have 10 years or more in the field versus those who have less than 10 years. Also, although the sample was a national sample, it was not very diverse in nature. A study with a larger sample size could compare differences in perceived readiness to respond to a crisis among participants based on racial and ethical background. Furthermore, given the different types of counseling programs, comparing participants depending upon whether or not they graduated from a CACREP-accredited program could be beneficial in determining if there are differences in the preparation of school counselors. With a large national sample, one could also compare counselors based upon geographic locations. It may be that there are unique aspects of teaching crisis counseling that are occurring in certain areas or programs. The survey did not ask the participants what grade level they served which would provide additional information regarding preparation based upon the population served. By replicating the study with a larger sample size, these comparisons could be done.

Conclusion

It is evident with current events in today's society that school counselors need to be prepared to handle crisis situations. Administrators, teachers, parents, and students view school counselors as the experts when it comes to crisis situations that are developmental in nature and also those that occur on a school campus. However, some school counselors may not feel adequately prepared to deal with certain crisis situations and not all training programs require a course in crisis counseling for school counselors. Even counselors who take a course in crisis intervention may not feel adequately prepared to apply what they have learned. The results of this study suggest that counselor educators need to consider ways to infuse knowledge and skills regarding crisis situations throughout the curriculum.

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