

Article 26

School Counselors and Border Violence Narratives

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Abstract

In response to the call for more crisis intervention training from the American School Counselor Association and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, the authors explored the experiences of professional school counselors (PSCs) with students who have experienced border violence. This was a small exploratory study of a local situation: six PSCs were interviewed in a small city on the United States/Mexico border. The study revealed student themes of family loss, trafficking, and fear, as well as PSCs' impressions of the impact of border violence.

Keywords: border violence, human-induced crisis, professional school counselors

The most recent statistics from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS; 2014) indicate that annually between 2009 and 2013, almost 20,000 immigrants are under the age of 16. These immigration statistics refer to children and adolescents arriving in the United States who may be surviving abuse experiences, including border violence, as they attempt to find refuge settling throughout the country (DHS, 2014). In her 2014 testimony to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee (American Psychological Association, 2014), Judith Glassgold, a representative of the American Psychological Association, outlined the need for preparations to assist these children and adolescents who may have been exposed to trauma and may suffer the negative impacts.

Professional school counselors (PSCs) are at the forefront of helping students in educational settings survive the crisis situations that accompany disaster experiences. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) includes crisis response as a part of the duties for PSCs and, according to Melton (2007), PSCs' roles during crisis intervention include: providing crisis counseling; identifying those students who require referrals (community/agency); supporting parents, teachers, and staff who provide for students; and stabilizing the school environment. In 2016, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) revised their standards to include disaster, crisis, and trauma counseling training to educate PSC candidates about their roles and responsibilities. These two professional organizations have recognized and emphasized the need for change to include crisis counseling training for both clinical and school counseling candidates.

However, when it comes to crises, counseling professionals have largely overlooked border violence, a growing area of concern that is underrepresented in the literature, as evidenced by a minimum of research studies or journal articles. In February of this year, Myers (2016) reflected in *Counseling Today* on the impact of immigration on the profession of counseling, but no mention was made of the experience of border violence for Hispanic/Latino students. Yet, Mexico's homicide rate increased over a five-year span from 8,867 in 2007 to 27,199 in 2011 (Molzahn, Rodriguez Ferreira, & Shirk, 2013). In 2012, Mexico's upsurge of homicides was linked to drug-trafficking and organized-crime groups, where 45 to 60% of homicides had "characteristics typical of organized-crime groups, including the use of high-caliber automatic weapons, torture, dismemberment, and explicit messages" (Molzahn et al., 2013, p. 1).

Border violence is defined as multiple forms of violence that affect the communities and families residing along the United States/Mexico border. Categories of border violence include drug-cartel/trafficking violence, gang violence, arms/weapons violence, gender/sexual violence, and immigration/security related violence (Guilamo-Ramos & Lee, 2010). Students on the United States/Mexico border are faced with border violence on a daily basis (Araujo & de la Piedra, 2013). However, this is not an issue that only affects PSCs working in that region. According to the U. S. Department of Education (2014), the number of Hispanic students is increasing throughout the country. Though Southern and Midwestern states are experiencing the highest proportional increase in Mexican-born populations over the past two decades, immigrants have been migrating beyond the traditional Southwestern region as well (Kandel, Rosenblbaum, Seelke, & Wasem, 2012).

According to Leiner et al. (2012), border violence is having an impact on children living in the border area. In conjunction, as movement of Hispanic students continues to increase throughout the country, raising awareness about border violence is essential to the professional preparation of those assisting children and adolescents (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Yet, there is little information regarding the impact of border violence on children and adolescents, especially information about actual experiences for students in the United States, resulting in little to no information about training or resources for PSCs on the effects of border violence.

An exploratory study was needed because it is imperative to document the unique and untold stories of prekindergarten–12th grade Hispanic/Latino students who have experienced border violence directly. Because interviewing these students, who are a

vulnerable and protected population, would be challenging, PSCs, who have direct experience with the students, were chosen as a more accessible source of information about these students and their experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to gather information and discover experiences from the students and the PSCs, in a small community located on the United States/Mexico border. The research questions utilized to begin exploration of the topic included:

- What stories/experiences are being told to PSCs in the schools regarding border violence?
- What are the impressions of border violence for the PSCs who work with children who have experienced border violence?

Method

Participants

This study utilized purposeful sampling, requiring a narrow range to include only participants who met a variety of criteria (Creswell, 2007). Participants had to meet the criteria of being PSCs for more than 10 years, having students in their schools that had experienced border violence, having heard stories from their students who had experienced border violence, and living in a small city along the United States/Mexico border. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, PSCs who met inclusion criteria were approached and asked to participate. At that time, two of the authors of this study were teachers in the school districts (and graduate students in the school counseling program) and had connections to the PSCs. After permission was granted by the school district, general requests were sent out for participation, starting with PSCs who were recommended by others or were friends with the researchers. A total of six PSCs, male and female, two at each elementary, middle, and high school level were recruited. To maintain anonymity, each PSC was assigned a pseudonym. Due to the rarity of male school counselors, gender-neutral names were selected for the pseudonyms. All but one of the PSCs was Hispanic.

Procedures

The phenomenological approach involves the collection of information to understand what it is like to live a specific experience (Creswell, 2007). Children and adolescents who have survived border violence experiences are present in schools throughout most of the country. The phenomenological approach provides a method to capture the students' stories from the observations, interactions, and perspectives of the PSCs' accounts and recollections of their lived experiences with their students.

The first step was to complete training of the researchers completing the interviews, including agreement on the interview questions (see Appendix A). After obtaining informed consent, each participant was initially interviewed over a 6-month period. Once analysis was completed a member-checking interview took place for confirmation of information by the PSC interviewees. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purpose of analyses.

The PSCs agreed to meet in a variety of locations: school offices, automobiles, home, and a private room in the public library in order to avoid being overheard or being

interrupted by the overhead announcement system. The average length of the first interview was 30 minutes. The intent during the interview was to allow each PSC to say as much as they felt comfortable saying and to maintain an open environment for the PSC to share their experiences while hearing the stories of border violence survivors. The member-checking interview, to confirm analysis, did not last longer than 15 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Recording the voices of the PSCs allowed a textural description of the experience that aided in the discovery of themes shared and allowed for further analysis.

Data Analysis

In a phenomenological study, after interviews are completed, significant statements are used to uncover a textural description and a structural description (Creswell, 2007). The structural description provided by the significant statements, included the professional setting of each PSC with specific descriptors that might have influenced how the phenomenon of hearing the stories of border violence was experienced by the PSCs. Moustakas's (1994) approach to the phenomenological method was utilized in analyzing participants' responses. In this approach, it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. The interview questions provided data for transcript analysis. Researchers reviewed the transcripts to determine any significant statements for understanding the experience and to develop clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Clusters of meaning allow the researcher to convert the significant statements into themes (Creswell (2007)). From the clusters of meaning, the researchers were able to describe the context of experiencing border violence.

Methodological rigor was attained through three validation strategies (Creswell, 2007). First, the researchers resided in the area and were teachers in the same school environment from which the PSCs were recruited. The researchers were well aware of the students in their school environment who were experiencing border violence. In addition, the researchers were colleagues of the PSCs who agreed to participate in the study. Being colleagues and teachers in the same school environment assisted with building trust and understanding the culture of the participants, allowing the researchers to make decisions about what was salient and relevant to the study. Secondly, peer review of the interviews was accomplished when the interviewers spent copious hours transcribing their recordings and adding their observations made during the interviews. The evaluation team then met multiple times to discuss the PSCs stories/experiences about students and border violence, reading the transcripts aloud and documenting the experiences that emerged.

The third validation strategy utilized was member checking. According to Creswell (2007), member checking involves taking preliminary findings back to participants, allowing them to judge the accuracy and credibility of the results. The member checking process consisted of revisiting all six participants and having them review the findings outline, asking them if they felt they were represented. All of the participants felt they were represented in the findings; however, one participant out of the six participants admitted feeling misrepresented, as she/he felt that only about 60% of the findings represented her/him.

The recording and transcribing of the PSCs' interviews strengthened the reliability of the study (Creswell, 2007). These transcriptions indicated crucial pauses and nonverbal cues of the PSCs' reactions to their experiences. Inter-coder agreement, another reliability measure, was reached by the consensus of all three researchers regarding how to code the findings. The inter-coder process consisted of all three researchers reading each transcript out loud and identifying significant statements that reflected experiences that PSCs and students were having as a result of border violence. Codes were then developed and organized into an outline of clusters of meaning. After revisiting all statements in the clusters of meaning and reaching inter-coder agreement, the clusters of meaning were used to develop an outline.

Results

The experiences being shared by the PSCs revealed students' border violence recollections and provided a voice to the students' and PSCs' experiences. Students' three experiences included family loss, trafficking, and fear. These experiences are a starting point for the understanding of the impact of border violence on the children and adolescents who are surviving this crisis. Finally, regarding the experiences of PSCs after hearing about border violence from students, three clear experiences were uncovered from the transcripts of the interviews with the PSCs: PSCs' reflection of self, PSCs' description of students, and interruption of school performance.

Student Experiences

Family loss. The first experience was family loss for students; four out of the six PSCs gave direct comments on this theme. These experiences of family loss are a result of many forms of loss: family members simply vanishing, separation because of the border, death, and involvement in illicit activities. Nevada offered,

I did have one case of a student that is no longer with us, whose father went missing, um [pause], during that peak of violence, um [pause], and of course the mom and the children in the family were quite devastated, so was the grandmother, so it was a difficult year for the child.

Desi also reported about a female student with family on both sides of the border,

The other [student], the female student is also suffering because of the situation in [Mexico], cause she really misses her mom [who lives across the border], and she [the student] is having a lot of problems here with the dad and she really wants to go back, but there is no going back.

Alex added,

Uh [pause], a big majority of our population, our students' families live in Mexico. So, they're staying here with, you know, relatives, while their parents, sometimes their siblings, are there [living in Mexico]. So, we hear from them, you know, and sometimes it's actually, their families. You know, members of their families [the students'] that have been victims of kidnappings or murders or things like that.

Rosario elaborated on how family members are lost due to illicit activities, “I've had other kids who either have had a sibling or a parent or a cousin you know killed because of a drug situation.”

Trafficking. The second experience was the presence of trafficking and students’ involvement in trafficking including drugs, gang involvement, and being an accomplice in gang kidnapping. Four out of the six PSCs gave direct comments to this theme. Rosario reflected, “um, drug trafficking, human trafficking, um, that is very prevalent, not only in [city], but throughout the border for Texas.” One example that Lupe heard was, “the family, itself . . . generations through generations . . . they got involved with the gangs . . . or just the drug trafficking itself.” Lupe continued, “it took a toll on different . . . students . . . losing within a year and a half, four of their family members.” While Desi reported how they had observed a particular student, “she was afraid . . . she [the student] was helping a gang in [Mexico] kidnap people.” Part of the trafficking issues included stories of students having a cyber presence, glamorizing experiences on the Internet. In addition, Trinidad reported that a particular student was posting photos on Facebook, “then getting a weapon and putting it up and showing it, she took a picture with three or four weapons in her hands.”

Fear. The third experience was the feeling of fear for students including: fear, worry, and denial, demonstrated through an increased level of aggression. Five of the six PSCs gave direct comments to this theme. Lupe reported,

There's a lot of stories . . . sometimes they [the students] come and share as to what they see, you know, what they've been exposed to, some with family members and sometimes it's very scary because they [the students] come in and they're just, kind of fearful for their lives . . . because it involves the family.

Lupe also reported about an additional student,

She [the student] was very scared for her life too. Because it was . . . her cousins were very involved with, um [pause, hesitant], with the other cousins [who were in gangs] and she would usually hang out with them. So she says, ‘You know I don't know, I don't know what to expect? I don't know if I'm safe. I don't know if my parents are safe.’ So that always was her fear, you know [emphasizing], day in and day out.

Trinidad reported, “Overall, there's fear, they're scared.” Trinidad elaborated, “we see students more aggressive, the girls are super violent, they like to fight . . . all verbally abusive now [on] Facebook; Facebook is the number one and everything is being posted there.”

Nevada reported,

About three years ago . . . we saw an influx of recent immigrants to the district and basically the consequence[s] of so much violence just . . . scared families and they leave everything behind and they take a chance on crossing, coming over illegally to get away from all that violence that they are experiencing all the time.

This experience included students being afraid of previous schools they had been forced to flee and being afraid to cross the border (that was a contrast to a history of crossing back and forth). Rosario reported that “we're getting a lot more kids coming, crossing over [pause], specifically there have been cases of [pauses again], individual

children telling me that their school situation was scary.” In addition, Rosario stated that students “make mention of being afraid of their old school or their parents having fear for them.” Desi reported,

Well, I think they [the students] are afraid, like I said they are afraid to go across the river because like the student, the male student, told me, he was afraid for his life because they [the gangs] were following them [the student’s family] and trying to get in touch . . . and hurt them.

PSCs’ Experiences

PSCs’ reflection of self. The first experience was how the PSCs reflected about themselves: feeling helpless, fearful, worried, scared, overprotective, and sad about their loss of connections to their heritage. Four out of the six PSCs reflected on these sentiments. Desi reported, “Well, I feel kind of helpless because I am not able to do anything about it.” Lupe contributed, “Of course, I don’t live it, I live it through them. I see it through what they hear or what they tell me through their eyes.” Nevada reported,

Now I am more cognizant of the fact that it [violence across the border] exists, so many times I find myself with my students closing a session, especially on a Friday, and when they tell me they are going to go visit their grandparents or family in [Mexico], I always make sure to tell them, you stay safe.

This feeling of fear has resulted in a feeling of sadness about a loss of heritage. People have historically been able to cross the border safely and frequently, maintaining family and cultural connections. Now it is dangerous. Rosario, herself, expressed feeling the loss of a lifestyle since “being able to hop over to Mexico was part of our lifestyle and growing up, but we went to Mexico regularly at least weekly and it was a beautiful part of my growing up.” Rosario continued,

Uh, it’s sad for me that my kids are not growing up with that part of our culture and for more fear . . . I’m not willing to take the chance that I’ll be that one, you know, at the wrong place, at the wrong time. You know what I’m saying? At that one rest stop or on that one street where something happens to happen, it, it scares me.

PSCs’ description of students. The second experience was the descriptors PSCs provided of students. Three out of the six PSCs described students as resilient and demonstrating perseverance. Alex noted, “amazingly, I mean, kids are resilient.” Rosario reported, “The little ones [elementary students], they’re very resilient,” while Lupe reported, “Overall, there’s fear, they’re scared, but they, they start themselves, um [pauses], finding some source of power within themselves, too.” Lupe went on to relay that,

A student once told me, you know, it’s . . . I [Lupe] get a little emotional, but, you know, she [the student] says, ‘It’s uh, it’s a big monster, but you know, I’m not gonna let, [Lupe pauses, teary eyed] I’m not gonna let it get the best of me.’

Lupe continued,

They’ve [students] told me, you know if, life goes on and if we are just fearful of what can happen on a daily basis or as we walk the streets of [Mexico] or as we

go to school, you know then, we will never accomplish anything. We won't ever do anything with our lives.

Interruption of school performance. The final experience was the interruption of school performance. Two out of the six PSCs articulated that many of the students see violence every day and are the victims of it. Being a victim of this violence impacts the attendance of students, reported the PSCs.

Lupe relayed,

When we have those days that there's a lot of things going on in [Mexico], you know, we do have a lot of absenteeism, so that is where we do notice that the border violence can keep our kids, our students, from coming to school and not because of, well of course their lives are at risk, but not because they don't want to come. Sometimes it's just parents are keeping them [home]. So does attendance impact? You know, yes it does. It impacts a lot. Um [pause], even though sometimes we want to think everything is okay, we don't know. We don't know until our kids come and share.

Nevada further elaborated about the influence of border violence on attendance.

I've never personally taken a survey of the number of kids who visit [Mexico], during the school week or on the weekends but I'm going to say that we have from our 600 students that we have here, we have maybe about 200 or so of those who have family over there and who visit during the school week and weekend and even when the violence was at its peak, those families with students were still talking about visiting over there and only because that's where many of their grandparents were or maybe mom or dad or one [parent] or the other could not come over to the United States, but was living in [Mexico], so we knew they were risking [their safety] even though there was that violence over there.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to document how border violence impacts children, adolescents, and PSCs in the school setting. PSCs are on the front line helping these survivors cope with their experiences of border violence. Due to a dearth of information regarding the effect of border violence in the school setting, these findings can contribute to building a foundation to understanding and addressing the resulting trauma in schools via improved PSC training. In this study, the emerging themes uncovered from student experiences were: family loss, trafficking, and fear. The impressions of the PSCs included: PSCs' reflection of self, PSCs' description of students, and interruption of school performance.

Family Loss

PSCs are encountering school children experiencing the loss of family members to border violence either by the death, kidnapping, or the disappearance of a family member. Surprisingly, we also found students grieving for their family members as a result of being forced to live apart, where part or all of the family stayed behind in Mexico while children were sent to the United States to attend school. These findings

indicate that whether or not these students' families were directly involved or not, border violence has caused them to experience some form of loss.

Trafficking

We found that some students were involved through family members who were associated with gangs in illicit activities of drugs and human trafficking. We had hypothesized finding students vicariously impacted through their family members' victimization of border violence. Surprisingly, we found students themselves were part of the border violence. In addition, we found that students involved in the criminal aspect of border violence were making a presence in cyberspace by glamorizing the life on Facebook. As a result, some students were not just victims, but active participants in the illicit activities of border violence.

Fear

We found that students had reported their fear as a result of border violence to their PSCs. Students reported being scared for their lives or the loss of family members. They were fearful of the manner in which border violence had affected their families. PSCs shared that the students were displaying violent outbursts in order to deal with the fear and insecurities. PSCs need to realize that the presence of fear may impact students' ability to focus.

PSCs Experiences

While PSCs reported being fearful and overprotective, there was also a sense of how strong and resilient the students are becoming. These particular experiences can be topics of training, but the loss of heritage is a cultural conundrum. The PSCs reflected that there had been a lifestyle change because people were fearful of crossing the border. Families were divided and their lifestyles were changed. Border cities had been two different cultures that blended into one. However, due to border violence, these cultures have been separated and have become two different cultures that interact less frequently. Families have lost their connections with each other. There has been a loss of traditional culture, food, music, art, etc.

Implications

This exploratory study has provided some preliminary information about the experiences of students and PSCs with regard to border violence. Developing curriculum that will address these experiences would be a next step for advancing the skills and techniques for intervention for PSCs. For the students' experiences of family loss, trafficking, and fear, PSCs could address these concerns in classroom guidance lessons. The personal involvement of students with the border violence crisis will require additional training for PSCs. PSCs need to realize that the impact of grief from these experiences and the influence of gang involvement is possibly interfering with students' ability to focus on learning in the school setting (Sandoval, Scott, & Padilla, 2009). In 2009, Burnham put forth a call for the need for training for PSCs due to the emerging fears of children and adolescents. The need for school counselors to be adequately trained

to be accessible, helpful and supportive (Burnham, 2009) has only increased with the addition of border violence in the lives of children and adolescents.

PSCs found that though students demonstrated resilience and perseverance, students were also acting out with violence and exhibiting anxiety over their experiences, apparently without the means to cope with or process their experience. Through the use of classroom guidance lessons, PSCs can target those unknown students who hide their border violence crisis or trauma experience out of fear for their life or for their family members' lives. In addition, PSCs need to be aware that cultural conflicts might interfere with students' ability to adapt and acculturate themselves to their new environment (Sandoval et al., 2009).

PSCs need to provide students with limited grief, crisis, and trauma counseling. There might be a need for continuing education or workshops designed to assist PSCs with training for crisis intervention for stabilization purposes and referral to local resources. Since PSCs are not licensed mental health counselors, they need to refer these students to receive services from outside mental health agencies. In addition to the cultural conflict and possible mistrust of seeking outside assistance, an additional concern PSCs should consider is whether these particular students qualify to receive these services if they live in the United States without proper documentation (Myers, 2016).

A further area of research would be to determine how to provide services, in the school setting, to the undocumented students who need mental health counseling or have outside agencies begin to serve their needs. According to PSCs, when students are referred to services, they receive mental health counseling; however, locally a professional who can deal with the specifics of border violence might not exist. Therefore, an additional implication would be to explore outside agencies who have staff trained and experienced in dealing with the effects of border violence and highlight the need for training across all levels of professional counselors. Just as the increasing levels of border violence have impacted PSCs, so have more professionals realized a greater need for additional training in trauma and crisis.

The emotional well-being of the PSCs handling these types of crisis cases is a consideration that needs to be further investigated to uncover what kind of support they need to manage these types of cases. The training PSCs are receiving to deal with cases that involve illicit activities is limited: no coursework in their educational backgrounds and limited professional development seminars.

Limitations

A limitation of this exploratory study was that the participants were all from one school district in a city on the border of the United States and Mexico. Other border cities might have different themes of concern and the phenomenological approach does not lend itself to data that can be generalized. Schools located further away from the border, receiving these students, may have more or differing themes of concern, including cultural transitions. An additional limitation is that since students are a vulnerable population, the PSCs had to be trusted to be accurate with their recollections of the stories from the students. In this location, students are also protected in a cultural manner, as it is not typical to seek assistance outside of the family and talking about border violence is considered dangerous. A possible limitation includes the opinion of the PSCs having

been influenced by their own fears regarding border violence. Although their anonymity was assured, fear of retribution might have contributed to holding back regarding incidents with students. As this study was seen as a preliminary study, the small sample size of six PSCs was considered sufficient, as there were two PSCs representing each grade level. Further research should include more PSCs in multiple school districts to gain a more diverse sample size.

Conclusion

The professional organizations, ASCA and CACREP, are requiring counselors to be trained for crisis intervention. Professional school counselors need to be ready to help the students in their schools and the students moving into their schools. The overlooked crisis of border violence is impacting students in the schools and PSCs need training to help with Hispanic/Latino students' experiences of family loss, trafficking, and fear. It appears more could be done to prepare our PSCs and all professional counselors in regards to crisis intervention; border violence needs to be included in crisis intervention training curriculum.

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Appendix A

Survey questions for this study included:

- 1) How would you describe border violence and the impact it has had on the community?
 - a. What about the impact it has had on the school district?
 - b. What about the impact it has had on your school?
- 2) How do you find your students to perceive border violence?
- 3) What types of border violence experiences have your students encountered?
 - a. How have those experiences affected those students?
 - b. How have those experiences affected you?
- 4) What have you done to educate yourself (on border violence)?
 - a. How has the district assisted you?
- 5) What have you found to be helpful with the impact of border violence?
- 6) Anything else you would like to add or share?