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Article 92

The Role of the School Counselor in Crisis Planning and Intervention

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> *Knowing how to respond quickly and efficiently in a crisis is critical to ensuring the safety of our schools and students. The midst of crisis is not the time to start figuring out who is to do what. At that moment, everyone involved-from top to bottom-should know the drill and know each other.*
> - Margaret Spelling (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 1)

Disturbing school events have the potential to erupt in schools at any time. These deleterious situations can range in scope from natural catastrophes such as tornadoes or floods, to emergencies such as the death of student, or man-made disasters such as school shootings or suicides. Although crises in schools are rare and unexpected, these events have created a heightened awareness of the need for effective crisis intervention plans in schools (Allen et al., 2002). Despite the fact that no plan can cover the wide range of incidents that could occur within the school setting (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). preparedness is an essential component to facilitating a return to normalcy.

Although many school personnel have responded to the promotion of school safety by developing crisis plans, others have been remiss in preparing for such incidents (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). Based on a review of the literature, crisis plans that do exist in schools vary and often have significant problems and gaps that include: (a) having guides that are outdated; (b) excluding the community safety personnel; (c) failure to train school personnel on their school crisis plan; (d) not practicing drills in cooperation with the community safety partners (Trump, 2007); and (e) the tendency to react to crises rather than being proactive (Cornell & Sheras, 1998).

Effects of Crises on Students and School Personnel

School crises bring chaos that undermines the safety and stability of the school and may make it difficult to protect students and staff (Allen et al., 2002). Furthermore, crises put individuals in a state of "psychological disequilibrium" with feelings of

anxiety, helplessness, and confusion. When crises do occur, impairment in problem solving abilities and academic growth has the potential to occur (Stevens & Ellerbrock, 1995).

To be properly prepared for a crisis, school personnel also need to be aware of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its association with exposure to a traumatic event. Although exposure to deleterious events does not necessarily mean that an individual will develop PTSD (Auger, Seymour, & Roberts, 2004), it is more likely to occur among "at risk" youth who have not learned appropriate coping skills, and/or developed the cognitive ability to process the event realistically (Auger et al., 2004).

In a study by Auger et al. (2004), school counselors were asked to identify behavioral changes displayed by students after the events of 9/11. Students who were most strongly influenced by these acts of terrorism were those who either had a personal connection to the events, and/or those with pre-existing mental illnesses. Forty-four percent of the students in this study displayed behavior associated with increased fear and anxiety, and approximately 15% revealed an increase in anger and aggression. Approximately 47% of the school counselors provided counseling to these students, yet the majority of the counselors indicated that there were no provisions available for distressed faculty and staff. Researchers suggest that providing a rapid, competent response for all individuals may facilitate a quicker return to normalcy (Cornell & Sheras, 1998), and assist individuals in regaining control and self-confidence.

Responses to School Crises

In response to school crises, some school systems have adopted various primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention strategies (Poland, 1994; Riley, 2000). Primary prevention strategies are proactive and include: (a) creating safe, and nurturing school and classroom environments; (b) creating a caring school community (Crepeau-Hobson, Filaccio, & Gottfried, 2005; Smith & Sandhu, 2004); (c) identifying students at risk for self, or other, violence (Poland, 1994); (d) teaching social skills; (e) adopting "zero tolerance" policies; and (f) providing counseling for students with emotional difficulties (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). Secondary intervention refers to actions taken immediately following the crisis to minimize traumatization such as leading classroom discussions and answering questions about the event. Tertiary intervention involves debriefing strategies (James & Gilliland, 2005), follow-up with students and personnel, and caring for victims following the tragedy (Poland, 1994). In addition, some school officials have responded to violent acts by placing police officers and metal detectors in the schools. Unfortunately, despite the importance of prevention and preparation, research suggests that these practices have not reduced incidents of violence, and in some cases may even contribute to aggressive acts (Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005).

Despite the wisdom of purposeful planning for an eventual school crisis, statistics indicate that even when schools have a written crisis plan, there is little evidence of best practices that specify roles (Adamson & Peacock, 2007) or techniques that affect crisis prevention activities (Morrison, 2007). Furthermore, it is unclear as to the types of school crises school counselors have experienced and how these incidents were managed. In one study, school psychologists were surveyed regarding the types of crisis activities that were evident in their critical incident management plan. Participants indicated that

critical incident response was the primary focus of their crisis plan in contrast to prevention and implementation. When these participants were asked to identify the types of crises that impacted their school community, unexpected deaths was the most common incident, followed by suicide, transportation accidents, and school shootings (Adamson & Peacock, 2007). In addition, some school officials have responded to violent acts by placing police officers and metal detectors in the schools. Unfortunately, despite the importance of prevention and preparation, research suggests that these practices have not reduced incidents of violence, and in some cases may even contribute to aggressive acts (Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005).

The School Counselor's Role in Crisis Planning, Intervention, and Prevention

According to the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position statement, "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" (2007, para. 5). In addition, school counselors may need to take on a leadership role before, during, and after a crisis. In a recent study about educators' perceptions of the role school counselors and school psychologists occupy in schools, 32% of the teachers and 30% of the administrators believed that the school counselor should assume leadership in the event of a school crisis (Studer, Baker, & Camp, 2009). However, Wiger and Harowski (2003) revealed that when a crisis impacted schools, many school counselors assumed administrative roles that resulted in making numerous decisions that were beyond their scope of training and job description. Following the crisis, some administrators perceived the school counselor as "overstepping their authority" by filling a role ordinarily assumed by the principal. As a result, tension and strained relationships occurred between these two professionals. Counselor education programs have a responsibility to prepare school counselors for crisis; however, despite the need for crisis preparation, training, and leadership, pre-service school counselors have reported the opposite. Allen et al., (2002) investigated the amount of pre-service training school counselors received in crisis management, the professional development activities practicing school counselors attended surrounding crisis intervention, and school counselor participation on crisis intervention teams. The results indicated that approximately one-third of the participants entered the profession with no formal coursework or supervised training in crisis intervention, and only 18% felt "well prepared" or "very well prepared" to deal with school crises. Yet 75% of the counselors reported being "familiar" or "very familiar" with the crisis plan in their school, and 61% reported participating as a member of the school crisis team. Participants suggested suicide, aggression and violence, and awareness of school crisis plans as the major topics that counselor education programs need to address. These results were supported by research conducted by Auger et al. (2004) in which school counselors and other helping professionals within the school setting were asked to indicate their preparation for dealing with traumatic events. Approximately 36% indicated feeling inadequately prepared for crisis intervention and reported that their knowledge was received primarily through reading professional literature, discussion in a college course, or preparation through

workshops. These results correspond to the lack of preparation voiced by school counselors in other studies (Fein, Carisle, & Isaacson, 2008).

Although much has been written regarding crisis management in schools (Adamson & Peacock, 2007; Allen et al., 2002; Auger, et al., 2004; Callahan, 2000; Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000; Fein et al., 2008; Flom & Hansen, 2006; Poland, 1994; Riley, 2000; Smith & Sandhu, 2004), there is still much that needs to be known about school crisis intervention plans. This exploratory study was designed to obtain a glimpse into the more frequently encountered school incidents, practices that helped mitigate tragedies, and school counselor responsibilities in crisis planning, intervention, and prevention. The following research questions were examined:

1. What is the professional school counselor's role in crisis management?
2. What prevention and postvention activities are included in school crisis plans?
3. What types of school crises have professional school counselors experienced?
4. What practices are suggested for inclusion in crisis management plans?

Methodology

The Crisis Response and the Role of the Professional School Counselor (CRRPSC) instrument was developed on *mrInterview*, a web-based program. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the CRRPSC was sent electronically to practicing professional school counselors in all settings to pilot the instrument, and revisions were made based on their feedback. Members of the ASCA were randomly selected to participate in the research through an e-mail invitation that included an explanation of the study, a definition of school crisis, as described by the Center for Prevention of School Violence, and a link to access the study. Informed consent was indicated through the completion of the survey.

Instrumentation

The *CRRPSC* contained five sections. The first section contained a four-question demographics section. The second section included five questions on crisis planning, defined as a "written plan for and response to critical incidents such as shootings, terrorism, and weather-related disasters." The third section contained two questions on prevention, defined as "providing a physical environment congruent to the purposes of an educational institution and addresses the strategies that schools and districts can do to reduce or eliminate risk to life and property." The fourth section included two questions on postvention strategies, defined as "the provision of systematic intervention, support, and assistance for those affected by a tragedy." In the final section an open-ended question asked participants to provide responses that would provide a better understanding of crisis intervention planning, prevention, and postvention. Participants were asked to indicate their answers using radio-button, multiple choice responses with an option to provide descriptive information to responses that were not provided for each question.

Procedure

Five hundred participants were sent an e-mail invitation to participate in the study with a link to the survey. Three subsequent reminders were sent to the identified

participants approximately every two weeks. A total of 22 participants completed the survey. The results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The low return rate was due to nonworking e-mail addresses, outdated computers that created survey access difficulties, and the time of the year that the survey was sent. As a result, these preliminary results are exploratory and will be linked to future research efforts when larger sample sizes are acquired.

Participants

Seven males and 15 females responded to the survey. Of these participants 19 indicated their ethnicity as White non-Hispanic, and one individual identified as African American, Asian American, or other, respectively. Approximately 64% practiced less than five years as a professional school counselor. Eight participants were employed at a middle/junior high school defined as grades 6-8, and five were employed at the high school level. One individual indicated being employed in a K-12 school, primary (K-2), elementary (grades 3-5), and split grades (middle school and high school) respectively, with the remaining individuals indicating placement in a combination of grades other than those listed above.

Results

In the first section of the survey, school counselors were asked to indicate whether or not their school had a crisis plan in place. Sixteen individuals indicated that their school had a crisis intervention plan in place, two individuals responded that school system personnel were in the process of creating a plan, and one person indicated that the plan was in place in some schools to which he/she was assigned, but not other schools to which he/she worked. Additionally, one individual responded that he/she was not certain whether a plan had been developed, and two participants did not respond to this question. In the second section, participants were asked if the plans in place were district wide or school specific. Five respondents indicated that the plan was developed specifically for an individual school, 12 indicated that the plan was district-wide, and one individual indicated that the plan was developed district-wide, but specifically tailored for individual schools. The remainder of the participants did not respond to this question.

When asked about the creation of the crisis plans, eight participants indicated that they were involved with plan creation, and eight respondents indicated that they were not involved in plan development. One individual said that another school counselor was involved with the plan creation, and one participant reported that he/she was involved with some of the planning specific to the individual school in which he/she was employed. The remainder of the participants did not respond to this question.

Crisis Planning

In identifying the school counselor's role in the crisis plan, participants were asked to indicate all the tasks to which they were assigned from a list of roles typically assumed by the school counselor based on a literature review of roles commonly assumed in a crisis. These role selections included crisis team leader, provider of individual counseling, media liaison, assist with teacher and classroom issues, parent contact, and other. Five participants indicated that they served as the crisis team leader, 11 were

designated to provide individual counseling, eight assisted with teacher and classroom concerns, and seven were responsible for parent communication. It is important to note that none of the respondents served as a media liaison, which is the primary source from which community members and parents receive their information about school incidents. In addition to the roles listed on the questionnaire, participants indicated making referrals to community agencies as part of their role after crises situations and one participant indicated uncertainty as to the roles he/she was to assume due to novice status at the school.

Participants were provided with a list of the more frequently occurring school crises and were asked to indicate all of the various crises they have experienced as school counselors. Two individuals identified school shootings, and seven respondents reported suicidal incidents. Eleven participants experienced an unexpected death of a student, four individuals reported being involved with an unexpected death of a faculty or staff, and two individuals reported drug overdoses at their schools. Other crises school counselors reported included transportation accidents involving students or faculty/staff, a natural disaster such as a tornado or flood, and one participant cited an explosion in his/her school. Other types of crises reported by at least one of the respondents that were not listed in the survey included: bomb threats, domestic violence (student shot by parent), missing student, abuse, parent suicide, and parent homicide.

Crisis Prevention Activities

Participants were asked to identify all of the various prevention activities that were included in their school crisis intervention plans. Sixteen participants indicated that they assisted in creating a safe environment in the classroom and school building, and ten respondents stated that they educated teachers and staff regarding the characteristics of youth at risk for aggressive behavior. Eight participants indicated that they helped students create their own personal safety plans, and 13 respondents stated that they taught bullying prevention strategies to students. When participants were asked about other prevention strategies that were not included on the instrument, one participant indicated that he/she involved the community, and another assisted with drug abuse education. The final question in the survey was to determine if and when schools review and revise crisis plans. Eight participants indicated the plan was reviewed on an annual basis, and the same number of participants indicated that there was no consistent review or revision of the plan in their schools.

Postvention Crisis Activities

The final section of the instrument was designed to determine the types of postvention crisis activities that were included in crisis management plans. Fifteen participants indicated that their plan made provisions for individual counseling. Seven individuals indicated that their plan included parent meetings, while 13 stated that their plan included faculty/staff meetings. An open-ended question was provided for participants to discuss their perceptions about the areas of the school crisis plan they considered most beneficial in crisis prevention, intervention, and postvention. Participants offered the following suggestions:

- Being seen and interacting with students and serving as a backup for teachers.
- Coordinating a partnership with community resources.
- Having good communication with parents.
- Having a crisis team leader from the district come to the school following the death of a first-grader to provide specific instructions to the students and other stakeholders. Specific directions included informing the students in this child's classroom, answering parent questions, and serving as a host to other school counselors who came to provide assistance.
- Providing defusing and debriefing activities.
- Providing group and individual counseling.
- Setting up a "crisis room" for students needing assistance.
- Having the plan in place and practiced so that everyone was aware of their role.

Discussion and Implications

Although research has been conducted on various aspects of educational crises, the role of the professional school counselor in crisis preparation and planning is unclear. Literature surrounding the types of prevention activities included in crisis plans is sparse as postvention activities appear to be the focus in most of the critical incident plans. One major goal of crisis intervention plans should be to reduce the amount of trauma students and staff experience, and although it is difficult to predict the types of crises that will occur at schools, preparing for those that most commonly occur can assist in proactive prevention endeavors. In this study, school counselors indicated that the crises they have experienced most often were unexpected deaths of a student, unexpected deaths of a faculty member, and suicide. Therefore, it is recommended that school counselors include bereavement issues in their school crisis plan in addition to the suggested practices provided by the participants of this study.

Although there were only 22 individuals who responded to this study, their responses provide a foundation for future investigation. It is disturbing to note that many school counselors were not involved in crisis plan development or aware of the plan at their school. Because prevention and postvention activities are designed to assuage possible traumatization, it is unclear as to the reason few counselors were actively involved in plan creation. Additionally, it was troubling to note that some schools still did not have a crisis plan in place despite the benefits of attending to this need. Future research is required to determine the reasons these schools have not attended to this vital issue. With the heightened attention to crisis and critical incident concepts proposed by professional counsleing organizations (e.g., ASCA, ACA), it seems critical that counselor education programs incorporate crisis planning into curricular programming.

Defusing and debriefing were identified as postvention activities indicated by 75% of respondents, however, there is little research to determine its effectiveness in reducing deleterious psychological effects (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). In fact, research conducted on debriefing models noted that mental health issues have not been reduced, and in some cases have worsened due to these activities (Uhernik, 2008). Therefore, future research should investigate specific debriefing strategies employed, with whom

they were used, the level of the school counselor's involvement in debriefing, and whether counselors themselves received debriefing. Furthermore, additional attention needs to be given to the reasons administrators do not promote or participate in postvention activities as found in the study by Fein et al. (2008).

Students with mental health issues that are exacerbated through crises can begin the recovery process through the intervention from an individual with a counseling background. The school counselor's ability to provide this assistance is of critical essence to address in the crisis plan. Proactive strategies such as having an open door policy, visiting classrooms, providing teachers with a list of characteristics associated with stress, requesting teachers identify students who display anxiety, and organizing support groups (Auger et al., 2004) are concrete examples of how the school counselor may facilitate well-being of students before and after crises occur. Furthermore, when developing a crisis plan it is integral to address the role the school counselor is expected to take during a crisis to avoid confusion and communication failure (Chandras, Chandras, & DeLambo, 2008).

Although important, cultural differences in response planning were not explored in this study. Future researchers need to address language issues as well as cultural tenets and traditions that may facilitate or debilitate trauma recovery. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds may respond differently to prevention and postvention activities, and in some cases these strategies may create an adverse reaction from individuals from different cultures.

Summary

Incidents of school crises have been proliferating across society, and school counselors are key individuals in addressing violence prevention activities and addressing issues in crisis intervention plans. This exploratory study investigated the role school counselors play in the development, implementation, and evaluation of school crisis plans. The types of crises school counselors have experienced and suggestions for school crisis plan development were also addressed. Future research should be conducted to support these preliminary findings to obtain a more acute picture of how school counselors can assist in creating, implementing, and revising school-based crisis intervention plans.

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