

Introduction to the Special Section: Suicide Risk Assessment and Intervention in School Counselor Training

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Cover Page Footnote

The Editors sincerely thank the authors of this special section for contributing to a complex and difficult scholarly conversation. The Editors also humbly thank the editorial board members and ad hoc reviewers who peer reviewed the articles published in this section. Your collective expertise is critical to shaping counselor education and supervision and informing clinical practice.

Introduction to the Special Section: Suicide Risk Assessment and Intervention in School Counselor Training

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This special section on school counselor preparation in assessing for crisis and suicide risk considers the impact of the perception of school counselor training and expertise related to suicide assessment and intervention. The collection of six articles focuses on considerations and best practices in assessing and intervening with PK-12 students experiencing suicidality, the unique considerations within a school setting, and corresponding implications for school counselor training.

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Keywords: suicide, crisis, assessment, school counseling, counselor training

School counselors and school counselor educators have been situated in a vexing position within the counseling profession. At the intersection of divergent philosophies within the counseling profession (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021), school counselor educators typically wrestle with a multitude of training issues wrapped in a larger scheme of professional divisions, pressure from work settings and administration, lack of funding mechanisms, and disproportionate counselor-student ratios (Cholewa et al., 2020; Watkinson, 2015). In fact, the most recent separation of the American School Counselor Association and the American Counseling Association echoed ongoing debates on the role of school counselors in tandem with those raised by other school professionals (e.g., administrators, paraprofessionals, teachers, school psychologists). Despite the distinctions of school counseling as a specialty, its history has long intertwined with the counseling profession, where many school counseling leaders participated in guiding documents, governance of large professional bodies, and professional advocacy movements to contribute to a unified vision of

counseling (Gladding et al., 2014; Watkinson et al., 2018). As professional school counselors and school counselor educators have been steeped in a long-term conflict around professional identity within the counseling profession, the schism among school counseling professionals have alarmingly instigated a lack of clarity around belonging and guidance within large professional bodies.

Such a separation spurs numerous ramifications that invariably influence the training, supervision, and advocacy of school counselors. Aside from meeting the challenges of disproportionate counselor-student ratios within schools, school counselors have endured significant misconceptions about their roles and depth of their training, particularly among administrators and principals who have limited the scope of school counselors or assigned work functions diametrically opposed to counseling skills (Havlik et al., 2019; Watkinson, 2015). Ambiguity around school counselor professional identity can undermine the overall impact of school counselors and tax them with a combination of responsibilities (Goodman-Scott, 2015), which can lead to salient outcomes of

burnout (Fye et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2022). The long-term effects of role ambiguity and professional schisms distort the needs of professional school counselors and school counselor educators, which shape curricula, accountability mechanisms for licensure and certification, and quality of field placements (Pool et al., 2021). Additionally, the shifts in the profession may widen the gap around a preexisting dearth of training for school counselors in practice and in content (Cholewa et al., 2020; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Watkinson et al., 2018). The culmination of these shifts may diminish large-scale advocacy efforts to promote the expansion of school counseling programs; convey the impact of school counselors in wellness, academic achievement, mental health, and well-being; and stymie standards around school counselor licensure and certification (Goodman-Scott et al., 2022; Watkinson, 2015).

An extension of such shifts can be seen in a more recent debate that has emerged around school counselor preparation in assessing for crisis and suicide risk (Gallo, 2018; Shannonhouse et al., 2017, 2018; Wachter Morris et al., 2021). Although counselor educators broadly train risk assessment techniques across specialties, the notion of risk assessment in schools has become a largely debated topic, given the philosophical differences of educators and counselors (Wachter Morris et al., 2021). Assessing for suicide risk is a fundamental skill imbued among counselors-in-training across specialties, given the ethical mandates employed across the counseling profession (American Counseling Association, 2014; American School Counselor Association, 2022) and the surge of crisis and trauma training in counselor education curricula (Greene et al., 2016; Minton & Hightower, 2020).

In fact, recent discussions illuminated the legal consequences for school counselors assessing suicide risk, which sparked debate across school counseling and counselor education about the ongoing topics of scope of practice, school counselor professional identity, and ethical responsibility (Stone, 2021). This debate elicited some intense reactions from school counselor educators, who are tasked not only with the training of counseling techniques, mental health practices,

and school counselor roles in delivering a comprehensive school counseling program, but also the current advocacy movements to reduce school counselor to student ratios and increase the number of school counselor positions. Examination of sociohistorical and ecological professional contexts sheds light on why many school counselor educators have strong beliefs about school counselors' ability and readiness, or not, to assess for suicide. Positioning "counselor" with primacy in the title of school counselor has been an endeavor occurring over the past decade. This effort is reflected in a special issue related to mental health and school counseling appearing in the *Professional School Counseling (PSC)* journal in 2013 (DeKruyf et al., 2013) and emerging more recently with a *PSC* special issue on a combined professional identity as educator-counselor last year (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021).

Unfortunately, the questioning of the mental health training, expertise, and skillset of school counselors does not solely emerge from those outside of the counseling profession. In some instances, it is driven by state licensing boards who have changed, or lobbied to change, the title from Licensed Professional Counselor to Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor, thereby negating the counseling experiences accrued in field placement for school counselors and impeding their ability to seek dual licensure. This conflict is especially problematic in areas with a significant shortage of counselors, which will diminish access to crucial services for students, families, and communities (Johnson et al., 2020). Why are attempts being made to exclude school counselors from the purview of professionals equipped to provide mental health services, and how can we professionally advocate for the important role that school counselors play in suicide risk assessment and intervention? As editors of this special section of *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling (TSC)*, we offer that tacit messages and advocacy begin with counselor educators, who are positioned within counselor training programs to educate *all* counselor trainees (i.e., students in clinical mental health and school counseling tracks) on the ways that school counselors address student mental health

needs, including suicide risk assessment and intervention.

On one hand, students in Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs ([CACREP], 2016) accredited programs train alongside their clinical mental health peers in core classes and in supervision courses such as practicum (Gallo & Wachter Morris, 2022). Counselor trainees are exposed to the same curriculum standards on suicide assessment and prevention, as these standards are not track specific (CACREP, 2016). Unfortunately, in many CACREP core classes, the dominant paradigm in case examples, conceptualizations, and assignments is with clients in clinical mental health settings and application of content with adults, providing few opportunities for all counselor trainees to be exposed to the unique ways in which school counselors deliver developmentally tailored and culturally responsive mental health prevention and intervention programming. Counselor educators make important decisions regarding when and how suicide prevention and intervention standards are presented, with the potential to increase application of the standards across counseling settings and specialty areas.

Counselor educators are critical in preparing counselor trainees to address suicidality in children and adolescents within a social-justice and anti-racist lens, bringing needed attention to contextual factors such as race-based trauma (including identity-based bullying and harassment). School counseling standards, training, and supervision incorporate an equity lens (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mason et al., 2021; Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.), and are beneficial to present to all counselor trainees not just to students enrolled in school counseling specific courses. For example, school counselor training increasingly has focused on systemic interventions to increase equity and access to school counseling services incorporating frameworks such as youth participatory action research (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022a), critical race theory (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022b), and community cultural wealth (Purgason et al., 2020), important perspectives to augment suicide

intervention and prevention strategies for all counselor trainees. Further, school counselor educators are positioned to lead the way in research related to suicide pedagogy (see Binkley & Elliott, 2021) and suicidality in PK-12 students (see Gallo et al., 2021; Sallee et al., 2021; Stickl Haugen et al., 2021; and Wachter-Morris et al., 2021) including scholarship partnering with school counselor practitioners (Brown et al., 2021).

The goal of this special section is to further scholarly discourse regarding the role of school counselors in suicide risk assessment and intervention and the corresponding training implications for counselor education and supervision. This collection of articles serves as a resource for counselor educators, graduate counseling students, and school counselors on best practices in assessing and intervening with PK-12 students experiencing suicidality, given the unique considerations within a school setting. The special section opens with an invited manuscript from Laura Gallo and Carrie Wachter Morris, “Suicide Interventions in Schools: If Not School Counselors, Then Who?,” who offer legal, ethical, and cultural implications of school counselors engaging in suicide risk assessment and intervention, including an emphasis on school counselor training in this area. Following this article is a series of responses to Gallo and Wachter Morris that wrestle with the complexities and divergences of this debated topic. In the first response, Carolyn Stone provides context about the intent of labeling *school counselor* vs. *mental health professional* to assuage professional identity concerns and emphasize a more holistic context of training and expertise of school counselors. She notes some of the very real pitfalls of scope of practice, including how some school counselors have been placed in legal jeopardy from misjudging suicide risk and failing to act. Next, Donna Gibson’s response speaks directly to school counselor professional identity and its complexity, with an emphasis on the role of training in professional identity development. Specific considerations for school counselor training to equip future school counselors with evidence-based research on addressing the growing mental health needs of PK-12 students is considered.

Tahani Dari and Jan Gay's response introduces the importance of utilizing a wrap-around approach as a culturally responsive suicide assessment and intervention strategy. Considerations for ways this aligns with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) frameworks are offered along with how this approach advances multicultural and social justice considerations. In addition, they offer implications for preparing counselor trainees to engage in the collaboration required to provide wrap-around support and increase knowledge on the intersectionality of race, trauma, and suicide risk by incorporating a consideration for race-based trauma in suicide assessment training.

In a fourth response, Emily Goodman-Scott, Jennifer Betters-Bubon, and Rebecca Pianta outline Dr. Pianta's model of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention with a focus on culturally sustaining and anti-racist practices. Utilizing an MTSS framework, school counselors are involved with numerous facets of addressing student suicidal ideation; including screening, assessment, and prevention; exposing PK-12 students to the instrumental role that school counselors play in supporting student mental health. Finally, Gallo and Wachter Morris offer a final rejoinder, responding to each of the four manuscripts and providing recommendations and closing remarks about moving the field forward.

Collectively, this special section considers the impact of the perception of school counselor training and expertise related to suicide assessment and intervention within and beyond counseling and counselor education. We note that perhaps an even greater consideration is how PK-12 students view school counselors' expertise and training. Do students see school counselors as qualified and trustworthy to turn to around suicidal ideation and other mental health concerns? To this end, the special section also tackles the practical aspects of how school counselors approach suicide risk assessment in schools. Factors surrounding and influencing this topic are profoundly complex, and opinions and beliefs are diverse and deeply held. We hope that this special section challenges readers to "lean in" and critically examine these nuances.

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