Elevating and expanding school counselors' roles and voices in the prevention of school violence

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Abstract

Although school counselors are at the forefront of the prevention of school violence, their roles and voices are largely absent from the literature. Of 269 articles published in the Journal of School Violence between 2010-2019, only two center the roles of school counselors in school violence prevention and intervention efforts. Counselors and counseling appear in the literature as participants or in implications sections of published articles, but rarely are the subject of the research itself. Failure to include school counselors in these scholarly conversations further contributes to role confusion and sporadic implementation efforts, weakening the safety net for school violence prevention and intervention. This article seeks to draw attention to the ways school counselors are already doing the work of violence prevention in schools (i.e., mental health, social emotional learning, school climate), and to highlight areas for further training and professional development for practicing school counselors and school counselors-in-training.

Keywords: school counselors, school violence prevention, role confusion(ambiguity?), comprehensive school counseling

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After an incident of targeted school violence at Columbine High School in 1999, the U.S. Department of Education and the Secret Service joined forces to create the *Safe Schools Initiative* (SSI), an attempt to utilize the resources of both agencies to answer two main questions: a) "Could we have known these attacks were being planned?" and b) "What could we have done to prevent these attacks from occurring?" (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 3). The final report of their findings (Vossekuil et al., 2002) was released in 2002, along with a guide for effective threat assessment (Fein et al., 2002). More recently, another publication was released, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*, with the intention of providing another tool for school personnel to utilize in their attempts to "create a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan" (NTAC, 2018, p.1). Each of these publications highlights recommendations for schools to prevent acts of targeted violence in schools. And yet, while school counselors are essential leaders in and after a crisis, sometimes outranking their administrators (Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008), they are minimally included in the literature in violence prevention efforts.

Although the recommended actions of the Final SSI Report included roles and activities that are traditionally performed by school counselors, they were mentioned only once. Similarly, in Fein and colleague's *Threat Assessment in Schools* (2002), school counselors were included as "other professionals" with "coaches, teachers, and others" (Fein et al., 2002), which underestimates the training and expertise that school counselors have as experts in personal/social development, including expertise in mental health, crisis response, and human development (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs

[CACREP], 2016). This failure to acknowledge school counselors as vital players in violence prevention may prevent the recognition of school counselors as key members of violence prevention efforts.

This lack of acknowledgement is similarly reflected in the school violence literature. For example, in a hand search performed on articles from 2010 - 2019 from the *Journal of School Violence*, the words "counselor," "counseling," or "counsel" only appeared in 95 (35.3%) articles. Further examination shows that of those 95 articles, only 18 (6.7%) mentioned those terms more than five times, indicating the possibility of more than a fleeting mention in a participant list or implication section. Only five (1.9%) specifically mentioned "school counselor," "school counseling," or "guidance counselor" more than five times, and only two (0.7%) clearly centered school counselors as a focus in the article. Having school counselors explicitly mentioned in less than 2% of the school violence literature in a 10 year period is both striking and concerning, demonstrating that, while school counselors themselves understand that they play a key role in school violence prevention, they may be overlooked as crucial interventionists by other education and mental health professionals involved in school violence prevention and intervention efforts. This undermines the ability of school counselors to expand their capacity for prevention into larger scale guidance regarding the prevention of targeted school violence. While there is a recent paucity in the literature, it is interesting to note that the preceding ten year period (2000-2009) yielded a much greater number of articles discussing school counselors. For example, there were 25 (39.7%) that mentioned school counselors more than 5 times, with six (11.1%) where school counselors were clearly centered. While we are unsure of the reason for this shift in inclusion, it is vital to solidify and clarify school counselors' roles as critical stakeholders in the effort to prevent school violence generally, and targeted

school violence specifically, by clarifying and amplifying how school counselors' roles align with the prevention strategies informed by experts on school safety.

School Counselors' Existing Roles

Key findings from the SSI report (Vossekuil et al., 2002) provide a guide for aligning school counselor efforts with the prevention of acts of school violence. The role of school counselors -- as well as their training and expertise -- make them linchpins in the implementation of the recommendations set forth, particularly for students who are struggling to cope and may be at risk for violence towards themselves or others. We posit that school counselors' existing efforts are well positioned to support the findings of the SSI report in two areas: (a) addressing students' mental health needs and (b) creating a safe and connected school environment.

Addressing Students' Mental Health Needs

Addressing students' mental health needs is a focal area for school counselor intervention that emerged from the SSI report (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The report highlights characteristics related to mental health considerations of the attackers. One of the most pronounced patterns was that almost all of the attackers had "experienced or perceived some major loss prior to the attack (98%, n=40)". In most cases, the students' recent behaviors indicated they were not coping well with the loss (83%, n=34). Additionally, although only a small percentage of attackers had a mental health diagnosis (17%, n=7), 78% had attempted suicide or considered suicide prior to the attack, and 61% had a documented history of feeling depressed or desperate. While the SSI report did not include more recent targeted school shootings (e.g., Stoneman Douglas High School), reviewing a timeline of the attacker's life events, it becomes obvious that he had experienced numerous significant losses, including the death of both of his adoptive parents and

a recent school expulsion, with which he was not coping well, and he had a history of suicidal ideation-- following a similar pattern to perpetrators of school violence profiled in the SSI report.

School counselors -- particularly at the middle and high school levels -- typically are assigned to one school. Therefore, school counselors have a unique opportunity to establish rapport with students across multiple academic years, and are able to foster familiarity with families, and trusting relationships with faculty and staff. School counselors may be the only mental health professionals located within a community, particularly in rural areas, and most provide mental health services in schools on a regular basis. Acknowledging this work as a part of the formal role and responsibilities of school counselors is crucial for helping students and families understand the services school counselors can provide as well as clearly positioning them as key personnel in the work to prevent school violence.

Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals

It is notable that only a few attackers had a mental health diagnosis (17%, n=7), yet the majority (78%) had attempted suicide or considered suicide prior to the attack, and had a documented history of feeling depressed or desperate (61%). This leads to questions about access to community mental health resources, efficacy of referrals to community mental health resources, and stigma around mental health care. Ongoing collaboration between school counselors and community mental health professionals is a critical component of school violence prevention, particularly given the pattern of suicidal ideation, grief and loss, and depression among perpetrators of school violence. Thus, school counselors must strive to maintain open communication with families to know if a student is receiving mental health services outside of school and make referrals for timely care.

School counselors must use their mental health training, as well as their advocacy skills, to be persistent when a student indicates a need for mental health services. Educating parents, families, and students to identify concerning thoughts and behaviors for themselves and each other is a preventative measure that school counselors can take. School counselors can also help reduce stigma within the school environment to promote a help-seeking culture, not just for mental health needs, but for other needs as well. When providing resources to families, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) recommends resources for families include behaviors and symptoms of mental health issues, action steps for seeking help, services and supports that are available, referral information for mental health professionals, and age appropriate behavioral intervention strategies (Grutardo, & Markey, 2011).

Referrals to Community Mental Health

School counselors are urged to follow school system policies when making mental health referrals, and work with the school's support services and threat assessment teams to best serve the needs of the whole school. However, a referral itself is not enough to prevent acts of targeted school violence. Thus, when referrals are made, a release of information is helpful to ensure the school counselor and community mental health professionals are able to share vital information that might help support students who are being seen by more than one counselor or mental health provider. Even once a referral is made, school counselors are urged to build positive relationships with the community counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist and maintain ongoing communication and collaboration regarding the needs of a student with whom a threat assessment has been conducted.

In addition to outside referrals, it also may be possible to work with organizations, such as Hospice, to provide school-based services to address students' mental health needs around

issues of grief and loss, particularly since we know these issues can be predecessors for acts of targeted school violence. Further, school-based mental health and behavioral health services are available in some school districts, including those provided by school-based health centers.

Create a Safe and Connected School Climate

School climate is the physical, academic, social, and disciplinary school environment (Osher & Berg, 2017, p. 2). The primary accreditation body of counseling, CACREP, and the primary professional organization of school counselors, ASCA, both speak directly to the need for school counselors to be able to understand how school counselors play specific roles in creating safe and connected school environments through school leadership, crisis response, use of data to inform decisions, and promoting personal/social development of students (ASCA, 2013; CACREP, 2016). School counselors also use their knowledge and training to assess a schools' emotional climate, improve the school climate, and help students feel they are in a safe and healthy environment for building a strong community and academic success (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). The SSI report (Vossekuil et al., 2002) indicated that school climates of bullying, aggression, and/or discrimination were present prior to the majority of targeted school violence incidents. By emphasizing open communication and a culture of listening, school counselors may combat acts of bullying and relational aggression as well as helping break the code of silence (Sullivan, 2012). Research on the topic suggests that school violence may be prevented by establishing and sustaining a "positive school climate built on a culture of safety, respect, trust, and social emotional support" (NTAC, 2018).

Elevating School Counselors' Roles in the Prevention of School Violence

Notable shifts in school safety policies and procedures intended to make schools safer. However, a lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in school

violence prevention has hampered the efficacy of preventive efforts (Borum et al., 2010). Although school counselors' roles and responsibilities already align, in some ways, with school violence prevention efforts, there is a lack of evidence-based or research-based intentionality. Guidance from school violence literature can help elevate the work in which school counselors are already engaged to provide a stronger preventative safety net and more effective interventions in schools.

Addressing Students' Mental Health Needs

Through their ongoing contact with students and their families, school counselors can identify students who need additional support, and work to attend to those students' mental health needs. Based on the findings of the SSI Report, focusing individual, small group, and classroom guidance work on students (particularly adolescent males) who have experienced a real or perceived loss with which they are not coping well would align school counselors' work with larger school violence prevention efforts. Since school counselors are positioned within school buildings, they have opportunities for observing students within the school environment, offering research-based early intervention, connecting students and families with ongoing community support, and collaborating with teachers and staff to create support plans. These supports could be provided both inside and outside the school building. Paying attention to key indicators outlined in the SSI report and taking a thoughtful approach to these students' mental health needs, including responsive, wrap-around services, with continuous follow-up at regular intervals integrates school counselors' existing responsibilities with best practices identified by experts in school violence prevention.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends pediatricians serve as a first response for child and adolescent mental health issues. Making mental health referrals to a

child's primary care physician (e.g., pediatrician, family physician), rather than direct referrals to community mental health, is a good first response to mental health concerns for multiple reasons: a) they have likely had a long-term relationship with the individual and his or her family, b) they have knowledge of other diagnoses and medications that may be impacting the student's mental health, c) they have relationships with mental health providers as a network for referrals, and d) they have specialized training in children and adolescents. Some pediatric offices even offer integrated care, in which a mental health professional is co-located in a pediatric practice. In an ideal world, the medical system, the mental health system, the school system, and the family would all work seamlessly together to address children and adolescent's mental health needs; however, if needed, other avenues may be helpful to complete mental health referrals. Also worth noting, many Federally Qualified Community Health Centers (FQHCs) offer behavioral health services for students who are covered by Medicaid insurance or who have no insurance coverage.

Creating Safe and Connected Schools

The following recommendations are included in the guide, *Threat Assessment in Schools* (Fein et al., 2002), and provide a starting point for school counselors who are attempting to shift their school culture. School counselors, in order to elevate their roles in the prevention of school violence, should ensure these steps are being taken systematically and regularly.

First, assess the school's emotional climate by surveying and interviewing all key players within a school environment, including students, families, staff, and key stakeholders. It is important not to make assumptions about the emotional climate, but to collect data as evidence. Performing needs assessments are integral to school counselors' establishing and maintaining a comprehensive school counseling program, and building in not only an initial assessment of the

school's emotional climate, but also periodic assessments to check progress in subsequent years is important, so that both successes and challenges can be monitored and additional areas to target for growth can be identified.

Second, emphasize the importance of listening in schools, meaning that there is reciprocal listening between students and adults in the building, as well as within these groups. This also includes paying attention to behaviors that might indicate that a student does not know how to articulate feelings well, and helping empower their voices so those emotions can be expressed in healthy ways to avoid violence. The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Mindsets and Behaviors (2020), includes social-emotional development, and is designed "to help students manage emotions and learn and apply interpersonal skills." School counselors' rapport, knowledge (e.g. mental health, school climate), and skills (e.g. empathy, active listening) encourage students to share vital information in regards to their thoughts and feelings (e.g. suicidality, access to weapons, planning of attacks), unlike anyone in the position of authority.

Third, take a strong but caring stance against the code of silence. Among adolescents in particular, there can be a code of silence that is actually harmful to individuals which further hides hurt and breeds anger. Breaking this code of silence, and allowing space for honest, genuine feelings to be examined and addressed can prevent violence. Daniels and colleagues (2007) found that school climate does, in fact, affect the willingness of students to report students and situations of concern. The scholars recommend that schools prioritize relationships between students and staff to "break the code of silence" that exists between students and school staff to uncover leakage for attacks (p. 91). School counselors who aim to create a positive school climate should consider research conducted by Pollack et al. (2008), which suggests, "Simple and genuine measures, such as regularly greeting students, talking to students, and

addressing students by name, help to make students feel connected and part of the school" (p. 8). School counselors should also model positive behavior and address situations where students feel marginalized in order to establish an environment with consistent and dependable procedures. Research on perpetrators of targeted school violence suggests that 66% of attackers perceived a sense of failure or loss of social status (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Hence, situations that give preference for certain students or groups of students must be addressed immediately.

Fourth, work actively to change the perception that talking to an adult is snitching. A school culture in which students feel connected to adults and are able to trust that adults have their best interests driving decisions helps prevent violence. School counselors may support school staff to establish safe reporting mechanisms and teach students the importance of reporting concerns of student behavior. By emphasizing open communication and a culture of listening, school counselors may combat acts of bullying and relational aggression as well as combat leakage of student threats (Sullivan, 2012).

Fifth, find ways to stop bullying. This includes adults bullying each other and adults bullying students, as well as students bullying other students. By emphasizing open communication and a culture of listening, school counselors may combat acts of bullying and relational aggression as well as combat leakage of student threats (Sullivan, 2012). Additionally, in order to break the cycle of violence against schools, school counselors may collaborate with education administrators to develop an array of options that address bullying behavior, while at the same time addressing the underlying conflict and keeping students engaged in school. A number of alternative responses may be considered, such as interagency approaches, restitution, mental health counseling or opportunities for skill development. With that, direct and timely

communication of student behaviors and response strategies to school counselors may also prove beneficial for monitoring purposes and to ensure students' are positively reconnected with peers.

Sixth, empower students by involving them in the planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect. This includes encouraging communication between students and school personnel, intervening in conflicts and bullying, and empowering students to share their concerns. School counselors who aim to create a positive school climate should consider research conducted by Pollack et al. (2008), which suggests, "Simple and genuine measures, such as regularly greeting students, talking to students, and addressing students by name, help to make students feel connected and part of the school" (p. 8). School counselors should also model positive behavior with colleagues and address situations where students feel marginalized in order to establish an environment with consistent and dependable procedures.

Seventh, ensure every student feels he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school. Research suggests that feeling heard and connected to at least one adult in the school building is vital not only to prevent acts of school violence, but also to increase resiliency and persistence to graduation (Colazzo Navarro, 2020). Students' feeling connected, relationally and communicatively, to school counselors may help to foster student engagement and create opportunities to identify student needs that may not have been known otherwise. School counselors should be visible (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, classrooms, school-based social media accounts) and available to develop and maintain trusting relationships with all students.

Expanding School Counselors' Roles

Incidents of targeted school violence are characterized as a culminating event in reaction to a range of negative experiences (Henry, 2009), in which the majority of perpetrators communicated their intent to others and/or displayed concerning behaviors prior to the event

(O'Toole, 2000). Thus, training school counselors in effective threat assessments has the potential to prevent acts of targeted school violence before they occur, if appropriate referrals and follow-up take place based on the results. Reports from the U.S. Department of Education (2014), the American Psychological Association (2013), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2014) advocate for the adoption of threat assessment principles in schools.

Conducting Thorough and Effective Threat Assessments

The most prominent threat assessment model was developed in a collaborative effort by the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) and the Department of Education (DOE), hereinafter referred to as the USSS model. Findings from the SSI study indicate that acts of targeted violence in schools were planned attacks and other individuals-usually peers-typically knew about the perpetrators plans for attack prior to the event (Fein et al., 2002). These results suggested that schools could prevent acts of targeted violence by examining students' behavioral and/or communications for indications of thinking, planning, or progressive lethal capacity to engage in an act of targeted school violence (Deisinger et al., 2008). Using these empirical findings, the USSS adapted the Secret Service threat assessment model and developed the federal model of school threat assessment (USSS model) for use in schools (NTAC, 2018) with 11 key questions to guide the process (Appendix A). Training school counselors on the USSS model and empirically-based assessment practices is critical.

Co-assessing Suicide and Threat Assessment Risk

Although school counselors are often included in suicide prevention and suicide assessments, it is often school administration that leads efforts related to violence prevention and

threat assessment. However, according to the SSI Report, the two areas are intertwined and show significant overlap. With any threat assessment, a suicide assessment screening for social emotional distress should be conducted and should include a school counselor. Identifying students who have experienced a significant loss or perceived loss, as well as those who are experiencing thoughts of suicide, may create an opportunity to make appropriate mental health referrals and prevent future school violence. Additional training on loss and social ostracism may increase the likelihood of early identification and intervention for students in social emotional distress.

Responding to Threat Assessment Outcomes

For students who score high on a threat assessment, reactive steps are appropriate, including a threat assessment investigation by school and law enforcement officials, one that goes beyond a school counselor's scope of practice. However, for those students that score lower on a threat assessment, there is still a need for school counselors to attend to their mental health needs. The population most in need, related to targeted school violence, is adolescent males who have experienced a real or perceived loss to which they are not coping well. However, other populations are likely struggling with similar issues, though they may express these emotions differently. These key factors signal a red flag for a thoughtful approach to these students' mental health needs, which includes responsive, wrap-around services, with continuous follow-up at regular intervals.

Intentional and Ongoing Check-Ins

Sometimes there is a tendency to utilize threat assessments as an all or nothing approach to violence prevention. The notion that a student is worthy of a threat assessment inquiry is

enough to warrant periodic check-ins about how things are going and whether anything has changed significantly in the student's life circumstances or state of being. A threat assessment provides a snapshot in time, and must be considered in context. As seen in the Stoneman Douglas shooting, someone who may be a mild to moderate risk can escalate to a high risk, depending on changes in their life circumstances. Intentionally-timed, periodic check-ins are critical to reassess risk levels at regular intervals, before major transitions, and before and after school breaks.

In short, a safe school environment requires relationships between and among students and adults that are built on respect and connection. A sense of community that fosters a sense of belonging can often combat isolation, ostracism, shame, stigma, and, ultimately, violence toward others.

Future Directions

Despite the ongoing, demonstrated need for ongoing mental health support for students (O'Connor & Coyne, 2017; Hoover & Bostic, 2020), school counselors often receive conflicting information about how and where they need to focus their time, leading to role confusion and role ambiguity (Chandler, et al., 2018). An unintended result of the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) introduction of the National Model (2003, 2005, 2012, 2019), school counselors often feel conflicted between meeting the mental health needs of their school communities and following the recommended delivery systems outlined in the model, which can also sometimes lead to confusion for administrators and counselors in terms of the best uses of school counselors' time. While school counselors are already doing a lot of the work related to violence prevention, it is important to put those pieces together in an evidence-based model that is intentional and preventative in nature, in order to guide the work of both school counselors and

researchers interested in this topic. Ideally, such a model would be developed by a team of experts in school safety, mental health, educational leadership, school counseling, and other student support experts.

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