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Validating School Counselor Professional Identity: Response to “Suicide Intervention in Schools”

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In response to the article “Suicide Intervention in Schools: If Not School Counselors, Then Who?,” the roles and responsibilities of school counselors and educators are highlighted regarding effective preparation for suicide intervention. Although training school counselors to prevent, assess, and intervene with suicide is needed due to the increasing rates of suicide in K–12 student populations, the professional identity development of school counselors is examined as it applies to the growing mental health needs in schools. Implications for counselor educators and school counselors in their responsibility for training and prioritizing needs to address are provided.

Keywords: school counseling, professional identity, counselor education

Suicide is an issue that is highly prioritized in mental health communities. As mental health professionals, we are trained to take the topic seriously and may often be predisposed to the experience of its impact from personal experiences with friends and/or family prior to that training. In training, though, we learn that suicide can occur within any type of setting that counselors serve, including K–12 schools. Hence, training revolving around suicide includes prevention programming, assessment, intervention, and posttrauma or crisis counseling. These points are reiterated in Gallo and Wachter Morris’ (2022) “Suicide Intervention in Schools: If Not School Counselors, Then Who?” article in this issue. As Gallo and Wachter Morris respond to Stone’s July 1, 2021, *ASCA School Counselor* article on suicide assessments, they agree and disagree with several of the concerns that Stone has about suicide assessments and risk evaluations. They focus on the implications of the training and responsibilities that school counselors have when attending to the larger issue of suicide and suicide assessment, and I agree overall with their conclusions. They further expand on how well-prepared school counselors-in-training are to not only assess suicide, but to program prevention, intervention, and postvention services for students

and their families. All of this is according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2022a) ethical standards for school counselors and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP, 2016) standards. However, there is a missed opportunity in their manuscript to discuss the professional identity of school counselors.

Why should we examine the professional identity of school counselors as it relates to the Gallo and Wachter Morris’ (2022) response to Stone’s (2021) article on suicide assessments? In my review of Stone’s article, the second part of the first sentence in the article was a shot to the heart of professional identity. Stone stated that “school counselors know they cannot accurately assess suicide risk.” It is unclear as to the accuracy of that statement since no empirical support was provided in Stone’s article, but it makes me wonder why the assumption is made by Stone. If the assumption of training in this area is related to training and ethical standards, have we veered off course in this process to make school counselors question their knowledge and skills in being equipped to assess, manage, and intervene with suicide in the schools? If we are training all counselors to be able to do this in their specific work settings, are school counselors not identifying

themselves as counselors? To begin to answer that question, utilizing a model of professional identity development of counselors can lend itself to exploring implications for understanding factors that influence a school counselor's professional identity.

Elements of the Professional Identity Development of Counselors

According to Gibson et al. (2010), counselor professional identity development includes interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. Professional counseling organizations and state licensure boards influence many of the training and professional practice standards (i.e., CACREP standards, ASCA ethical standards) that constitute a large aspect of the interpersonal dimensions (Moss et al., 2014). Intrapersonal dimensions are found within school counselors and include the personal, working definition of counseling; how they gauge their effectiveness as counselors; and all other aspects of internal reflection on their identity as counselors. Over time and through experience, both dimensions interact and impact the amount and variation of change in professional identity (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010).

In training counselors, Gibson et al. (2010) found in a sample that included counselors-in-training for school, mental health, and couples and family counseling that there were three transformational tasks that were affected by the same transformational process over the length of time in training. The tasks included how counseling was defined, how responsibility was perceived for their own professional growth, and how identity transformed from an individualistic identity to one that was more systemic. In the early aspects of training, students rely more on expert knowledge and seek more expert definitions of counseling and the counseling process. As training progresses, counselors-in-training develop more personalized definitions of counseling instead of mirroring expert opinions. They also develop a sense of being part of the bigger counseling community, which is reinforced often through interactions with professional counseling organizations. For many new school counselors, following expectations from

these organizations may be in conflict with one another and subsequently confusing. For example, the 2016 CACREP standards that are endorsed by the ACA Governing Council require counselors to be trained in suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention. However, the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2022a) requires counselors to only recognize the "level of suicide risk" (p. 4) and consult with parents and administrators on the results of the risk assessment. It appears that it would be difficult for school counselors to integrate responses to suicide into their professional identity if school counseling professional organizations like ASCA do not support those behaviors. The influence of professional organizations on their sense of identity was echoed in a Moss et al. (2014) study that utilized a sample of school and LPC-only new and experienced counselors. For one transformational task that emerged in this grounded theory study, over time there was a shift from idealism (for recent graduates) to realism (for more experienced counselors). This reflected the ideal practice of counseling taught in graduate programs to the frustration with noncounseling duties, administrative tasks, and paperwork that is often dictated by outside organizations, and impacting professional identity. With conflicting standards and expectations, it may be obvious to perceive how school counselors are trained to address suicide in schools (idealism) but expectations within the job do not reinforce those behaviors (realism).

Challenges to identity development become manifest when these identity-disequilibrating experiences (Marcia, 2002) cause counselors to re-examine their life conditions, meaning making, and development of a personal life direction (Carlsson et al., 2015), as well as moments when their skill development is incongruent with their enacted identities (Hull & Zacher, 2007). Both internal and external dissonance, then, can result in identity fluctuations and identity confusion. This problem has been well-documented in school counseling, where role conflict literature in school counseling has examined lack of counselor supervision, conflicting expectations, and principal (not counselor) job performance evaluation as sources of this identity confusion, among other issues (Havlik

et al., 2019; Mau et al., 2016). Identity conflict, then, can be conceptualized as the enactment of foundational and situational identities arising from situational responsibilities as a school counselor. Foundational identity can be defined as the core identity for the professional based on training, professional associations, and professional development efforts, while situational identity captures the nondominant identities associated with location-specific expectations and job demands. These situational identities, such as test coordinator, disciplinarian, attendance clerk, and lunch attendant do not *replace* the core foundational identity (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006); however, they can interfere with the professional's sense of meaning, satisfaction, and belonging (Maor & Hemi, 2021). Much attention has been given to the situational identities of school counselors with much blame being placed on a lack of advocacy for school counselors' roles and responsibilities to adhere to standards set by professional counseling organizations. However, we should not ignore what we in the counselor education community are doing to influence the foundational identity of school counselors and how that may be leading to role confusion of future school counselors. As mentioned previously, expecting school counselors to adhere to competing standards of practice can present as role confusion in advocating for the mental health needs of students in schools. Not being prepared to address suicide is one issue to address while not being expected to address suicide in schools is another. Counselor education programs need to expect school counselors to be prepared to address suicide with competence and confidence as an integral aspect of their professional identity.

The Complexity of School Counselor Professional Identity

Similar to new students and new professionals across different disciplines, counselors demonstrate a need to know and perform with expectations provided by experts and research to validate their professional identity (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2010; 2015; Moss et al., 2014). Hence, there is trust that experts are using appropriate research and standards in their training. Later in their training and in the process of

becoming a new counselor, practice as a counselor further validates this sense of professional identity. Examining these two aspects of professional identity develop may help us determine how the professional identity of school counselors is integral to meeting the mental health needs of students in schools.

New school counselors look to counselor educators to teach them about school counseling, and their roles and responsibilities. Because counselor educators have a significant influence on counselors' professional identity, this is one of the many reasons CACREP (2009) made a significant change to the requirements for the professional identity of counselor educators in their standards. In this case, it not only matters that the counselor educator has degrees and/or experiences in school counseling, but also how they identify in addressing mental health issues. Counselor education has relied on professional organizations (e.g., ACA, ASCA, CACREP) and counseling professionals to lead the way in current knowledge to inform standards and ethics. However, the counseling literature provides minimal evidence-based research to support interventions being taught to and used by counselors (Yates, 2013). Therefore, school counselors-in-training may receive standards-based training to assess and provide interventions addressing suicide in schools, but is that training effective? Equally important is the degree to which school counselors feel confident and competent in using this training to address the second leading cause of death (suicide) in 10–14-year-olds and the third leading cause of death (suicide) in 15–24-year-olds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Practica and internships for school counselors-in-training may require elements that are not clinically focused and may result in minimal experience in handling mental health concerns as counselors. Therefore, the experience as counselors that can address these situations effectively and is needed to validate that sense of professional identity may not occur prior to their first job as a school counselor.

As Gallo and Wachter Morris (2022) pointed out, suicide rates and attempts have risen at alarming rates since 2007 in school-age populations. The

increased mental health needs presenting in schools and the prioritization by policymakers and educational leaders to address these needs are at a crossroads with professional organizations that are not prioritizing these needs. According to ASCA (2022b), “school counselors are certified/licensed educators who improve student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.” So, *educator* appears to be moved into the primary status of the role and responsibilities for school counselors, although the word *counselor* is in the title. Zyromski et al. (2021) acknowledge that “ASCA’s emphasis on school counselors’ educator role” has brought clarity to the profession (p. 2). Yet, at the same time, they acknowledge it has “resulted in a tension in practitioners’ therapeutic skill set and unique ability within school settings to address the clinical needs of students” (p. 2). For school counselors, they are trained in the responsibilities outlined in the ASCA National Model (2019) and are encouraged to refer students and their families to community resources to meet long-term mental health needs (Christian & Brown, 2018). However, Lambie et al. (2019) argue that school counselors should be viewed as mental health professionals “who are positioned and accessible to meet students’ mental health needs” (p. 55) since they have received the training to do so in their counselor education programs. Recognizing the growing mental health needs many years ago, DeKruyf et al. (2013) suggested a conjoint identity of both educational leader and mental health professional for school counselors. Instead of a false dichotomy of identity as either educator or mental health professional, school counselors should embrace their identities as counselors who are leaders in the schools that address the mental health needs of their students.

Implications for Counselor Educators and School Counselors

We should thank Gallo and Wachter Morris for responding to Stone’s (2021) article regarding suicide assessments and school counseling. The counselor education community has been ignoring the implications for school counselor identity development for too long, and it is time to prioritize attention and research in this area. Although school

counseling as a profession was built on the early years of career counseling and guidance, it has evolved to where society can no longer afford to delegate attending to the mental health needs of school-age children to others. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2022), adolescents aged 12–17 are just as likely to receive mental health services in an education setting as from a specialty provider, yet account for only half of the youth with mental health conditions that need to receive treatment. The demystification of mental health and counseling is what we have been striving toward as a profession for so many years, and we need to address those needs in as many settings as we can reach, including K–12 schools.

For counselor education, one of the aspects of training is to instill a sense of counselor professional identity. Counselors-in-training rely on their professors and supervisors to provide them with expert knowledge and guided experiences to assist in their development. This means that the counseling profession needs to increase the available evidence-based research and practices that inform school counselors how to address the growing mental health needs among school-aged children. School counselor educators need to examine professional practices and standards critically to determine how to prioritize those recommended practices for training new counselors. Reviewing curriculum and how school counselors experience clinically relevant issues should be systematic processes in this examination.

Finally, the professional counseling community should stop the debate about the identity title for school counselors. In schools, they address the mental health needs of students with concerns that may be related to academics, relationships, health (i.e., physical and mental), life transitions, etc. When stated simply, it can help others understand that children cannot focus on math concepts if they are considering ending their lives. What becomes the priority for the school counselor to address in this situation: helping children understand math, or helping to save their lives? Demonstrating the ability to serve as a counselor in meeting the exploding mental health needs in schools highlights

the leadership and advocacy inherent in the identity of a school counselor.

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