Crisis Intervention for Students of Diverse Backgrounds: School Counselors’ Concerns

Michelle Canada, EdS
Melissa Allen Heath, PhD
Kristy Money, BS
Neil Annandale, MS
Lane Fischer, PhD
Ellie L. Young, PhD

Although school counselors routinely provide crisis intervention, minimal research has focused on providing such services in a manner sensitive to the unique needs of culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse populations. Responses of a random national sample of school counselors \(n = 236\), 59% return rate) indicate that approximately half expressed concerns related to this type of service. The study summarizes school counselors’ concerns, providing an initial understanding for this aspect of school-based crisis intervention. Specific topics of concern most frequently mentioned were school violence and suicide. Particular attention and sensitivity must be focused on addressing these specific topics in crisis plans, taking into account the unique needs of the individual, family, and community.

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Stockton Schoolyard Shooting

On January 17, 1989, during morning recess, a man carrying a semiautomatic AK-47 rifle randomly fired shots across the school’s playground. Five students were killed, and 1 teacher and 29 students were wounded. This incident, known as the Stockton Schoolyard Shooting, became a pivotal point in rallying strength for school-based crisis intervention (Armstrong, 1991; Cox & Grieve, 1989). Of the approximately 970 students attending Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, CA, 70% were of Southeast Asian descent and the majority of parents did not speak English (Armstrong, 1991).

Armstrong (1991), the school psychologist assigned to Cleveland Elementary, described the ensuing chaos: Frightened parents, the majority non-English speaking, rushed to the school in an attempt to locate their children. The language barrier made communication with parents and children next to impossible. Panic escalated as parents and school officials realized the extent of the disaster. Amidst the heightened emotions...
and confusion, police and emergency medical crews transported unidentified wounded children to the hospital. This panic continued for several hours. Administrators, teachers, and parents were uncertain which children were safe, missing, injured, or dead. Although mental health professionals were called in to assist, these professionals were English speaking, a mismatch to the needs of the traumatized school and community.

Tragically, this incident demonstrates the challenge of providing emergency mental health services to a culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student body and community. Adding to the initial trauma, difficulties in meeting student and family needs continued in the days and weeks following the shooting. Many children and their parents resisted returning to school. Based on their beliefs and traditions, the community wanted a ceremony to rid the school of evil spirits and ghosts. A Buddhist monk was invited to perform exorcisms after school hours (Armstrong, 1991). Additionally, recognizing the needs of many families in the community, bussing was provided for those needing transportation.

Although exorcisms are not typical of services provided by mental health professionals, the majority of students and families were of Southeast Asian decent and believed exorcisms would make the school safe. This was the service the community desired, and after this need was met, students returned to school and the community began to heal from the traumatic school shooting.

In addition to heightening concern for children’s safety and well-being during and following a school crisis, in particular, this incident demonstrates how a lack of culturally sensitive services greatly increases chaos and confusion (Armstrong, 1991; Brock, 2002; Cox & Grieve, 1989). On the other hand, this example also demonstrates the effectiveness of a culturally appropriate intervention, though foreign to mainstream American culture.

**Multicultural Competence and Effective Crisis Intervention: Meshing Two Skills**

Derald Wing Sue wrote in the foreword of *Multicultural Counseling in Schools, “There are an increasing number of texts devoted to the topic of multicultural counseling and therapy. There are, however, a paucity of relevant publications on multicultural school counseling”* (Pedersen & Carey, 2003, p. x). Indeed, human diversity is often broadly defined in nebulous terms and difficult to translate into practical application, particularly for educators and school-based mental health professionals (Locke, 2003; Pedersen, 2003b). Simply stated, the exact definition of human diversity is hard to pinpoint (Pedersen & Carey, 2003; Sue & Sue, 2003). Numerous definitions and terms for multiculturalism, culture, and human diversity focus on human differences ranging from the more visible categories of skin color, language, and socioeconomic status to the less visible, though powerful, influences of spirituality and personal belief systems (Lonborg & Bowen, 2004; Pedersen, 2003a; Richards & Bergin, 2000, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2003). In fact, Locke (2003) identified more than 150 definitions of “culture” in the literature.

Although some general differences among and between various groups of people are visible and easily recognized, there are also subtle individual differences that dilute the broad term of diversity to the fact that each individual is unique. In order to honor this uniqueness, counselors must consider an individual within multiple layers of diversity, ranging from the individual to the broader context of interconnectedness with family, peers, community, and society (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Providing effective counseling services sensitive to the context of diverse backgrounds requires an understanding of what diversity is and how diversity impacts student and family perceptions. Taking this one step further,
school-based mental health workers must understand how these perceptions impact reactions to crisis situations and how individuals from diverse backgrounds perceive and ultimately accept or reject interventions.

Current School Demographics

Ethnic Diversity. The changing demographics across the United States are reflected in the makeup of American schools, increasing the need for cultural sensitivity in school-based mental health services. During the 2000–2001 school year, approximately 40% of the 47 million students enrolled in U.S. public schools were students of color: 17% Black, 16% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2002). However, these demographics are not evenly distributed across geographic areas. Currently, six states (California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas) and numerous urban areas report students of color outnumber Caucasian students (NCES, 2002).

Linguistic Diversity. In addition to increasingly ethnically diverse student populations, schools are also faced with meeting the needs of linguistically diverse students. Almost 9 million students, 17% of the U.S. student population, speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Two states, in particular, California and Texas, have a particularly high proportion of non-English-speaking families. In fact, based on the 2000–2001 census data, over 1.5 million students in California, 25% of that state’s student population, speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Understanding Cultural Diversity in School Settings

For school counselors, understanding diversity begins with understanding how students function on several levels. In relation to understanding how culture affects personal development, Sue and Sue (2003) refer to a diagram of three concentric circles describing a tripartite framework of personal identity. The first level, the individual level, comprises characteristics unique to an individual, such as genetic make-up and personal experiences. The next level, the group level, moves beyond the unique part of an individual to include shared experiences with others: “social, cultural, and political distinctions made in our society” (p. 13). The outer, universal, level encompasses overriding commonalities of humanity.

Considering these various levels of human diversity, the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention defines culture as “the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, faith, or social group” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 197).

Culture in relation to the group level of personal identity is of particular interest to those working within a system, such as a school setting (Pedersen & Carey, 2003). Sue and Sue (2003) explain that an individual’s perceptions are greatly influenced through socialization. Participation in cultural groups can “exert a powerful influence over us and influence our worldviews,” shaping the way we perceive and interpret situations and events (Sue & Sue, 2003, p. 7). When serving groups, families, and individuals during a crisis, understanding culture and group identity has powerful implications for responding sensitively and effectively (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004; Pedersen & Carey, 2003).

Effective Crisis Intervention for Students and Families From Diverse Backgrounds.

Recognizing the importance ASCA leadership places on developing and practicing multicultural competencies (ASCA, 2000, 2004;
Pedersen & Carey, 2003), the next step is to place this set of skills in the context of providing effective school-based crisis intervention. Although no one would argue the importance of factoring these skills into the equation when planning and providing effective and appropriate crisis intervention, very few guidelines are given specifically for cultural sensitivity in school-based crisis intervention.

Although blending these two categories of competency, multicultural competencies and effective response to crisis intervention, is not specifically described in ASCA position statements, this blend deserves attention as the U.S. population is rapidly becoming “more ethnically and culturally diverse” (Athey & Moody-Williams, 2003, p. 1).

To respond effectively to the mental health needs of all disaster survivors, crisis counseling programs must be sensitive to the unique experiences, beliefs, norms, values, traditions, customs, and language of each individual, regardless of his or her racial, ethnic, or cultural background. Disaster mental health services must be provided in a manner that recognizes, respects, and builds on the strengths and resources of survivors and their communities (Athey & Moody-Williams, 2003, p. 1).

Similar to community mental health, this same careful consideration of an individual’s background should take place when assisting with school-based crisis intervention. In providing counseling services to students and families in crisis, cultural sensitivity to both individual and group differences is particularly important (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Pedersen & Carey, 2003; Sandoval & Lewis, 2002; Sieckert, 1999; Young, 1998). Recognizing and tailoring crisis intervention to fit the needs of student diversity will positively impact the quality of services provided in the school and community (Athey & Moody-Williams, 2003; Sandoval & Lewis, 2002; Sieckert, 1999; Young, 1998).

**Purpose of Current Study**

Incongruities between the service provider and the recipient are often intensified during times of crisis (Armstrong, 1991; Pedersen, 2003a). Those who may need help the most are often the least likely to seek mental health care (Evans, 2004; Romualdi & Sandoval, 1995). Additionally, there is often a mismatch between services that are needed and the type of services offered by mental health professionals (Armstrong, 1991; Pedersen, 2003a).

This study is based on the need to align school-based crisis intervention and emergency preparedness with multicultural sensitivity, providing a contextual intervention strategy based on the school’s unique setting. Surveying a national sample of school counselors regarding their concerns when providing crisis intervention to students from diverse backgrounds would provide an initial basis of information, a summary of current needs and concerns pertaining to multicultural crisis intervention. Additionally, this information would provide initial direction for improving school-based crisis intervention. More specifically, this initial investigation would assist in building a foundation for strengthening service provision to students and families from diverse backgrounds.

To date, only two published survey results have investigated the school counselor’s role in providing general crisis intervention beyond suicide prevention and school violence (Allen et al., 2002; Mathai, 2002). In both of these studies, practitioners reported inadequate preparation for this role. However, even though school counselors report limited preparation to assist with crisis intervention, they interact regularly with youth and families from diverse backgrounds affected by traumatic events (Allen et al., 2002; Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Johnson, 2000; Mathai, 2002). Currently, limited information exists to inform school-based practitioners about providing crisis intervention.
to students and families from diverse backgrounds.

In addition to increasing information regarding the provision of school-based crisis intervention services, it is also important to provide school-based practitioners the opportunity to voice their concerns. Practitioners’ insight and feedback will provide a basis for strategically strengthening crisis intervention contextually and improving mental health services for schools and communities composed of diverse populations. Their feedback will assist in developing practical guidelines for improving crisis intervention, increasing the effectiveness and utility of these services.

**Research Question**

The research question was designed to gain an initial understanding of school counselors’ concerns regarding crisis intervention for students of diverse backgrounds. One open-ended research question was included in a previously conducted survey with school counselors regarding their preparation for and participation in crisis intervention (Allen et al., 2002): “What issues in the area of crisis intervention most concern you when working with students of diverse backgrounds?”

**Method**

**Participants**

Upon request, ASCA provided 400 randomly selected names, e-mail addresses, work phone numbers, and home addresses of current ASCA members. Of the 400 potential participants, 276 participants completed surveys (69% return rate) and 236 (59% of 400) surveys were considered valid for data analysis. Surveys were excluded if the participant reported never working as a school counselor.

Respondents reported practicing as school counselors for an average (arithmetic mean) of 6.25 years ($SD = 6.22$ years). Female participants accounted for 85% of the sample and males 15%. Almost half, 53%, of the school counselors reported graduating after 1995. With regard to their level of education, counselors reported the following information: approximately 3% were temporarily certified, 88% completed a master’s degree; 5% completed a specialist degree or a master’s degree plus 30 additional graduate school hours, and 3% completed a doctoral degree.

Participants working in school districts located in 35 states in the United States and 3 foreign countries. Thirty-two percent of counselors worked in southern states, 28% in the northeastern portion of the United States, 20% in north-central states, 19% in western states, and 1% outside the United States.

**Questionnaire**

In a previous study, school counselors completed a questionnaire regarding their training and participation in school-based crisis intervention (Allen et al., 2002). The current study summarizes responses to one open-ended question, not analyzed in the previous study: “What issues in the area of crisis intervention most concern you when working with students of diverse backgrounds?” Because minimal information exits on this topic, an open-ended question was intended to gather preliminary information on which to base future research studies (Richardson, 1996; Schwarz, 1999).

**Procedure**

Two university professors, four graduate students in counseling psychology programs, and two undergraduate research assistants attempted to contact each of the 400 randomly selected ASCA members by phone. All participating school counselors responded to the same
scripted questionnaire. Participants were given three options for completing the questionnaire: (a) phone interview format; (b) written format, a questionnaire mailed and returned by regular mail; and (c) written format, a questionnaire sent and returned by e-mail. These options were offered to increase the likelihood of participation and to accommodate school counselors’ busy schedules.

Approximately 55% of participants completed surveys by regular mail, 40% completed via a phone interview, and 5% completed by e-mail. Although several attempts were made to initially contact all school counselors by phone, those not available at their work number were contacted by mail and e-mail. Six weeks after the initial mailing, a follow-up letter with an enclosed questionnaire was sent to each counselor not responding after the initial mailing.

Data Collection

The researchers made an average of two to three attempts to contact each of the 400 school counselors by phone. Research assistants were directed to follow the scripted questionnaire. The script briefly described the study, indicated the approximate time required to complete the questionnaire, and informed participants of confidentiality issues and the voluntary nature of their participation. The supervising faculty member’s name and phone number were provided in case the participant had additional questions or concerns regarding the research.

Coding

Two individuals—the primary author and secondary author—individually developed categories based on themes and recurring topics. After discussing these initial themes and topics, 13 categories were identified and clearly defined. These categories are described in the Results section. Each comment was coded in at least one category. Additional categories were coded if the comment included more than one category.

After coding the comments independently, interrater reliability was established utilizing Cohen’s kappa statistic. For each of the 13 categories, the two coders’ data were paired, making a coding set from which to determine an interrater reliability coefficient.

Interrater Reliability. Interrater reliability coefficients ranged from .717 in the relationship issues category to 1.00 in the blank/no comment; not applicable, not involved; needs met; and miscellaneous issues categories. After discussing interrater reliability, it was decided that discrepancies were related to personal interpretation of comments. For the final coding, on which the statistics of this study are based, discrepancies were discussed and the two coders reached mutual agreement.

Crisis Topics. In order to describe and tabulate concerns regarding specific events or crisis topics, data were analyzed with a word search. This provided a breakdown and count of specific crisis topics most relevant to school counselors who provided crisis intervention to students from diverse backgrounds (see Table 1).

Results

School counselors responded to the following question: “What issues in the area of crisis intervention most concern you when working with students of diverse backgrounds?” Their responses were coded in the following categories.

No Concerns

Just under half of the counselors surveyed either provided no comment or reported no concerns when providing crisis interventions.
to diverse students and families ($n = 109$, 46.2% of the 236 participants). Four categories were developed to more clearly define the rationale for these comments. Of the valid sample, 89 individuals (37.7% of the total sample) left the question blank or had no comment. One counselor (0.4%) commented “not applicable, not involved in crisis.” Fifteen individuals (6.4%) wrote in comments such as “no differences,” “no issues,” and “we don’t have enough diversity to comment.” One counselor commented that she had no concerns because “most of today’s major school tragedies (shootings) are happening in communities where there are no diverse backgrounds, I think we need to focus on that rising dilemma.” The remaining four individuals (1.7%) stated that they had no concerns because they or their crisis teams were already sensitive to the needs of diverse students and were addressing those needs when appropriate.

The remaining school counselors ($n = 127$, 53.8% of the total sample) stated their concerns, frequently reporting more than one concern. Table 2 lists the categories of responses with the number and percentage of counselors reporting concerns.

### Cultural Issues

The topic of cultural issues was one of the two most frequently reported concerns. Fifty-three, approximately 22% of respondents, directly commented on cultural issues. The main theme was the need to understand students’ culture and background. Other counselors reported feeling unprepared to handle a crisis involving individuals from other cultures, stating they fell short of providing effective intervention. In particular, one counselor commented on her fear of saying or doing something that might be potentially damaging, rather than helpful. Another counselor summed cultural

### Table 1. School Counselor’s Comments: Specific Crisis Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis topic</th>
<th>$n^a$</th>
<th>% of counselors providing comments$^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger/conflict resolution</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns/weapons</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School dropout</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy/sex education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mutilation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intruder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 53$.

$^a$Out of the 127 participants who made comments, 53 participants commented on specific crisis topics.

$^b$Most counselors commented on more than one topic.

### Table 2. Categories of School Counselors’ Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>% of total sample$^a$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No concerns</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank/no comment</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable, not involved</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No differences/no issues</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs are met</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural issues</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues related to specific crises</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/home-related issues</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication/language issues</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School staff/school climate issues</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship issues</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping issues</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous issues</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention issues</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 236$.

$^a$Sum of all categories exceeds 100% because several school counselors reported more than one concern.
concerns quite nicely: “Understanding their worldview, in hopes of helping them to deal with the situation that fits their beliefs and their family’s beliefs. Helping the students to realize that although we are different in culture there can be an understanding and a basis for hope.”

**Issues Related to Specific Crises**

Table 1 contains a list of specific crisis topics mentioned in school counselors’ comments regarding their concerns in providing crisis intervention to students from diverse backgrounds. Of the 127 school counselors who listed concerns, 53 (41.7%) mentioned specific crisis topics or incidents. Because several participants mentioned more than one crisis topic, the sum of numbers in the table exceeds 53. As shown in the table, by far the largest number of counselors mentioned the topics of violence and suicide. Death and drugs were also frequently listed. Similarly, these four topics were key topics suggested in the Allen et al. (2002) study as “high priority crisis topics” in need of special training emphasis in counselor education/preparation programs.

**Community/Home-Related Issues**

In regard to frequency, this category was one of the top three categories of school counselors’ comments. When serving students and families from diverse backgrounds, almost 18% of participants, n = 42, indicated concerns related to community and home issues. Comments in this category included barriers related to families and communities rejecting or not accessing school-based services. Some families hesitated when interacting with school counselors because professionals were considered to be “outsiders.”

On a more positive note, some comments referred to strengthening school-based crisis intervention services by involving trusted community members from diverse backgrounds. Also highlighted was the continued need to be sensitive to family perceptions and providing interventions that family and community perceive as necessary and prudent.

**Communication/Language Issues**

Communication and language issues represented the fourth largest category: 28, almost 12% of respondents, stated this was a concern. When language barriers impeded communication, counselors identified this as the primary and immediate hurdle blocking their ability to help diverse students and families. Additionally, counselors were concerned with communication in general, even when all involved spoke English. Identifying the best means of communicating with a family and student was a challenge. More specifically, knowing how to reach families without phones was a common challenge and how to disseminate information, letting them know the details of the crisis, and how to access available services. Counselors also expressed a concern about avoiding “cultural misinterpretation.” There was a need for translators and other individuals who could assist with the nuances of language and culture.

**School Staff/School Climate Issues**

Eighteen school counselors, 7.6% of the total participants, commented on issues related to school staff and school climate. The majority of responses in this category related to school crisis teams and staff training on how to handle crisis situations. Counselors indicated that although crisis plans were in place, there were school-level barriers that prohibited their effectiveness such as “having enough personnel to carry out the plans.” Another counselor was very specific, stating, “I think principals, teachers, and superintendents should have training in crisis intervention and see the
necessity for being proactive and having a plan and drilling the scenarios.” One counselor expressed frustration because “too many [administrators] see it [crisis plans and training drills] as a waste of time and effort—I however don’t.”

The other theme in this category related more specifically to school climate issues. Concerns included the importance of the school being a safe environment, creating an inclusive environment for all students, and decreasing conflict between students to reduce students’ perceptions of vulnerability and fear.

**Relationship Issues**

Responses in this category (n = 17, 7%) generally referred to some aspect of culture that impeded rapport between counselor, students, and families. Counselors explained that rapport was sometimes difficult to establish because of differing attitudes and beliefs. A few commented on the hesitancy of students speaking with someone outside their family. Additionally, there were reservations on the part of the student in having a “tolerance” for other viewpoints and a limited desire to speak to a counselor who was from a different background. One comment highlighted a counselor’s perspective regarding the uncertainty and resistance on the part of families and students to seek assistance during a crisis: “Cultural differences play a key role in defining procedure in dealing with certain families. When students are in crisis, there tends to be a banding together and/or a sense of dividedness, depending on the incident and the individuals involved.”

**Coping Issues**

Approximately 7% of the sample indicated concerns about personal or family coping styles. Most of the comments focused on how to respect others’ beliefs about death, grief, and loss in terms of each student’s unique cultural and religious values. One counselor indicated that, in their school’s relatively tight-knit community, several individuals were murdered. “Grief work” became a major crisis intervention issue for the entire school. In particular, this counselor emphasized the importance of finding appropriate support services that aligned with their community’s existing ways of coping with death and loss.

**Miscellaneous Issues**

Almost 4% of comments did not fit into the other designated categories. Examples of such responses indicated concerns about resources, such as money, computers, and time. One comment mentioned students’ need for psychotropic medication and yet parents resist complying with doctor’s orders. Another concern mentioned a “lack of supervision” for crisis intervention. However, this comment did not indicate whether the supervision applied to students or to supervision of professionals assisting with crisis intervention.

**Prevention Issues**

This category was not well represented (n = 6, 2.5% of participants); however, the few comments gleaned were quite succinct. One counselor stated the importance of focusing on prevention and providing education/information in advance of a crisis, assisting students in building peer-based prevention programs. Similarly, another emphasized the importance of preventing crises from ever occurring by teaching students to pick up on warning signs and, even more importantly, teaching them how to react appropriately. Additionally, one counselor stated the importance of being “pro-active, not reactive,” involving both students...
and families in reaching potential solutions for problems that arise.

Discussion

Implications

As described by Capewell (2001) and Jimerson, Brock, and Pletcher (2005), crisis intervention must be site specific, sensitive to the context of the tragedy. It is important to acknowledge that mental health professionals are responding to more than the actual event. Tragedies become personal, immediately congealing with the setting, of which culture plays a significant part. Based on the unique characteristics of the individual, family, and community, those who intervene must tailor their support to align with what is needed and what will work.

In particular, a needs assessment of crisis intervention could be utilized to evaluate concerns and propose strategies and possible solutions to improve services for students from diverse backgrounds. This type of assessment must be specific to the individual school, taking into account the makeup of the local community and how individuals and groups will respond to crisis situations. The needs assessment could assist in identifying underlying crisis intervention needs. Based on these needs, a variety of interventions could be offered, taking into account the specific needs of students and families.

School counselors’ comments summarized in this study could be the starting point for designing a needs assessment. For instance, school counselors most frequently mentioned school violence and suicide as topics of concern when providing crisis intervention to students and families from diverse backgrounds. Interestingly enough, these topics were also topics of concern when providing crisis intervention to the general school population (Allen et al., 2002). Additionally, suicide and violence topped the list of recommended high-priority topics for school counselor education programs to address (Allen et al., 2002). Possibly, these topics are the most difficult for school counselors to address, with increasing difficulty added when assisting those from diverse background. Particular attention and sensitivity must be focused on addressing these specific topics in crisis plans, taking into account the unique needs of the individual and community. Consulting with religious and community leaders regarding the appropriateness of interventions and gearing up for extended community-based support are important aspects of effective crisis planning (Athey & Moody-Williams, 2003).

Limitations

As with any research, there are limitations to this study. One of the major limitations is the high number of responses indicating “no response” or “no concerns.” More specifically, almost half of the school counselors in this study made no response or indicated they had no concerns in regard to providing crisis intervention to students and families from diverse backgrounds. Because this was only a response to one question, there is no way to determine why so many counselors’ responses fell into this category.

It is possible that many of the counselors felt they were competent in the area of crisis intervention and that they were able to provide effective interventions for all students, regardless of the student’s background. It is also possible that counselors were of the opinion that crisis response should be handled on an individual level, respecting individual uniqueness. One counselor responded to the survey saying that she makes sure to take individual differences into account whenever dealing with a crisis situation. Another stated that her focus was not on diversity but rather on building good
rapport with all students, treating each student with the same concern without focusing on the student’s diverse background. Such a response may indicate that counselors are “sensitive to the unique experiences, beliefs, norms, values, traditions, customs, and language of each individual, regardless or his or her racial, ethnic, or cultural background” (Athey & Moody-Williams, 2003, p. 1).

Finally, the wording of this study’s research question was biased: “What issues in the area of crisis intervention most concern you when working with students of diverse backgrounds?” This question basically assumed that counselors should have concerns in this area. Also, because the question was open ended, responses varied in focus, length, and content, creating the difficult challenge of analyzing comments in an objective manner. Another factor to consider, school counselors may have been rushed for time and merely skipped the open-ended question.

**Future Research**

It is important to do more than hypothesize and conjecture about culturally sensitive crisis intervention. The findings of this study open the door for subsequent research, which could in turn lead to more effective crisis response. First, the coded categories, as well as the frequently mentioned crisis topics, provide an initial foundation for future studies in this underresearched area. In particular, based on the results of this study, specific topics of interest to school counselors include suicide, violence, death/grief, and drugs. These topics are listed in relation to two intersecting areas of competency, crisis intervention and sensitivity to cultural diversity. Including these topics in academic and site-based practicum and internship training would assist in more effectively preparing counselors to meet the needs of students and families from diverse populations, particularly in the area of crisis intervention.

Focusing on the complicating factor of cultural diversity, future studies must take a step closer and examine student and family responses to particular interventions after specific types of crises. Studies of this nature will provide data regarding which interventions are most effective. Practically speaking, this type of study will prove most informative on a local level, rather than on a state or national level. On the local level, specifics about the school and community will be kept in focus and findings will be specific to that particular setting. Because interventions are geared to assist students and their families, these individuals are critical in reporting feedback as to whether or not interventions were effective and appropriate. In fact, feedback from multiple sources (counselors, teachers, students, and families) would provide a more comprehensive picture of what is and what is not culturally sensitive crisis intervention.

**Acknowledgment**

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**References**


