

Lived Experiences of School Counselors Who Address Mental Health Needs Through Evidenced-based Programs: Practice Implications

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Introduction

The mental health problems of children is a public health crisis that affects students across the country. Researchers suggest that only 30% of children who need care will receive services*. Since students spend a significant amount of their time in school, this setting is ideal for mental health access. School counselors, a natural resource in schools, are in a frontline position to address these needs as they are trained mental health professionals with advanced degrees.

School counselors offer a range of services to promote the healthy development of students in the areas of academic, social, emotional, behavior and career to help students develop skills to contribute to society. Many of the programs purported to reduce academic barriers and improve learning outcomes are inconsistent and fragmented across school districts whereby students receive inadequate services.

This study proposed that Restorative Practices (RP) as a whole-school approach may position schools to be transformative agents to student academic achievement, overall student personal growth, and global school improvement as measured by decreased disciplinary infractions, student and teacher perceptions, and school academic progress.

The present study examined data from qualitative interviews to understand how RP provide a means for school counselors to address the personal and social needs of students and improve academic outcomes. Results indicated that RP may position schools to improve overall student outcomes and school culture.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of school counselors who address the mental health needs of students through evidenced-based programs (EBP) such as Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RtI), Restorative Practices (RP), & Student Assistance Programs (SAP)?

Materials & Methods

Ten interviews were conducted with practicing school counselors in 6 states in the Southern & Great Lakes Regions. School counselors were recruited based on their use of the EBPs.

Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and followed semi-structured protocols. Interviews were transcribed and then coded according to developed themes. Because coding at this stage is for descriptive purposes, transcripts were only coded by one researcher.

Results

Frontline Position

“[M]ental health issues don’t stop at the door.” P003
 “[T]he personal-social domain is probably the largest area that I get referrals for.” P002
 “I am the frontline mental health professional in my building, it’s important for me to address personal/social, academic, and career domain” P010
 “Mental health concerns come to me. I use individual counseling or small group interventions. My core curriculum is preventative.” P008

Lack of Consistent Resources, Underused Programs

[RP underused in our building] not everybody is trained in RP, only a couple counselors and myself, are trained in RP. More training is needed.” P003
 “[S]he [principal] values and understands the work of a school counselor and understands the role, because of that I think she tries to protect my time and utilize me in ways that is consistent with the school counselor role.” P005
 I think the biggest challenge is having teachers understand how our role has changed...they become resistant to change. P001

Impact on Stakeholders

“[Her Dad was] so disappointed that his daughter would do something like that and if we didn’t have this restorative circle she might not have how her actions impacted him.” P003
 “our lunch lady, who they love, everybody loves Mrs. XXX, and Mrs. XXX told them when it was her turn to talk and say how she was feeling, that she was accused of stealing money because when she went to count the money at the end of the day she was short however much, however many dollars.” P006 on how grateful staff member felt to be heard and for students to learn how they impact others
 “[T]he feedback from our teachers and the people that’ve been trained they are much more inclined to use that positive restorative language, um, as opposed to punitive language.” P003

Equitable Practices/Promotes Student Voice

“you know, it’s an opportunity for them to, um, to be heard and to express their opinions on things.” P003
 “For many of us elementary, we are the attendance coordinator also; attendance takes a lot of time and while it’s important...it takes away from addressing social and emotional stuff.” P002
 “So having that added responsibility is difficult in my role as a school counselor in addressing the mental wellness of our students.” P007
 “We implement something, don’t give it enough time to work, funding gets cut, or new people are not trained; we brush our hands off it” P009
 “[I]t’s just about validating their experience and being a support for them.” P6

Reduce Exclusionary Discipline Practices

“I want to say all those students had been given 10 day suspensions for mostly fights that had just pretty much come out of nowhere, um, and they, we were able to do a conference and they were able to come back to school early. So they didn’t end up having to spend two weeks at home.” P003
 “[W]e were able to work with those students through conferencing and bring them back to school sooner so that they could, uh, readjust and, and come back in to the building...last discipline for most of the students.” P006
 “...with RP last year, some of our students with mental health issues, ...all struggled from impulsive decisions and so having restorative practices as alternate consequence and being able to conference with the student instead of just arbitrarily giving them a suspension out of school which would’ve impacted their education more” P002

RP Improves Outcomes/Provides Structure

“[T]he restorative practices training though was a lot more intensive and relevant [for our students, compared to the other programs]...I’ve actually, I totally bought into restorative practices, I found it to be very helpful in our schools, it’s, the, by far in my six years of, of being a counselor and going through all these professional development trainings it’s been the most helpful professional development I’ve ever had...[I]t’s a concrete action [for addressing students’ needs]” P003
 “RP helps me address mental health needs. I like RP so much. It’s useful for school counselors to use the language of RP. I use it when doing individual counseling.” P006

Global Impact on Students (Promotes Altruism)

“I think restorative practices has definitely helped students see kind of the global impact of their actions, mindset of, you know, my actions just affected me versus, you know, it being reflective of your school or of your teachers and peers, and your parents.” P003
 “[RP] definitely helped them see the global impact of, of their actions... it makes, it kind of takes students out of that egocentric [mindset]” P006
 “[T]hat is what really made the, the kids got very upset that they hurt Mrs. XXX, so it really is a great opportunity for them to see the global impact of their actions.” P003
 “She was able to see how her, it, her actions were more than just taking a picture of her teacher and, and posting it and saying something not nice” P6

RP Promotes Stronger Relationships

“But you really can’t help them until they feel like they can trust you and that you have that relationship with them.” P006
 “...if they’ve got that relationship in place, um, they’re just so much more open to asking for help or receiving help [from teachers].” P003
 “Which would have really impacted, not only their grade, but also just their relationship with their teachers and, that was really beneficial to them... they’re not just a face in the classroom, they actually know their story.” P002
 “...had their moms brought in, they were wonderful, um, very supportive, talked to each other, built a relationship, and the parents were just so appreciative of the school for running the conference that throughout the year every time you know, something came up, [they wanted to help]” P003

Implications

- Incorporating RP principles is critical to promoting mental wellness in a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program.
- RP, including needs assessments, provide school counselors with a framework to effectively promote mental wellness in all students.
- School buy-in promotes a reduction of use of exclusionary disciplinary practices.
- Students are more likely to be successful in academics if their personal and social needs are addressed consistently through a trusted, familiar relationship. (*Relationships are central to building community*)
- Students are more likely to understand how harm was done, how to repair the harm, and how to restore relationships.
- Positive chain is likely in schools when those in charge listen and collaborate with students (*shared ownership*).
- School counselors recognize the need for more training in mental health & RP via counselor preparation and professional development.

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Further Information

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