

**A Content Analysis of School Counselors' Legal Experiences  
Through Self-Reflective Letter Writing**

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### **Abstract**

School counselors can write letters to themselves to practice self-reflection and enhance learning from experience. Using inductive and deductive content analysis, we analyzed how twelve school counselors used letters to themselves to reflect on their legal experiences. In their letters, participants demonstrated a wide range of depth in dimensions of self-reflection. Implications for future and current school counselors' self-reflective practices are provided.

*Keywords:* school counselors, self-reflection, letters to themselves, content analysis, legal experiences

## **A Content Analysis of School Counselors' Legal Experiences Through Self-Reflective Letter Writing**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) notes that school counselors face a myriad of daily professional challenges (2012). School counselors often face complex decisions regarding relationships with principals, parents, other stakeholders (Brown, Armstrong, Bore, & Simpson, 2017), and legal preparedness (Hermann, 2002). Serving the needs of their students and communities often requires complex thinking and solutions beyond non-reflective, reactionary behaviors. While researchers have suggested that self-reflective and narrative practices can be useful tools for helping students (Autry & Walker, 2011), few have considered how school counselors may use self-reflective narrative practices to enhance their professional identities and better inform their work when experiencing legal issues on behalf of students.

ASCA's National Model (2012) contains school counselor competencies that suggest "school counselors should possess their knowledge, abilities, skills, and attitudes necessary" to meet the demands of the profession and of their students (p. 148). Specifically, standard IV-B-1g suggests that school counselors use personal reflection to promote their professional growth and development (2012). Additionally, the ASCA National Model (2012) requires that school counselors develop and articulate foundational principles and philosophies that guide their work and maintain accountability practices to assess its effectiveness. In completing these tasks, school counselors must be aware of their personal values and beliefs as well as their strengths and limitations. Therefore, self-reflection through writing can serve as a foundation for

school counselors to set intentional goals, develop their professional identities and hold themselves accountable. Citing our inductive and deductive content analysis of 12 participants' self-reflective letters, we propose incorporating structured letter writing to enhance school counselors understanding of complex experiences with the legal system.

### **Narrative Letter Writing**

Narrative exercises (e.g., letter writing, journaling) are regarded as reflexive tools to promote self-discovery and enhance one's interpretations of the world. Historically, narrative forms of self-expression are credited to White and Epston (1990). Epston (1994) claimed letter writing can be a crucial tool to foster change because "the words in a letter don't fade and disappear the way a conversation does; they endure through time and space, bearing witness to the work of therapy and immortalizing it" (p. 1). Since White and Epston's groundbreaking contributions, narrative techniques, including journaling (Keller-Dupree & van der Hagen, 2015), expressive writing (Wright, 2005), and writing poetry (Kloser, 2013) have helped clients externalize their problems and lead healthier lives (Hagedorn, 2011).

Narrative exercises for school counselors have also gained mainstream recognition. For instance, Nafziger and DeKruyf (2013) encouraged school counselors to use narrative counseling with elementary students struggling with select mutism. Oliver, Nelson, Cade, and Cueva (2007), Zyromski (2007), DeCino, Waalkes, and Smith (2018), and Haskins, Grimes, Johnson, Moore, and Norris-Brown (2016) have proposed that school counselors can use narrative approaches to conduct needs assessments, build stronger student-school counselors relationships, improve direct services, and

help students of color transition into alternative school settings. Despite widespread conceptual support for narrative activities, little research exists that helps explain how narrative exercises may be useful for school counselors to help make meaning from being subpoenaed and testifying on behalf of students.

### **Self-Reflective Practice**

Self-reflection is generally regarded as one type of reflective practice and has been widely explored in the social sciences. Perhaps most notably, Mezirow (1990) stated that self-reflection enables us to “correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving” (p. 1). Rosin (2015) added that self-reflection is a process that practitioners can use to “improve their practices by reflecting on the way their past and present personal experiences affect their interactions with clients” (p. 90).

Building on Mezirow, Rosin (2015) categorized self-reflection into five dimensions. First, *content* reflection is the most basic form of self-reflection. Individuals displaying evidence of content reflection would share facts of their experiences (e.g., details of the setting, people, and eventual outcome) and little else beyond simple nuances. *Process* reflection is more complex and individuals would offer evidence that explored their thinking, feeling, and acting from a particular event. *Premise/critical* reflection is the third dimensions and continues to increase in depth and complexity. Rosin (2015) claimed, “critical reflection promotes a deeper level of reflection necessary for reflective practice in which a perspective shift, or a transformation of personal meaning perspectives, can take place” (p. 90). *Affect* and primary emotions are the fourth dimension of self-reflection. In this dimension, individuals may link early childhood experiences that shape and influence their emotions related to current experiences. For

example, adults who may experience law enforcement negatively as a child (e.g., watching a guardian or parent be arrested) may retain feelings of resentment, confusion, and mistrust towards law enforcement as they age. Finally, the fifth dimension of self-reflection is *heightened emotional intelligence*. Individuals demonstrating evidence of heightened emotional intelligence would share examples of increased awareness, analysis, and importance of how emotions impacted the outcome of their experiences.

Self-reflective research lends support to increase awareness and foster professional development in counselors and counselors in training (Moffatt, Barton, & Georgina, 2016; Schmidt & Adkins, 2011). For those who train doctoral students in counselor education programs, Wong-Wylie (2007) advocated counselor educators use critical incidents and reflective practices with trainees to facilitate meaningful learning and trusted relationships. Recently, Ziomeck-Daigle, (2017) claimed the DEAL model for critical reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2004) should be used by counselor educators to structure narrative writing activities for trainees to help formalize critical reflective practices. Interestingly, Ziomeck-Diagle (2017) used a school counseling example to demonstrate how the DEAL model can help tie together advocacy competencies and developmental theory during training courses. Finally, Woodbridge and Rust O'Beirne, (2017) found addiction counseling students reported journaling and self-reflection practices were helpful for their professional development, increased personal awareness, and helped codify their learning.

## **Rationale for the Study**

Even though the benefits of self-reflection practices and prevalence of narrative techniques are documented within other helping professions (Woodbridge & Rust O'Beirne, 2017), there is room for more exploration in school counseling and with school counselors (Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). There is a need for more evidence how school counselors reflect upon their experiences with the legal system. This evidence may help improve training and learning about how legal experiences influence school counselors and help them navigate these unique encounters. In the present study, we analyzed school counselors' self-reflective practices in their letters to themselves (LtTs), collected as part of a larger, qualitative study (see DeCino, Waalkes, & Matos, 2018) on school counselors' experiences with the legal system. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What, if any, dimensions of self-reflection were noted in participants' LtTs (e.g., evidence of content reflection, process reflection, premise reflection, affect, and heightened emotional intelligence) about their legal experiences?
2. What themes, if any, of self-reflection from participants experiences with the legal system emerged in their LtTs?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited in the larger study (see DeCino, Waalkes, & Matos, 2018) using a combination of criteria and snowball sampling. All 14 participants were offered an opportunity to complete the LtT activity as a follow up to their interviews. Four participants identified as men and 10 as women. They were recruited from one state located in the Western U.S. and two states within the Midwest region of the U.S. All

participants reported as having a White, Caucasian, White-Irish, or Hispanic identity. Criteria for inclusion included: employment as a full-time school counselor and reporting at least one subpoena and court testimony on behalf of one or more students while working as a school counselor. School counselors represented a variety of experience at different levels (e.g., elementary, middle, high). Participants averaged 11.88 years of experience. Several school counselors reported multiple legal encounters for students across various types of child custody and criminal cases (DeCino, Waalkes, & Matos, 2018).

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The 12 participants who agreed to write a letter to themselves about their legal experiences responded to the following prompt:

Please take a few moments to consider your experiences being subpoenaed and testifying in court. Think back to when you began your journey as a school counselor. What messages/words/thoughts/feelings do you recall today about your experiences being subpoenaed and testifying that you would want the younger you to know?

In poem, letter, or other written form you feel suitable, please write your message down in email or standard mail format. You may send this letter to me at any time before we reconnect to discuss your transcript (DeCino, Waalkes, & Matos, 2018).

Participants were provided with the letter writing instructions above and asked to return their letters either by email or standard mail within a few weeks. Participant letters averaged 260 words in length and varied in content and style. For example, three letters were poems while the remaining nine were composed as traditional letters.



## Data Analysis

We utilized content analysis (CA) to answer our research questions. CA is the “analysis of the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material through classification, tabulation, and evaluation of its key symbols and themes in order ascertain its meaning and probably effect” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 1). We structured our CA according to Krippendorff's (2013) six principles: unitizing, sampling, recording, reducing, inferring, and narrating. Unitizing refers to defining who or what will be studied. We defined the unit of analysis as the individual participant. Sampling involves selecting a set of texts from a particular group, era, or experience. Recording/coding refers to how data are recorded in a way that they are transferable among multiple coders. In this study, data were recorded as written text (i.e., written letters). Participants' LtTs were randomly assigned a letter (A-L) for scoring and coding purposes.

To reduce data into interpretable categories, we utilized a dual deductive/inductive coding procedure. A deductive coding approach involves defining and coding a priori categories based on existing research or conceptual/theoretical frameworks. An inductive approach allows new themes to emerge from data without a priori definitions (Krippendorff, 2013). For our deductive approach, we specified five a priori categories of self-reflection (content, process, premises/critical, affect, and heightened emotional intelligence) drawn from self-reflection scholars Mezirow (1990; 1991) and Rosin (2015), which were coded numerically. In addition to the five types of self-reflection, we also coded a sixth category (i.e., no self-reflection) if a participant's letter contained none of the self-reflection types listed above.

For the inductive coding procedure, we allowed categories to emerge from the letters beyond the self-reflection codes, and we organized these open codes into new categories based on common themes (Krippendorf, 2013). To do this, we coded direct participant quotes from the letters that further described participants' self-reflection process, and we organized these quotes into categories based on common themes in the quotes (Krippendorf, 2013). This inductively coded information further described each of the five dimensions of self-reflection mentioned above. Unlike the deductive coding process, which yielded numerical data, the inductive coding process involved noting representative direct participant quotes that were organized into categories. We organized all coding definitions and procedures into a codebook and coding sheet, which guided the content analysis.

The first two authors comprised the coding team for this content analysis. Author one was employed at a research two institution in the Midwest, and author two was employed as a counselor educator at a different Midwest institution. Both coders were trained as professional school counselors and have four combined years of experience as counselor educators. The coders bracketed their assumptions and biases by outlining each person's thoughts independently and discussing them at each phase in the coding process. The third author served as an external auditor during the coding process. Author three had three years of experience as a counselor educator at the time of this study and has research experience with content analysis. The auditor reviewed all coding procedures, as well as all deductively and inductively analyzed data, and provided feedback to the coding team. Based on the feedback provided, the coders reconciled a few scores and re-reviewed participants' LtTs.

We analyzed participants' letters through four rounds of coding, coming together after each round to identify any coding discrepancies and to reach consensus. For the first two rounds of coding, we evaluated participants' LtTs for each dimension of self-reflection. We also recorded direct participant quotes that provided additional depth on the self-reflection process, which we subsequently coded inductively. After participants' LtTs were deductively coded, two rounds of inductive coding were conducted using the recorded quotes. We created broad and open categories from participants' LtTs and separated individual quotes into categories. Then, we sorted inductive categories into corresponding dimensions of self-reflection that were previously coded deductively. We used ReCal2 (Freelon, 2013) to compute interrater reliability, which was adequate (86.11% agreement, Krippendorff's alpha = .70). The coding team was able to reach consensus on all initial coding discrepancies and an audit trail was kept to promote trustworthiness and document each step in the data analysis process (Krippendorff, 2013).

The fifth principle of content analysis, abductively inferring, enables researchers to extend meaning from the data into larger social and cultural contexts. For this step, we utilized our experiences as former school counselors and current researchers to share salient findings from the LtT activity helpful for school counselors to help increase self-reflection and self-awareness. Finally, narrating entails the representation and sharing of the findings with others. In this article, we offer the findings of the LtT activity for school counselors to help facilitate deeper self-reflection and enhance professional identity.

## Results

All participants revealed evidence of self-reflection. Deductively, participant LtTs were evaluated along dimensions: content reflection, process reflection, premise/critical reflection, and heightened emotional intelligence. Inductively, participant quotes were divided into independent sections and then sorted into categories. Thirty-eight categories were created, emerging from the participants' methods of self-reflection in their letters. Each category was then placed into one of the dimensions of self-reflection. For example, if a participant wrote about facts or other technical aspects of their legal experiences, this evidence was named and categorized as content reflection. In the following sections, more explanation of participants' dimensions of self-reflection are provided.

### Content Reflection

The sixteen inductive categories (e.g., recounting details to set the stage, contextualizing significance of experience) demonstrated that content reflection was widely used among all 12 participants. As the most basic level of self-reflection, participants' content reflections did not go into depth regarding evaluation of their behavior, underlying assumptions driving their behavior, and their emotional experiences. Participants often offered their past selves concrete and specific advice about their legal experiences that did not show clear evidence how they had personally reflected and grown. For example, one participant wrote, *"only speak to what you know for sure; don't guess at feelings or situations. Just answer each question and do not elaborate. If 'they' want to know more, 'they'll' ask."*

Other examples of content reflection included participants' messages of validation of their abilities or their professional identities as school counselors. These segments seemed to represent broad sentiments that motivated participants, and yet lacked specificity and critical thinking. One participant expressed, "*If you hold true to this compass, you will navigate your career with confidence and admiration for the work you do in the middle of often hard circumstances.*" Whereas another participant wrote a more reaffirming commitment:

*This is a demanding and dynamic profession. People are depending on us and for guidance, advocacy and support. We need to all work together so that we can give them our best. Do your research, work tirelessly and please know that what you do matters.*

All participant LtTs contained some element of concrete reflections. In addition, over half of the participants in this study provided richer evidence of self-reflection.

### **Process Reflection**

Eight participant LtTs demonstrated evidence of process reflection and were coded into seven categories. Unlike content reflection, these categories and messages were not just descriptions of facts (e.g., locations, people, events), but shed deeper insight into *how* participants grew from their legal encounters. Assessments of their thoughts and behaviors in these passages demonstrated more personal accountability and a heightened awareness. For example, one school counselor wrote how they shifted their thinking before and after their courtroom testimony:

*That's the problem, I realized after the testifying in court that I was really in no position to know the family dynamics of the students I saw on a daily basis, no matter the amount of time spent I with the student, I was not in the home or able*

*to interact with the parent(s). So, my information was one small piece to the situation.*

Similarly, participants also revealed evaluating their past experiences and using those evaluations to guide future behaviors. Participants' stressed more personalized and specific learning within their unique circumstances. For instance, one school counselor expressed how they talked about their past behavior negatively impacted their work:

*If the younger me had known this information and had a stronger support system in place for keeping this off my plate of duties, I would have been able to avoid dual relationships with parents and remained an active advocate for the students and their siblings.*

Another participant evaluated the impact of their behavior on student relationships and used that self-reflection to act differently if this type of event should occur in the future.

*After a particularly tense custody battle, I also was made aware of the problem with dual relationships, as the former student's younger brother was in our school yet and mom was no fan of me. I only did what I was required to do, how could she blame me?*

### **Critical/Premises Reflection**

Critical/premise reflection, regarded as the highest level of self-reflection (Mezirow, 1990, 1991), was also the least frequently cited within participants' letters. Eight categories (e.g., impact of professional development helps shift schema) from three school counselors were noted. School counselors' offerings in this dimension included evaluations of their legal experiences, personal behaviors and thoughts, but also stepped back to assess the bigger picture, noting their presuppositions of *why* events occurred the way they did. Participants also expressed sentiments elucidating *how* their behavior was the result of their prior beliefs and reevaluated the usefulness of

those beliefs. For example, one participant shared their legal proceeding experience as an opportunity to challenge their assumptions about their role as a school counselor:

*I was young, naïve and really wanted to be that utility person for everyone—teachers, principal, parents and students. What I didn't know now that I have certainly learned now, is that I have limits and reasons to stay neutral and remain an advocate for the students I work with.*

Other critical self-reflections were brief, yet poignant sentiments of transformed perspectives placed in the context of experience. One participant wrote this cogent message about the shift in their underlying assumptions about their legal experience, “Remember: this is only one part of the process, and your testimony does not seal your kiddos fate.” Another participant gave themselves permission to be honest about their upcoming experiences and challenging their initial assumption of themselves as an all-knowing expert, “You don't have a magic wand or all of the answers.”

### **Heightened Emotional Intelligence**

Heightened emotional intelligence were noted in nine participants' LtTs and coded into six categories. Evidence of heightened emotional intelligence confirmed participants' acknowledgment that maintaining a sense of emotional self-regulation helped facilitate deeper self-reflection. Four school counselors shared evidence of specific emotional self-regulation strategies when approaching legal experiences, such as “You may feel scared and alone but take a deep breath and let that go.” Two were more expansive, such as this participant who was able to name and bracket their negative emotions: “Do not let the anxiety and fear surrounding this event get in the way of your well-being.” Seven participants expressed ways successful learning can result from disruptive emotional legal experiences. One school counselor viewed an

evaluation and challenge of their emotions helped him be a stronger school counselor, *“You will also arrive at a point when these types of challenges [legal encounters] are something that you still fear, but you will also possess the confidence to face them with professionalism and effectiveness.”*

In summary, participants demonstrated variety and depth across most dimensions of self-reflection in their LtTs. Some school counselors self-reflected in ways that produced evidence of deeper personal transformation while a few simply retold the facts of their legal experiences. Finally, evidence of participants’ emotions codified during early childhood experiences were not noted (i.e., the emotions/affect dimension).

### **Discussion**

The results of this study exploring the self-reflective practices of school counselors with narrative letter writing warrants further discussion. Evidence of content and process self-reflection were prominent throughout many participants LtTs. This finding aligns with Woodbridge and Rust O’Beirne (2017) study of addiction students and reflective journaling. It seems in this study; school counselors were able to recall the details of their legal experiences. Descriptions of key facts were well documented and were reflected in numerous themes in the findings. Further attention towards school counselors’ decision-making processes and declarations of facts regarding their legal experiences may uncover where school counselors stop deeper reflection processes and create new prompts to help them access elements beyond content reflection.

Critical reflection was also found within participants LtTs. Although somewhat less documented, evidence of critical reflection contained powerful, insightful, and unique dimensions of insight from their legal experiences and learning. For example,



when participants discussed how they have changed and offered their insights on why their prior beliefs (e.g., unawareness of legal proceedings) may have impacted their legal proceedings, it is possible school counselors were able recall and write about their experiences in more comprehensive ways. In line with other self-reflective research (Wong-Wylie, 2007; Schmidt & Adkins, 2011), this study highlighted the value of self-reflection at deeper levels to enhance learning. Additionally, this study brought to light that barriers may have prevented participants from recalling more critical aspects of their legal experiences. More research is needed to determine what limitations may exist for school counselors to critically reflect and express in written form deeper self-reflections that impact their handling of legal proceedings.

School counselors in this study also wrote about declarations of transformation as a result of their legal experiences along dimensions of professional development. For example, participants' statements similar to *what I didn't know then about subpoenas and would want you to know now about appearing in court* type statements emphasized a shift in their school counselor identities. Results from this study highlighted reflective practices demonstrating the "value of learning from previous experience" (Schmidt & Adkins, 2011, p. 90) and aligned with ASCA's (2012) endorsement that school counselors use "personal reflection, consultation, and supervision to promote professional growth and development" (p. 6). More research is needed to uncover how school counselors can use self-reflective activities to overcome feeling unprepared for legal encounters. Finally, due to the open-ended structure of the LtT activity, participants were not deliberately asked to consider related early childhood experiences and emotions tied to those events as they reflected and wrote their letters. A lack of

evidence along the fourth dimension (affect) means that evidence of this domain in school counselors' self-reflections of legal experiences remains relatively unknown, even though this element may have entered participants' recollections, reactions, and processes of self-reflection without appear in their LtTs. This lack of evidence highlights using structured prompts may produce more focused and comprehensive results across all dimensions of self-reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2004).

### **Implications**

There are a few important implications from this study. First, school counselors may benefit from setting aside time for self-reflection and letter writing to harness important lessons from their legal experiences. School counselors often face countless unique experiences in one week, let alone an entire academic year. Taking time to process and document the meaning of their experiences can help externalize the meaning of important experiences (Woodbridge & Rust O'Beirne, 2017). For example, school counselors could review their written letters (e.g., at the end of the school year) and share key lessons learned with administrators or other colleagues and set goals for future legal experiences. Second, school counselors should prepare for intense thoughts, emotions, and reactions to their subpoena and testify experiences if they choose to write and practice self-reflection (Gladding, 2007; Schmidt & Adkins, 2011). School counselors in this study related intense and personal legal events imbued with emotions at many phases in their experience. In the event school counselors find themselves experiencing intense emotions while self-reflecting, others (e.g., trusted colleague, administrator) should be on standby to help as needed. Additionally, if school counselors are willing to engage in more comprehensive and structured reflective

processes, here are a set of general questions derived from the five dimensions of self-reflection that can help school counselors increase meaning and understanding of their legal experiences through self-reflection:

1. What were the facts and events? What was the problem or presenting concern? (content reflection)
2. What was your role? If you evaluated your behavior, what would you say about your performance? How would you change your behavior if you experienced this event again? What, if anything, has changed about your interpretations now versus then? (process reflection)
3. What underlying beliefs or feelings did you have before it happened? How did your prior beliefs or thoughts influence and/or limit you and your behaviors? How has the meaning changed now versus then? (critical/premise reflection)
4. What event(s) from your early childhood (age 6 or younger) reminds you of your current legal experience? What do you remember feeling, thinking, and doing in that moment? What feelings have influenced your thinking and behaving? (affect)
5. What feelings can you name that were a part of your legal experience? To what degree, were you able to evaluate and control your emotions? How can you regulate challenging emotions in the future that might get in the way of your work? (heightened emotional intelligence) (Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Rosin, 2015)

Finally, school counselors struggling to self-reflect in deeper (e.g., process and premises reflection) ways, should consult with others able of helping them develop more cognitively complex thinking which can enhance self-reflection practices.

### **Limitations**

There are three limitations from this study. First, as might be evident by some participants' shorter LtTs, school counselors in this study may have struggled to recall, articulate, and contribute previously unshared details from their legal experience. For

some, writing activities may not be the best suited medium to help unlock hidden messages that were not shared during their interviews. For others in this study, some may have felt too anxious and defensive writing about the deepest elements generated through the LtT activity. Other narrative activities (e.g., picture drawing) may have been a better option for some participants. Second, member checks were not completed for the letter writing portion of the study. We should have provided participants an opportunity to include, clarify, or change aspects of their letters after they were submitted. Finally, this study was more exploratory in design and more examination among school counselors practicing self-reflection with legal issues is warranted. Discovering if and how school counselors self-reflect on deeper levels about legal experiences would provide additional and useful insights that currently remain unknown.

## **Conclusion**

Narrative writing activities can promote self-reflection, critical thinking, accountability, and an increased awareness of one's lived experiences (Knapp, Gottlieb, & Handelsman, 2017). In this study, we discovered participants generated evidence of self-reflection and demonstrated some school counselors holding themselves accountable and being intentional about critically reflecting on their legal experiences. School counselors' engagement with self-reflective writing activities may reveal components of certain experiences that could otherwise remain unexamined. By using self-reflective letter writing, school counselors may increase their understanding of complicated experiences and be better prepared for similar events in the future.

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