

**A Narrative Inquiry Study: The Experiences of a School Counselor at a  
Continuation High School**

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## **Abstract**

Alternative education is one of the contexts that receives little attention in research and practice. This narrative inquiry study explores the narrative of a school counselor at a continuation high school to better understand his experiences, challenges, contradictions, and opportunities of serving in an unfamiliar educational sector. This paper provides recommendations for policy and practice, specifically for professional school counselors, school district counseling personnel, and counselor educators to consider in their efforts to support counselors and students in continuation high schools/alternative education.

*Keywords:* Alternative Education, Continuation High Schools, School Counselors, School Counseling, Narrative Inquiry

## **A Narrative Inquiry Study: The Experiences of a School Counselor at a Continuation High School**

This narrative inquiry study seeks to bring visibility to the experiences of school counselors in alternative schools. This work is motivated by my experiences as a former mentor and school counselor in alternative schools. In these spaces, I witnessed how critical school counselors and educators are in supporting racially minoritized youth during their transition from a traditional school into an alternative school. Across the nation, nearly six percent of the entire public high school system in the United States are considered alternative schools (DePaoli et al., 2016). Thus, the need to bring attention to experiences of school counselors in alternative schools is essential, as they are one of the most rapidly growing segments of secondary education (DePaoli et al., 2016). Simultaneously, the number of Black and Latinx youth enrolling in alternative schools has significantly increased (DePaoli et al., 2016). With the increasing number of alternative schools, research has shown some troubling patterns, as these institutions only graduate less than two-thirds of their students (DePaoli et al., 2016). Considering the inequitable graduation rates in alternative high schools (Fresques et al., 2017; Vogell & Fresques, 2017), one must pay more considerable attention to the experiences and perspectives of school counselors and how they are promoting equitable practices to support students in these spaces.

This study aims to understand better the experience of a school counselor in an alternative school. While this study only focuses on one school counselor, it is crucial to understand that many alternative schools across the nation do not employ a full-time school counselor (Fresques et al., 2017). In comparison to traditional schools, research

has shown that alternative schools receive fewer resources. Although many alternative schools are known to provide more individualized education, smaller classrooms, and a renewed opportunity for many students to graduate (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008), yet research has identified some troubling patterns of how these institutions further reproduce inequity. More specifically, many alternative schools have depleted buildings and classrooms (Huerta & Rios-Aguilar, 2018), deficit and irrelevant curriculum (Malagon, 2010; Nygreen, 2013), massive surveillance and punitive practices (Huerta & Hernandez, 2021; Hurtado et al., 2015; Rios, 2017), minimal extracurricular activities (Hernandez, 2018), and insufficient school counselors and mental health personnel to support students' academic, career, and socio-emotional needs (Fresques et al., 2017; Vogell & Fresques, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2019). Given some of the reasons mentioned above, it is not surprising that many alternative schools have lower graduation rates as they continually receive fewer resources to provide a substandard educational experience to youth of color (Fresques et al., 2017; Vogell & Fresques, 2017).

This paper seeks to confront how one school counselor makes sense of his role to serve in a critical space, such as a continuation high school in Southern California. In this study, I specifically focus on a continuation high school, as they are considered the largest substandard alternative educational program in California (Malagon, 2010). I draw on participant observations and interview data with Mr. Liera, a Latino male school counselor with more than 13 years of experience at a continuation high school. By focusing on the story of Mr. Liera, this study does not seek to generalize to all school counselors in continuation high schools, but to bring attention to the experiences,

challenges, contradictions, and opportunities of serving as an educator in these spaces.

The two research questions guiding this qualitative study are:

1. What contributes to the retention or departure of a school counselor at a continuation high school?
2. How does a school counselor understand and describe their critical role at a continuation high school?

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will focus on two bodies of research, beginning with an overview of California's continuation high schools and student characteristics, followed by the experiences and job satisfaction of school counselors. Both bodies of literature guide this study to contextualize the need to focus on school counselors in continuation high schools.

#### **California's Continuation High Schools**

The number of continuation high schools in the state of California has drastically increased over the years (Malagon, 2010). Currently, there are nearly 435 of these institutions that serve approximately 51, 811 students (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019), which accounts for almost ten percent of the overall high school student population in California (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). In particular, Latinx youth are the largest overrepresented group as they account for over two-thirds (70.6 percent) of the students in continuation schools (CDE, 2019; Hernandez & Ortez, 2019; Ojeda, 2020). Every year, many racially minoritized students who experience exclusion practices in mainstream public schools are funneled into continuation schools (Malagon, 2010). For many racially minoritized youth, their transition to continuation

high schools is challenging as they have experienced a disconnect with adult educators in their schooling experience (Hernandez; 2017; Rodriguez, 2005). Many of them have a long history of hostile relationships with counselors, teachers, and administrators due to the unfair treatment they have encountered along their educational pathways (Hernandez, 2017; Malagon, 2010; Rodriguez, 2005). Some scholars argue that some continuation high schools are not living up to their full potential, as some institutions fail to provide an education that will prepare youth for higher education or the workforce after graduation (Huerta & Hernandez, 2021; Muñoz, 2005; Nygreen, 2013; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Yet, in other studies research has shown how some continuation high schools have partnerships with higher education and community-based organizations to provide additional support services to support students transitions with postsecondary education and the workforce (Hernandez & Ortez, 2019; Ojeda, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to center the experiences of school counselors in continuation high schools and how they understand their critical role to increase opportunities to better serve racially minoritized youth in this sector.

### **Experiences of Professional School Counselors**

Research has documented that some school districts push educators into continuation high schools as a form of punishment for their underperformance in traditional schools (Hernandez, 2018; Kelly, 1993). Evidence has shown that some educators do not view continuation high schools as a primary location to work; therefore, issues of retention are typical in these institutions (Hernandez, 2018; Kelly, 1993). Consequently, it is essential to explore how schools and administrators can contribute to the retention of school counselors and educators in continuation high

schools. Specifically, research has shown how job satisfaction contributes to the persistence and retention of school counselors (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Hermann et al., 2019; Mullen et al., 2018). Simply put, when school counselors have higher job satisfaction, they are more likely to be retained in schools (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Hermann et al., 2019; Neale-McFall et al., 2018). Thus, schools benefit when they have long term counselors that provide consistent services to boost the academic, career, and social-emotional needs of students (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Hermann et al., 2019; Mullen et al., 2018). Empirical research has also found school counselors' job satisfaction is related to their ability to manage stress (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Mullen et al., 2018; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), having positive interactions with school administrators (Curry & Bickmore, 2012; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), support from colleagues (Curry & Bickmore, 2012), and a strong belief that they are making an impact in the lives of others (Curry & Bickmore, 2012; Rayle, 2006). The factors mentioned above have shown to contribute to the sense of job satisfaction for school counselors in traditional schools, which further research needed is to explore the various reasons that might influence the job satisfaction and retention of school counselors in continuation high schools.

### **Pivotal Moments Framework**

This study draws on Espinoza's (2007, 2011) *Pivotal Moments Framework* to examine the role of a school counselor in how they engage with racially minoritized youth along their educational pathways. For this study, the *Pivotal Moments Framework* serves as an opportunity to explore how a school counselor develops relationships with racially minoritized students at a continuation high school and helps them reintegrate

into school and on the path to college or the workforce (Espinoza, 2007, 2011). An educational Pivotal Moment initially occurs when a professional school counselor, voluntarily takes the initiative to support and mentor a racially minoritized student. In this way, counselors freely make an informal or official concerted attempt to support and mentor a student. Professional school counselors who engage in pivotal moments do so in three critical ways: by building trust, serving as a mentor and advocate, and transmitting social and academic capital (Espinoza, 2007, 2011; Espinoza et al., 2016). First, school counselors need to consider developing meaningful relationships with students, which includes building authentic relationships (Valenzuela, 1999), respecting students (Rodriguez, 2005), validating students' experiences, and having high expectations (Rodriguez, 2005). Research has shown how stronger student-adult relationships contribute to higher levels of student engagement and more favorable academic outcomes (Rodriguez, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). School counselors who serve as mentors and advocate for their students do so by providing emotional/moral support, encouragement/motivation, and connections for students with the necessary academic capital that will be vital towards their long-term educational success (Espinoza et al., 2016). Therefore, Espinoza's (2007, 2011) *Pivotal Moments Framework* is used in this study to examine the critical role of Mr. Liera, a Latino male school counselor at a continuation high school.

### **Methods**

This study employs a narrative inquiry study approach to report, analyze, and narrate the experience of Mr. Liera, a Latino male school counselor at a continuation high school (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A narrative inquiry method is suited for this



study, as it provides the opportunity not only to explore the story of Mr. Liera, but also pay a close attention to the context in which the narrative is embedded, such as the continuation high school (Clandinin, 2013). As recommended by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), it is essential to pay close attention to how institutions shape the experience of individuals. In this case, we analyze and understand the narrative of Mr. Liera by examining how educational institutions, both the traditional and continuation school have shaped his experience as a school counselor. Thus, narrative inquiry is a useful way to generate narratives that tell stories and the value those stories hold to participants but also situated within a broader cultural meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “the contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field” (p. 42). Therefore, narrative inquiry provides an opportunity to make sense of meaning and significance through the lens of Mr. Liera, a school counselor at a continuation high school.

### **School Setting**

This study took place at Camino, a continuation high school located in a large urban-suburban community in Southern California. Camino is located on a large and open campus, which connects with another alternative school, an adult school, and the school district offices. During the 2016-17 academic year, the average enrollment at Camino was over 500 students, which is considered a large continuation high school in comparison to other schools in California. Camino serves nearly five percent of all the district's enrolled students in addition to providing services to students from outside of

the school district and the surrounding communities. The student body was majority Latinx as they account for nearly 88 percent. Over 90% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch at Camino.

### **Data Collection**

All data collection occurred during the 2016-2017 academic school year. Data collection consisted of participant observations and an interview with Mr. Liera, who serves as the lead school counselor at Camino. Mr. Liera is the focal participant of this study, due to his long-tenure and a lead role as a school counselor at this continuation school. First, participant observations were collected to get a sense of Mr. Liera's activities as a school counselor and his relationship with students and educators at the continuation high school. Participant observations were conducted in the spaces that Mr. Liera navigates on a daily basis, such as his office, the main office, college/career center, lunchtime supervision, and any interaction with students before or after school in the campus quad. Second, a semi-structured interview with Mr. Liera was conducted towards the end of the academic year after having spent nearly eight months at the school site and establishing rapport with him, students, and educators from the continuation high school. The interview was conducted in his office and lasted about 90 minutes. The interview allowed me to learn about his experience, challenges, and opportunities of working as a school counselor at a continuation high school. Some of the questions included: (a) What informed your decision to work at a continuation high school?; (b) Can you describe and share your role and responsibility as a school counselor at a continuation high school?; and (c) Tell me about your students here. What do you know about them? What are your relationships with them like?

## **Data Analysis**

The interview with Mr. Liera was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. To analyze the data and interpret the result, the process of *restorying* was employed to reorganize the stories of Mr. Liera and placing them in a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002). The rationale for using a chronological sequence is well suited for the narrative of Mr. Liera, as the sequence of stories has an introduction, middle, and an end. Another element found in formulating a narrative through a series of events involves aspects that detailed conflict, struggle, and resolutions in a story plot (Carter, 1993). Therefore, the data analysis process describes the story of Mr. Liera and the themes that emerge that detailed his experience before working at the continuation high school, his desire to work at the continuation high school, and lastly, his call to work with other educators and schools to shift the deficit-centered lens about continuation high schools. This narrative inquiry study presents in chronological order the meaning of those experiences. In addition to the semi-structured interview, informal conversations and observations supplemented the interview data as another form to triangulate the findings from this study (Merriam, 2009).

## **Findings**

The findings provide an introduction to become familiar with Mr. Liera's story and his experiences, challenges, and opportunities of working at a continuation high school. His narrative provides a detailed account of his rising story as a pivotal educator, as early moments in his career formed his identity and perceptions about gradually committing long-term to work at a continuation high school. However, over the years, his perspective shifted as he provides his experience of his crucial role as a school

counselor to advocate for students in continuation high schools. In sum, the narrative of Mr. Liera represents his ability to reconcile these adversities and still be of meaningful service for the students he profoundly cares about at the continuation high school.

### **Transferring to a Comprehensive School As Soon As Possible**

Mr. Liera is a full-time lead school counselor at Camino Continuation High School located in a predominantly Latinx community. He has been a professional school counselor at this continuation high school for more than 13 years. Yet, his narrative demonstrates how he gradually became invested and committed to serving as a pivotal moment educator at a continuation high school. However, that process was not easy, as he was consciously aware of the perceptions of continuation high schools, particularly the belief that school districts transfer many educators as a form of punishment, which might signal that this is not a desired place to work (Kelly, 1993).

In my exchanges with Mr. Liera, I had the opportunity to learn about his early work experiences and what guided his decision not entirely to commit long-term at a continuation high school. One of the initial reasons, he disclosed, was the stigma associated with continuation high schools as they are known as “dumping grounds” for unwanted students and educators. Mr. Liera also revealed the lack of attention on college and career counseling at the continuation high school was another factor for his decision not to commit long-term at this institution. Before joining Camino Continuation School, Mr. Liera had worked for several years at a traditional high school. In that role, he focused on college and career readiness. Yet, at the continuation high school, the end goal was to support students’ transition back to their comprehensive schools or graduate from the continuation high school. Although Mr. Liera enjoyed working at his

previous institution, the long commute from home to work prompted his decision to find other school counseling positions near home. Eventually, Mr. Liera received and accepted his first job offered by the continuation high school near his community. After he accepted the offer to work at the continuation high school, Mr. Liera described his immediate intentions, "The decision was made that I would take the job with the understanding and the goal being getting my foot in the door and transferring to a comprehensive school as soon as possible." Thus, Mr. Liera's experience informs how the stigmas of continuation high schools also affect educators' decision to remain long-term at these institutions. While Mr. Liera shared those early moments in his tenure at the continuation high school, in the next sections, we learn more about how he gradually became invested in serving students at the continuation high school.

### **This [Continuation High School] is Where I Want to Be**

Although Mr. Liera's narrative provides a compelling perspective of the multiple reasons why he had a strong desire to transfer to a traditional school immediately, his perspective shifted. Eventually, during the interview, Mr. Liera disclosed the opportunity to move back to a comprehensive school had been there over the last 13 years, as he shared the following:

I've had the opportunity to go back to the comprehensive school now a couple of times and I've decided that this is where I want to be and this is where I need to be at this point in my life and my career. So that desire to go back to the comprehensive school has now faded down.

Firmly stated, Mr. Liera acknowledges that he is invested and understands that at this point in his career, he has made the intentional decision to remain at the continuation

high school for various reasons. One of the reasons he disclosed was the support he has received from administrators, as he shared:

This is where I want to be. I feel the support of the administration, Dr. Murphy [school principal], I feel the support by the district and the people that are here and being here at the district campus, I feel like I can walk in to different superintendents' office and or different people offices at the district level and get issues addressed that come up on a regular basis.

Mr. Liera recognized the immense support he has received from administrators, but also the direct and close connection he has developed with various leaders from the school district. One of the benefits he shared was the opportunity to immediately get support from the local school district, as the continuation high school is located in the same location as the main school district offices. Thus, it is an advantage for him and many educators to reach out for support, if needed immediately.

The role of a school counselor is significant at any school, yet Mr. Liera highlights how it is very critical at a continuation high school, as the students that you work with might have never had a positive relationship with an adult educator or been validated for their academics in school. Thus, Mr. Liera sheds light on the reason he strongly feels that the continuation high school is an important place to impact students, as he shared:

Just to be able to see a kid that's coming in and have that kid turn into a student who is doing well academically and being recognized for their hard work and achievements. That is the point that really keeps me being able to do this job because if it was just all negative and all, I would have left this a long time ago. And here I am finishing up my 13<sup>th</sup> year.

His experience as he recalled has not been all negative, as he provides insight into another aspect that is hardly told about the critical work of school counselors and other educators in continuation high schools. Mr. Liera describes the importance of having the ability to cultivate pivotal moments by engaging with students and witnessing their transformative experience at the continuation high school. Many of the youth in continuation high schools have rarely been recognized and celebrated for their academic achievements in schools. Thus, Mr. Liera highlights the importance of engaging in pivotal moments by validating students when they are excelling academically in these institutions. Consequently, the narrative of Mr. Liera has shown how his job satisfaction and retention at the continuation high school is coupled with the support of administrators and leaders at the school district, which in turn allows him to make a difference in the lives of students he connects with at the continuation school.

### **Find a Different Narrative, Find a Different Way to Explain Us**

As a school counselor who attempts to engage in pivotal moments, Mr. Liera recognizes the many challenges he and his colleagues encounter working initially with students who transition from a traditional school into the continuation schools. The challenge stems from the misinformation that exists about the role and purpose of continuation high schools, which leads to many students entering the continuation high school with fear, anxiety, and stress of expecting to have a bad social and academic experience at this institution. Mr. Liera shared his frustrations on how traditional schools present the continuation high school initially to prospective students, as he noted:

They use us to scare these kids. They do this for a year, maybe two years and then the beginning of their junior year the message changes to, you've done

poorly, so let's try to give you an alternate placement, we are going to send you over at Camino so hopefully you can do better there. But you just filled this kid's head for two years, that this is an evil bad place and now you are trying to change the narrative, that's not going to help. You just spent two years breaking us down, and you expect to build us up to the point that the student has to be here in a few conversations? That's not going to happen.

The excerpt above also sheds light on the missed opportunities in traditional schools to provide early interventions. Consequently, Mr. Liera alluded to how Camino has been described as a “bad place” to prospective students, which makes it challenging to get students to buy into the culture and the opportunities available at a continuation high school. Additionally, this narrative of fear dismisses the critical work of some educators in continuation high schools.

Therefore, Mr. Liera recognizes the crucial role of school counselors at traditional schools and how they present the continuation high school to prospective students. As a school counselor, Mr. Liera has come to understand over the years how critical his role is at the continuation high school to advocate for racially minoritized students. Specifically, in his interview, he provided a recommendation for school counselors in traditional schools to consider in their practice:

Stop using us as the boogeyman. Don't use us, a lot of times it is not going to help and then when you do have to send a kid here, the kid's going to come here with that fear, I don't want to go there, because you told me how bad of a place that it was. Find a different narrative, find a different way to explain us, find a different way to use us that is probably going to be better suited to your students.



In his statement, Mr. Liera stresses how the current message harms students' transition into a continuation high school, as they enter these spaces with fear and expecting a horrible academic and social experience. Therefore, Mr. Liera invites school counselors to reframe the role and purpose continuation high schools to prospective students, without immediately installing fear in them.

During my time at Camino, observation data revealed how school counselors address the misconceptions about continuation high schools to students and family members. I had the opportunity to observe several new student orientations that were organized during the academic year for incoming students to learn more about the continuation high school. The new student orientations served three purposes: (1) (re)introduce the role and purpose of a continuation high school to incoming students and parents/caregivers, (2) challenge and debunk the stereotypes about continuation high schools, and (3) introduce them to the school structure and opportunities available to students. In all of the orientations, Mr. Liera and the other counselors engaged in pivotal moments as they stressed the significance of this school as a "revolving door" of opportunities for incoming students that come for a diverse set of reasons. At the same time, school counselors emphasize that their focus is not so much on the reasons why they had transferred from traditional schools. Still, they intend to support students to reach their academic goals, whether it is to graduate from continuation school or transfer back to their traditional school immediately. As such, Mr. Liera and the school counselors expressed to students and family members to view Camino as a "clean slate," in other words, a new beginning to reinvent their academic and social identity.

In this renewed opportunity, Mr. Liera recognizes how critical his role is to support racially minoritized students with their reintegration back into school after being pushed out from a traditional school. Mr. Liera's efforts are also validated and supported by the school principal, as he noted:

One of the things that [school principal] implemented recently, is that she wants the counselors to meet with each of the new incoming students and have like a sit-down -- it doesn't have to be an in-depth it can be a good 5, 10, 15 minute conversation about life in general and the world they live in and how they are and that gives us a connection with them right away to learn just a little about them to help them know that there's somebody on campus that they can come to. And then what that does is it allows us to then identify students who may need more help later on.

These informal meetings serve as an opportunity for Mr. Liera and other professional school counselors to engage with each incoming student in his caseload. This initial meeting serves as an opportunity to meet each student, learn about their goals, and ensure they have the necessary support needed to thrive in this sector. Additionally, it is essential to recognize this intentional practice was initiated and strongly encouraged by the school principal, which further demonstrates the efforts of a healthy school leadership team. As a result of these short exchanges with students, Mr. Liera has been able to listen and learn about the diverse needs of continuation youth. Specifically, he sheds light on some of those pressing needs or concerns he has learned about the students he directly serves:

There are students who are very concerned about their parents, and their immigration status, and what's going on in our political climate right now. Makes that a real big issue for a lot of them. There are students like we talked earlier about the fact that they are in the foster system for whatever reason. Something happened, their parents may be locked up. Whatever is going on, they are in the system. There are students who may not be in the system, living relatives, but their parents are locked up. There are parents who will do everything and anything in their power to provide for their students.

During the time of data collection, the 2016 Presidential election took place, and many racially minoritized youth experienced fear, anxiety, and frustration with the results of the election. As Mr. Liera noted, there is a high percentage of immigrant youth at Camino and many of them feared for themselves or their families due to the hostile political climate for immigrant communities. Therefore, having those individual meetings with students allowed for Mr. Liera to engage and connect with most of his students in his caseload and learn about their diverse set of needs. In addition, Mr. Liera highlights the assets of parents and instilling the value of education on their children. In sum, Mr. Liera recognizes the challenges and resilience of his students and family members, as he engages in pivotal moments by providing emotional/moral support and connecting students and their family/caregivers with the necessary support that is needed towards their long-term educational success.

### **Discussion**

Across the nation, alternative high schools comprise six percent of the entire high school system in the U.S. (DePaoli et al., 2016), yet the experience of school

counselors has received limited attention in educational research and practice. This study offers some insight into the experience of one school counselor in an alternative school, thus, it provides important considerations of how other school counselors in continuation high schools may be going encountering similar experiences. Given the inequitable outcomes in these institutions, we should pay closer attention to the role of school counselors in alternative schools, as they can provide the necessary academic and social support for students to not only graduate but also transition into higher educator and/or the workforce (Hines et al., 2017; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

The framework of Pivotal Moments (Espinoza, 2007, 2011) is well suited for this study, as the interview and observation data demonstrate the rising story of Mr. Liera and how he comes to understand how essential his role as a school counselor at a continuation high school by building trust, transmitting the necessary knowledge, and serving as a mentor and student advocate. Yet, his story highlights the challenges and tensions he encountered during the transition from a traditional school to a continuation school, as he described that he immediately wanted to transfer back to the comprehensive school. Part of his decision to not commit long-term to the continuation high school was due to the deficit-centered ideologies about students and continuation high schools. Similar to previous studies, Mr. Liera's narrative aligns with other findings that have shown that continuation high schools are not a desirable location to work within secondary education (Hernandez, 2018; Kelly, 1993).

Yet, this study reveals how a professional school counselor found the value of working in this critical sector and supporting youth that has been punished and pushed out from traditional schools. In alignment with the literature on school counselors' job

satisfaction and retention, this study also shows how Mr. Liera, as a professional school counselor had positive interactions with the school principal and school district personnel (Curry & Bickmore, 2012; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), received support from his colleagues at the continuation high school (Curry & Bickmore, 2012), and had a strong belief that he is making a difference by impacting the lives of youth in continuation high schools (Curry & Bickmore, 2012; Rayle, 2006). Thus, the findings from the study support existing research that shows how a school counselor's job satisfaction is critical for their retention in schools (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Hermann et al., 2019; Neale-McFall et al., 2018).

As an educator in a continuation high school, Mr. Liera describes the challenges of engaging in pivotal moments in working with students, as he specifically points out the tensions within the traditional schools from the same school district. Findings show Mr. Liera's frustrations in the ways that educators from the traditional schools present the continuation high school from a deficit lens, but also blame students for falling behind on their academic credits. Rather than collaboration and providing early interventions to meet the needs of students, educators in traditional schools use the continuation school as a scapegoat by installing fear and pushing them out. Again, this approach is deficit oriented which views the students as the problem, rather than traditional schools changing their practices to support racially minoritized students fully. Instead, many students feel wholly disregarded by traditional schools as they are pushed out into continuation high schools (Hernandez, 2017; Malagon, 2010). While research has shown school counselors to be active collaborators with stakeholders in schools, families, and communities to advance for student success (Chen-Hayes et al.,

2014; Hines et al., 2017), yet this study reveals that collaborations are absent among school counselors and educators in both the continuation high school and traditional schools within this school district. As a result, Mr. Liera highlights the need for more school counselors, teachers, and administrators from the local traditional schools to engage and visit the local continuation high school to truly understand the efforts and opportunities that are presented to students in these spaces.

This study has several limitations, as it only focuses on one Latino male counselor at a continuation high school. Therefore, generalizations cannot be made about the gendered and racialized experiences of counselors of color in continuation high schools. Despite the limitations of this study, the narrative of Mr. Liera provides rich in-depth information that an “unknown audience who may be far removed from the lived and told experiences of participants” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 50) can become familiar with his experience in a continuation high school. In the next section, some implications are presented to consider for policy, practice, and future research.

## **Implications**

### **Policy**

Policy efforts should be considered at the local and national levels regarding alternative schools. These initiatives should consider bringing together key stakeholders from school districts to reconsider the dehumanizing framing of students, school counselors, and teachers in continuation schools. These policy efforts can provide the opportunity for engagement, collaboration, and shared accountability among traditional schools and their local continuation schools, as this study indicates the disconnection that exists within one school district.

## Practice

The findings of this study offer some recommendations for practice, as the narrative of Mr. Liera highlight the critical role of a school counselor to increase student success at a continuation high school. Findings reveal the ways in which administrators and school district leaders can support and retain school counselors within continuation high schools. Therefore, there is a lot to learn from the narrative of Mr. Liera and his experience at a continuation high school that has implications for how administrators and school districts leaders consider recruiting, retaining, and developing in school counselors to advocate for students and continuation high schools. School administrators play an essential role in structuring conditions of support and fostering an environment that will contribute to a positive job satisfaction for school counselors in these educational spaces. Thus, when school counselors are in position where they can thrive, they are most useful and productive, which will ultimately benefit students in continuation high schools.

Finally, this study can also inform the work of counselor educators in the teaching and supervisor of school counselors, as there needs to be more curriculum, instruction, and learning opportunities that discuss the role and purpose of continuation high schools within secondary education. As part of these initiatives, graduate programs should also consider developing partnerships with local continuation schools as potential sites for fieldwork placements for school counselors in training. Through these programs, whether they opt to work in continuation high schools or remain in traditional schools, future school counselors will have a clearer understanding of the nuances that exist in continuation high schools.

## **Future Research**

Although this study only draws on the experience and perspective of one school counselor, it presents opportunities for future research to consider. There needs to be more work examining the experiences of school counselors in other alternative schools across the U.S. In addition, future research should explore gender and racial identity differences in the experiences of school counselors in alternative schools. Also what might be some other struggles school counselors may experience in these settings that we have limited knowledge, and how do these challenges compare and contrast to what we know about school counselors in traditional public schools.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides insight into the everyday experience and practice of Mr. Liera, a school counselor who is student-centered and provides an honest, authentic, and caring description of his role as a pivotal educator in a continuation high school. Despite not being his first-choice to serve in a continuation high school, we learn about the possibilities to shift minds when individuals are in a school structure that supports them, which contributes to their job satisfaction, and ultimately to their decision to remain of service. Mr. Liera provides a compelling narrative about the critical role of school counselors in continuation high schools, as his story shows the tensions and opportunities that exist in California's most overlooked and racialized educational spaces. Yet, alternative schools are an important sector that can benefit from more school counselors who see the value of working in these spaces to provide students with renewed opportunities in their educational pathways.



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