Comparative School Counseling

Volume 2

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Volume 2

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Preface

Another Step towards Establishing Comparative School Counseling

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This volume contains a collection of strictly selected papers submitted to the Second International Conference on Comparative School Counseling in 2022. The mission of this conference is to contribute to the development of the Comparative School Counseling research field.

The volume is divided into two parts and includes six papers written by fifteen authors.

Part 1 is devoted to school counseling policies and consists of three papers. Michael S. Trevisan examines the importance of evaluation for international school-based counseling and presents an evaluation framework that has six components: (1) involve stakeholders, (2) construct a theory of action, (3) write evaluation questions, (4) develop an evaluation design and select methods, (5) conduct data analysis and report findings, and (6) communicate and use the evaluation results. George Vera, Alfonso Barreto, Mario Fung and Fabiola Macias focus on current public policy challenges to school counseling in Latin America, and considering these challenges, the authors discuss some common characteristics and specific features of school counseling in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela. Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu and Queen Chioma Nworgu explore the causes and consequences of work-related stress for staff in education during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing on human resources management.

Part 2 focuses on school counseling practices and comprises three papers. Petra Gregorčič Mrvar, Barbara Šteh, Marjeta Šarić and Katja Jeznik present a case study of Slovenia on school counselors' coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors provide results of their exploratory qualitative study on the ways the school counselors in Slovenia were coping with questions and challenges during the time of distance learning and counseling. Gillian L. S. Hilton examines a very interesting trend in Argentina, namely, being overly concerned about one's own and others' mental health and how this influences school counseling approaches. The author

explores what affect on school counseling the therapy culture has had in this country. Gordana Stankovska, Ruvejda Brahha and Zebide Ibraimi focus on inclusive education for students with disabilities in the school system in the Republic of North Macedonia. Some psychological counseling programs for teachers who work with such children are also presented and discussed.

The papers in this volume represent a small but continuing step towards our efforts for establishing Comparative School Counseling as a research field.

As in the previous volume, here readers can again find comparative and case studies, documental and empirical explorations, and a variety of interesting data on school counseling in Europe, North and Latin America.

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Part 1

School Counseling Policies

The Importance of Evaluation for International School-based Counseling

Michael S. Trevisan

Abstract

The need for K-12 school-based counseling programs and services across the world has likely never been greater. Depression, anxiety, suicide and trauma are at epidemic proportions throughout the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the challenges young people face. Without addressing these issues, it is difficult to see how effective instruction and learning can take place. I argue that those interested in school-based counseling must find ways to engage policy makers, gain their interest, and keep their commitment to effective school-based counseling.

Evaluation is one tool that can be employed to gain widespread support for K-12 school-based counseling programs and services. When done well, evaluation can provide information to broad stakeholder groups about the effectiveness of programs and services and how to improve the day-to-day activities of school-based counseling programs. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) has promoted a model of school counseling (ASCA National Model) that includes evaluation as an essential element. Using the ASCA National Model as a basis, and informed by the evaluation literature, Trevisan and Carey (2020a) provide an evaluation framework that could be used by school-based counselors worldwide. This paper will lay the groundwork for evaluation in the context of international school-based counseling.

Keywords: ASCA National Model, evaluation, evaluation standards, program effectiveness, program improvement

Introduction

School-based counseling has struggled to gain footing in US schools. The literature detailing why this is the case is decades long and well known to school-based counseling researchers, and many school-based counseling policy makers and policy advocates. Role ambiguity, ineffectively deployed by school principals, lack of resources, and an uneasy understanding and acceptance of mental health support for children, all conspire against school-based counseling being seen as a legitimate and

essential role within schools (Astramovich, 2016; Lambie et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). A similar phenomenon has occurred in other countries, such as India and South Korea, as some work toward policy implementation of school-based counseling (Thomas, George & Jain, 2017; Lee & Yang, 2017). The world has been in the throes of a pandemic for more than two years with no discernable end in sight. Concerns about mental health are articulated in news articles, the internet, and talks by government health officials on nearly a daily basis. I argue that this could be a time in world history where there is broad recognition for the importance of mental health, particularly among children, and that school-based counseling could be seen as having a legitimate role in schools in support of children's mental health.

The evidence

Individuals throughout the world who work with children and youth know that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused increased mental health problems. In addition, there are a growing number of research studies and reports that document the increased prevalence of different mental health problems among children and youth. All note significant increases in depression, anxiety, suicide, and trauma among young people, as well as other mental health issues (e.g., Unwin et al., 2022; OECD, 2021; Racine et al., 2021). These studies use survey results or information from databases and compare either rates of mental health issues from 2019 to 2020 or 2019 to 2021. These studies provide strong evidence of a world-wide mental health crisis among children and youth.

As mentioned, school-based counselors have struggled to gain sustained support within schools. In recent years, school-based counselors have been absent from most major education-oriented speeches, policy documents, and state or federal education budgets in the US. School-based counselors have also absent from similar documents disseminated by the OECD, and the World Bank. This is now changing. A recent report by the U.S. Surgeon General recommended the important role school counselors can play in providing mental health support to students (U.S. Surgeon General, 2021). In addition, the report acknowledged the high, school counselor to student ratios across the US and implored states and school districts follow the guidelines recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) of a 1:250 ratio.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) provided a broad and detailed set of recommendations to support states, school districts, and schools dealing with mental health challenges among K-12 students. These recommendations include a significant expansion of the number of school counselors across the US, removal of administrative tasks from the school counselor workload so that they can focus on mental health support for students, and to set the ASCA recommended ratio of one school counselor to 250 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In short, there is no time in modern history for which school counselors have been so

broadly promoted as an essential professional in schools, at least in the US. In gaining a foothold in schools, perhaps this time is different for school counselors.

A set of recommendations in the USDOE document focuses on the use of data and evaluation to support program decisions. Cited in the document are limiting factors within the mental health infrastructure for schools, including poor program implementation, a fragmented school and mental health system, and a lack of focus on outcomes. These limitations could in part be addressed through effective program evaluation. Program evaluation in particular, has much to offer the school counseling profession and mental health system that supports K-12 school districts in the US. The remainder of this paper will address program evaluation for school-based counselors.

Program evaluation

Program evaluation is an emerging discipline and profession, with its genesis in the US in the 1960s. The benefits are largely twofold. One, program evaluation can be used to inform program personnel regarding ways to improve programs and services. Two, program evaluation can be used to determine impact and form the basis for program accountability. The first is called formative evaluation; the second summative evaluation.

There are several definitions of program evaluation in the literature. Gopal and Preskill (2014) provide a straightforward definition of evaluation by stating that "evaluation is a systematic and intentional process of gathering and analyzing data (quantitative and qualitative), to inform learning, decision-making and action" (para 2). The Joint Committee on Standards in Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) provide the most broadly accepted set of expectations on the practice of program evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2010).

Some professions have incorporated program evaluation as part of professional practice. School counseling in the US, is among these professions. Program evaluation is required and promoted by ASCA for school counseling programs and services to be accredited as an ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). The program evaluation component is largely focused on gathering quantitative information and completing a variety of forms and templates that when completed, meet the accountability expectations of the ASCA National Model. Given the decades long call found in the US school counseling literature for the benefits of school counselors conducting program evaluation, the expectation found in the ASCA National Model is progress. These expectations have considerable room for improvement, however, in particular, the ASCA expectations are not well connected to current thinking and practice in evaluation. The following framework was developed to address this issue and provide school-based counselors with the best in evaluation thinking and practice.

Evaluation framework

Trevisan and Carey (2020a) have recently offered a school-based counseling framework that incorporates the best program evaluation thinking from the evaluation field and integrates this thinking with school-based counseling professional practice and expectations. The framework has six components:

(1) involve stakeholders,

(2) construct a theory of action,

(3) write evaluation questions,

(4) develop an evaluation design and select methods,

(5) conduct data analysis and report findings, and

(6) communicate and use the evaluation results.

Component 1: Involve stakeholders

A key feature of high-quality evaluation is the involvement of stakeholders (Yarbrough et al., 2010). Stakeholders for school counseling programs include students, parents, teachers, school and district administrators and community members. While the ASCA National Model advocates involvement of stakeholders through the advisory committee, the framework expands on the idea of stakeholders in an advisory role to one of involvement in the evaluation. This could range from providing feedback on an evaluation before its inception, to being involved in collecting data. This of course depends on the expertise of the stakeholder(s), size of the school community, available resources, and the like. School counselors in the US have many school and community stakeholders and have a solid skillset for engaging a wide variety of people. Trevisan and Carey (2020a) provide several recommendations for implementing stakeholder involvement in the evaluation. Communicating regularly with stakeholders and thinking strategically about their involvement are fundamental aspects of these recommendations.

Component 2: Theory of action

Once stakeholders have been identified, a theory of action is developed. A theory of action is a description of how the resources and program components go together to generate outcomes. In short, it is the program logic. A common way to portray a theory of action is to develop a logic model. A logic model is a graphic representation of the theory of action and is composed of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The ideal is to involve stakeholders in the development of the theory of action. In addition, all assumptions about the program should be identified. If there are disagreements, work is needed to reconcile these differences.

Figure 1 shows a simple logic model.

Figure 1. Simple logic model
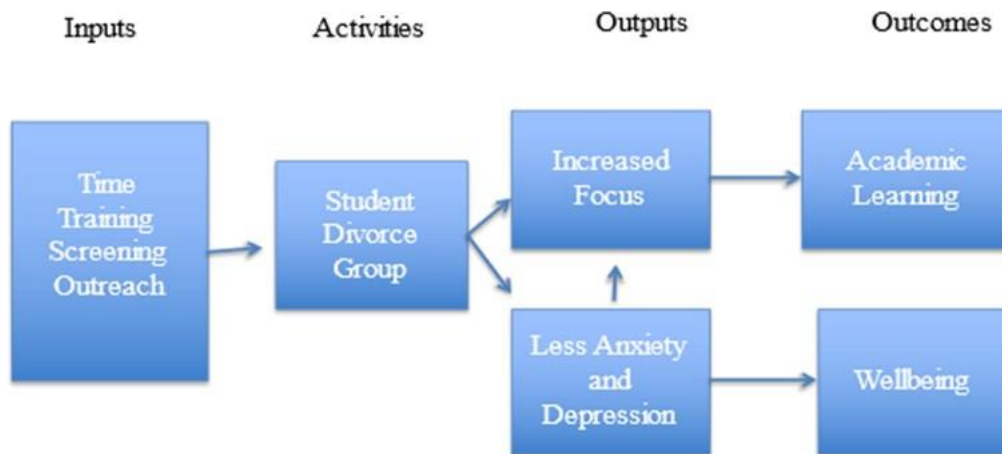
From: J. Carey & M. Trevisan evaluation workshop, Christ University, January 2020.

Component 3: Evaluation questions

Evaluation questions address what the school counselor and stakeholders want to know about the program and its services. The evaluation questions provide focus for the evaluation and signal the kind of data that are needed. Evaluation questions can be categorized into the four parts of the logic model and broadly into formative and summative evaluation. For formative evaluation, logical questions such as, "Are resources deployed as planned?" and "What is working well and what needs improvement?", are typically included. For summative evaluation, "What is the impact of the program?" and "Were desired outcomes obtained?" are standard questions. Development of evaluation questions is a straightforward way of including stakeholders in the evaluation and provides the opportunity to convey what is essential about the program.

Component 4: Evaluation design and select methods

The development of an evaluation design and the selection of methods is driven by the evaluation questions and available resources, most often the resource of time for school counselors. Thus, tradeoffs between the strength of the design and feasibility are inevitable and necessary. Evaluation designs include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs. Quantitative designs typically make comparisons, such as comparison before and after an intervention. Numerical data such as test scores, fixed-response survey results, or behavioral data are used. Qualitative designs are useful to get an in-depth understanding of an entity, such as the program, intervention, or school. They can also be used to understand a particular phenomenon. Observations, interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of documents are typically used in qualitative designs. Mixed-methods designs are a

combination of quantitative and qualitative designs and associated data. They are often used to get a stronger, more focused understanding about some issue or component of the program.

Component 5: Data analysis and findings

Findings used to answer evaluation questions form the basis of recommendations for such things as program revision. Thus, keeping the connection between and among the evaluation questions, designs and methods, and data analysis and findings is essential for doing high-quality evaluation work (Yarbrough et al., 2010). There are a variety of data analysis techniques that can be used to determine findings. Statistical techniques are employed to analyze quantitative data. Identifying trends, patterns, outliers and the like, are central for analyzing qualitative data. In the end, the findings are obtained to answer evaluation questions, questions that the school counselor and stakeholders identified as important to know about the program.

Component 6: Communicate and use the evaluation results

Communicating about the evaluation is a central feature of high-quality evaluation work and reflected in the JCSEE Standards (Yarbrough et al., 2010). Think of evaluation work as having a beginning, middle, and end. Communication is tailored to the phase of the evaluation, the particular stakeholders involved, and any issues that may have arisen during the evaluation. Communication is inevitably connected to results and findings, and used to provide recommendations from the evaluation. This in turn, sets the stage for using the evaluation in some way. Evaluation use is the central reason for doing evaluation. Several types of use are possible. Certainly, the school counselor will use formative evaluation to consider program revisions. The evaluation could also be used to educate a broad stakeholder group on what the school counseling program does, has accomplished, and its importance to the school and community.

Benefits

The evaluation framework was in part developed to meet the ASCA (2019) standards. School counselors in the US can be assured that if they follow the framework, the tenets of the ASCA National Model will be met. There are several additional benefits to using the Trevisan and Carey (2020a) school-based counseling evaluation framework. In particular, the framework: (a) meets the JCSEE Standards; (b) incorporates the use of qualitative methods; (c) includes formative evaluation as a valued purpose; (d) embraces stakeholder engagement; and (e) fosters culturally-responsive evaluation.

A key benefit of the framework is that it meets the JCSEE Standards for educational evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2010). These standards are broadly supported within the evaluation community. In addition, the American Counseling

Association participated in the standards development process. Thus, the profession had a hand in shaping the standards to be useful and meaningful for the counseling community (Trevisan & Carey, 2020a). The real benefit here is that the JCSEE Standards represent the best thinking on doing quality program evaluation work, embraced by much of the evaluation community. School-based counselors can be assured that the evaluation framework will guide them to high-quality program evaluation.

The program evaluation expectations required for an approved ASCA National Model is almost exclusively focused on obtaining quantitative data for various aspects of the evaluation. While all types of data have strengths, they also have limitations. Some of the benefits of quantitative data are its conciseness, the fact that it is easily summarized, the data are used to document impact, and that quantitative data can be readily communicated. There are other benefits as well. However, quantitative data cannot be used to probe for more in-depth responses or develop a rich, nuanced appreciation of stakeholder views. Qualitative data can get at these aspects of stakeholder thinking. The JCSEE Standards call for use of qualitative data when the situation warrants. The use of qualitative data is part of the thinking of high-quality program evaluation promoted by the evaluation field.

The ASCA National Model is focused on summative evaluation. It addresses outcomes and impact. Except in a cursory manner, the ASCA National Model does not address formative evaluation. As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of formative evaluation is to improve the program and services. In turn, there will be a better chance of showing impact through summative evaluation. Thus, the Trevisan and Carey (2020a) school-based counseling evaluation framework maintains a key connection between formative and summative evaluation. In sum, both are essential for high-quality evaluation work. This is also reflected in the JCSEE Standards.

Being responsive to stakeholders is a fundamental difference between program evaluation on the one hand and research on the other. Evaluation requires stakeholder involvement; research does not. Stakeholder engagement is reflected in the JCSEE Standards. The ASCA National Model includes stakeholder engagement in a limited way. The evaluation framework includes stakeholder engagement for program feedback, as is the case with the ASCA National Model, but also in all aspects of the evaluation, if feasible and useful. The evaluation framework also includes a broader look at who the stakeholders are for a school counseling program, beyond parents, students, and school building staff. Including stakeholders in the evaluation is the surest way to increase the likelihood that the evaluation will meet their information needs. It can also build and sustain strong support within the stakeholder community for the school counseling program and its services.

Race and ethnicity are demographic characteristics throughout most communities in the US and increasingly so throughout countries in Europe. Ensuring that the evaluation of the school-based counseling program is responsive to people who do not come from the dominant culture is a unique challenge and responsibility of conducting high-quality evaluation. US scholars and professional organizations

have worked to develop and continually refine expectations for working with different demographic groups within the context of evaluation. Australia has worked on evaluation best practice within the cultural context of indigenous communities. A summary of this work is offered by Trevisan and Carey (2020b) and recommendations are reflected within the school-based counseling evaluation framework. Acknowledging the complexity of culture, recognizing power differences, and use of culturally appropriate methods, are among these recommendations reflected in the literature and framework (Trevisan & Carey, 2020b). And more recently, Trevisan and Carey (in press) have applied the framework to addressing racial inequalities within the context of evaluating school-based counseling programs.

Limitations

While the school-based counseling evaluation framework provides guidance for performing high-quality evaluation there are two limitations that are found throughout the literature addressing school counseling evaluation in the US. The first is the lack of time that school counselors have for conducting program evaluation (the most recent, Riechel et al., 2020). School counselors in the US for example, typically have administrative tasks that must be dealt with, along with a heavy caseload. Integrating program evaluation tasks and activities into the workday seems overwhelming and unrealistic. The second limitation is the lack of training opportunities for school counselors in program evaluation. Few graduate programs in the US maintain a course or set of pedagogical experiences in evaluation for pre-service school counselors. Once in professional practice, there are limited professional development experiences in program evaluation that address program evaluation in the context of school counseling.

There is some data indicating that school counselors are interested in program evaluation, see value in conducting program evaluation of their program and services, and would like professional development experiences (Astramovich, 2016). In addition, Trevisan and Carey (2020a) provide ways to make program evaluation tasks and experiences more efficient and less time consuming. Smaller data collection, rotating aspects of the program for evaluation in any given year, are among these strategies. The counselor to student ratio of 1:250 recommended by ASCA (2019), if enacted, could provide the necessary time to not only better address student needs but also provide time needed to effectively conduct program evaluation. More work is needed to address these limitations.

Framework pillars

There are three pillars that form the foundation of the school-based counseling evaluation framework, a framework that could propel the school-based counseling profession forward. These pillars are born out of the knowledge and experience of scholars and professionals in the fields of evaluation and school counseling as they

work to move their respective fields forward. First, the initial inception of evaluation in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, was that of large-scale evaluation done by evaluation researchers outside the programs being evaluated. The thinking at that time was that evaluation was largely a methodological issue. Consequently, sophisticated researchers were needed. Further, individuals outside the program were thought to be more objective about the evaluation and findings since they did not have a vested interest in the program being evaluated. Unfortunately, and despite the promise of obtaining useful evaluation findings, these large-scale external evaluations were not used and thus, the expenditure for these evaluations was called into question. Carol Weiss, a well-respected evaluation scholar, made the provocative argument that to increase use of the evaluation, particularly for program improvement and social betterment, those closest to the program should take lead on all aspects of the evaluation (Weiss, 1998). The idea being that program personnel know best what the issues are within the program and need evaluation that provides them direct feedback on those aspects of the program. The Weiss (1998) argument is so profound that it foreshadows any attempt within the evaluation field for external evaluation of programs, uncoupled from the program personnel who provide program services. The school counseling evaluation framework embodies this thinking. The framework is offered with the explicit assumption that school counselors are in the best position to evaluate their respective programs.

Second, while evaluation has been historically thought of as a methodological set of tasks, the current thinking is that evaluation is also a people-oriented undertaking (King & Stevahn, 2012). For example, for program evaluation to work well the cooperation of many people is needed to fulfill the evaluation activities. An effective evaluator, one with strong nontechnical skills, can be instrumental in gaining and sustaining stakeholder participation and support. In fact, part of the struggle that earlier external evaluators had in conducting evaluation was that many of them did not have the nontechnical skills (e.g., effective communication, interpersonal skills, ability to work productively in groups) to obtain and keep cooperation from people who are central to the program. Past president of the American Evaluation Association, Laura Leviton, called the evaluation field to task for not recognizing this issue and addressing it (Leviton, 2001). In point of fact, the lack of nontechnical skills among evaluators, at least at that time, either made doing evaluation work more difficult than it otherwise should be; or worst, put evaluations at risk. With respect to school-based counselors and evaluation, we think school-based counselors have a real advantage and are well-positioned for doing effective evaluation work, given their education, training, and natural predilection for working with people (Trevisan & Carey, 2020a).

Third, as previously mentioned school counselors in the US and in other countries such as India, have suffered from role ambiguity. Many school staff members don't have a clear idea what school counselors can or should be doing in schools. Lambie et al. (2019) explicated these issues in an article titled, "Who took "Counseling" out of the role of school counseling in the United States?" This issue is

reflected in the US school counseling literature over the past few decades and struck such a strong chord among readership of the *Journal of School-based Counseling Policy and Evaluation* (JSCPE), that the article won the first-ever Sink Award for Outstanding Publication in the JSCPE. What the authors of the article also argued is that program evaluation is a strong means to better define what school counselors do. This idea is also found throughout the literature, yet it comes across clearly in the Lambie et al. (2019) article as a means to put "counseling" back into the role of the professional school counselor. By evaluating the actual work of the school counselor, and documenting the accomplishment of desired mental health outcomes, the school counselor has a hand in shaping and clarifying the role of the school counselor. While continual evaluation also has the benefit of providing information for program improvement and for being accountable to the school and community, it is a powerful form of professional advocacy for the proper role of school counselors.

Conclusion

As the world continues to deal with mental health challenges among young people as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, this could be an auspicious time for the expansion of school-based counselors to address these challenges. Evaluation of the school-based counseling program by the school counselor could be a powerful means to shape the best program and services and interventions possible, and establish the school counselor as an essential school staff professional.

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School Counseling in Latin America: Public Policy Contemporary Challenges

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ISPRESC Latin America

Abstract

Latin American school counseling (LASC) is historically, linguistically, culturally, and contextually diverse. Nonetheless, helping people make personal and educational decisions while successfully managing their lives and careers are shared purposes across the region. Currently, various challenges are hindering these purposes. For example, counseling specialized literature has called educational institutions, associations, and practitioners to debate policy and political issues affecting the counseling field professional advances while constraining LASC's contributions to individuals, families, societies, and economic progress across region countries. Another challenge is the development of new training and practice approaches that best assist individual and collective wellbeing and prosperity in the middle of the current worldwide health pandemic. In responding to these challenges, this presentation briefly discusses school counseling's common characteristics and distinctive features in three Latin American countries: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela. In addition, key historical events, the education systems, legislation, public policy, and current situations are described. In the end, recommendations on school counseling public policy development are offered, including assuming renovated philosophical foundations, developing new training strategies, and incorporating best practices and policies. These recommendations are preliminary results of current discussions within the International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRESC), Latin America.

Keywords: Latin America, school counseling and guidance, public policy, ISPRESC

Introduction

From Argentina to Mexico and including the Caribbean, a fundamental purpose of guidance and counseling practitioners in Latin America (LA) is to help people make personal and educational informed decisions and manage their lives and careers (Vera et al., 2017). Although there are distinct features among Latin American countries and their guidance and counseling services systems, there are common goals and shared challenges. Indeed, Latin American literature and research on guidance and counseling have noted the necessity for guidance and counseling practitioners to engage in policy-related debates and get involved in those political issues affecting the field development; as a discipline and a professional human-centered practice (Vera & Jiménez, 2015).

However, for active public policy and policymaking engagement, Latin American guidance and counseling practitioners need to consider how to include these matters in their training plans and professional counseling organizations' agendas. One step in that direction is understanding how public policy and policymaking are formed and how their participation is critical for advancing the profession. Another step is defining common policy development goals according to the realities and making decisions about engaging with policymakers, leaders, and other stakeholders (Martin & Vera, 2020).

In this paper, the following discussion describes school counseling's common characteristics and distinctive features in three Latin American countries: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela. The argument is organized around the following segments: historical events and the education system, legislation and public policy, and current situations and challenges. In the end, some recommendations are offered to address current needs and challenges. These recommendations are preliminary search results and recent discussion outcomes within the International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRESC), Latin America group.

Historical events and education system

In LA countries, school guidance and counseling practices are historically and culturally diverse. Yet, there is a similarity in critical fundamentals. One common characteristic shared across Latin American guidance and school counseling is their origins; although there were connections with the fields of psychology and medicine, guidance and school counseling have mainly emerged within the Universities' Schools of Education. Likewise, counselors' practices have been shaped by international organizations (Vera et al., 2017).

Unlike in many other parts of the world, guidance and counseling in LA did not derive from the mental health field. Indeed, Schools of Education housed at universities are the home counseling training programs, not the medicine, psychology, or liberal arts schools. Accordingly, guidance and counseling have historically been conceptualized as an educative practice.

The first signs of guidance and counseling appeared in Mexico between 1912 and 1914. During these years, surveys that included counseling constructs and Verified Educational Conferences were developed to transform Mexican schools. Nevertheless, more advancements were achieved after 1923, once the National Institute of Pedagogy was founded. Two years later, the Mental Hygiene and Psychopedagogy Department was established beneath the umbrella of the Public Education Secretary. Eventually, the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM) was pivotal in promoting counseling conferences, founding the Medical-pedagogical Institute in 1935, developing the first school counseling training programs between 1940 and 1942, which were part of a Techniques of Education specialization in the career of Psychology. Years later, counselors will play significant

roles at the high school level, and the Psychopedagogical Center of Counseling was founded in 1950, but it was dissolved in 1960. By 1984, the National System of Educational Counseling was created to support students' vocational decisions and careers (Aceves & Simental, 2013). Currently, different endeavors struggle to expand the role of school counselors in areas such as addictions, teen pregnancy, and school violence.

In Venezuela and Costa Rica, the first signs of guidance and counseling practices began in the 1930s. In Venezuela, these practices developed quickly as educational counseling concerned with academic, vocational, and occupational issues. In Venezuela, during the 1940s, some formal guidance and counseling services were designed based on education, philosophy, and counseling according to an interdisciplinary perspective. By 1956, counseling services included mental hygiene and pupil hygiene. The Departments of Psychoeducation and Guidance, ascribed at the Ministry of Education, provided student assistance programs. Then, in the early 1960s, the national government created the first counselor education training programs at the Pedagogical Institute of Caracas. Professors from the United States went to Venezuela as trainers for the first official counselor degrees. The Ministry of Education's Guidance Division was created in 1965 (Vera et al., 2017; Vera, 2010). Until now, school-based services have continued under the Ministry of Education's supervision, albeit with some struggles. The US-based training of guidance and counseling professionals at master's and doctoral levels has also continued, sponsored chiefly through both public funding and private initiatives.

The guidance and counseling professional field developed faster in Venezuela, even though Mexican counselors may have more integration of education and medicine fields in practice. However, Costa Rican counselors were the first in inscribing educational guidance and counseling into fundamental laws. In 1957, the Fundamental Law of Education was approved. Article 22 establishes that the education system guarantees students access to educational guidance and counseling to explore their skills and interests, help them make career plans, and support their emotional and social development. In 1964, a formal professional training program was established at the University of Costa Rica in response to the needs of the Department of Education for professionally trained counselors. Since 1980, public and private institutions have provided different undergraduate and master levels training programs. Law in Costa Rica strongly supports guidance and counseling professionals. In 2010, the guidance and counseling field was further acknowledged as a public service by enacting the College of Professional Guidance and Counseling Law (Vera et al., 2017).

Legislation and public policy: a summary

Due to the vital educational component of guidance and counseling in Latin America, the professional counseling field is most shaped by education laws. For example, the Fundamental Law of Education of 1957 supports and shapes the school

counseling professional role in Costa Rica. Likewise, the Education Act of 2009 defines the school counseling family and educational goals to best national support development. Meanwhile, in Mexico, the General Law of Education of 2019 delineates the roles and functions of school counselors. These legislations, subsequent regulations, agreements, public policies, and programs are unfolded.

The Costa Rican Fundamental Law of Education of 1957 refers to the guidance and counseling field and its social role in contributing to people's personality formation, favoring Christian values, developing aesthetic and ethical reasoning, and preparing the youth for civic life and patriotism. In parallel, based on the Central American Agreement on Basic Unification of Education (1962), the country has assumed school and vocational counseling as "an educational process by which the student is helped, on the one hand, to adapt to the school environment and, on the other, to correctly choose an occupation, prepare, enter and progress in it" (Article 80). Accordingly, the country compromised on establishing school and vocational counseling services (Article 82) across all educational levels and entrusting the management of these services to specialized personnel to best coordinate family, school, and state actions (Article 83). With this, Costa Rican school counselors have gained some experience developing public policies and programs across the country's scholar regions. Baldares (2014) pointed out that counselors are involved in guidance and counseling program evaluation by offering consultation to policymakers.

The Education Act of 2009 recognizes guidance and counseling as a political and human right for every citizen in Venezuela. Article 6, F "guarantees counseling, health, sport, recreation, culture, and wellness services to students involved in the educational process in co-responsibility with the relevant bodies". It is essential to consider that the Education Act is one of the most important and influential pieces of legislation from a constitutional perspective. The Constitution of 1999 establishes that "education and work are the fundamental processes for guaranteeing the state's purposes" (Article 3).

It is also important to understand that the Constitution (1999), Education Act (2009), and the school counseling services are rooted in the Liberator Simon Bolivar's philosophical, political, and pedagogical ideas found in the Angostura Address of 1919. Some of the ideas are:

- "The most perfect system of government is the one that produces the higher sum of possible happiness, the higher sum of social security, and the higher sum of political stability."
- "Popular education must be the firstborn care of the Congress' paternal love. Morals and enlightenment are the poles of a republic; morals and enlightenment are our first needs."
- "An ignorant people is the blind instrument of its own destruction."

In pragmatic words, Bolivar's philosophical-political-pedagogical principles enlighten a specific political-juridical framework (Constitution) that sets up a concrete juridical-pedagogical context (Education Act) for school counselors at all public and private schools (Vera & Barreto, 2020). This also acknowledges the need

for and defines the importance of the counselors' profession for national development and prosperity. According to the Venezuela legislation on counseling matters, every educational institution, from preschool to high school, should employ one counselor to work in a counseling center on a staff-pupil ratio of 1:10 class sections (Vera et al., 2017). The situation has created a more robust legal-political platform for developing guidance and counseling activities under the Ministries of Education and University Education's supervision. Often, these activities occur in the Centros Comunitarios para la Protección y el Desarrollo Estudiantil (CECOPRODEs) [Community Centers of Student Protection and Development], Coordinaciones de Protección y Desarrollo Estudiantil (COPRODEs) [Student Counseling and Protection Coordinations], and Sistema National de Orientación (SNO) [National Counseling System] (Vera & Vera, 2020).

The Mexican new General Law of Education (2019) states that "it will promote a humanistic approach, to favor students' socio-emotional skills, acquire and generate knowledge, strengthen the ability to learn to think, feel, act and develop as a member of a community and in harmony with nature" (Article 59). Therefore, the student's right to educational and vocational counseling services should be guaranteed. Within this framework, the General Law of Teacher's Carrier System (2019) outlines that counseling services should be guaranteed by members of the public school system, including teachers, teaching technicians, pedagogical, technical advisors, directors, and supervisors. Due to several social issues, education and school counseling practitioners have been allocated actively at the high school level. As a result, every public school offering high school education has at least one counselor. Here, it is possible to find schools with specific education and vocational programs to assist students holistically. On the other hand, private schools at every educational level (elementary, high school, and higher education) have developed a more robust counseling services network for students, including counseling for human development, academic, vocational, and family purposes.

Current situations and challenges

Guidance and counseling are activities and processes that have been around for more than one hundred years of promoting people's wellbeing and prosperity, individually and collectively, in Latin America. Nevertheless, this does not mean that guidance and counseling practitioners have been fully recognized for their skills and contributions to the human and social development of countries, nor that they have gained the power to lead their own professional field, nor that they have been capable of fulfilling the services required by the law to promote individual and collective wellbeing and prosperity, and the subsequent implications for Latin America's development. This situation has been acknowledged by scholars, practitioners, and counseling country-based associations, such as Federación de Asociaciones Venezolanas de Orientadores (FAVO) [Venezuela Federation of Counselor Associations], Asociación Mexicana de Profesionales de la Orientación (AMPO)

[Mexican Association of Counseling Professionals], Colegio de Profesionales en Orientacion (CPO) in Costa Rica [Professional Counseling College], Asociacion Argentina de Counselors (AAC) [Argentine Counselors Association]. Other regional and international organizations have pointed out these situations, including Red Latinoamericana de Profesionales de la Orientación (RELAPRO) [Latin American Counseling Professional Network] and the International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRESC) (Barreto, 2020; González, 2008; Vera & Jiménez, 2015; Vera & Barreto, 2020; Vera et al., 2017).

　　　ISPRESC, with its Latin American regional leaders and members, has been meeting with scholars and public policymakers to discuss current circumstances and outline country-based challenges that counseling practitioners face. In this regard, some of the most urgent challenges are as follows:

- Lack of enough training programs and qualified professionals: although many countries understand the need for school counseling services and try to promote them, the number of qualified counselors is insufficient. Venezuela is an example. According to the legislation, a school counseling professional should be hired per 10 class sections. However, there are insufficient professionals to satisfy the legislation and the students' counseling needs (Vera & Vera, 2020). The situation complicates by 1) the fact that only two colleges have consolidated training programs at undergraduate levels and 2) currently, many counseling practitioners are retiring from service. Hiring psychologists, teachers, and social workers has partially covered this shortening of school counseling professionals. Still, these professionals are not trained and qualified to provide school counseling services, nor do they hold the official degree of "counselor" required to practice in the school system. In Venezuela, the official degree is a bachelor's degree in Counseling and Guidance. In this country, graduate degrees do not authorize free practice. However, free professional practice is allowed for those who hold undergraduate degrees. Therefore, undergraduate degrees have two functions: making professional competencies visible and worthwhile socially; and degree holders are licensed to practice freely. Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and other countries have similar situations.

- Lack of understanding about counseling as a professional field and attention to policy research in the general community: there is a long history of guidance and counseling in LA, and laws and formal public policies are identifiable in most LA countries. However, the issues those policies cover and how those laws and policies have designed, implemented, and evaluated counseling services are not extensively understood (Vera et al., 2017). Overall, there is an equivalent lack of understanding of the social function of the guidance and counseling profession. In addition, there is a lack of attention to policy research issues in the professional literature across LA countries. Research indicates a significant lack of awareness and understanding by counselors, communities, legislators, and policymakers of

the relationship between policy and policy research and how the work of practitioners can support the wellbeing of people and the economic development of countries (González, 2008; Vera & Jiménez, 2015).

- Low influence of counselors in developing counseling public policies and legislation: practitioners have been trying to promote specific public policies and regulations at the national level in several LA countries, but it does not mean that they have succeeded. It is true that Costa Rican guidance and counseling practitioners have been involved in program evaluations and offered consultation to policymakers, but this is not the norm; it is the exception. And the fact that guidance and counseling practitioners are consulted does not mean that their recommendations are always considered. There were debates and discussions in Mexico to create the General Law of Education of 2019. But despite the Mexican Association of Counseling Professionals (AMPO)'s efforts, counselors were powerless to promote specific clauses to enlarge their professional recognition and work benefits. There is not even a specific national law to regulate the guidance and counseling professional practice in Venezuela, even though regulations and codes of ethics are stipulated by the Federation of Venezuelan Counseling Associations (FAVO).

- Ambiguous professional identity: the professional identity of counselors in Latin America is not clear enough even to counselors. Psychologists are psychologists in every LA corner, which is apparent to psychologists and other professionals. However, counselors do not share the same story. In fact, the profession can be called differently in the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. There is not even uniformity in the name. "Counseling", "Orientación", "Consejería", and other terms are common names used to call the same profession. Furthermore, even within counselors' conversations, the role of counselors is subject to debate. Are counselors more related to educators? Are counselors more related to psychologists? Are counselors a more multidisciplinary helping professional? Should school counselors be concerned about vocational decisions only? Do counselors have a broader scope of action within schools and form students' personalities to best adapt to social environments and become the best of themselves? What is the role of counseling in society? What are counselors? These questions and other concerns do not find quick and standardized answers in the LA counseling community. This situation affects professional development in different areas, including when counselors must introduce themselves before policymakers and legislators to promote their professional interests and objectives (Vera, 2013).

- A strong influence of foreign theories and practices: different LA authors have argued about rethinking the guidance and counseling field from a more LA perspective. They say that counseling's "philosophical, conceptual, procedural, and methodological body of knowledge has been heavily

influenced by theories and practices produced in contexts that are historically, culturally, politically, and economically dissimilar from Latin American countries" (Vera & Barreto, 2017, p. 457). The United States and Spain have been highly influential in both counselors' training and the development of counseling professional organizations. According to Barreto (2020), this situation may speak about coloniality in a helping profession that should promote equality, freedom, justice, and inclusion. As Barreto says, how would the US or European counseling theories and approaches understand LA aboriginal societies and their life aspirations? How can Holland's RIASEC model understand the career development of aboriginal populations or people who live in rural areas? How would a US individualistic concept of "independence" approach the collective Latin American construct of "interdependence"? How would foreign family system approaches understand Latin American family dynamics, traditions, values, and struggles?

Final thoughts from ISPRESC Latin America

Although constitutional principles and legislation on guidance and counseling exist in several LA countries, laws regulating the profession's free practice can only be found in Costa Rica and Puerto Rico. Without these legal instruments, the guidance and counseling profession will remain constrained and under the control of outside forces from the field. As a result, guidance and counseling professionals will be limited in how much they can participate in creating public policy. Therefore, counselors will not properly inform and assist policymakers in their work.

Even though the region's most influential guidance and counseling associations are well organized and invested in high-quality research and fostering professional encounters, critical discussions about political issues and rigorous research on policy matters are primarily absent from the agendas of these associations. Unless this situation changes, the profession's influence will likely be missing in debates about appropriate public policies and legislation. As a result, the current status of favorable legislation found in some countries could disappear. Public funding for guidance and counseling activities could be eliminated or restricted. These alarming predictions are already coming true in Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil.

We can reach high levels of professional development based on our diversity and long-standing counseling culture in the LA hemisphere. Today, it is recognized that the profession and its functions are of immeasurable strategic value for individuals, society, government, and public institutions. This awareness is achieved when counseling organizations, thinkers, and practitioners join efforts and work together to achieve the following:

1) Active participation in counseling public policy formation.
2) Work with legislators on counseling matters.
3) The inclusion of public policy education into counseling training programs.

4) Common agendas across counseling institutions and associations.

5) Linkages with counseling peers and organizations across borders.

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An Exploration of the Causes and Consequences of Work-related Stress for Staff in Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications for Human Resources Management

Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu & Queen Chioma Nworgu

Abstract

There is an extensive literature on the causes and consequences of prolonged work-related stress, drawing on research from a broad range of occupations. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting changes to working practices, created a host of new challenges for staff and managers in education. The requirement to deliver remote learning to students during periods of lockdown added a previously unforeseen level of challenge to teachers and lecturers. Rapid adaptation to new technologies and new ways of working was required at a time when many staff were already feeling overworked and – as a result of the lockdown restrictions – increasingly isolated. This small-scale research project draws on both primary and secondary data on a small group of employees who have faced stress or were experiencing stress at work, how they approached the situation and the support they received from their HR departments to help them cope. The findings indicate that during workplace stress for these staff was related to heavy workload and unrealistic management expectations. New working practices introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have exacerbated these stresses for many of those working in education, with implications for employee wellbeing and health, morale, absence, staff turnover, and the need for referrals to occupational health or counselling services.

Keywords: work-related stress, occupational health, counselling, public sector, Human Resources management, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Stress has a key role in organisational performance, particularly in the UK where it is noted that workload is the primary cause of stress (Cigna Corporation, 2018) and most employees leave their jobs due to workload-related stress (Smail, 2018). Stress is a key factor in work-life balance (Mullins, 2020). Furthermore, stress is closely connected with worker performance at work, which in turn is related to the workload, priorities, deadlines and targets that staff are expected to meet. The consequences of stress include sickness, absence and detrimental impacts on the

mental health of employees, which can require occupational health or counselling referrals. Without effective Human Resources management strategies in place to deal with workplace stress, this can lead to increased staff turnover within the organisation. As such, managing stress is a key challenge for all HR departments.

Stress can result from internal and external work pressures (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005). Stress occurs when an individual has perceived disequilibrium between pressure and their ability to manage the resources at their disposal – including other staff for those in management roles. Workload can impact both positively and negatively on employees. It can incentivise staff to work harder to meet targets and deadlines, but on the negative, stress occurs when workload demands surpass the ability of individuals to cope with those demands. In this instance, stress can seriously impact on the health and mental health of staff (Cartwright & Cooper, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in working conditions such as working from home, increased workload, lack of socialisation, and isolation due to lockdown rules, resulted in more work-related stress – providing an important case for research into the subject. A previous paper presented in March 2021, focused on stress in relation to students and the support available to them. This paper shifts the focus onto staff working in higher education, the work-related stresses on them during the pandemic, and the role of HR professionals (including referrals to occupational health or counselling) in helping staff to deal with these new stresses. It will share qualitative insights from participants in a focused piece of research that examined the impact on their jobs, health, and the support received from HR.

The key objectives of this paper are to:

- Explore the nature of the work-related stress these employees faced during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Analyse the challenges of stress in relation to the role of HRM
- Evaluate the impact of work-related stress on staff retention
- Share comments from employees about their experiences with stress and the support they received to help them cope with their stress

Literature on work-related stress

Management of employee stress at work is one of the key responsibilities of HR and some of the employees that face stress at work are referred to either occupational health or counselling services. Therefore, it is vital to explore the challenges of stress-related cases at work and the role of HR in supporting employees to manage their stress levels. In the preceding paper that focused on stress in relation to students in higher education, some key causes of stress, such as heavy workload and pressures of meeting deadlines (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2021) were noted. As stated by Khalique et al. (2018), employees' stress can also arise due to workload and family, relations with line managers, and lack of cooperation with colleagues. When we talk about stress, we need to understand the workplace context, what causes stress to arise, and then

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look at the strategic role of HR in supporting staff who are experiencing stress at work – e.g., through referrals of employees to either occupational health or counselling.

According to the Health & Safety Executive (2022), stress is the adverse reaction that people have when they perceive that they are no longer able to cope with the demands placed on them to do things. Stress can manifest in different ways for employees due to the demands of workload that may be contrary to employee expectations, interests, skills and knowledge in meeting the demands of the job requirements (Soegoto & Narimawati, 2017). Workload is the most common cause of stress. This became more pronounced during the pandemic as changes in working practices led to employee isolation from their routine office work and working from home. Other causes of stress result from work-life balance, the nature of the job, organisational conflict, and poor relationship with line managers and colleagues (Mullins, 2020). In addition, hierarchy, organisational changes and structure (Parry & Tyson, 2013) can lead to work-related stress.

The current pandemic provides an opportunity to study the stress that is caused due to embracing a sudden change in work practices (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2021). Stress can manifest in different ways. Poor management of tasks and employees, office design, recognition or denial, role conflict and inequality in pay could have big implications on higher education employees' performance as well as the students (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). When employee performance is affected due to stress, it can also have adverse effect on organisational performance and worker retention. The current pandemic has brought stress on employees as they embrace the changes in their working conditions and practices. The ability to cope with the demands of an online delivery for staff, isolation from their normal routine office work, lack of communication and loss of face-to-face interactions has caused stress for many staff (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2021).

This paper will share the perceptions of employees on work-related stress during the pandemic and how they coped with it, whether it affected their attendance, and whether they were refereed to occupational health or any counselling services to help them cope with stress. This research will share the experience of staff on their current stress levels in trying to embrace the challenges of changes in work practices and the supporting role of HR in helping them cope with the stress that they experienced – and the implications for their retention and work performance.

Challenges of work-related stress

Work-related stress presents HR departments, organisations, and the economy as a whole, with considerable challenges. HR has a key role to play in referring employees to either occupational health or for counselling depending on the nature and degrees of stress experienced by the employees to help them cope better with stress. Work related stress has rapidly increased with the current pandemic as the workload has increased, working in isolation and with changing expectations of employers. It is noted in research and data that stress related issues have been

estimated to cost UK employers around £370 million as well as the cost to the entire society, estimated at about £3.75 billion, and stress-related cases are on the increase due to the current pandemic.

The costs of work-related stress are a long-standing problem. Figures from the Trade Union Congress (Gentle, 2004) estimated work-related stress to cost the UK economy about £7 billion a year in sick pay, lost production and NHS costs. This is in line with other countries. Factors contributing to work-related stress include working hours and heavy workload, poor relationships with line managers, racism experienced at work, and reduced job security (Palmer et al., 2004). These can be seen to be increased by the advent of modern technologies including email communication, with employers requiring tasks to be done faster and more efficiently. Meanwhile, reduced staff numbers have led to increased stress at work that further impacts on employee health and wellbeing.

Palmer et al. (2004) identify six hazards of stress related issues: demands, which includes exposure to issues such as workload; work patterns and work environment; the complexity of work; shift work; unrealistic deadlines; and how much say and involvement the person has in the way they do their work. The role of HR managers, occupational health and counselling services become relevant to supporting staff to have a clear understanding of the main issues involved with workplace stress, prevention and management. Preventing stress is a measure to reduce employee absenteeism, promote employee well-being, health and organisational effectiveness.

Stress affects employee concentration in accomplishing tasks effectively hence leading to errors that can in effect result in conflicts among employees and managers that can result in poor organisational performance based on employee errors (Talib et al., 2019). Stress is common in the teaching profession and it is an ongoing experience that teachers face on daily basis in accomplishing the job roles, trying to teach long hours, mark course work to meet deadlines for moderation, submit marks, release results for award of degrees. The start of each new semester can be daunting and exhausting for teachers. The question here remains in finding out the role of HR in supporting staff and teachers cope with stress-related issues, challenges, and wellbeing at work. Are those affected with stress referred to either occupational health or counselling to help them cope with their stress related issues?

Implications for Human Resources management

The Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey (CIPD, 2021) shows that most organisations' HR departments are doing their best to manage stress related issues and challenges. However, despite the effort in managing stress-related issues at work, there is still a large increase in the rate of stress at work in education and other service industries. As the survey points out, the rise in stress-related cases is linked with overwhelming workload, cultural differences, leadership and management styles and changes in organisational structure which are the major causes of stress that require HR intervention. Other research has related causes of

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stress with organisational factors such as strict working conditions, unfair discrimination, and the lack of available career development opportunities (Shukla & Gary, 2013). It is therefore important for HR to intervene to assist staff to cope with work related stress and, if possible, refer affected staff to either occupational health for assessment of fitness to work or counselling geared to understanding of how to deal with work-related stress.

Options for addressing work-related stress

There are several options HR can use to assist staff with work-related stress. An important aspect in tackling workplace stress is related to measures that HR can use to support employees to understand how to deal with their stress levels and what causes it. The training role of HR can help develop employee skills to cope with the challenges of stress and also to understand the requirements of their jobs from the outset, including sufficient and appropriate induction provided by HR. The absence of good quality training and development of employees can trigger stress among employees as they struggle to cope with continuous demanding tasks and expectations (Ajayi, 2018).

Job design, rotation, enrichment and job analysis as part of HR roles can help reduce employee stress at work as most employees prefer flexibility and non-monotonous jobs. According to Landy and Conte (cited by Hargrove et al., 2016), job analysis and designs are important functions of HR in managing stress as it helps to ensure that employees are given realistic and achievable workloads.

Wireko-Gyebi and Oheneba (2014) affirm that job role is one of the factors that can cause work-related stress, in which the role of HR is important to help support employees. Effective recruitment is also noted in the literature as another way in which HR can help to reduce work-related stress (Miller & Cardy, 2000), by hiring applicants with the best fit for the roles they will be undertaking (Hargrove et al., 2016). Effective communication is also noted in the literature as important; the absence of this can lead to confusion and uncertainty (Cooper et al., 2012). A further important role of HR is to ensure clarity of job roles, and to facilitate timely and precise information to all employees with two–way communications with positive feedback – all of which can help reduce pressure on employees (Seaward, 2019).

If these HR functions are not being carried out effectively, organisations are likely to face a high incidence of stress among employees. The starting point for this research was to give voice to a group of employees who have, directly or indirectly, experienced stress at work – and to then explore the extent to which HR professionals have helped them to cope with stress. This will include looking at whether these staff have ever had referrals to either occupational health or counselling services. Consideration of the specific contributions of these interventions is the gap in the literature that informed the current extended research on work-related stress management in UK higher education.

Methodology

To understand the nature, issues and challenges of employee work-related stress, we have considered both a qualitative and quantitative research approach. We faced particular challenges in recruiting participants for this research. This is partly due to the confidentiality and sensitivity of the topic of study, as people find it difficult to discuss their stress-related issues on their health and wellbeing. Moreover, at the time of the research, COVID-19 measures restricted the opportunities for face-to-face contact in conducting research.

However, the existing literature provides a wealth of secondary data that can be combined with primary data using interviews with participants who volunteered to be interviewed online for this research. The researchers acknowledge that tackling stress in specific workplaces requires a full stress related assessment by qualified professionals to determine the nature and degree of work-related stress (Palmer et al., 2004). This should be supported by a process that involves employees, such as setting up a working party to help identify stress and how the organisation and its HR can support employees. The approach employed in data collection has relied more on qualitative data. Responses were gathered from respondents who volunteered to be interviewed using online facilities such as zoom interviews and a dedicated WhatsApp group. In addition, the nature of the research required reassurance to staff in protecting their identity and confidentiality which limits the scope of intended work to carry out data collection in a large quantity. However, the approaches employed in collecting data yielded ample useful data to compare with the prior literature. These will be used to make suggestions for HR management practices that can better support staff in managing work-related stress.

Findings from the research

The findings from the research draw on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The secondary data took account of journal articles, books and the work of other researchers to have depth of knowledge and understanding of other work-related stress issues, challenges, and areas of focus. The primary data collection has provided data to compare and contrast with the existing literature, to inform conclusions on the role of HR and areas for improvement. The primary research targeted 20 employees for this study, with 15 staff from a higher education institution based in London, UK, eventually taking part. All the 15 participants were asked the same questions. A selection of the most relevant comments is reported in this section.

Have you ever experienced work-related stress and why do you think that it was related to stress?

Stress is something that most employees do not want to talk about because of the confidentiality and also the impact if you mention your employers. However, one

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participant admitted that he has experienced stress in his previous job, which was the reason for changing to his current job. It was related to poor management of staff as due to appointment of a new director who was said to have made the working conditions for staff unbearable. Heavy workload, unexpected and unrealistic targets and set deadlines were mentioned. The Supervisor was described as never listening to staff, simply putting pressure on them to do what was being asked. Symptoms of stress described as worrying about work and waking up at midnight thinking about work. The feeling began with dizzy spells, unhappy mood and eventually led to a breakdown. It was an awful feeling, he said, and he reported being relieved being out of it having moved to another job. (FY)

Did the experience affect your work performance and how?

Stress is one of the major things that affect most people's job performance. In the case of SB, it affected his immune system, causing loss of appetite and mood swings, leading him to hating his work place, but he persevered. On many occasions, he said he vomited when going to work and never wanted to see the place. SB went to work doing less due to weakness and feeling low. He never mentioned these feelings to anyone, but a few friends knew that he was under stress. It is a horrible feeling for anyone and should not happen to anyone, he said. (SB)

What were the feelings experienced and how long did it take to relate them to stress?

Not quite sure how it all started, maybe coping to meet demanding workload, targets, constant lesson observations and inspection demands. As a Lecturer, you are like machine and the Covid pandemic has not helped but rather increased the workload. It was a feeling of loneliness, resentment; isolation working from home in most cases and poor management of staff with no appreciation of their hard work, few promotion opportunities for women, some managers recruiting their friends and relatives in top available positions. This may have triggered off the stress as BB observed these things happening in a job that she dedicates time and effort supporting colleagues and students. The stress has not gone and BB can't tell anyone how she feels. Although she feels she should report it, she is in doubt and has lost trust on what anyone can do to support. She was not sure of whom to share her feelings and stress related to workload. It is better to keep moving with it, she asked. Not sure whose responsibility it is to support the staff here. (BB)

How did you see the supporting role of HR in helping you cope or address the stress faced at work?

PS commented that she had experienced stress once in a previous university, which was related to workload and leadership. It went on for over three months and she later went off sick for six months for work-related stress. She couldn't go into details, but admitted being referred to occupational health for support. Counselling was suggested but she did not need it. The important thing noted in the case was

that employees are always losing out in stress-related cases she said, it affects their health and wellbeing, leading to staff leaving their jobs in some cases. The role of HR is needed at all times to assist staff to cope with work-related stress. (PS)

What more do you think HR, occupational health and counselling services could do to support employees reduce stress levels at work?

Some of the participants have stated that there are several ways that employers and HR can use to help employees cope with their stress-related issues and challenges. The first is to avoid anything that can lead to stress at work, reduce workload, spot poor attendance when employees are regularly phoning off sick. Other suggestions were referrals to professional bodies such as occupational health advisers, counselling for mental health conditions that can cause stress, offer training and development to gain the skills and knowledge for employees and managers to manage stress, supporting them in the current dynamic work environment to motivate and boost morale and providing them with counselling specifically to help manage their stress levels. They also said that the ultimate responsibility for the issue lies with line managers and HR to spot and understand the process of stress levels in the workplace and have measures in place to minimise and deal with stress at work (Tucker et al., 2013). Work policies, rules and regulations that can trigger stress at work should be fairly implemented to provide a conducive working environment, including the ability of HR to identify areas of work-related stress and causes (Ahmed et al., 2015) to apply appropriate measures for remedy or reduce work-related stress at work.

Summary and next steps for research

One of the key things that emerged from the research was that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased all the teacher's workloads from the participant's comments on their workload. The move to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic resulted in all the teachers interviewed trying to meet unrealistic deadlines, juggling being a teacher and coping with administrative workload of teaching and learning, meeting set marking and moderation targets and, in most cases, covering classes for absent colleagues. These have all increased teachers' workload and added to work-related stress. Not all instances of work-related stress were reported and so did not lead to staff receiving the support of HR or getting referrals to occupational health or counselling to help cope with the stress they faced at work. The research also highlights how heavy workload, long hours due to taking extra work home, poor management of employees, and less support from HR have resulted in employees feeling stressed at work.

This work will now continue onto a third stage, involving a larger sample, to find out what staff in other higher education institutions report on their stress levels, to see whether they share similar experiences.

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Part 2

School Counseling Practices

School Counsellors' Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Slovenia

Petra Gregorčič Mrvar, Barbara Šteh, Marjeta Šarić & Katja Jeznik

Abstract

Life and work in educational institutions, including the work of school counselling service, changed suddenly due to the Covid-19 pandemics. The classes were conducted online, and the educational processes, along with the work of the school counselling service, had been thwarted and altered in many ways. A number of previous evaluation studies have shown that the long-established school counselling tradition in the educational institutions in Slovenia is welcomed and well received by headteachers, teachers, students and parents already in the normal circumstances. The aim of this paper is to present the results of the exploratory qualitative study on the ways the school counsellors in Slovenia had been coping with the questions and challenges that have arisen in the time of distance learning and counselling. The study was conducted with an on-line questionnaire in April 2020. The non-random sample consisted of 328 Slovenian school counsellors. The results have shown that, in the first pandemic wave, the school counsellors were important actors in solving different situations related to: relationships between adults and children or adolescents; school learning; teachers' educational dilemmas and questions regarding distance schoolwork; and to the management of the educational institution. The findings of the study also show a positive attitude of counsellors in collaboration with school headteachers and teachers. The state of emergency has raised the awareness of all professionals at the school about the importance of mutual support and at the same time represents an opportunity to reflect on even better cooperation and a reciprocal relationship that enables quality educational work.

Keywords: school counsellors, Covid-19 pandemic, counselling work, challenges, cooperation

Introduction

In March 2020 Slovenia declared a Covid-19 epidemic, which quickly grew into a global pandemic. Life and work in educational institutions, including the work of school counselling service, changed suddenly due to the Covid-19 pandemics. The

community of children, students and educators moved to a virtual space, raising a number of questions about the impact of these changes on educational and counselling processes and the role of the school counselling service (see Gregorčič Mrvar, Jeznik & Kroflič, 2020a; Šarić & Gregorčič Mrvar, 2020; School Counseling during COVID-19, 2020). This includes the question to what extent school counsellors adapted their work in order to be as supportive as possible to all those in need and, on the other hand, to what extent they were supported in their efforts by the school management and relevant state institutions (see Savitz-Romer et al., 2020).

As researchers in education, we quickly realised that education was carried out under fundamentally changed circumstances, which could continue for some time and, above all, the situation was unlikely to be the last of its sort. Consequently, we started conducting both theoretical and empirical research from the very beginning of the pandemic in order to provide a sound basis for well-informed solutions (prim. Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). To gain insight into the situation in educational institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted an exploratory study among school counsellors in April 2020. In the study, we explored how the counselling service dealt with the challenges that arose during the implementation of distance education and counselling during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (March to mid-April 2020).

Some characteristics of school counselling in Slovenia

One of the basic characteristics of the school counselling service in Slovenia is that it is part of the individual school and often brings together a team of professionals with different profiles (e.g., pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, etc.). The key conceptual document for school counselling is the Programme Guidelines for the School Counselling Service (Programske smernice, 2008a, 2008b). The Guidelines state that school counsellors participate in resolving pedagogical, psychological and social issues in schools by means of three central activities: activities of assistance, of development and prevention, and of planning and evaluation. Undertaking these three main types of activities, the school counselling service helps students, educators, management, parents and it collaborates with them in the following areas of everyday life and work at the institution: learning and teaching; school culture, school climate and order; physical, personal and social development; schooling and career guidance; socio-economic difficulties (ibid.).

The fundamental orientation of the counselling service, which remains essential at a time when a variety of issues and uncertainties in the educational work and process are coming to the foreground, should become and stay a development- and prevention-oriented service – and as such crucial in achieving a higher quality of the work in educational institutions. The counselling service will become developmental and preventative in its orientation only if it is interdisciplinary and if it is able to integrate its activities into the work of the educational institution at different levels – institutional, classroom, micro-pedagogical (see Gregorčič Mrvar,

2021; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b; Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019) – in collaboration with all participants in education. Collaboration is essential to creating conditions for successful educational activities that require adherence to the principles of safety, acceptance, equality, participation, respect, caring for others, and mutual aid (e.g., Resman, 2007). The counselling service focuses on the activities and processes that focus on the entire educational institution as a community. It addresses issues of group dynamics, communication, culture, and climate in the educational institution.

A number of previous evaluation studies have shown that the long-established school counselling tradition in the educational institutions in Slovenia is welcomed and well received by headteachers, teachers, students and parents in the normal circumstances (e.g., Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b). Research findings also show that the cooperation between the counselling service and various other actors in the educational institution is good. For example, a survey of teaching staff in Slovenian schools (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011) indicated that almost three quarters of teachers (73.1%) and even more headteachers (92.7%) rated their cooperation with the school counselling service as very good or good. A study conducted a few years ago (Mrvar, 2008; Kalin et al., 2009) on the cooperation between counsellors in Slovenian primary schools and parents showed that the majority of the counsellors involved parents in their work and had relatively good personal experience of working with them. Similarly, the findings of a survey on collaboration with external institutions and experts (Gregorčič Mrvar & Mažgon, 2017; Šteh et al., 2018) showed that the responding school counsellors were relatively satisfied with their collaboration with different institutions in the community, with the majority of them rating their collaboration as good or very good. The counsellors evaluated collaboration with other schools, preschools and student dormitories the most favourably. They emphasised that without the help of external institutions and individuals, without teamwork and inter-institutional networks they would not have been able to carry out certain activities and projects (e.g., organising an intergenerational collaboration where older people provide learning assistance; organising various volunteer activities, etc.) or solve students' and families' problems (ibid.).

A recent large-scale study on the work of the school counselling service (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b) also found that the majority of headteachers and teachers rated their cooperation with counsellors as very good or good, while counsellors themselves were a little more critical in their assessments. It is noteworthy that the headteachers saw the counsellor as more of a support than the counsellors saw the headteacher (ibid.). On average, the counsellors saw more obstacles to establishing and developing quality collaboration than the teachers did. They saw obstacles in the lack of knowledge about each other's work and tasks, workload on both sides, different expectations about collaboration and different professional perspectives on classroom work and work with students (ibid.). Parents demonstrated considerable knowledge of the work of the school counselling service

and positive attitudes towards it. Similar responses and assessments were given by students (ibid).

Despite some divergence in the assessments, the findings are encouraging. Satisfaction with existing cooperation undoubtedly provides a good basis for further cooperation with various actors inside and outside the educational institution. However, the situation around the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – when direct contacts between students and educators were disrupted and moved to a virtual space – presented counsellors with new challenges on how to organise education and counselling and how to provide adequate support for teachers, students and parents.

The purpose of the study and its methodology

The aim of this paper is to present the results of the study on the ways the school counsellors in Slovenia had been coping with the questions and challenges that have arisen in the rapid transition to distance learning and counselling (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). The study was conducted using an online questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions in April 2020 – during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the exploratory qualitative study, we focused on several questions of dealing with the Covid-19 situation. In this article we will present the answers to the questions (ibid.):

- How did the responding counsellors cope with school closures?
- Did the counsellors notice any positive aspects in the changed working circumstances?
- When working from home, did the counsellors face any difficulties and obstacles in their educational and counselling work?
- What was the counsellors' evaluation of the cooperation with different participants in education during their work from home?

The study was carried out among school counsellors and it also included those working in preschools and student dormitories, via the online questionnaire. The non-random sample consisted of 328 Slovenian school counsellors. A total of 328 respondents accepted the invitation, 316 female counsellors (96.3%) and 12 male counsellors (3.7%). They included 59.6% primary school counsellors, 28.1% secondary school counsellors, 5.9% preschool counsellors and 3.7% student dormitories counsellors. The situation regarding the respondents' employment status as a consequence of the closure of educational institutions was as follows: 88.1% of the counsellors worked from home, 5.9% were on furlough, 5.9% gave another answer (e.g., they were on leave) (ibid.).

The questionnaire included assessment scales that were analysed for basic descriptive statistics. The participants were asked to explain their assessments in open-ended format. For open-ended questions, responses were coded using an inductive qualitative analysis approach. First, parts of text were ascribed codes and, subsequently, content-related codes were combined into categories. At the first level

of analysis, one of the researchers coded the responses and another coded 20% of the responses according to the proposed coding scheme. Where there was a discrepancy in the attribution of the codes, the researchers suggested reformulations until a consensus was reached. The codes were then grouped into superordinate categories, which were created incrementally, with new codes added as necessary and the categories repeatedly reviewed and reorganised to keep the meanings of the coded and categorised responses as clear as possible and in line with the participants' original responses.

Results

Coping with the situation

First, we considered how the counsellors coped with the situation of working remotely in general. Most of their answers on the rating scale were positive. Three quarters of the counsellors indicated that they were coping well (61.9%) or very well (13.4%) with the situation, while a fifth chose a neutral answer. 4.4% of the counsellors answered that they were coping poorly with the situation, while no one chose the option very poorly. We asked them to justify their assessment and 266 (83%) did so. The responses show that many of the counsellors adapted quickly and well to the situation (f = 60). According to their responses, they tried to ensure that the work continued as smoothly as possible in some adapted form, to support the management and teachers, and to maintain contact with students and parents.

Even among the counsellors who reported that they were coping well with the situation, in their explanations many added that they needed a period of adjustment (up to 14 days) (f = 23), which was particularly arduous, as it was necessary to adapt to working remotely, to delineate it from family responsibilities, and above all to establish communication and contact at a distance, to equip and train all the teachers, and especially the students, to work remotely.

The counsellors also reported that the situation made their work more demanding and exhausting, and that for many the working day stretched over the whole day (f = 45). It was particularly difficult for those with children of their own who needed care and help with their schooling. Not all the counsellors working remotely were in the same situation, and this should be taken into account when planning their work in such circumstances.

Some of the counsellors reported continuing most of their work in an adapted format, while others pointed out that the quality of counselling was not the same (f = 74), that there was a lack of personal contact, and that students did not open up as much as they might have otherwise, as they did not have the privacy they needed, and they were unable to make contact with some students altogether. Some counsellors reported feeling helpless (f = 17) because they did not know how to help these students. Working with vulnerable groups was particularly strenuous. The focus of the counsellors was on students with special educational needs, students

with learning difficulties and students who did not have adequate support at home. An example of an explanation:

> *I don't feel good because I don't have access to vulnerable groups. Even if I'm successful in making contact, it's different from what it is at school. I feel that some students are anxious because other family members (in some cases) are listening in on the conversation. In spite of being asked to report problems, few actually report them even though you know they're in need because you know the family.*

Most of the counsellors stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining contact (f = 89) with the management, teachers, students and parents, but they used different modes and forms of communication. Some of the counsellors wrote that this kind of situation was a challenge for them (f = 16) and that they were trying to be proactive and find new ways of working remotely. Some of them used the situation for professional training and education and for writing various articles (f = 8), which they usually do not have time to do.

It is important to take note of the counsellor's warnings that not everything can be done remotely (f = 15). This includes more demanding counselling, individual learning support as well as specific tasks such as enrolment in Year 1.

The positive aspects of the changed working conditions

We inquired if there were any positive aspects that the counsellors had noticed in the changed working circumstances. 67.6% answered in the affirmative, 25.6% did not see any positive aspects to the situation, and 6.8% chose "Other".

The analysis of the counsellors' explanations of their assessments on the rating scales showed that those who did not find any positive aspects in the changed working conditions pointed in particular to the fact (already mentioned by some in the previous question) that there was a lack of personal contact with colleagues, students and parents. They underlined that certain groups of children and adolescents were particularly disadvantaged and that distance education was generally of a lower quality. This confirmed the fear expressed in several places that the existing form of distance education was deepening pre-existing disparities among students. One representative quotation:

> *I can't imagine what it's like to live in a family where there's violence, alcohol, abuse, poverty … The children from such families go to school to get away from their environment. Now they have nowhere to go.*

On the other hand, there were many counsellors who saw advantages in the changed circumstances, especially in the different way of working, which they supported both by describing their personal circumstances (more influence on work scheduling, no commuting to work) and changes in their work (less administrative work (or more time for it), more time for studying and writing articles, etc.). One of the highlighted benefits was the new skills and knowledge acquired, especially the use of ICT, both by counsellors and teachers and by students. For example:

> *We've made a good plan with the school management and teachers, and everything is on track. After four weeks, all senior students were computer-trained and all students now have access to ICT. Students with learning difficulties work well with us and are happy to receive help.*

The counsellors also mentioned greater cohesion within the team, as well as with students and parents, students' greater independence, and they argued that some students – such as those with special educational needs – benefited from this approach. Interestingly, quite a few of them believed that the situation would make educational work more valued in the future. The positive side of the situation was the realisation of the importance of educational work and the role of the educator.

The negative aspects of the changed working conditions

We went on to ask whether the counsellors faced difficulties and obstacles in their educational and counselling work when working from home. 72.8% of the counsellors answered in the affirmative. 51.5% of the counsellors who agreed cited students' or parents' lack of access to a computer or appropriate ICT as a major problem. The lack of knowledge and training of others (teachers as well as students and their parents) in the use of ICT tools was mentioned by 41.4% of the counsellors, while 22.2% also mentioned their own lack of knowledge and training in the use of ICT. 34.8% also mentioned technical difficulties in using ICT, as well as the fact that such tools were not suitable (or were only partially suitable) for counselling (32.8%). 3.5% cited the unavailability of a computer or appropriate ICT tools as a problem.

The counsellors' cooperation with other participants during distance education

Two questions referred to the frequency of cooperation with colleagues, students, fellow counsellors and the evaluation of this cooperation. Encouragingly, no counsellor indicated that they had not worked with teachers or preschool teachers at all or did so only once during the school closures. The most frequent the counsellors worked together with the school staff – several times a week or every day with the headteacher (50.9% and 23.8% respectively) and several times a week or every day with teachers (46.4% and 44.5% respectively), as well as with parents – several times a week (45.6%) or every day (19.1%) and students – several times a week (38.3%) or every day (47.4%). The counsellors were least likely to work with experts or professional services outside the school, and they interacted with other school counsellors inside and outside the institution once (33%), several times (36.6%) or on a daily basis (19%). This implies the importance of professional support networks, including during a pandemic.

The counsellors' evaluations of their cooperation with the various participants show that they worked well or very well with most of them. The highest ratings were given to cooperation with teachers and preschool teachers and to cooperation with the headteacher (89% of the respondents rated cooperation with teachers or preschool teachers as very good or good, and 87% of the counsellors gave a positive rating to the

headteacher's support). They rated cooperation with students (69%) and their parents/carers (70%) slightly lower, but still as good or very good. The lowest scores for cooperation and support (poor 20.2% and very poor 7.2%) were given to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and other professional institutions such as the National Education Institute, the Association of School Counsellors, faculties, etc.

Most of the counsellors explained reasons behind their assessments of the cooperation. Their answers indicate that the pandemic brought counsellors and other educators (headteachers, teachers) together: they offered each other support and help, they collaborated to find solutions to educational and consulting/counselling issues, and they shared ideas, knowledge and experiences. Some examples of their answers are: "We're in touch all the time, every day of the week, by phone, by email, etc."; or "The headteacher is supportive and helpful, responsive, calm, available and up-to-date, we support each other".

Discussion

The findings of our study demonstrate that the majority of the participating counsellors were able to work remotely, but there was also a significant share of counsellors who were not (they were on furlough, etc.) or whose role in distance education was not entirely clear. Here, we would like to draw attention to two key roles that counsellors play in the regular context of educational work: a link in the formation of the school community and a supporter of all educational participants in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning. This was confirmed during distance education, as can be seen from the results of our study on the way counsellors interacted with students, their parents and other educators. The importance of their role was confirmed both by the counsellors' responses in this study and by the headteachers' responses from the same set of studies (Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021).

The counsellors reported that during the period of distance education they had more work than usually and that work was more tiring, and for many the working day stretched over the whole day. They also emphasised that the quality of communication and counselling was not the same as before, because personal contact was lacking, and interaction with the help of modern technologies could only partially replace this contact. Nevertheless, some of them reported that the work enabled them to acquire new skills, especially in ICT, and that a lot of materials had been produced (e.g. on independent learning, motivation to learn, coping with adversity) that could be used in different areas of education and counselling in the future.

According to the majority of the responding counsellors, the pandemic and the emergency have strengthened cooperation between educators. The situation showed – and we may have forgotten this or taken it for granted – that the school is a community of students and educators and that their daily pedagogical interactions enable learning as well as personal, emotional, social and moral development (Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). It is a community that fosters friendships, learning

to live in a community that cares for the wider well-being of children and the development of their potential (ibid.). The school community, of course, is an integral part of the wider community (Šteh et al., 2018). On the one hand, it needs its support to function; on the other hand, it gives support back and strengthens the community (ibid.). The pandemic revealed how important it is to work together for quality education and quality of life in the wide and narrow communities (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022; Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) find that Covid-19 strengthened collaborative relationships in some educational settings and weakened them in others. Collaboration among educators was further strengthened in the schools where professional collaboration between educators had already been developed before the pandemic (ibid.).

The results of the present study indicate that school counsellors are aware of how great the distress can be for children, adolescents and adults when personal contact and community socialising are interrupted (cf. Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022; Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). Lee (2020) also reports that school closures during the pandemic had a particularly negative impact on children and adolescents with mental health problems and those with special educational needs, because school routines go some way to helping them cope with their problems. They had limited access to appropriate support (peer support groups had been cancelled, as had face-to-face counselling, while telephone or video counselling could be a problem for them), and children with special educational needs missed out on opportunities to develop key skills for their personal development (ibid.). The author further points to the increase in violent behaviour in families as a consequence of isolation, economic insecurity and all the related pressures.

Implications

As the respondents in our study indicated the lack of knowledge in use of ICT in their work, we recognized this as a need that has emerged among the counsellors for more training in distance counselling. In addition, the respondents reiterated the need for teamwork, participation in support (e.g., supervision) groups, and more support from the responsible Ministry and other institutions (e.g., in terms of norms and guidelines, which mostly teachers received). As Slovenia found itself without any systemic model of crisis education at the beginning of the epidemic (Skubic Ermenc & Urbančič, 2021), it is not surprising that a number of the counsellors said that the Ministry's guidance was too vague or insufficient and too late (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021) and some also said that the support provided by external institutions was unhelpful and the recommendations given were merely a varied range of recommendations from which school counsellors had to work out for themselves what was and was not useful for them. Some, however, did recognise the efforts of various institutions (ibid.) and used their activities as a source of support for their work. The data also indicate differences between counsellors in the way they engage in cooperation with external institutions and in the way they perceive this cooperation as a support for their professional activities. We can foresee increased support for

schools provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on various prevention programmes in the future. However, if we shift too much of the responsibility for prevention to external collaborators – in this case NGOs – and if we understand the involvement of external institutions too narrowly in terms of "servicing" (i.e., direct action to address problems once they have occurred), we move away from an understanding of the school counselling service as contributing to the holistic development of individual students and of the school as a whole (Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019).

The counsellors in our study (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022) emphasised that the quality of communication, education and counselling was not the same as before because personal contact was lacking, and interaction with the help of modern technologies could only partially compensate for this lack (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) make a similar point, arguing that collegial meetings via different technologies and platforms are often a poor substitute for face-to-face meetings. However, they also argue that remote interactions can be adapted to educators' different needs and circumstances and where quality relationships and trust already exist, professional collaborations can be strengthened further. Counsellors should also be given additional training in remote consultation/counselling. It is also important to ensure a clear demarcation between work and private life and to provide adequate support for counsellors to maintain their mental health (see Savitz-Romer et al., 2020).

Recommendations for future research

In the future, it would be useful to explore in more depth how technology can be used to respond more effectively to the diverse needs and potentials of students and educators, and how they can work together. It will also be necessary to study how counsellors deal with the challenges of the reopening of schools in the face of all the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus (e.g., the use of face masks, the implementation of frequently changing quarantine rules, the cancellation of various events, schools in the nature, etc.), as well as with the long-term consequences of school closures and the uncertainty and unpredictability that still surround us when carrying out our work in education and counselling.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and the emergency situation have undoubtedly changed the work and processes in educational institutions tremendously and caused various difficulties, and it was crucial to adapt very quickly to the new situation and to establish new forms of communication and cooperation. School counselling is predominantly oriented towards individual and remedial activities, often at the expense of developmentally oriented tasks (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021). This was already evident before the pandemic (ibid.), our data has shown that this was the case during and after the pandemic as well, if not even more.

In Slovenia, we witnessed a considerable variety and diversity of approaches to, as well as improvisation in, solving problems and implementing educational work (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022; Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). The situation stimulated more ingenuity and courage among educators, at least some of them, to make increasingly more complex use of technology and to introduce more innovative ideas (Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). Positive attitudes and various opportunities for cooperation and joint work have also emerged in terms of cooperation (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). The challenge for educators is how to maintain and nurture this supportive and collaborative climate and the willingness to face challenges together that developed in many schools during the first wave of the pandemic. Many practitioners have come to the important realisation that working together can help them overcome the difficulties of their day-to-day work, and that, with each other's support, they can learn and develop professionally. However, we wonder whether this will be – or has been – maintained in educational work under normal circumstances.

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Argentina's Therapy Culture: Its Affect on School Counselling

Gillian L. S. Hilton

Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing trend in Argentina to demonstrate deep concern for one's own and others' mental health. It explores the reasons behind the wide use of therapy and the work of psychologists in the country, by using literature to explain the open culture of discussing and addressing emotional issues with a trained therapist and with friends. Included is a discussion of the work of Psychologists (counsellors) in schools in the country and the normality of students attending regular therapy sessions. A case study of one, well established and all age private school is included, using the results of interviews undertaken on Zoom. The approaches to school counselling in the country were discussed with a teacher who is English, one Argentinian teacher and one school counsellor. Comparisons with attitudes related to counselling and its use in England are also addressed.

Keywords: counselling, schools, psychology, therapy, Argentina's affect

Introduction

The educational system in Argentina has four levels: non-compulsory kindergarten to five years; compulsory primary having seven grades, from six to twelve years of age (or until all grades are passed), or the child reaches fourteen years of age. Failure of a year means it is repeated, but students must leave primary at fourteen years of age. Schools at this level may also admit adults, whose previous education was not completed. Secondary (lower) education has two grades from ages twelve to fourteen, secondary (higher) has two grades ages fifteen to seventeen years. Courses prepare students for vocational programmes, including attending night schools, or follow a more academic track. University education (both state and private provision) may follow. Most schools across the country work in two shifts each day with different groups of students; morning eight to twelve and afternoon, one until five. There are massive discrepancies between urban and rural school provision, as the country is so large and apart from in the urban areas, has a scattered population. Rural education has expanded recently, with many more schools being built, but there is a great difference in achievement between state and private schools and urban and rural ones (Argentina Educational System Overview, 2021).

Psychological care in Argentina

CNN news reported (Landau, 2013) that Argentina has the highest number of psychologists per capita in the world and almost half of them are in Buenos Aries, the capital. Research carried out in the country in 2012, reported around 202 psychologists per 100,000 people in the country, far higher than in the next highest country Austria, which the WHO reported as having 80 per 100,000, at a similar time. This ratio in Argentina of psychologists/therapists per capita, appears to have continued to increase lately (Brotherton, 2019). Freudian psychoanalysis, not now commonly used in the world, is still popular there and many citizens see it as an important part of their health care. They are happy to talk about their mental health, their emotional problems and those of their children, to others. Seeing a therapist is normal, not something to be hidden away as shameful, as in many European countries and also the USA. In fact, it appears that many ex-pats resident there, take advantage of this different attitude to problems with emotions and relationships, adopting the local and different approach to mental health care. Korman et al. (2015) describe the move away from Freudian psychotherapy to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in recent years in the country and that terms such as depression and panic attack, have as a result, become part of normal conversations in Buenos Aries. With provision in health care systems for therapy annually, there has been an exponential rise in students who wish to study psychology and join the profession, either as psychologists or counsellors, who may work with adults or with children, both in and outside of schools. Landau (2013) reported that the use of group therapy sessions is common and with most students attending therapy, though few had serious issues. Non-attendance was seen as extraordinary and classmates consider these students must have serious problems, which they are reluctant to discuss. There is it appears, less distinction between physical and mental health in Argentina, than in other countries and a national feeling that anyone who has emotional issues, needs to have professional help. This author further suggests that this may be the result of a large immigrant population, fleeing conflict in other areas of the world and leaving their usual family support networks. People questioned by Landau (2013) suggested that in countries like the USA, people have found a different solution to emotional problems, such as a high work ethic, pragmatic approaches to life and finding one's own solutions to personal problems. This obsession in Argentina of attending therapy, is attributed by Brotherton (2019) to the ups and downs of life in the country. From a booming, prosperous, financially secure country in the nineteenth century, the dream of the easy, rich way of life enjoyed then, was shattered in the twentieth.

> This dream transformed into a nightmare in the 20th century and lingers on today. Characterized by prolonged and cyclical periods of economic growth and bust; militaristic violence; state-engineered terrorism and the forced disappearance of tens of thousands of individuals; political instability; and debilitating austerity measures have left emotional, physical, and psychological

scars for many Argentines, past and present. Rupture, failure, precarity, and uncertainty shape everyday life. (Brotherton, 2019, p. 102)

For Argentinians now failure, and uncertainty has become a part of everyday life. It is not one event, but what has been termed as 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011, p. 10).

However, in 2017 the then President, Macri, who had been trying to modernise the country claimed that this obsession with psychological support, was what was aiding the rapid decline of the nation. Mander (2017) reported that the President believed it was childish and encourages the feeling of the people that failure and pain are part of normal existence, echoing the traditional. much loved tango dance, which depicts despair and anger as common in life. He insisted that psychoanalysis would not help prevent the further decline of the country and wanted its people instead, to pull together, to improve the outlook for all citizens. He was voted out of office at the next election.

Schools in Argentina

The difficulties in changing this therapy culture reported by so many sources, can be seen in Buenos Aries itself, where one of the main areas of the city has a nicknamed 'Plaza Freud' as there are so many psychologists' offices there and local bookshops are full of books about psychology and psychologists. This culture transmits to the education sector. The schools, however, are not universally equal, in that as in many countries, affluent families choose to send their children to private schools. Many of these educate children from international backgrounds and were founded in earlier centuries by immigrants, thereby having a more global outlook. However, the obsession with mental health seems to encompass these establishments too. The children of the Villas (the local name for the shanty towns) have only the state schools provided for their education and little choice. The rural schools may be one room, one all age class, which works against providing extra support and provision for learning, or mental health issues.

Readiness for learning is a strongly followed theory used in educational settings in Argentina. Jensen (1969) discusses the two forms of readiness which have held sway in education pedagogy internationally. Growth readiness is defined as the development of neural structures that allow the experiences of the child to encourage learning to take place, be absorbed and contribute to a child's development. Contrary to this is the view of the stimulus-response theory, where learning occurs via environmental factors provided by experience. However, this author stresses that physiological development must go hand in hand with experience, if cognitive development is to occur. There appears to be a strong belief in these ideas in Argentina, particularly that of the physiological development stages which it is believed, occur at different times in different children. The beliefs that govern these strongly held ideas are termed neuromyths by Hermida et al. (2016) who claim that many Argentinian teachers have some understanding of neuro science, but tend to

believe popular myths about learning and how the brain functions. One of these popular misunderstandings these authors say is about memory and how memories are stored and retrieved, and another that we only use ten percent of our brain functions.

School counselling

A report on school counselling in a global context of ninety countries (Harris, 2013), stated that it is mandatory in only thirty nine countries globally, but practised in far more. South America countries were in the mandatory category and in Argentina it is provided at all levels of schooling. In most countries, counselling traverses education and psychology and in some areas, but not all, it includes career guidance and advice. The report also suggested that in most countries, the one to one approach was used, but in South America the 'person to person approach has been challenged' (Harris, 2013, p. 2) and other approaches have become more common with the focus on providing counselling within an educational setting. This author states that 'where counselling is mandatory it is positioned between the two professions of education and counselling and is often delivered by experienced teachers with an additional postgraduate level qualification in guidance and counselling, or school-based counselling' (Harris, 2013, p. 1).

The schools, therefore, particularly those in the private sector, are proud of and thoroughly detailed in their online information to parents, on what they offer their students in order to support their mental well-being. One such school teaching younger children, offers a composite explanation of the counselling services they offer. The school is deemed an 'international one', that is, the students are from a wide variety of countries, which the school considers makes them liable to suffer from difficulties with transition to a different culture. The aim from their website appears to be to guide students in these transitions and their development (BACIA, 2021). The term 'guidance' is used to incorporate their strategy to support students in academic work, development and social skills. The main issues, however, seem to be very much geared to emotional matters, not learning. The explanation given, is that what they term 'guidance' is at the heart of what the school offers and that keeping students 'safe' is paramount. The school's website lists the following issues that are at the heart of their approach (BACIA, 2021, no page):

1. Counseling students in academic and personal matters
2. Planning with students for their future educational and career plans
3. Limited testing of students for diagnostic, placement, and counseling purposes
4. College counseling and placement
5. Referral of students and families for outside-of-school counseling services
6. Consulting with parents/guarding, teachers, and administrations on student related issues

The programme offered is designed to help students achieve success in school and career choice, but seems to be very socially oriented, in that anger management and conflict resolutions skills are the only issues specifically named. In addition, the department is also there to support teachers, administrators and parents, in learning how to meet students' needs. The school is proud of this all-round approach and passes students on to private provision if the problem is not being overcome in school. This is not common in schools in England, as generally the school's Local Authority or Academy chain's employed Educational Psychologist is contacted, rather than a private health care counsellor or psychologist. However, as most of those who attend these private schools in Argentina are from affluent backgrounds, private health care possibly covers fees. The children of the Villas and less affluent areas, however, seem to have access to less support, if the problems they face cannot be solved in school. However, a counsellor is provided in every school, as students to some extent, despite the lack of pressure on them academically and the less competitive culture in schools there than in Western countries, are expected to face times of depression and anxiety. This expectation is possibly affected by the therapeutic culture of Buenos Aries and the whole country (Plotkin & Viotti, 2020).

Practitioner training

Training the practitioners has continued to alter in the early part of this century, as a continuing process of adaptation and change. In the 1990s, it was agreed that Latin American countries should cooperate and provide similar training and that university psychology departments would be linked and learn from each other's practices. Deficiencies in the training were addressed at this time. These included the application of psychological practices in the world outside, including links with social sciences, in particular the links with education. Undertaking research on mental health in general were addressed and included in training programmes (Stein-Sparvieri & Maldavsky, 2015). These authors address the influx of Europeans into Argentina after the second World War; people fleeing from conflict and settling in, what then was a prosperous country, which supplied the largest proportion of the World's grain supplies. This resulted, they say, in the rise of a new affluent social class, who brought from Europe their values and culture. They rapidly became successful business owners and through frequent trips back to Europe, spread local interest towards psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

However, despite the common use of psychotherapy in Argentina there are severe criticisms of practice and the lack of updating of the methods used to support patients with mental health problems. According to Fierro et al. (2018) there is insufficient interest and supervision of practice by the state and a lack of upgrading and modernising of university programmes and the learning of students. This, these authors claim, is a major problem. The first degrees in Counselling were recognised in 1998 and very quickly became popular with young people and this interest in first

degree and Master's qualifications has grown since then (Hohenshil et al., 2013). However, the criticisms of the training programmes continue.

> *… challenges in Argentina should be faced with a critical, reflective and rational disposition, through the strengthening of communications and relationships with international scholarship, through the improvement of the training and education of psychotherapists and through the prioritization of the well-being of the population's mental health over partisan, subjective beliefs and likings.* (Fierro et al., 2018, no page)

Research

Interviews were conducted via Zoom with personnel from one all-age, private, dual language school (intake of children ages two to eighteen) in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Questions focused on how counselling is run in that school and in addition, the opinions of some staff on the effects of the 'therapy culture' particularly on school counselling processes. The teachers are a mixture of Argentinian (majority) and ex-pat British (minority). One of each nationality was interviewed. English teacher (A) and an Argentinian teacher (B) were questioned, as the researcher wished to discover if attitudes to the therapy culture differed between the Argentinian and British teachers, in that particular school. One counsellor was also interviewed, the Educational Psychologist (C). A was alerted to the prevailing culture when, on her first day of employment, she was asked for the name and address of her psychiatrist in London. When she said she did not have one, there was total consternation amongst the staff counsellors.

The school works a full day, as it is bilingual; unlike as mentioned above, most schools in the country which use a two shift system, morning or, afternoon and many teachers work in two different schools. In single language schools, other activities are offered sport, creative lessons etc. in the non-academic part of the day. In the school researched, formally three counsellors had been employed, one for each of kindergarten, primary and secondary levels. Now, however, rising costs have led to a reduction, one is employed for the kindergarten and primary, the other for secondary students. One is an educational psychologist, the other a general psychologist. They each work three days a week, as they have additional employment in the private sector or in other schools. The work and its approach is determined on a case by case basis and the students' needs. In the secondary school the approach tends to be class based with group work, talking over problems and issues as a team work exercise. Also, some individual work occurs to address emotional and academic issues. In primary, more time is spent on observing individual students, one to one work, talking therapy, individual assessments and help with work problems. They are particularly involved with children who have to repeat a year, or a specific subject which a child has to re-sit.

As far as a counselling policy A has never seen one and no policy was offered to the researcher. A considered that most of the counsellors' time was spent on

addressing perceived emotional and social difficulties, not learning problems. This A believes is embedded across the school, with the avoidance of putting pressure on children at its heart. However, she believes a more challenging curriculum would benefit most children and prevent boredom, which affects behaviour. She considers the teaching/learning policy is strongly affected by the readiness/no-pressure culture and needs improving.

A stated that there appears to be, in her experience, little training provided to Argentinian teachers on these learning or emotional issues and that inclusion is extremely important in the culture. This results in children with severe learning difficulties, such as autism and severe dyslexia being admitted (special schools are not of a very high standard, according to A) to mainstream schools. Teachers have received little training on how to cope with such learning problems she feels. But 'Fairness' A believes is more important than fitting the learning to the needs of the child. Carers are provided, but no learning support for special needs, as you would see in English schools is evident. In fact, there is no such department in most schools, A believed. Many parents will not accept their child has learning difficulties, diagnosis is delayed and there is no special needs teacher in this school. Labelling children with a problem seems to be against the culture and teachers appear to lack training in learning issues. This is exacerbated, she believes, by the strong belief, that children take different times to achieve a variety of goals and they will do it when they are ready, that is, the readiness theory. This, it appears, delays any early diagnosis of learning difficulties. In England, where she had worked for several years, early diagnosis and referral is considered essential she stressed. In this school, it appears much learning time is lost in her opinion, as children attend therapy/psychologists in class time for emotional issues, rather than for learning difficulties. A has had difficulty getting agreement to 'push' younger children using setting, so work can be adjusted by her, to match abilities. The Educational Psychologist C did not agree and B said that Argentinian teachers expect the counsellors to alter the work for individual children, not the teachers. A believes that play is the only 'work' considered suitable for younger children in Argentina, when UK's children area already reading. However, A's work has raised questions from parents, as to why children are reading and writing in English, much sooner than in their native language of Spanish. She has had to work hard at persuading the counsellors and teachers in order to be allowed to test children's reading ability, as it could make children 'feel bad' she was told. B and C agreed with this belief. Class groups are organised by C, not by teachers, by asking children to pick people they like, do not like, learn from etc., so class, groupings are social not academic.

If children in the kindergarten or primary school are experiencing problems, the parents can be called in to see the counsellors, not teachers. There are discussions about the home environment. The counsellors (A, B and C all agreed), send a form to the teacher, asking about the child's attitudes to work homework and its behaviour. A discussion follows with the counsellors and the Headteacher. Teachers, said both A and B, do not generally contact parents as they do in the UK.

Asked if the concern not to stress out and worry children affects their progress, the answer from A was a strong 'Yes'. She had tried in the early years to use a more Reception Class approach, not a kindergarten one, but had been told this would be too stressful, asking too much of the children by the counsellors and other teachers. However, the children A said, 'are taught to write in capital letters, which I deplore and then have to relearn to write in lower and upper case, so confusing'. She was told too much pressure and stress would badly affect the children; too early reading could make some students feel failures and B and C agreed with this idea. A has had to work hard to be allowed to test children's reading, as it would stress them she was told and unnecessary. Eventually she has convinced C and the other counsellor, that this is untrue and believes she had to some extent brought B round to her teaching process, supporting children's learning. B and C to some extent agreed that they had been surprised with the progress made by the children under A's direction, seemingly without stress resulting.

For those students who have difficulties with which the school cannot cope, all respondents explained that they are referred to licensed Educational Psychologists, or therapists outside of school. This produces massive numbers of reports for teachers and in-school counsellors to read and the children involved have many therapy sessions, resulting A believes, they miss a great deal of learning time.

Responses from C and B demonstrated clearly the different culture to that prevalent in English schools, they had been, in all their training warned about the problems children could face if 'pushed, tested and made to feel failures'. These respondents both raised the problems of over-testing, common they believed in English schools and both held firm beliefs that the theory of 'readiness' for learning was essential and that children reached this in their own time. In particular, C stressed the mental health issues for children, pushed into too early competition and before they were 'ready to learn'. In addition, she concentrated a great deal on the social concerns of the students. Problems in their families, she claimed, often had an enormous effect on their behaviour and their ability to learn. The need to be 'happy, belong and feel valued', she believed, was very important for learning. B agreed with this, but admitted that the way reading was taught by the English teacher, had to some extent 'surprised the staff about how quickly the younger children learned a foreign language and became fluent in it, before acquiring the ability to read and write fluently in their own language'. When questioned about her training which was for five years, she admitted that little had been covered on children with special needs and that it was difficult to work with children of widely varying abilities in the same group, without special training on issues such as dyslexia and autism, to name just two challenges that the teachers faced. However, both B and C agreed that therapy was very helpful in addressing personal problems for the students and that B and the other Argentinian teachers, felt well supported in the school by the counsellors, who were the ones to contact parents, suggest therapy etc.

Conclusion

It appears from these findings that the culture of therapy, supporting mental health and not pushing or stressing children, are at the heart of educational practice in Argentina. There is a belief generally held in the community it appears from the literature and the research findings, though these latter are of a limited nature, that most problems in life are caused by emotional and social issues and can be addressed by therapy. This was evident when A, who suffers from asthma, was asked by the school counsellors why she was not attending therapy to 'cure' it, as the cause must be emotional or social stress problems. The limited research undertaken here is strongly supported by the available literature which demonstrates the strength of the therapy culture and the insistence on waiting until children are ready to undertake certain tasks. In addition, the findings support the idea that the main concerns of the school counsellors are related to social and emotional difficulties, not to those associated with learning. Teachers seem to be some distance from the work of the counsellors and learning difficulties seem not to be high on the list of perceived problems, nor is early diagnosis considered as good; possibly because this would label the children. It does appear as if teachers' training is not sufficiently focused on learning difficulties and how these need to be addressed and the schools do not seem to have such departments to deal with children with special needs, related to learning problems. Labelling a child as having those, appears to be quickly rejected as harmful, where labelling them with emotional or social problems is not problematic. Possibly children in England are too stressed, over assessed and too pushed to succeed, but sadly it appears that Argentinian children may not be meeting their potential due to this 'care not stretch culture' and the wait till they are ready approach. It is possible the two countries' education systems could learn from each other.

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Inclusive Education, Psychological Counseling and Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

It is indeed a challenge to research otherness in the modern world, whereby "the other or the invisible one can be any one of us" (Petrov et al., 2004, p. 85). Only by seeing and discerning the other we can see and discern ourselves. Recognition, acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular education system can only make us richer and more accomplished individuals. Inclusion is a process that is implemented in the Republic of North Macedonia, respecting the right of all children to equal inclusion in regular schools. It is a process of mutual respect for the diversity of each student and his needs, where the student is the center of attention, and the education system should cope with the challenges ahead of all students, in this context, ahead of students with special educational needs as well. They will need counseling in many areas of academic functioning compared to their non-disabled peers. Therefore, counseling interaction programs are a necessary part of inclusive education in supporting children with special educational needs and their families. Hence, the main aim of our paper is to represent the actual situation in Macedonian schools regarding the challenge of educational inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular school system. The research methods are based on document studies and case studies about changes in social and educational policies for students with disabilities and special educational needs who are included in primary and secondary education. Also presented are some psychological counseling programs and guidelines for teachers who work with these children and future directions for a proper inclusion system in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Keywords: disabled children, special educational needs, inclusion, psychological counseling, school counselors

Introduction

Human rights are rights or powers that belong to each person; they are universal moral rights that are to be distributed among all human beings. All human beings are entitled to their rights, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), and children need special and increased protection, care, safety, understanding and love in order to develop in a healthy way. Children have special rights, because of their vulnerability, such as the right to protection from exploitation and abuse, the right to be cared for and have a home, and the right to have a say in decisions which affect them.

In this regard, historically many children with disabilities were not visible. They lived in large institutions, away from their families and communities (Bulat et

al., 2017). Now, most children with disabilities live at home with their families in communities across the country. These children and their families are fully included in all aspects of the society and enjoy full citizenship (Nussbaum, 2007).

Approximately 10% of children in the Republic of North Macedonia face some kind of disability (UNICEF, 2019). Their equal functioning within the society requires elimination of all types of obstacles, including physical inaccessibility to institutions, greater inclusion in education, access to healthcare services, development and greater availability of appropriate support services and raising public awareness, which implies reducing discrimination and stigmatization. Acceptance and increased inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in the regular education system can only make us richer and more accomplished individuals (Ruijs & Peersma, 2009).

Children with developmental disabilities and special educational needs

Every child has his/her own characteristics, interests, abilities and needs. For this reason, we should always consider the different characteristics and pay special attention to each child. This particularly refers to children with developmental disabilities who have disorders of specific organ systems and/or reduction of specific functions, due to which they experience difficulties in the execution of certain activities. Usually, a disability is the result of complex interactions between the fundamental limitations that arise from the physical, intellectual and mental state of the person, as well as from the social and physical environment (Valentine, 2001).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities describes them as "persons who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (UN, 2006, p. 136).

Research and practice in special education show that children have special educational needs if they have a learning difficulty which calls for special provision to be made for them. Some children may have special educational needs for a relatively short time; they often have special educational needs directly through their education. So special educational needs mean, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition (Bines & Lei, 2011).

Inclusive education – a possible solution

Inclusion is a process of coping and responding to the different needs of all students through the learning process, integration into the cultural environment and community and an increasingly reduced exclusion from the education system (Anaby

et al., 2013). It implies change and modification of the contents, approach, structure and strategy in the education system, with a common vision that includes all children of a certain age, and believes that the regular education system is responsible for educating all children equally.

Inclusive education implies that all children, regardless of their abilities, are included and accepted. Inclusive education pays special attention to the inclusion of children who may be marginalized, discriminated or excluded from the educational process (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017). Despite their potentials or weaknesses in some areas, they are included in the regular classes and are provided with appropriate conditions for learning, advancement and participation in school life.

Every child with special educational needs has the right to be educated with children of the same age, who have no difficulties, and to have access to the general educational program. Inclusive education allows children with special educational needs to attend the nearest schools just like other children, and live with their families, which is particularly important for their development (Punch, 2006).

The need of counseling students with special educational needs

School counselors encourage and support the academic, career, and social/emotional development of all students through school counseling programs (Baker & Gerler, 2008). They are committed to helping all students realize their potential and meet or exceed academic standards with consideration for both the strengths and challenges resulting from disabilities and their special needs. Also, they provide direct or indirect services to students in the least restrictive environment (as determined by each student's individualized education plan – IEP) and in an inclusive setting when possible (Hall, 2015).

The school counselor takes an active role in student achievement and postsecondary planning by providing school counseling programs for all students. As a part of this program, school counselors advocate for students with special needs, encourage family involvement in their child's education and collaborate with other educational professionals to promote academic achievement, social/emotional wellness and college/career readiness for all (UNICEF, 2017).

Teachers and counselors need to use a variety of strategies during lessons and counseling sessions. The implementation of inclusive education requires innovating strategies by which students are evaluated. It will be necessary to adapt testing educational instruments to accommodate the special needs of students with disabilities (Singhal, 2015). This will need to be done without lowering the quality of the assessment. Hence the primary function of the school counselors is to assess referred students to determine their personal and academic problems.

Furthermore, counselors can help teachers promote social adjustment for these students by providing guidance in incorporating peer modeling, self-resilience, age-appropriate social behavior and friendship-making skills into classroom activities

(Raby, 2008). They can promote tolerance of differences in peers without disabilities through social skill programs, integrated counseling groups, and classroom modeling and discussion (Council of Europe, 2006). Counselors can offer individual and group counseling focusing on self-esteem, self-expression and behavioral problems. In addition, counselors can help parents understand and encourage their child's or adolescent's abilities. Parents may require to be taught how to assist their child's basic academic skills. Parent training is a necessary part of programs for families with children with special educational needs (Ainscow, 2013).

The right of children with disabilities to inclusive education in the Republic of North Macedonia

The changes in the education of children with developmental disabilities are an integral part of the reforms of the education system in our country implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia. Thereby, vast support to the reforms in the education of children with developmental disabilities is provided by pilot projects of inclusive education in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, which are implemented with the assistance of domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, Save the Children, etc.). The mentioned pilot projects cover a number of kindergartens and primary schools with the main goal of developing and testing innovative models of education and protection of children with disabilities. The experiences gained during their implementation play a role when considering the advantages and disadvantages of the tested models; therefore they are guidelines for undertaking further activities and larger projects in the field of inclusive education. Of the numerous pilot projects of exclusive education that have been implemented in our country, we will mention the following:

- *Inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools* (implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science in the period 2000-2006) (OECD, 2006).
- *Cooperation to Inclusion* (implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF in the period 2010/11 to 2016/17) (UNICEF, 2017).
- *Education for All* (implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and UNESCO in the period 2017/18 to 2019/22) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017).

Although the indicated pilot projects do not have the same contents and activities, they are very similar in terms of the general principle and the initial goals. The point of departure of all pilot projects is the right of every child to a quality education in accordance with the child's abilities and capabilities, therefore the focus is on changing the school, rather than changing the child. In all projects, the emphasis is put on the application of the individual approach to teaching, discovering the preserved potentials of the child and making individual educational plans for children with developmental disabilities. The evaluation of the mentioned pilot

projects in North Macedonia shows encouraging results. The data show that the organized activities, by providing the necessary support in kindergartens and schools, create conditions for quality inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular groups in kindergarten and in regular schools. Hence, inclusive education is gradually being introduced in certain primary schools throughout the country. In addition, training on inclusive education has also been introduced in all schools throughout the country, and investments are constantly being made in creating resources, manuals and guidelines for inclusive education, which will be used for improving the access and participation of all children in the teaching and learning process, and will increase their success.

Also, inclusion was an integral part of the development of the Education Strategy 2018-2025 in the context of lifelong learning and the Action Plan, which had been adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018).

Our experience

This study is a part of a project called *Inclusive education and support of children with developmental disabilities* implemented by the expert team of the Association of Citizens for Psychological and Speech Therapy "Center Savant" Skopje with the support of the Municipality of the City of Skopje. The main goal of this study was to explore the reality of inclusive education of students with disabilities in mainstream secondary schools in Skopje, from the perspectives of secondary school teachers, students without disabilities and parents of children with disabilities. As an outcome of the completed project activities in 2019, significant effects were concluded which created the base for exploration of possibilities to extend the network with new project schools. To that end, in order to determine the attitudes, knowledge and experience of teachers, peers and parents, in the first four project schools in regard to the inclusive practice, research was carried out in the period from September to December 2019. A total number of 246 respondents were included in the research, of which: 40 parents, 89 teachers, professionals and counselors from secondary schools and 117 students from first to fourth year of secondary education within the same schools.

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design was chosen. In fact, a qualitative approach was adopted since it provides the best support aimed at gaining greater understanding of inclusive education (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010), from the perspectives and experiences of those involved, namely teachers, peers and parents of children with disabilities. A combination of sampling techniques was used for this study as advised by Cologon (2016). Convenience sampling was used as the researchers selected four local schools together with the representative from the Department for Education from the City of Skopje. Purposive technique was also employed since the researchers wanted to gain insights from teachers who were in mainstream secondary schools and had experience in working with children with

special needs within their mainstream class groups. The study also required insights from parents who had a child with special educational needs who was attending a mainstream school setting. The third groups were the students without disabilities who learned together with their peers who had developmental difficulties such as autistic spectrum disorder, Downs syndrome, learning difficulties, cerebral palsy.

In order to invite candidates to take part in the study, contact was established initially with the principal or the vice principal of the school. By using a network sampling technique, they were asked to convey the information and the invitation to participate to the members of the teaching staff, peers and parents of students with special educational needs attending the school. The parents were contacted by the school principals and teachers. Confidentiality and anonymity of children, family and school was reiterated to all participants at this point. The contact with participants was held at the school premises during school hours. At this time the ethical status of the study was explained to the participants, plus clear information about the study was given. The researchers communicated openly and honestly with all participants in this study. All information – written and recorded – was stored securely, whereby access was available only to the researchers. Contact details for the researchers were also included for any resulting queries.

The research included three modules of work.

Module 1. Workshops with students without disabilities

The main purpose of these workshops was to educate students on accepting and supporting their peers with some form of disabilities, but at the same time to teach them how to reduce their prejudice towards their peers. During the workshops, different forms of activities involving the students were organized: role plays, discussions, films and competitions. For example, secondary school students from 16 to 18 years of age spent 5 days undertaking photography activities with a camera. Students with disabilities were paired with their non–disabled peers. Together they shared the photos and conversed. This type of activity provided them with the opportunity to learn or develop their educational skills, but above all, it contributed to breaking down barriers between children with and without disabilities. The results demonstrated how positive attitudes and friendships can grow within a short time by using a very simple, but a powerful tool – a camera. The research has very effectively promoted a message that all children can and must be educated together.

Module 2. Work with parents

The work with parents was focused on training, support, knowledge, communication skills and legal advice. After this activity, the parents acquire a positive experience of the abilities of their child and develop a partnership which provides support and encouragement to parents in their effort to do as much as possible for their children. We found that the parents were very satisfied with their children's experience of mainstream education, for example:

We always considered the other children as well … so we had to learn how to adjust over the years and think about what was best, not just what we wanted for her, but what was best for everybody. I really wanted my girl to go to a mainstream school. I think we all have the idea of the school we would like our kids to attend. (Parent of an autistic child)

Also, the participants identified social learning and social awareness as positive aspects of inclusive education settings. It is not only children with disabilities who have a social benefit, this applies for all children at school.

Since he started school, he has been spending more time with his peers than with his family. So, they are his educators; they are his everything; they are his world, and he is not the only child with a disability in the school, so he himself would be helping them. (Parent of a child with cerebral palsy)

Regarding the inclusive processes, the views of the parents are divided, depending on their personal experiences, the degree of disability their child has and whether the society has accepted their child or not. Still, some parents are not satisfied with the inclusive education and they believe that there is not any real inclusion in the country and that it all depends on the parents and their means.

Module 3. Training and support for teachers

No single change in the educational process can become embedded in practice without the teacher, because the teacher is and remains the key factor in the implementation of the educational process. Teachers are the ones who observe progress. According to this, the researchers organize training for teachers, psychologists and officials about inclusive education issues. Participants were invited to share their views and experiences on various themes, related to inclusion in education. During these activities teachers and parents should share the same view of what the term inclusive means, express positive attitudes concerning the acceptance of children with special educational needs in regular school by their schoolmates and positive attitudes concerning the need of additional assistance by a special needs assistant within the framework of inclusive practice. Also, most teachers were determined to design an individual educational program (IEP) as one of the forms for additional necessary assistance. From the discussion on children's social interaction, an emphasis on the caring nature exhibited by secondary school students towards pupils with special educational needs became evident.

He would be very well looked after in the class and they would include him as much as possible… But for him, you know, whether he would consider any of them as his 'real' friends, I do not know if he would. But yet he really enjoys being with them… (Teacher of a student with Downs syndrome)

Although teacher training courses have more recently incorporated modules on inclusion in education and students can avail placement practice in special needs settings, we found that teachers feel it is not enough to prepare them for the needs of all children attending mainstream education. The results indicated that 60% of the

teachers from the secondary schools had no training or experience in working with students with special educational needs, but 90% of them believed that every teacher would receive training in order to work better with these children. It was the same with the school counselors who were part of this project. School counselors need to use individual approaches to meet the individual learning needs of each student.

Teachers and counselors need confirming education (training, access to literature, workshops, and instruments). This helps them overcome negative, individual medical model–based perceptions and attitudes. Thus, they need to acquire skills for supporting students and establishing collaboration with parents. In this regard, training content related to human rights, the social model of inclusion, defining inclusive education, the twin–track approach, learning styles and individual planning really help. The school inclusion team uses this training content adapted to our context.

The participation in this inclusive education project encouraged us to reconsider school challenges in our country. Our participation in the last training module was a new stimulus to focus on the current inclusive processes and the school's future potential. According to this, we share this case study as an example of good practice for creating conditions that enable students with disabilities to enroll and successfully progress in an inclusive school.

Case study: A 16-year-old girl with Down syndrome

The student Lilly had intellectual impairments. The girl had developed during her first year of life, but problems emerged (when she was at the age of 17 months). The parents noticed an attention deficit; she did not respond to her name and had speech difficulties. During her early childhood, the girl received speech therapy three times a week and worked individually with a special educator. Her parents followed her progress, because at the age of 7 the little girl could count to 10, she knew relations, colors, shapes and letters. The speech therapist and the special educator together decided that she had abilities, needs and potentials to be in educational settings together with her peers in a local mainstream primary school. Here her teachers helped and encouraged her to play with other children. An education inclusion team together with the teacher and the parents made an individual educational plan (IEP). An IEP was developed, which specified learning goals for Lilly that matched her abilities and identified needs. The following instructional methods/strategies have been used with Lilly:

- Individualized approach;
- Working in pairs and a small group;
- Play, observation, showing images, applications, objects, toys, illustrative method, dialogue, practical work;
- Development of individual instructional booklets for educational purpose;
- Use of teaching aids, educational software, practical didactical tools;
- Psychological support and counseling.

Apart from having a good achievement level according to her abilities and the educational goals set out in the IEP, Lilly was included in all activities of the school community (school performances, exhibitions, after–school activities, etc.).

Now Lilly is in first grade of secondary school and she still needs support, because the new environment and greater mobility in the classroom still upset her, but her new teachers helped and encouraged her to feel better amongst between her new peers. In fact, the teachers were a part of Module 3 and they explained to us their plan of Lilly's future education. A new action plan would be made for her, by the school inclusion teams and counselor. This includes organizing meetings to exchange views and experiences among teachers who teach such those students, providing individual support, understanding her socio/emotional status, because she is in period of adolescence and taking action for improvement, etc. The monitoring of the implementation of the IEP shows that she is mostly achieving her goals, although if her parents were more fully engaged in the process, the results could be even better. Lilly has an opportunity to further develop as a result the implementation requirements of inclusive education. She hopes to go to college and study art.

Up until now, her inclusion in mainstream school has been extremely positive, for all concerned. Lilly is happy. Her parents are happy. The school team is happy.

Conclusion and recommendations

Every child is special, talented and prone to success in some field. Every child needs to play, learn and socialize with the children. Every child has a right to participate in a regular kindergarten or school according to their pace (Milsom, 2007; Subramanian, 2003). This is especially important to children with disabilities, because school settings can help them learn more about themselves, the others and the world. The world is a big place with lots of opportunities!

On the basis of our findings and lessons learned from all of the training modules on inclusive education, we would give the following recommendations:

- providing school counseling curriculum lessons, individual and/or group counseling to students with special needs within the scope of the school counseling program;
- encouraging family involvement in the educational process;
- consulting and collaborating with staff and families to understand the special needs of a student and understanding the adaptations and modifications needed to assist the student;
- advocating for students with special needs in the school and in the community;
- getting the necessary training and supervision needed to effectively counsel persons with disabilities.

Finally, continuous inclusive process across the whole school, through connecting and networking activities based on the principle: "you can teach and you can learn".

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Comparative School Counseling

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This volume contains a collection of strictly selected papers submitted to the Second International Conference on Comparative School Counseling in 2022.

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