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Introduction to this Special Issue on Cross-National Differences in School-Based Counseling Practice

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation* presents the outcomes of the research of a team of international scholars seeking to better understand the nature of the variability of school-based counseling practice across countries and the contextual determinants of this variability. A lead article describes a large, ten-nation, factor analytic study of school-based counselors' ratings on the *International Survey of School-Based Counseling Activities* (ISSCA) that identified five dimensions that describe cross-national variability. Five articles use this five-dimensional framework to describe the mode of practice for school-based counseling within a single country (India, Kenya, Malta, Nigeria, and the United States) and to organize a discussion of the contextual factors related to these modes of practice. One article used the five-dimensional framework to compare the modes of practice in two countries (Costa Rica and Venezuela). The last article reported the results of two separate factor analyses from respondents in Hong Kong and supported the validity and utility of the five dimensions presented in the lead article. Implications, future directions and limitations were discussed relating to the promotion of cross-national, comparative research in school-based counseling.

Keywords: special issue, cross-national differences, school-based counseling

This is the first special issue of the *Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation*. It presents the outcomes of the research of a team of international scholars seeking to better understand the nature of the variability of school-based counseling practice across countries and the contextual determinants of this variability. Understanding these issues is an essential prerequisite to the cross-national, comparative research that is needed to identify and promote the development of effective policy to promote good practice. In a groundbreaking scoping study, Harris (2013) found that school-based counseling is practiced in at least 90 different countries with considerable differences in modes of practice across national contexts with variability in practice being related to specific historical and contextual factors that have affected the development and practice of the work.

Investigating the similarities and differences in modes of practice amongst school-based counseling practitioners around the world and the relationships between these modes of practice and public policy can uncover important findings and implications that can lead to the development of more effective policy and the improvement of practice (Aluede, Carey, Harris, & Lee (2017). To date, however, very few cross-national, comparative studies of school-based counseling practice have been conducted despite the particular advantages offered by this approach. In order to enable cross-national comparative research, an overarching framework for describing the dimensions along which modes of practice differ is needed.

In contrast to cross-national comparative research, the international literature is replete with descriptive articles cataloging the evolution and practice of school-based counseling within a single national context (Martin, Lauterbach and Carey, 2015). While these articles offer rich descriptions of individual cases, it is difficult to compare observations across articles and integrate information because of the idiosyncratic ways that the authors approach their analyses and because of the lack of an overarching framework for describing the dimensions along which practice differs.

While it is readily apparent that school-based counseling differs across national contexts, a precise description of how modes of practice are different is still lacking. This special issue is an attempt to provide such a description to enable the comparisons of modes of practice across contexts and the subsequent identification of policies that promote effective practice.

The International Society for School-Based Counseling Policy Research and Evaluation (ISPRESOC) enabled the coordination of the development of an instrument to measure cross-national variability in modes of practice (International Survey of School-Based Counseling Activities, ISSCA) and the collection of data on school-based counseling modes of practice in 10 countries (China, Costa Rica, India, Kenya, South Korea, Malta, Nigeria, Turkey, the United States, and Venezuela). It should be noted that cross-national research of this breadth and scope would not be possible without the supportive network provided by ISPRESOC.

Articles in the Special Issue

In the lead article of this special issue Carey, Fan, He and Jin describe the results of an exploratory factor analysis of the aggregated data. This analysis identified five dimensions that describe cross-national variability in practice. These include: Counseling Services; Advocacy and Systemic Improvement; Prevention Programs; Administrator Role; and, Educational and Career Planning. The authors also present an analysis of average factor loading for all ten countries that indicates how much emphasis is placed on each of these five dimensions in each of the countries. These analyses, for example, suggest that counselors in some countries (Turkey, Nigeria, India, United States, China, and Malta) placed great emphasis on Prevention Programming while counselors in other countries (Costa Rica, South Korea, and Venezuela) placed much less emphasis. These five dimensions provide a useful framework for describing and measuring cross-national differences in modes of practice. Different countries may emphasize different dimensions. Different countries may include fewer or more of the dimensions in their mode of practice. In some countries school-based counselors may be responsible for activities related to all (or most) of the dimensions, while in other countries school-based counselors may be responsible for activities related to only one or two of the dimensions. Five articles in this special issue use this five-dimensional framework to describe the mode of practice for school-based counseling within a single country and to organize a discussion of the contextual factors relate to the mode of practice.

Thomas and Dey used the five-dimensional framework to describe the mode of practice in India based on the responses of a sample of practicing school-based counselors. They also indicate how this mode of practice is shaped by contextual factors operating in India. For example, they indicate practice in India emphasizes Prevention Programming because of both public policy initiatives by government to promote prevention of social problems in schools and the consistency of prevention programs with the Indian public education system.

Similarly, Eze, Nzangi, and Obaweiki used the five-dimensional framework to describe the mode of school-based counseling practice in Kenya, based on the responses of a sample of practicing school-based counselors and also describe how this mode of practice is shaped by contextual factors operating in Kenya. They suggest, for example, that Kenya's strong emphasis on Educational and Career Planning results from policies of the National Ministry of Education, which have a major impact on both counselor training and counseling practice.

Falzon, Galea, and Muscat use the five-dimensional framework to compare the mode of school-based counseling in Malta to that of other countries in the sample and to identify contextual factors that are responsible for unique aspects practice in Malta. They indicate, for example, that school-based counselors in Malta have a more focused role than is evident in many other countries--largely focusing on delivering personal and social Counseling Services. In

Malta, guidance teachers do much of the work in psycho-education and Prevention Programming and career advisors are responsible for Educational and Career Planning services.

Aluede and Adubale used the five-dimensional framework to describe school-based counseling practice in Nigeria and to identify contextual factors that are responsible for unique aspects practice in Nigeria. They noted, for example, that Nigeria was the only country in the ten-country sample where counselors considered activities relating to the performance of an Administrator Role to be appropriate for school-based counselors. They noted that previous research has consistently documented that Nigerian school-based counselors have a long history of being involved in student discipline and in other activities that in other national contexts are the province of school administrators.

Finally, Carey used the five-dimensional framework to describe of school-based counseling practice in the United States and to identify contextual factors that are related to practice. He noted, for example, that US school-based counselors showed a strong emphasis on four of the five dimensions: Counseling Services; Advocacy and Systemic Improvement; Prevention Programs; and, Educational and Career Planning. He suggested that the longstanding emphasis in the US on comprehensive models of school-based counseling was related to a greater breadth in the focus of US mode of practice in comparison to that of other countries.

One article in this special issue used the five-dimensional framework to compare the modes of practice in two countries. Martin and Vera compared the modes of school-based counseling practice in Costa Rica and Venezuela. They found no practically significant differences between the two countries on any of the ISSCA scales related to the five dimensions and very few significant differences on individual items. They suggested that similarities in the history of school-based counseling and in government policy affecting its practice are responsible for the apparent similarity in practice between the two countries.

Finally, the last article in this special issue presents factor analysis results from two separate samples of respondents in Hong Kong to test the robustness of the five dimensions presented in the lead article. Wong and Yuen found a seven-factor solution provided the best fit to their Hong Kong data. Five of these factors corresponded to those reported in the lead article of this special issue. In addition, they found discrete factors related to Practice Improvement and Services to Parents. They suggested that these results confirm the validity and the utility of the five-dimensional framework in describing important dimensions of practice. Their research also suggests that additional complexities in modes of practice may exist within countries that are not captured by the framework.

Implications

The research presented in this special issue indicated that the five dimensions identified in the lead article provide a valid and useful framework for measuring and describing cross-national differences in school-based counseling practice. Subsequent qualitative cross-national comparative research using these five dimensions of practice is warranted. Similarly, qualitative cross-national comparative research examining the relationships between policy and practice as described by these dimensions is warranted. Relatedly, these five dimensions should be used in any future qualitative case-study descriptions of school-based counseling practice so that comparisons can be made across case studies.

Limitations

The research reported in this special issue has two major limitations. First, the sampling methods and sample sizes varied greatly across countries and samples were obtained from only ten countries. This variability was related whether the counseling profession within a given country was able to support data collection. Large and more representative samples were collected in countries where governments or professional associations supported data collection (e.g. China, Costa Rica, South Korea, Malta and the United States). In other countries (e.g. India and Kenya) only smaller samples of convenience were possible to obtain. This research should be replicated with samples from additional countries and with as large and representative samples as possible.

Second, while the ISSCA proved to be a useful instrument in identifying the dimensions related to cross-national variability in practice improvements in measurement are needed. The ISSCA is long (42 items) and scales have different numbers of items associated with them (ranging between 2 and 18). A redesign of the ISSCA is warranted.

Conclusion

The five dimensions presented in the lead article of this special issue provide a valid and useful framework for describing and measuring cross-national differences in school-based counseling practice. These dimensions can promote comparative research seeking to describe cross-national differences in practice and understand the contextual origins (including differences in policy contexts) of these differences in practice.

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