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Exploring the Multicultural Competence of School Counselors

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the self-perceived multicultural competence of school counselors. Forty-one school counselors out of the 510 school counselors who were current members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) completed both survey instruments: a demographic survey and the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS). The results of the study indicated that one of eight demographic variables demonstrated significance in relation to multicultural competence. Recommendations for future research included using a larger, ethnically diverse sample; including all school counselors in the state of Virginia; developing a survey instrument that included more aspects of multiculturalism than race/ethnicity; and including a third assessment tool to examine the relationship between demographic variables, multicultural competence, and additional variables.

Keywords

multicultural competence; school counselors; multicultural counseling; counselor training

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Fallon K. Dodson

The purpose of this study was to explore the self-perceived multicultural competence of school counselors. Forty-one school counselors out of the 510 school counselors who were current members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) completed both survey instruments: a demographic survey and the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS). The results of the study indicated that one of eight demographic variables demonstrated significance in relation to multicultural competence. Recommendations for future research included using a larger, ethnically diverse sample; including all school counselors in the state of Virginia; developing a survey instrument that included more aspects of multiculturalism than race/ethnicity; and including a third assessment tool to examine the relationship between demographic variables, multicultural competence, and additional variables.

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As The United States continues to evolve into an increasingly diverse society, school counselors should have the necessary knowledge, skills, and awareness to provide multiculturally competent counseling. One of the major challenges school counselors face is uncertainty about whether they are sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural students. Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, and Hof (2008) discussed five factors that have contributed to an increased focus on multicultural competence in counselor education programs (CEPs). The first factor is the diversification of the population that CEP graduates will serve. The second factor is the recognition that CEPs have not historically met the needs of students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The third factor is that accrediting agencies are requiring CEPs to infuse multicultural and social justice education initiatives into their programs. The accrediting agency for CEPs is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; CACREP, 2009). CACREP has outlined clear, extensive, and detailed requirements to ensure the cultural competence of students and faculty.

The fourth factor that has brought increased attention to the incorporation of more multicultural/social justice issues into their curriculum are the large number of contributions made by multicultural counseling, research, and educational scholars (Zalaquett, et al. 2008). The fifth and final factor that has led to an increased focus on multicultural counseling in CEPs is that the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2010) mandate counselors to be ethically responsible in addressing the diverse cultural needs of all students, families, teachers, and administrators.

In addition to increased attention on counselor education programs and ethical mandates, school counselors' multicultural competence has been linked to self-construals (Constantine &

Yeh, 2001), student advocacy (Lee, 2001), and multicultural training (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001). Other factors that may affect multicultural competence in school counselors include race, gender, years of experience, age, and work setting. To date, no study has addressed the school's racial and ethnic composition on the perceived multicultural competence of school counselors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the self-perceived multicultural competence of school counselors in Virginia. If school counselors gain a deeper understanding of multicultural competence, school counselors can work more effectively with diverse students, teachers, administrators, families, and the community. Counselor education programs (CEPs) can use these findings to incorporate additional training in multiculturalism, advocacy, and social justice initiatives. Finally, school counselors can use these results to provide professional development on local, state, and national levels.

Research Hypotheses

The research questions were tested by the following hypotheses:

1. H0: Race/ethnicity will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
H1: School counselors who are from a minority/multiracial background will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than school counselors who are not.
2. H0: Gender will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
H1: Female school counselors will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than male school counselors.
3. H0: Years of counseling experience will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
H1: The more years of counseling experience a school counselor has, the more they will perceive themselves as multiculturally competent.
4. H0: Work setting (elementary, middle, high school) will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
H1: High school counselors will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than middle and elementary school counselors.
5. H0: Racial/ethnic composition of the school will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
H1: School counselors with racially/ethnically diverse schools will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent.
6. H0: Taking a multicultural course will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
H1: School counselors who have taken a multicultural course will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than school counselors who have not.
7. H0: Participating in multicultural training will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.

- H1: School counselors who have participated in multicultural training will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than school counselors who have not.
8. H0: Graduating from a CACREP-accredited program will not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence.
- H1: School counselors who graduated from a CACREP-accredited program will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than school counselors who have not.

Method

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was Virginia school counselors with a minimum of a Master's degree in school counseling practicing in elementary, middle, and high schools who were members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). Participants were solicited through the researcher's access to ASCA membership e-mail addresses. As of June, 2011 there were 510 practicing school counselors who were members of ASCA. An invitation to participate in the study, including complete details of the study, were sent to these Virginia school counselors through a mass email by the researcher.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather data for the study: a demographic questionnaire and the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS).

The demographic survey. The demographic survey was developed by the researcher to gather the following information about participants: age, years of school counseling experience, gender, race/ethnicity, current work setting, racial/ethnic population of the school, highest degree earned, number of multicultural courses taken, and number of multicultural training sessions attended. The survey also asked school counselors if their school counseling program was CACREP-accredited.

Multicultural counseling knowledge and awareness scale (MCKAS). The Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS) is a 32-item self-rating scale that assesses multicultural counseling competency across two factors: Multicultural Knowledge ($\alpha = .92$) and Multicultural Awareness ($\alpha = .79$). There are 20 items for the Knowledge subscale and 12 items for the Awareness subscale. The scale uses a 7-point Likert scale to measure knowledge and awareness, with responses from not at all true (1) to totally true (7) (Hays, 2008; Ponterotto, Rieger, Barrett, & Sparks, 1994; Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Rieger, & Austin, 2002).

Procedures

Permission to use the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS) was obtained from the developer (Joseph G. Ponterotto, personal communication, June 27, 2011). After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the study began. Ethical standards were adhered to in accordance to the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) ethical code.

The study also adhered to the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) ethical standards for research.

A cover letter was e-mailed to 510 Virginia school counselors. School counselors who elected to participate in the study clicked on a link that connected them to the Psychdata.com site. Upon entering the site, school counselors completed informed consent by providing an electronic signature. After completing informed consent, school counselors were asked to complete an electronic survey packet that included a demographic questionnaire and the MCKAS. School counselors were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and informed how to obtain a copy of the study results. Psychdata.com also included a comments section where counselors could provide qualitative feedback.

The surveys were e-mailed to school counselors in October, 2011. A reminder e-mail was sent to counselors two weeks after the initial mailing. Two additional reminders were sent to participants on October 31, 2011 and November 14, 2011. Data collection and analysis took place from October, 2011 to December, 2011.

Data from the demographic questionnaire and MCKAS were stored with Psychdata.com and forwarded to the researcher. Data was confidential and identifying information was not included about participants. Responses to the demographic survey and MCKAS were encrypted using 256-bit SSL, and the data remained encrypted until it was retrieved from the PsychData database. Psychdata.com had the only encryption key used to retrieve information. Research was stored in an isolated database on Psychdata.com and could only be accessed by the researcher with the correct username and password. Once all surveys are complete, the data was turned over to the researcher and deleted by Psychdata.com. The researcher stored data in an Excel spreadsheet then export data into SPSS for analysis.

Results

Hypothesis 1 Findings

Hypothesis 1: School counselors who are from a minority/multiracial background will perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than school counselors who are not.

Of the 54 participants, 13 were missing data on the dependent variables and were removed from the data set. No univariate or multivariate outliers were identified. The resulting sample size for Hypothesis 1 was $n = 31$ for Caucasian/Whites and $n = 10$ for African Americans/ Blacks. The assumption of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity ($r = .641$ and $-.216$ for Caucasians and minorities, respectively) were met. Box's M test was significant indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was not met; however for a two group design, MANOVA is robust to violation of this assumption (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Levene's test for both dependent variables was not significant, indicating that the assumption of equality of error variance was met.

A one-way between groups MANOVA was used to test whether there was a significant difference in multicultural awareness and multicultural knowledge depending on ethnicity (Caucasian/White or African-American/Black). Results from the test indicated that there was not a significant difference between groups on the combined dependent variables ($F(2, 38) = 3.255$, $p = .05$; Wilk's Lambda = .854; partial eta squared = .146). Although the multivariate results were not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, the results were bordering

significance so the univariate tests were evaluated. The model summary for the univariate tests are provided in Table 1.

Source	DV	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Multicultural Awareness	3.305	1	3.305	6.655	0.014	0.146
	Multicultural Knowledge	1.049	1	1.049	1.286	0.264	0.032
Intercept	Multicultural Awareness	945.715	1	945.715	1904.475	0.000	0.980
	Multicultural Knowledge	817.188	1	817.188	1002.260	0.000	0.963
Race/Ethnicity	Multicultural Awareness	3.305	1	3.305	6.655	0.014	0.146
	Multicultural Knowledge	1.049	1	1.049	1.286	0.264	0.032
Error	Multicultural Awareness	19.366	39	0.497			
	Multicultural Knowledge	31.798	39	0.815			
Total	Multicultural Awareness	1383.536	41				
	Multicultural Knowledge	1181.694	41				
Corrected Total	Multicultural Awareness	22.671	40				
	Multicultural Knowledge	32.847	40				

When the dependent variables were considered separately, the univariate test for multicultural awareness was significant ($F(1, 39) = 6.655, p < 0.05$, partial eta squared = 0.146) but the univariate test for multicultural knowledge was not ($F(1, 39) = 1.286, p = 0.264$, partial eta squared = 0.032). Approximately 15% of the variance in multicultural awareness scores was explained by whether the participant reported being Caucasian/White or African American/Black. Individuals who reported being Caucasian/White had significantly higher multicultural awareness scores ($M = 5.922$) than individuals who reported being African-American/Black ($M = 5.261$). Based on these results, the null hypothesis that race/ethnicity will not have a significant effect on school self-perceived multicultural competence was rejected. Caucasian school counselors perceived themselves to be more multiculturally competent than African-American school counselors.

Hypotheses 2-8 Findings

The null hypotheses for the remaining seven hypotheses were retained. There was no significant mean difference between groups in the combined dependent variables, multicultural knowledge, multicultural awareness, and the following independent variables: gender (Hypothesis 2; $p = 0.126$), years of experience (Hypothesis 3; $p = 0.725$), work setting (Hypothesis 4; $p < 0.05$), racial/ethnic background of the school (Hypothesis 5; $p = 0.703$), taking a multicultural course (Hypothesis 6; $p < 0.05$), participating in multicultural training (Hypothesis 7; $p = 0.091$), and graduating from a CACREP-accredited program (Hypothesis 8; $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

Research hypothesis 1: Race, ethnicity, and multicultural competence. The first null hypothesis posited that race/ethnicity would not have a significant effect on school counselors' self-perceived multicultural competence. Results indicated there was not a significant mean difference between groups in the combined dependent variables, multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness, and ethnicity. Although the multivariate results were not significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, the results bordered significance so univariate tests were reviewed, and multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness were separated. This analysis showed that multicultural awareness alone showed statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), but multicultural knowledge did not show significance ($p = 0.264$). By separating the variables of multicultural awareness and multicultural knowledge, approximately 15% of the variance in multicultural awareness scores was explained by whether the participant was Caucasian/White or African-American/Black. Individuals who identified as Caucasian/White reported higher levels of multicultural awareness ($M = 5.922$) than their African-American/Black peers.

This finding is important to the field of school counseling because awareness allows counselors to recognize cultural similarities and differences between themselves and the students they serve. According to Pedersen (2000), "A well-defined awareness becomes essential for teaching, research, training, direct service, and consultation" (p. 18). Caucasian school counselors may have perceived themselves to be more culturally aware since they work with students that may be culturally different from them. The finding that knowledge was not significant for either ethnic group in the study is concerning. Although school counselors are aware that there are cultural similarities and differences in the school setting, it does not mean that school counselors have the knowledge to comprehend the worldview of culturally diverse students. The sample of counselors in the study may believe they have gained sufficient knowledge of culturally diverse populations through various student interactions. These findings may assist counselor educators who can use this information to include more knowledge and awareness building exercises in their courses. Counselor administrators could utilize these findings to advocate for more professional development opportunities.

This finding contradicts the earlier work of Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) and Vinson and Neimeyer (2000), where minorities scored higher than Caucasians in multicultural awareness and knowledge. This finding affirms the earlier work of Merrill-Washington (2008), who found there was a significant relationship between multicultural awareness and ethnicity. However, the results of this study are contrary to the Merrill-Washington (2008) study, which showed a significant relationship between multicultural knowledge and ethnicity.

Research questions 2-8. For the remaining seven hypotheses, the null hypotheses were retained. The failure to find significant correlations for the variables of gender, work setting, and years of counseling experience aligns with the prior work of Holcomb-McCoy (2005), who had similar results using the MCCTS-R. Although Williams (2010) recommended including diverse schools as an aspect of school counselors' multicultural competence, this study did not find the racial and ethnic background of the school to be a significant variable; this suggests that additional research may be necessary to resolve this apparent contradiction in findings.

These findings can help inform theory by exploring additional aspects of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy (MCT). Since MCT is integrative, culturally centered, and uses multiple counseling interventions and strategies to empower clients (Sue, 1995), these findings could encourage future researchers to look at other aspects of MCT, including cultural identity

development between counselor and student. These findings can also inform practice by having counselors discuss their experience working with culturally diverse students as well as their comfort level in building relationships with culturally different students.

The results of this study have direct implications for counselor education programs and can be used to include multiculturalism throughout the counseling curricula. The failure to find significance across seven hypotheses suggests the possibility that participants lacked a sufficiently broad base of educational and experiential background to fully engage with the questions. This possibility relates to Holcomb-McCoy's (2005) observation that multiculturalism cannot be learned in one course; it must be included in all aspects of school counseling. Holcomb-McCoy (2005) believed counselors who were able to provide unbiased, culturally appropriate services for students and families could make a difference in student achievement, especially minority student achievement. Multiculturalism plays an important role in how the counseling profession connects with the students and families they serve.

The findings that taking a multicultural course and participating in multicultural training were not significant were contrary to Grothaus (2004) who found that the number of multicultural courses or training attended was significant for both the multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness scales. The findings of this study do align with the findings of Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999), who found no statistically significant relationship between multicultural awareness and graduating from a CACREP-accredited program.

The failure to identify specific training as a significant factor in multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness implies that there may be limited opportunities for this small sample of school counselors to receive regular multicultural competence training in local school divisions during professional development. There may also be limited training within professional organizations. The failure to identify CACREP-accredited curricula as a significant factor in multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness also implies that there may be counseling programs that meet CACREP standards but are not CACREP-accredited. School counselors may graduate from online programs or accelerated programs that accommodate working adults. This information can be useful to practitioners seeking multicultural professional development within their school divisions and professional organizations.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The major limitation to this study was the small sample size. The target sample size recommended for the study based on the population was 153 counselors, and this target was based upon a guideline that suggests most online surveys yield a 30% return rate (Schonlau, Fricker, & Elliot, 2002). The study had 41 school counselors participate in the study, providing an 8% return rate; the low return rate means that the power was low and the results may have been different if the response rate had been stronger.

In considering how the response rate might have been improved, the invitation to participate in a research study could have been worded in a different way to encourage school counselors to participate. The message could have been more encouraging, placing greater emphasis on the value of the study and the importance of their contribution. In addition, incentives might have further enhanced the response rate.

In addition to the generally low response rate, not all respondents answered all questions and some did not have experience with the variables under study. This further limited the ability to fully analyze the variables. For example although MANOVAs were used for seven of the

hypotheses, a Spearman rho correlation coefficient was used for Hypothesis 7 because only three school counselors had not participated in multicultural training. A large sample overall might have reduced such issues.

Another limitation to the study was the self-reporting nature of the surveys. Results indicated that Caucasian school counselors in Virginia perceived themselves to be more multiculturally aware than African-American school counselors. Caucasian school counselors may have overestimated their multicultural awareness to appear socially desirable. Constantine and Ladany (2000) mentioned that social desirability was a factor in multicultural counseling competence scales.

Another limitation to the study is the convenient sampling procedure. This study is limited to practicing school counselors who were also current members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) in the state of Virginia. The study could have included school counselors from throughout the United States, counselor educators, counselor supervisors, counselor educators, counselor directors, and counselor coordinators. Generalizability was also limited in the study. The study was limited to school counselors who volunteered to participate and complete both survey instruments. The results are limited to this specific group of school counselors. These results could not be generalized to school counselors outside the state of Virginia.

Implications

Implications for multicultural counseling. This study has implications for the practice and profession of multicultural counseling. While it is important to acknowledge the limitations imposed by the small response rate and weak power, the data do provide some initial insights and the qualitative comments shared by the participants lend additional insights into the perceptions of school counselors on this matter. One school counselor mentioned that the study reaffirmed their belief in the school counseling profession, similar to the commitment to the field finding in the Constantine, Melincoff, Barakett, Torino, & Warren (2004) study. Worldview, another factor in multicultural counseling, was also influenced in the study. Hays and McLeod (2010) defined worldview as, “individuals’ conceptualization of their relationship with the world” (p. 10). It plays a vital role in school counseling by helping school counselors understand how their students view the world in addition to how school counselors view the world. One school counselor mentioned that in order to provide cultural specific interventions to multicultural populations in school, the counselor sought culture-specific training to provide meaningful counseling services. This initiative on the part of the counselor suggests that this participant developed an appreciation for understanding the worldview of their client, and found value in learning more about the client’s culture. Such initiative is referenced in Pedersen (2000) as a desired outcome of multicultural competence training, and Ibrahim (1991) indicated that worldview is an important variable that makes knowledge and culture-specific interventions meaningful. In light of this evidence and supporting literature, it is recommended that counselor-educator programs consider the importance of multicultural counseling and the value that counselors feel in exploring and reflecting upon concepts like worldview and how such factors influence their practice.

The statistical significance of race and ethnicity means it is a salient concept for the school counseling profession. Race and ethnicity are one of the first multicultural factors that counselors notice with students, families, and colleagues. Additional aspects of race and

ethnicity include verbal and nonverbal cues and language. Race and ethnicity is a factor in whether an individual grew up in an individualistic or communal society. Stereotypes are also inherent in every racial and ethnic group. The implications for the nonsignificant data may be that multiculturalism is not fully integrated within counselor education programs, professional organizations, and school cultures. Training and continuing education for school counselors may need to change in light of the results by integrating multiculturalism in every school counseling course. This study and those that came before it indicate that school counselors may not establish a strong multicultural background during their degree programs (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999); the work environment demands such competence and so school counselors need professional development on multiculturalism within their school division as well as their professional organizations. Another way of supporting counselors who may not establish a strong base of multicultural competence during their degree programs could be to make multiculturalism a regular part of all professional literature rather than a periodic topic for a special edition. Counselors should be encouraged to directly challenge their views on race and ethnicity, and to consider how their views are shaped through their own experiences. With these considerations in place, they can be prepared to consider how race and ethnicity may be influencing their students. Once school counselors have a better understanding of multicultural counseling, school counselors can work with administrators to include multiculturalism in all aspects of school culture.

Implications for multicultural counseling competence. The three requirements for multicultural counseling competence are awareness, knowledge, and skills (Sue et al., 1992). Counselors completed the MCKAS and their total scores were used to assess their multicultural knowledge and awareness. Ponterotto et al. (2002) developed the MCKAS to assess two of the three requirements of multicultural counseling competence: multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness. After completing the study, one school counselor mentioned that the points from the MCKAS were not points considered in daily work. The counselor believed it was important to frequently and regularly assess multicultural competence, and this belief in the literature was supported in the literature by Diller (2007), who held the perspective that cultural competence, viewed as a developmental process, involves continuous knowledge acquisition, advanced skill development, and ongoing self-evaluation; this cannot occur without conscious commitment. Though this comment came from a single participant, it is well worth considering the role, purpose, and benefits of ongoing assessment in this area. The implications of this respondent's comments were multicultural counseling competence must become a regular part of the counseling profession.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research. One recommendation would include a larger, ethnically diverse sample as recommended by Holcomb-McCoy and Day-Vines (2004). An additional recommendation would be to include school counselors throughout the United States instead of limiting the study to current school counselors in Virginia who are members of ASCA.

Another recommendation would be to develop a survey instrument that includes more aspects of multiculturalism than race and ethnicity. Since multiculturalism is multidimensional, the assessment tool should include questions to assess how school counselors address socioeconomic status, gender, religion, sexual preference, and ability/disability. Questions

should be included to monitor social desirability and address how school counselors handle bias in their practice. One final recommendation would be to include a third assessment tool with the study to examine the relationship between demographic variables, multicultural competence, and other variables. Holcomb-McCoy (2005) recommended survey instruments that address racial identity attitudes or interracial comfort. Including qualitative questions in the survey could also add depth to multicultural competence (Grothaus, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999). Qualitative questions should be included to assess skills, the third component of multicultural competence. Multicultural counseling competence will remain an important topic of discussion for school counselors as school become multicultural and multilingual.

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