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Practices and Priorities of School-Based Counselors in Venezuela and Costa Rica

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Abstract

This article reports findings from surveys collected from practicing school-based counselors in Venezuela (N = 30) and Costa Rica (N = 107) using the *International Survey of School-Based Counseling Activities* (ISSCA). Analyses identified striking similarities between these two countries and major differences when compared to the other 10 countries within this special issue. The discussion is focused on explaining how school-based counseling policies and educational policies in Venezuela and Costa Rica influenced the development of counseling practices over time.

Keywords: school based counseling, Latin America, international educational policy, international comparative research.

Mention the term 'international education' in conversation and most people can likely conjure up images of students in desks being instructed by a teacher at the front of a classroom. Mental models and assumptions about how schools function around the world are rooted in both lived experience and sound investigation. International education has been a real and vital area of study since the 1950s (Easton, 2014). While there are vast differences in resources, cultures, and teaching strategies; the 'work' of education is not a mystery and most people have a good idea about what learning looks like and what is involved. Replace the term 'international education' with 'international school-based counseling' and the mental models and assumptions are likely to be much less vivid. Martin, Morshed, and Carey (2017) reviewed articles published in the *Comparative Education Review* (the top journal in international education) over several decades and found that counseling and psychology were far behind other specializations in education. This is unfortunate, because it seems that professional helping in schools is not uncommon. According to Harris (2013) nearly 90 countries are currently practicing some form of school-based counseling around the world. Furthermore, while there are descriptions of school-based counseling within specific countries in the literature (Martin, Lauterbach, & Carey, 2015), there have been very few attempts to collect data from practicing counselors from different countries for the purposes of international comparative study. Relatedly, exploratory survey research has not been conducted to determine priorities of practice, professional values, or insights into how counselors spend their time in schools.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature by investigating the gaps in international school-based counseling research mentioned above. It is important to learn about how school-based counselors from around the world perceive their work and spend their time in schools. More specifically, this study is focused on two Latin American (LA) countries: Venezuela and Costa Rica. Both countries have a rich and documented history of counseling and offer a unique perspective on international school-based counseling. Data were collected using the *International Survey of School Counselors' Activities* (ISSCA; Fan, Carey, He, Wells, & Niu, 2019). The ISSCA is the first survey specifically designed to study international school-based counseling. While this paper reports only on the Venezuelan and Costa Rican survey results, this project represents the first large-scale effort to compare international school-based counseling across multiple national contexts. Data were also collected from China, India, Kenya, South Korea, Malta, Nigeria, Turkey, and the United States. It is our hope that these efforts will lead to more opportunities for international collaboration, learning, and professional development in school-based counseling.

Background

Venezuela

Guidance and counseling practice in Venezuela has a long tradition. Since its early years, the professional practice of counseling has been characterized by educational, academic, vocational, and occupational issues. In Venezuela, the guidance and counseling field started under the influence of European pioneers and foreign technical missions. Early counseling and guidance services included Mental Hygiene and Pupil Hygiene at the Ministry of Health and at Educational Centers. At the Ministry of Education, psycho-pedagogic labs and Guidance Cabinets were

created. These departments provided student assistance programs. Some services were organized by distinguished Venezuelan counseling pioneers who were European emigrants. By the influence of early professionals, guidance and counseling in Venezuela were conceived as educational, vocational, and career-oriented services. The first counselor education training program was implemented by the Government (Calogne, 2004; Moreno, 2009; Vera, 2009). In 1965, the Guidance Division of the Ministry of Education was created (EDUPLAN, 1964). The guidance and counseling school-based services have continued until today under the direction of the Ministry of Education.

Counseling and guidance is recognized as a profession of public interest because of its importance for individuals' and the country's economic development (Ministry of Popular Power of Education, 2009; Vera, 2009). In Venezuelan Education Law, its Article 6, literal F, "guarantees *guidance and counseling"*, health, sport, recreation, culture, and wellness services to students involved in the educational process in co-responsibility with the relevant bodies" (Asamblea Nacional, 2009, p. 5). This article mandates that counseling services must be provided at all public and private schools and colleges. The articles from the Constitution and Education Law are based on these guiding principles: political and social freedom, equality, and justice. Education and work are considered fundamental to achieve the constitutional aspirations of wellbeing and a peaceful, and happy society. Therefore, counseling and guidance practitioners are also advocating for the development of a society in which individual responsibility and participatory and protagonist democracy is strongly encouraged.

The practice of guidance and counseling in Venezuela is determined by the training program from which a professional is graduated. For a free practice, practitioners need to be graduated from a guidance and counseling program at the undergraduate level with the degree of Bachelor of Education, Guidance and Counseling. To be employed as a school counselor professional, the Ministry requires the Guidance and Counseling Bachelor's Degree in Education. Other professionals, even those who hold Guidance and Counseling Master's degrees, would not be considered professionals and therefore cannot be hired as school counselors.

A major public policy project in guidance and counseling is the Venezuelan Guidance, and Counseling System began in 2007 (González, 2008, Vera, 2014). This official project was led by a professional committee appointed by the authorities of the Department of High Education. The guidance and counseling services framework was designed under a prosocial perspective. Therefore, the following definitions were adopted as the core of any guidance and counseling services in the country, stating that services should be capable of: (a) working for individuals' healthy development and maturation in both community and educational settings, (b) attending to the academic and developmental needs of the population, (c) offering guidance and counseling programs and services to the community, (d) supporting the articulation between the community and the school as a continuum. Therefore, these services progressively (a) empower individuals according to their potentiality and talents, (b) identify vulnerabilities and needs timely, (c) design services and action plans as needed, (d) involve schools and communities with an individual's developmental plans and needs, (e) document all services and outcomes.

Costa Rica

In Latin-American, the Costa Rica guidance and counseling field is highly developed. Costa Rica is the only LA country that has a professional practice of guidance and counseling law. By this law, the guidance and counseling profession was established as a distinct profession from other related professional fields. Guidance and counseling activities have been practiced in Costa Rica since 1950. These activities were best described through the Fundamental Law of Education (Costa Rica National Assemble, 1957). This law stated that the Costa Rican education system would ensure that every learner in the educational institutions will receive a service of educational guidance and counseling which facilitates the exploration of their skills and interests, helping students in the choice of their career plans and allowing positive emotional and social development.

From this legislation, guidance and counseling field is understood as a component of vocational services. In 1964, formal professional training was established at the University of Costa Rica, and guidance and counseling professional education was initiated at the National University in 1980. Also, a guidance and counseling degree is now provided by the private Catholic University of Costa Rica and the Universidad Latina. These colleges offer associate and bachelor´s degree in education with a major in guidance and counseling. In 2004, the University of Costa Rica began to offer a master's degree in guidance and counseling specialties. In 2010, as a public service, the guidance and counseling field was further acknowledged through the enactment of law 8863, The Law of the College of Professional Guidance and Counseling (Costa Rica National Assemble, 2010). Its aims include promoting the development of the discipline, ensuring the prestige of the profession, and strengthening the professional identity (Alvarez, 1995; Pereira, 1998).

Costa Rica's counseling and guidance law established the following aims: (a) to promote the study and development of the guidance and counseling discipline; (b) to promote the professional rights of guidance and counseling practitioners; (c) to promote continual professional updates and improvement in all areas; (d) to supervise the quality of guidance and counseling professional practice and its activities without prejudice to the civil or criminal liability that may occur; (e) to contribute to the progress of education and culture through

professional activities in cooperation with universities, ministries, and public or related institutions; (f) to ensure the prestige of the profession and to strengthen the profession's identity; (g) to contribute to counseling and guidance's professional training in a way that best advances the field and responds to social demands.

In Costa Rica, guidance and counseling are primarily conducted in colleges where guidance and counseling training programs exist. Also, counseling and guidance professionals produce research related to workplace services. Legal provisions included in the Constitution of Costa, its Educational Law, and in its Educational Developmental Plan, clearly, link to the guidance and counseling field and its social role.

Baldares (2014) explained that Costa Rican counselors are very involved in guidance and counseling program evaluation by participating in discussions about how to make services more effective and by offering consultation to policy makers. How guidance and counseling services are evaluated for quality assurance and improvement is not well-known. Also, how Costa Rican practitioners are consulted or involved in guidance and counseling policy decision making which affect their professional practice need to be explored as well. In Latin America, it is common that changes in official policies and regulations on guidance and counseling services and organizational structures often take place without consultation or participation of guidance and counseling professionals or their flag organizations (Vera, Jimenez, & Barreto, 2017).

Method

Participants

In Venezuela (VE), 46 participants completed some part of the survey and 30 participants completed all sections. In Costa Rica (CR), 155 participants completed some part of the survey and 107 participants completed all sections. Within both countries, all of the participants were practicing school-based counselors. The majority were female, worked at the high school level, and belonged to several national professional associations related to school-based counseling. Experience levels were high with over 60% having at least 11 years of counseling experience. One difference between the countries was that over half of the VE counselors had obtained a masters' degree in school-based counseling, while in CR the vast majority (over 80%) were licensed post bachelor's degree. See Table 1 for detailed demographic information about the school-based counselors.

Data Collection

Data were collected from VE and CR using distinct strategies for each country. In VE, survey invitations were distributed by word of mouth through a network of experienced counselors and counselor educators. It should be noted, that the second author is a former counselor educator from VE. Furthermore, during the time of data collection, VE was experiencing increasing political and economic instability. This instability resulted in difficulties collecting data through typical channels (e.g., government, professional organizations). In contrast, a contact from the Ministry of Education in CR assisted in delivering the survey to a national listserv of practicing school-based counselors. The survey was translated into Spanish by the second author and reviewed by the Ministry of Education in CR.

Instrument

The tool used to collect data about counselors' education and experiences was the International Survey of School Counselors' Activities (ISSCA; Fan et al., 2018). The ISSCA consists of 42 items (though the version used across all 10 countries consisted of 40 common items). The first section of the survey uses a Likert scale from 1 (very inappropriate) to 4 (very appropriate) to measure counselor's opinion of the appropriateness of each activity to the role of school-based counseling. The second section consists of dichotomous (yes, no) items that relate to whether or not counselors actually do the activities mentioned in their corresponding items. Some sample items include: The school counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their social development; The school counselor engages in effective crisis counseling with students who need immediate attention due to traumatizing events; The school counselor provides consultation to the school administration on how an effective school counseling program should be designed and implemented. With each item followed by: Do you do this activity in your personal practice (yes or no)? The authors reported rigorous steps to determine if the instrument was appropriate for factor analysis. Completed factor analysis ultimately determined that mean Bartlett Factor (BART) scores could be compared across countries to represent the true expressions of the factors within different international contexts (see Carey, Fan, He, & Jin, 2020, for more details on the factor analysis process).

Results

Results from the ISSCA in both VE and CR returned similar findings. The majority of the subscale means were very analogous (see figure 1). The mean score for VE was 2.84 and CR was 2.82 out of 4 with mean standard deviations of .55 (VE) and .45 (CR). The subscale with the largest mean score difference was 'Administrator Role' with a 2.1 in VE and 1.9 in CR. To further explore the relationships between VE and CR results, a series of ANOVA analyses were run on the Likert scored items and chi-squared analyses on the dichotomous items. Seven Likert items were found to be statistically significantly ($p < .05$). For example, the item with the greatest significance was: 'The School Counselor

plans and delivers effective parent education programs for parents/guardians to help them develop more effective parenting skills and more productive relationships with their children' ($F1 = 17.93$, $p < .0001$; see table 3 for all significant Likert items). These items indicate that the biggest differences between the two countries were related to parent consultation, mental health referral, and administrative role.

Dichotomous findings were again very similar in terms of subscale responses (see Table 4 for details). Chi-squared analyses revealed only six items to be statistically significant in terms of comparisons between the two countries. The same item related to parent education programs that yielded the greatest significance in the Likert items also resulted in the most significance in the dichotomous ratings $X^2 = 8.181$ ($df = 1$, $N = 137$, $p < .004$). Table 4 includes all significant dichotomous items.

Next, practical effect sizes for the above statistically significant items were calculated using Eta squared for the ANOVA findings and Cramer's V for the Chi Squared findings. Despite the differences being statistically significant, these tests showed only small or moderate effect sizes (see tables 3 and 4 for details) regarding the practical importance of these differences.

Discussion and Limitations

In the lead article of this special issue, Carey et al. (2020) present graphs that compare activities and priorities of practicing school-based counselors across 10 different countries. Among the five different factors, VE and CR reported some of the lowest scores for 'prevention programs' and some of the highest scores for 'advocacy and system improvement.' These differences in practice is the purpose of this research. It is fascinating to know that counseling in schools can look very different from country to country and that there may be both similarities and differences that could yield new knowledge in terms of both policy and practice.

The most striking finding within these comparisons is how similar the counselors from both VE and CR responded to both Likert items (the appropriateness of the activity) and the dichotomous items (the presence of the activity in practice). All mean scores were only separated by an average of one tenth of a point. High averaged numbers in the factors of 'Counseling Services; Advocacy and System Support; and Educational and Career Planning' provide a window into the priorities of counselors within VE and CR. Based on the dichotomous items, educational and career planning seem to be driving both counseling services and advocacy activities. It is interesting that both counselor groups, separated by national borders and almost two thousand miles, view the practice of counseling in schools nearly identically. There are several logical explanations for these results. Both countries, as evidenced within their separate reviews and highlighted by Baldares (2014) and Vera (2014), share similarities in how counseling developed in their respective contexts. Both VE and CR value public policy and have worked closely with educational policy makers to ensure counseling is seen as a fundamental component of public education. Similarly, both countries contain opportunities for university training and professional development. We speculate that these two factors are largely responsible for these similarities.

That said, there were several noticeable differences in responses. In VE, counselors seemed to embrace working with parents more than their CR counterparts. In CR, counselors seemed to value advocating for students with special needs (mentally or physically) more than VE counselors. In VE, counselors seemed to be more comfortable fulfilling administrator roles than counselors in CR. Finally, CR counselors seemed more likely to track programmatic data than VE counselors. These differences help to paint a more nuanced version of practice than just the collective similarities and reinforces the notion that school-based counseling remains context specific.

Several limitations of this study were identified. The first being that the number of participants from both countries was very small. While we worked with the CR government to deliver the survey, we had limited access to projected numbers of school counselors in CR and a fairly high number of surveys that were incomplete. This could be due to the translation of the survey or some other blind spot that we were unable to identify. Secondly, the political unrest in VE played a major role in collecting data for this survey. Despite the much larger population and potential for high numbers of participants, we were only able to secure a small proportion of responses from practicing school counselors. While this is understandable, we are not confident the results adequately represent the perspectives of either practitioner groups.

Conclusion

The findings of this study add important data to the growing body of literature dedicated to better understanding how counseling is practiced within schools around the world. Two countries with similar backgrounds in Latin America were surveyed. Results indicated that practicing counselors from VE and CR maintain very similar orientations to the work. There was great agreement within both countries that counseling is a fundamental component of the educational system. Minor differences among respondents indicated that parental services, mental health and special need referrals, and counselors' administrative role helped to differentiate the priorities and practices within the two countries. A logical next step for future research would be to collect data from other countries with different backgrounds to better understand how unique or uniform VE and CR practices are from other countries in Latin America.

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Table .1

Demographics

Characteristics	Percentage
Venezuela (*N* = 30)	
Gender	
Male	10.8%
Female	89.2%
Experience (years)	
0-5	21.7%
6-10	15.2%
11-20	32.6%
21-30	13.4%
30+	17.4%
Education	
Bachelors/Licensed	34%
Masters	55.3%
PhD	10.6%
Work Setting	
Academic High Schools	68.2%
Technical Schools	9.1%
Elementary Schools	18.2%
Professional Associations	
Association Membership	100%
Colegio Professional de Orientacion	45.5%
Costa Rica (*N* = 107)	
Gender	
Male	17.4%
Female	82.6%
Experience (years)	
0-5	13.5%
6-10	24.5%
11-20	40.6%
21-30	16.2%
30+	5.2%
Education	
Bachelors/Licensed	86.2%
Masters	12.3%
PhD	1.3%
Work Setting	
Academic High Schools	51%
Technical Schools (day & evening)	30.9%
Elementary Schools	11.7%
Professional Associations	
National Association Membership	92.94%

Table 2.

Participants

		Counseling Services		Advocacy and Systemic Improvement		Prevention Programs		Administrator Role		Educational and Career Planning	
Country	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
Costa Rica	107	3.1	0.47	3.2	0.47	2.7	0.56	1.9	0.5	3.2	0.69
Venezuela	30	3.1	0.45	3.1	0.48	2.8	0.59	2.1	0.5	3.1	0.74

Note. 1 = Very Inappropriate; 2 = Inappropriate; 3 = Appropriate; 4 =Very Appropriate

Table 3.

Significant Likert items

Items	VE		CR		ANOVA			
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***F***	***df***	***p***	***Eta²***
20. The School Counselor plans and delivers effective parent education programs for parents/guardians to help them develop more effective parenting skills and more productive relationships with their children.	3.00	.935	2.22	.930	17.973	1	.0001**	.114*
23. The School Counselor coordinates with parents to support students', mental health, academic development, career development and personal/social development, in ways that respect students' confidentially and parents' rights to make decisions about their children's education.	2.56	1.02	2.97	.857	5.462	1	.021*	.056*
26. The School Counselor assumes the administrative role of the principal in their absence.	1.65	.884	1.31	.565	6.972	1	.009**	.063*
31. The School Counselor advocates for vulnerable children in order to safeguard their rights and protect them from abuse, bullying and/or exploitation.	3.18	.936	3.47	.701	4.074	1	.045*	.054*
36. The School Counselor makes appropriate referrals to outside mental health providers and coordinate with the outside providers to maximize students' experience of success and wellbeing in school.	2.82	.846	3.38	.785	12.565	1	.001**	.114*
38. The School Counselor documents their work and the impact it has on students, families and the school community.	2.76	.987	3.17	.893	5.195	1	.024*	.036*

Note. * = statistically significant, ** = greatly statistically significant, Effect sizes as described by Eta² scores: * = small effect size, ** = medium effect size, *** = large effect size.

Table 4.

Significant dichotomous items

	VE		CR		Chi-Square			
Items	**%Yes**	**%No**	**%Yes**	**%No**	X^2	***df***	***p***	**Cramer's V**
14. The School Counselor helps students resolve their interpersonal conflicts with peers.	93.9%	6.1%	100%	0%	7.248[a]	1	.007**	.219*
15. The School Counselor determines the appropriate disciplinary sanctions for students who have misbehaved.	78.8%	21.2%	60.2%	39.8%	3.891[a]	1	.049*	.161
20. The School Counselor plans and delivers effective parent education programs for parents/guardians to help them develop more effective parenting skills and more productive relationships with their children.	91.2%	8.8%	66.1%	33.9%	8.181[a]	1	.004**	.232*
26. The School Counselor assumes the administrative role of the principal in their absence.	47.1%	52.9%	28.7%	71.3%	4.009[a]	1	.045*	.164
29. The School Counselor advocates for children with special needs and ensure they receive the accommodations that are necessary for them to be successful in school.	88.2%	11.8%	96.6%	3.4%	3.713[a]	1	.054*	.156
39. The School Counselor monitors the efficacy of their work and uses this information to improve practice.	85.3%	14.7%	96.6%	3.4%	5.988[a]	1	.014*	.199

Note. * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; Effect size as described by the Cramer's V: * = weak, ** = moderate, *** = strong.

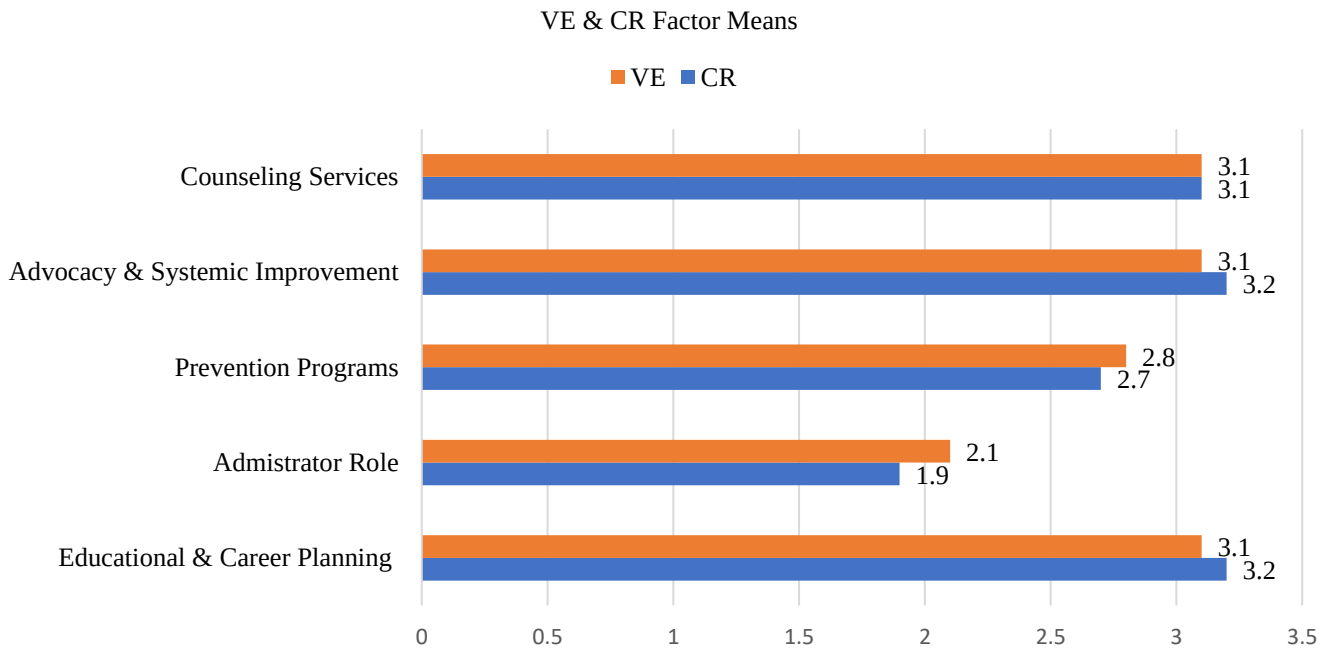

Figure 2. Comparison of factor means