DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 488   CG 025 888

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TITLE   Elementary School Student Mental Health Needs
                Assessment: Implications for School Counseling
                Research and Practice.
PUB DATE   [94]
NOTE   20p.
PUB TYPE   Information Analyses (070) -- Reports -
                Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Counseling Theories; Elementary Education; Elementary
                School Students; Literature Reviews; *Mental Health;
                *Needs Assessment; *School Counseling; Student
                Characteristics; *Student Needs; Theory Practice
                Relationship

ABSTRACT
        This paper reports on the current state of elementary
school student mental health needs assessment and makes
recommendations for future school counseling research and practice.
The review of the theoretical literature on needs assessment examines
several studies by numerous researchers. With one exception, all
instruments reviewed were generated solely from an adult perspective.
The data produced tended to be more indicative of adults'
conceptualization of children's needs. Many of the quantitative
studies reviewed also exhibited this same limitation. These studies
failed to employ rigorous sampling methodologies, which reduced the
scope and definition of children's needs to the researchers' own
concepts of children's needs. Other intervening variables concerning
needs assessment are also discussed. In order to aid school
counselors in better serving their students, future studies should
focus on children's attitudes, as opposed to adults perceptions of
such, and take into account previously neglected factors such as
differences in age or grade level of the children, gender, and
cultural diversity. Contains 51 references. (BF)

Elementary School Student Mental Health

Needs Assessment: Implications for School

Counseling Research and Practice

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Introduction

Throughout most of history, children were seen as miniature adults (Aries, 1962). Consequently, adults felt that children's needs, fears, and hopes only differed quantitatively from their own. In this century, Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1926) demonstrated that children view the world in ways that qualitatively differ as well. Piaget went on to show how this qualitatively different view uniquely shapes the nature of children's thoughts and emotions. Thus, to understand how elementary school students perceive their mental health needs, adults must do more than downsize their own perceptions. This paper will report on the current state of elementary school student mental health needs assessment and make recommendations for future school counseling research and practice.

Present Practice

The professional literature in school counseling is unequivocal about the necessity for needs assessment research. Needs assessment is seen as the cornerstone for effective program development, management, and evaluation (Borders & Drury, 1992; Gysbers & Henderson, 1994; Kaufman & English, 1979; Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, & Nelson, 1985; VanZandt & Hayslip, 1994; Wysong, 1983). Furthermore, Campbell and Robinson (1990) specified needs assessment research ability as an essential component of any master's level school counseling curriculum. In a recent survey, national school counseling leaders named needs assessment ability as the most important research skill for the practicing school counselor (Deck, Cecil, & Cobia, 1990).

The professional literature was also unequivocal about the school counseling field's

responsibility to conduct needs assessments with all clients, no matter what their age. Firth and Clark (1982) stated that they found children a reliable source of information in needs assessment research. Nelson-Le Gall and Gumerman (1984) found that the first through fifth graders in their study could articulate the reasons they selected particular helpers. Reid, Landesman, Treder, and Jaccard (1989) found a similar level of comprehension in their study of the helper choices of children aged six through twelve. Kelly (Kelly, 1984; Kelly and Ferguson, 1984) reported that researchers can assess even primary school aged children with the proper methods.

Despite the central importance of needs assessment, this author found only five published quantitative research studies concerning children's perceptions of their mental health needs. A search of the ERIC data bank produced only five additional studies. The last published comprehensive quantitative study involving a child's perspective appeared in 1984. No unpublished comprehensive study has appeared in the ERIC data base since 1986. In addition, this author found two specific studies of sixth graders; one from 1977 and one from 1986. A review of all quantitative studies will take place in the next section.

Review of the Literature

<u>What Is A Need?</u>

The theoretical literature in needs assessment has put forth a variety of definitions of need. An in-depth look at the nature of human need is beyond the scope of this work. Overall, Maslow's (1954) seminal work on human need has guided the needs assessment field. In addition to Maslow, the discussions of four prominent needs assessment researchers have

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influenced this area of study. These discussions include those of Celotta (Celotta & Telasi-Golobcow, 1982), Kaufman (Kaufman and English, 1979), Monette (1977), and Stufflebeam (Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, & Nelson, 1985). All of the above mentioned researchers had two ideas in common concerning the definition of need. First, all their definitions held that human needs fall on a continuum that runs from purely biological needs to purely social ones. Second, these definitions all posited the idea that all needs beyond the purely biological are the result of political debate and consensus.

Royse and Drude (1982) stated that the term need is without ontological or biological boundaries. Thus, the two stated that in each study, this relative term requires an operational definition. Woodhead (1987) claimed that the various definitions of need present in the professional literature project adult criteria onto children and thus disguise many complex, implicit assumptions. Woodhead stated,

> ...it is possible to view the concept of need as being used as a form of shorthand
> to convey the authors' conclusions about what are the requirements of
> childhood. There are certainly virtues in condensed prose! But arguably such
> expressions may also be serving as a very credible veil for uncertainty and even
> disagreement about what considerations might underpin recommendations
> about what is in the best interest of children. (p. 131)

Thus, without input from children, adults will construct needs assessment instruments which contain nothing more than veiled adult needs.

With one exception, all instruments I reviewed were generated solely from an adult'

perspective. Hence, they produced nothing more than data on children's perceptions of adults'

conceptualization of their needs. The one exception was the instrument constructed by Celotta

and her research group. Celotta (Celotta & Jacobs, 1991) defined need as,

> ...an actual or perceived lack or excess of a factor which contributes to current
>
> or future mental health problems. Mental health problems can be caused by
>
> both lacks as well as excesses. Too little stimulation will cause problems; too
>
> much stress will also cause problems. Perceptions can also cause mental health
>
> problems. For example, children who feel they do not have the "right" clothes,
>
> even when they are satisfactorily dressed, may still have a need (a need to
>
> conform) that must be dealt with. The phrase "future problems" is necessary to
>
> expand the definition to include prevention issues. (p. 2)

Celotta held adults cannot arrive at a full understanding of children's needs and perceptions

solely through their own logic. Thus, for Celotta, one can only start to understand children's

perceptions if one enters the phenomenology of children.

Needs Assessment Taxonomy

There is not just one type of needs assessment. In his major theoretical work on needs

assessment, Kaufman outlined a taxonomy of needs assessment (Kaufman & English, 1979).

This outline included the following six types,

> 1. Alpha-type: assumes few or no "givens" relative to goals, objectives, and
>
> requirements (synonymous with "external" needs assessment).
>
> 2. Beta-type: assumes the goals and objectives of the implementing agency (or

the agency under study) are the boundaries of study and change.

3. Gamma-type: starts planning on the basis of a gap analysis relating to
solutions and methods-means.

4. Delta-type: starts with a gap analysis relative to the implementation of the
selected methods-means.

5. Epsilon-type: examines gaps in results which have derived from the internal
planning which started with Beta-type through Delta-type needs assessments.

6. Zeta-type: determines gaps at any point in the system approach process
model. (p. 344)

Except for Celotta's work, all the studies in this area engaged in a Delta-type needs assessment.
Thus, in general, the literature in this area is the result of adults filtering children's needs
through adult perspectives and existent structures.

Celotta engaged in an Alpha-type needs assessment. She accepted no structure as
given or perspective as preordained. Celotta (Celotta & Jacobs, 1991) stated,

We developed a unique approach to needs assessment that we hoped would

overcome the previous limitations and yet meet the goal of accurately assessing

mental health needs. Our approach allows us to survey all youngsters, parents,

and teachers in a system. And finally, it makes no assumptions about the kinds,

patterns, or extent of existing needs or about appropriate program objectives,

this allows us to uncover the true nature of needs in a population. (p. 6)

By shedding a solely adultrocentric perspective, Celotta hoped to gain even greater reliability,

validity, and utility from her instrument.

Limits of Needs Assessment

While the importance of needs assessment in school counseling is without question, it is

not a research approach without its dangers. Monette (1979) made the following warning

about needs assessment,

> Freire's contention is that oppression comes from within the individual as well
>
> as from without; and hence that felt needs must be problematized or questioned
>
> as to their causes if people are to be freed from blind adherence to their own
>
> world views as well as to the world views of others which have been uncritically
>
> internalized. (p. 89)

If one commits to a certain plan of action based slavishly on the results of a needs assessment,

one may worsen a client's difficulties. It is possible that the needs a client articulates are the

result of malignant social forces such as racism or sexism. Social forces that have been

internalized by the client. Thus, the most accurate process of needs assessment instrument

construction will involve a variety of sources including teachers, parents, community leaders,

scholars, and children.

Quantitative Research Studies

Celotta, et al.

Celotta has been a leading empirical researcher in this area. She began her study of

children's perception of their mental health needs while on the counseling faculty at the

University of Maryland. It was at Maryland that she developed her needs assessment

instrument. This instrument came to be known as the Jacobs-Celotta Children's Need Survey (JCCNS) (CJK Associates, 1989). There are three separate forms of this instrument, one each for children, parents, and teachers. Celotta used this instrument to conduct a needs assessment with the students, teacher, and parents of Cherokee Lane Elementary School. Cherokee Lane is a public school located in Prince George's County, Maryland. The top ten concerns endorsed by student were,

1. Doing well on tests.

2. Losing things.

3. What your teacher thinks of your work.

4. Changing into the next grade.

5. What others think of you.

6. How well you are doing in school.

7. People stealing your things.

8. How to say the things you want to say to others.

9. People teasing you.

10. Worry about dying. (Celotta & Sobol, 1983, p. 177)

Celotta commented that her research group felt their most surprising finding was the children's lack of confidence in their academic performance (Celotta & Sobol, 1983). Also surprising to the research group was the children's concern about their interpersonal relations. Overall, Celotta concluded that the children basically liked themselves, but did not feel they were handling their interpersonal concerns well. In another published article, Celotta also remarked

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that her research findings indicated that the children felt that they were not living up to the expectations of the significant adults in their life (Celotta & Jacobs, 1982).

In the Cherokee Lane study, neither the parents nor the teachers named any of the children's top ten concerns as one of their top ten concerns. Comparing the results from the three groups, Celotta and Sobol (1983) concluded,

> ...the three groups had very different ideas about the needs of children. It seems as if the teachers were by and large primarily concerned about those children's needs which directly affected their own functioning. Teachers were concerned about those behaviors that make it difficult to teach, while parents seemed most concerned with those behaviors that make it difficult to parent. (p. 177)

The parents and teachers at Cherokee Lane used the results from the study to set counseling and affective education aims for the 1977-1978 school year. Celotta and Sobol (1983) reported that the adults entirely ignored the children's perspective. Instead the two adult groups agreed to goals that reflected the needs they had generated.

Concerning a child's perspective on his or her needs, Rousseau wrote, "Give him not what he wants, but what he needs (Woodhead, 1987)." Like Rousseau, this author agrees that children do not always know what is best for them. However, this author found the complete rejection of the children's perspective disturbing. What concerns impinge more on the academic performance of children than the specific concerns that children hold? Ironically, by ignoring the children's perspective, the teachers and parents at Cherokee Lane lessened their

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chance to resolve those issues that concerned them most about children. At least Celotta's research balanced various perspectives in instrument construction. No other quantitative study did so.

Other Quantitative Studies

Other quantitative studies on elementary school students' perception of their mental health needs appeared through a variety of sources. This author located these studies in the professional literature (Kuhl & Weslander, 1984; Snow, Gilchrist, Schilling, Schinke, & Kelso, 1986; Stiltner, 1978; Wagner, 1979), and through the ERIC document reproduction service (Brittle, 1986; Cage, Hancock, & Prewitt, 1977; Foundation for Child Development, 1977; Nebraska Department of Education, 1977; Oklahoma State University, 1976a, Oklahoma State University, 1976b; Roberts & Weslander, 1984; Smith & Wilson, 1976).

All of the above studies suffered from one or both of two serious flaws. First, on the theoretical level, only one study sought input from students in the process of instrument construction (Snow, Gilchrist, Schilling, Schinke, & Kelso, 1986.) However, this study only used input from students. Therefore, it fell into the theoretical problems Monette (1979) outlined. Also, this study made no attempt to construct an adequate sampling frame. Overall, the various researchers cited above reduced the scope and definition of children's needs to their own concepts of children's needs.

Second, on the methodological level, only two studies employed rigorous sampling methodologies (Cage, Hancock, & Prewitt, 1974; Foundation for Child Development, 1977). However, both of these dated studies contained the above mentioned theoretical flaws.

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Consequently, the results from these studies are suspect and cannot be generalized.

Miscellaneous Reports

While few researchers have investigated elementary school students' perception of their mental health needs, many in the counseling field have called for this research (Collison, 1982; Grobe, Myatt, & Wheeler, 1978; Gysbers & Moore, 1981; Miles, 1986; Rimmer & Burt, 1980; Wysong, 1983). Still others have gone one step farther and developed instruments for others to use (Kelly, 1984; Kelly & Ferguson, 1984; Moore & Miller, 1977a; Moore & Miller, 1977b; Phipps, 1974; Worzbyt, 1978). All of these instruments suffered from the same theoretical flaws discussed above. The children's point of reference was not considered.

Intervening Variables

Developmental Issues

In the elementary school counseling profession, developmental issues are a primary pragmatic and research concern (Bailey, Deery, Gehrke, Perry, & Whitledge, 1989). However, few studies examined these issues. For instance, only two studies broke their data down by grade level. The Caroline County Public Schools (VA) study (Brittle, 1986) broke the data down into scores for each of the three grades studied (fourth, fifth, & sixth). Brittle (1986) found no major difference in the items endorsed between fourth and fifth graders or among the fifth and sixth graders. However, there were major differences between fourth and sixth graders. The Des Moines Public Schools study (Kuhl & Weslander, 1984; Roberts & Weslander, 1984) compared third and fifth graders. Overall, the scores between these two grade levels were not dramatically different. The limited nature of the above mentioned studies

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does not allow one to draw any conclusion concerning developmental differences. Also, the quality of the studies would prohibit any final conclusions.

While the Caroline County and Des Moines studies did not lead to any definite conclusions about developmental differences, there is published research that does suggest such differences exist. The results of sound quantitative research in a closely related area suggested the existence of developmental variables. This area is the study of elementary school students' perception of helpers. Studies conducted on this topic have all found differences between the grades levels. Specifically, these studies found that as elementary school students grow older they focus more on the specific attributes of helpers (Nelson-Le Gall & Gumerman, 1984). Also, the studies found that older elementary students rely increasingly on peers as helpers (Bachman, 1975; Reid, Landesman, Treder, & Jaccard, 1989).

Gender

Both the Louisiana State University study (Smith and Wilson, 1976) and Des Moines study (Kuhl & Weslander, 1984; Roberts & Weslander, 1984) separated data by gender. Neither study reported significant gender differences in perceived needs.

Cultural Diversity

There has been no quantitative study of cultural differences in elementary school aged children's perception of their mental health needs. Keys, Jacobs, and Celotta (1990) suggested a quantitative needs assessment model for students from a rural subculture. Researchers at Oklahoma State University (Oklahoma State University, 1976a; Oklahoma State University, 1976b) questioned Native American high school students about their educational goals. The

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results from this study were similar to the results from a general study of high school students' perceptions (Hutchinson & Reagan, 1989).

Parker and McDavis (1989) conducted extensive interviews with counselors, teachers, administrators, and students from predominately African American, inner-city elementary schools. The two found the top five needs articulated concerned student improvement in the following areas.

1. Communication skills.

2. Self-confidence.

3. Job-knowledge & career information.

4. Study skills.

5. Interpersonal skills. (p. 245)

The above study did not provide specific interview data for the students. Thus, cohort and developmental issues remain unclear with this population.

Esquivel and Keitel (1990) named needs assessment as a key ingredient in school counseling work with immigrant populations. However, the two neither conducted nor reported any quantitative research on needs assessment with this population.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature on elementary school students' perception of their mental health needs. The research conducted up to the present contains many theoretical and methodological flaws. Moreover, the lack of common instruments made comparing these results difficult. This dearth of empirically-based

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knowledge calls into question current school counseling practices in the area of mental health.

For without such knowledge, it remains unclear whose needs are being served.

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