

SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S PERCEPTION OF THEIR MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCY

By

MARY G. MAYORGA *
KATRINA COOK ***

KAREN FURGERSON **
ELIZABETH ANN WARDLE ****

*-*** Texas A&M University, San Antonio.

-** Texas A&M University, Kingsville.

ABSTRACT

A school counselor's work environment is diverse by virtue of the student population that attends the school setting, yet it is possible that school counselors may not be prepared to deal with a diverse population. As part of counselor training a course in multicultural counseling is offered so that counseling students become familiar with the competencies and knowledge that help develop multicultural competency. Counselors are ethically mandated to remain multiculturally competent as they progress in their chosen profession. The perception of being multiculturally competent is different than being multiculturally competent. This article examines the importance of school counselors maintaining their multicultural competency and will examine school counselor's perception of their own skills, attitudes, and knowledge about multicultural competency.

Keyword: School Counselor's, Multicultural Competency.

INTRODUCTION

With the level of multicultural diversity that is facing counselors in today's society it has become imperative that counselors maintain their own level of multicultural competency throughout their professional lives (Pedersen, 2002). Counselors who work with different populations must be able to understand the cultural values of their clients and how these values influence what happens in the counseling process (Robles-Pina, 2001). A counselor's multicultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills play an important part in the counseling session so that the counseling process is beneficial to the client (Sanchez, 1995).

Rapidly changing population demographics and the continuation of growth among multiculturally diverse populations challenge schools and school counseling professionals to provide the best support service to their increasingly diverse student population (ASCA, 2006-2010, Education Trust, 2009). Demographic information for enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools was over 46.7 million in 1998 and it is predicted that by the year 2016, the enrollment in public schools across America will be at or over 53.3 million (Texas

Council for Developmental Disabilities, 2008). According to the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities (2008) there will be an increasingly diverse student population within the predicted 53.3 million student enrollment. A look at enrollment in the southern part of the United States demonstrates a continued growth in the area of minority students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009-2010) the states of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Louisiana have shown an increase in the number of minority students. Table 1 describes the present version of the IES reports for the states of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Louisiana.

These numbers only tell the story of the student diversity in schools throughout the southern part of the United States but it behooves school counselors to maintain their multicultural competency, whether they work in the north, south, east or western part of the United States.

In response to the changing demographics in schools the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) expects school counselors to "ensure students of culturally diverse backgrounds have access to appropriate services and

opportunities which promote the maximum development of the individual" (American School Counselor Association, 2004, p.3.). The American School Counselor Association's (1999) position on multiculturalism also emphasizes the importance of all school counselors to be well versed in knowledge and content in the area of multicultural competency yet school counselors may not be as well prepared as necessary to work with a diverse student population.

Additionally, LeBeauf, Smaby, and Maddux, (2009) and Pederson (2002), among others have identified multiculturalism as the fourth force in the helping profession and knowledge and skill in this area is critical for understanding the behavior of multiculturally diverse clients.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) requires counselor training programs to provide training in multicultural counseling competencies. While not all training programs pursue accreditation through CACREP, its standards identify minimal entry-level expectations of counselors (Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, & Duffey, 2011). CACREP specifies that school counseling students experience curricular activities that will help them explore the implications of sociocultural, demographic, and lifestyle diversity that is relevant to the experience they will have in school counseling (CACREP, 2009; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). However, even though counselor training programs encourage students to embrace and celebrate diversity, the average student may not be equipped with the knowledge necessary to move him or her in that direction (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991).

	Texas New	Mexico	Oklahoma	Louisiana
Total number				
of schools	9,232	866	1,812	1,678
Students	4.8 mil	334,419	654,802	690,915
Male	2.4 mil	171,240	337,500	353,721
Female	2.3 mil	163,179	317,302	337,194
Amer Ind/Ak	18,991	34,907	126,078	5,716
Asian/Pacific	4,214	180,028	14,432	10,269
Black	680,159	7,026	71,714	317,759
Hispanic	2.3 mil	200,223	73,107	22,112
White	1.6 mil	85,425	369,471	335,059

Table 1. Demographic Information for the states of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Louisiana

Counseling programs may offer one or two courses in multicultural counseling, but counselor educators recognize that while these courses in multicultural counseling might be enough to help student counselors become familiar with the competencies of multicultural counseling, they may not be adequate in keeping the counselors well versed in the area of multicultural counseling (Dinsmore & England, 1996). A study by Holcomb-McKay (2001) found that the multicultural competencies among elementary school counselors did not increase as a result of academic training.

In 1991, The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) approved a document prepared by the Professional Standards committee. These standards specify that proficiency and competency in working with a multiculturally diverse population means that a counselor needs to be aware of his or her own multicultural values, beliefs, and biases and how these may impact working with diverse clients including school age students (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2001). Therefore, school counselors working with a diverse student population must understand how the student's multicultural values and beliefs impact the life of a student on a daily basis and impacts how the student may respond to the counseling relationship (Portman, 2009).

Because the demographics in schools represent the changing demographics across the United States, school counselors must be able to competently respond to a large, diverse population.

Therefore, it is imperative that school counselors continue their own personal growth in the area of multicultural diversity (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). School counselors' continuation of knowledge in multicultural competencies may be accomplished through the participation of activities and workshops that will enhance their skills, knowledge, and ability to work with multiculturally diverse populations (Cowles, 2005). Multicultural counseling competency includes knowledge in the areas of religion and spirituality, economic class background, sexual identity, and ethnic and racial identity (LeBeauf, Smaby, & Maddux, 2009). It is essential that school administrators (a) encourage their school counselors to continue this path,

and (b) provide the opportunity for continuous training in the area of multicultural sensitivity that will emphasize the three major components of multicultural competency identified by AMCD: awareness, knowledge, and skills (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1991).

On any given day school counselors may assist students in negotiating relationships, making career decisions, and resolving mental health issues with the ultimate goal of helping students be successful in school (Robles-Pina, 2002). In order for school counselors to appropriately help ethnically diverse students achieve academic success, the school counselor needs to develop multicultural counseling competencies (King, Sims, & Osher, 2011). Therefore, assessing school counselors' perception of their own multicultural competency is imperative because school counselors seem to agree that multicultural competency is an important part of their responsibilities as a counseling professional (Constantine, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). However, acknowledging the importance of multicultural counseling competence does not ensure that school counselors believe they are multiculturally competent.

Study

A study was conducted with school counselors from a school district located in the southern part of the United States. The participants of the study were school counselors from one school district and the purpose of the study was to examine school counselor's own perception of their multicultural competency. The total number of participants in the study was 134. The total number of surveys completed through the use of Survey Monkey was 131. The Multicultural Counseling and Training Survey-Revised was used to survey the school counselors (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999). This survey is used for school counselors to evaluate their multicultural competence using a 4 point scale and competency statements based on AMCD's Multicultural Counseling Competencies. The instrument has 32 statements (see Table 3) and the range of the scale is 1 through 4 with 1 indicating that the participant does not perceive himself or herself to be competent (unable to perform at this time) the competency statement, and 2 indicating that the

participant perceives himself or herself somewhat competent (more training needed), and 3 indicating that the participant perceives himself or herself competent (able to perform competently) and 4 indicating that the participant perceives himself or herself extremely competent (able to perform at a high level). Also collected from each participant was demographic information on age, gender, years as a school counselor and area of school counseling (elementary, secondary, high school or other). Participants were also asked when was the last time they had attended a multicultural workshop and were they familiar with the AMCD's multicultural competencies.

The demographic data showed that 52.3% of the total participants were between the age of 32 and 45. Of the remaining, 37.1% were over 45 and only 4.6% were between the ages of 21 and 31. The majority of the participants (86.2%) were female. Experience as a school counselor for the participants was divided among the choices with 25.4% reporting they had between 1 and 5 years of experience, 28.5% with between 6 and 10 years, 26.2% with 11-15 years and the remaining 20% with more than 15 years of experience. The majority of these counselors were from elementary campuses (53.8%). The remaining participants were divided among middle school (22%) and high school (22.7%) and other (1.5 %). The participants were surveyed about their multicultural training, their competence in their own cultural development, and their competence with other multicultural skills.

Results

The results of the survey showed that 42% of the school counselors had their last multicultural training over 2 years ago, yet a vast majority of the participants described themselves as either competent or extremely competent in verbally (91%) or nonverbally (92%) communicating acceptance of their culturally different students. Less than 10% of the respondents did not feel competent in discussing their family's perspective regarding acceptable and non-acceptable codes of conduct. However, 68% disclosed that they did not feel competent (indicating needing more training) to discuss models of

White Racial Identity Development, but most did feel competent to define racism (84%), prejudice (87.1), discrimination (87.7), and stereotype (90.6%). The results of the study are listed in Table 2.

Discussion

The results from this study indicate that although school counselors might perceive themselves to be multiculturally competent 43.2% of school counselors in this study indicated they were not familiar with the AMCD Multicultural Counseling Competencies (1992). A possible explanation for this lack of awareness could be that some of the participants graduated from a counseling program prior to the introduction of the AMCD Multicultural Counseling Competencies in 1992 and therefore did not receive any in-depth multicultural training in their counseling programs (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

The study also indicated that there are areas in multicultural counseling where school counselors recognized their need for more training. School counselors indicated in more than 50% of the questions that they perceived themselves to be somewhat competent (more training needed) in the following areas:

- Models of White racial identity development,
- Articulating possible differences between the nonverbal behavior of the five major ethnic groups,
- Articulating possible differences between the verbal behavior of the five major ethnic groups,
- Counseling implications for at least two models of racial/ethnic identity development,
- Ability to discuss within-group differences among ethnic groups,
- Culture's effect on a student's vocational choices,
- Culture's effect on the help seeking behavior of students,
- Culture's effects on the manifestation of psychological disorders,
- Ability to describe an appropriate counseling approach for a specific group of people,
- Ability to explain how current conditions influence the

Items	Responses	
	Response Percent	Response Count
I am familiar with the multicultural counseling competency document:		
yes	56.8%	75
no	43.2%	57
I can discuss my own ethnic/cultural heritage:		
not competent (not able to perform this at this time)	1.5%	2
somewhat competent (more training needed)	16.7%	22
competent (able to perform competently)	52.3%	69
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	29.5%	39
I am aware of how my cultural background and experiences have influenced my attitude about psychological processes:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	2.3%	3
somewhat competent (more training needed)	13.7%	18
competent (able to perform competently)	58.8%	77
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	26.2%	33
I am able to discuss how my culture has influenced the way I think:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.0%	0
somewhat competent (more training needed)	11.5%	15
competent (able to perform competently)	60.3%	79
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	28.2%	37
I can recognize when my attitudes, beliefs, and values are interfering with providing the best services to my students:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.0%	0
somewhat competent (more training needed)	13.7%	18
competent (able to perform competently)	58.0%	76
extremely competent (able to perform at high level)	28.2%	37
I can verbally communicate my acceptance of culturally different students:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.0%	0
somewhat competent (more training needed)	9.2%	12
competent (able to perform competently)	47.3%	62
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	43.5%	57
I can nonverbally communicate my acceptance of culturally different students:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.8%	1
somewhat competent (more training needed)	6.8%	9
competent (able to perform competently)	53.0%	70
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	39.4%	52
I can discuss my family's perspective regarding acceptable and non acceptable codes of conduct:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	1.5%	2
somewhat competent (more training needed)	6.3%	8
competent (able to perform competently)	47.7%	63
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	42.4%	56
I can discuss models of White Racial Identity Development:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	32.1%	42
somewhat competent (more training needed)	36.9%	47
competent (able to perform competently)	24.4%	32
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	7.6%	10
I can define racism:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.8%	1
somewhat competent (more training needed)	15.3%	20
competent (able to perform competently)	54.2%	71
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	29.9%	39
I can define prejudice:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.0%	0

somewhat competent (more training needed)	12.9% 17	I can discuss within - group differences among ethnic groups (e.g., low, SES Puerto Rican students vs. high SES Puerto Rican students):	
competent (able to perform competently)	53.8% 71	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	28.2% 37
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	33.3% 44	somewhat competent (more training needed)	43.5% 57
I can define discrimination:		competent (able to perform competently)	24.4% 32
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.0% 0	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	3.8% 5
somewhat competent (more training needed)	12.3% 16	I can discuss how culture affects a student's vocational choices:	
competent (able to perform competently)	54.6% 71	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	6.9% 9
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	33.1% 43	somewhat competent (more training needed)	38.2% 50
I can define stereotype:		competent (able to perform competently)	44.3% 58
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.0% 0	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	10.7% 14
somewhat competent (more training needed)	8.5% 11	I can discuss how culture affects the help seeking behaviors of students:	
competent (able to perform competently)	55.4% 72	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	4.6% 6
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	36.2% 47	somewhat competent (more training needed)	32.3% 42
I can identify the cultural bases of my communication style:		competent (able to perform competently)	50.8% 66
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	6.9% 9	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	12.3% 16
somewhat competent (more training needed)	30.8% 40	I can discuss how culture affects the manifestations of psychological disorders:	
competent (able to perform competently)	45.4% 59	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	22.1% 29
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	16.9% 22	somewhat competent (more training needed)	49.6% 65
I can identify my negative and positive emotional reactions toward persons of other racial and ethnic groups:		competent (able to perform competently)	23.7% 31
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	0.8% 1	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	4.6% 6
somewhat competent (more training needed)	13.2% 11	I can describe the degree to which a counseling approach is appropriate for a specific group of people:	
competent (able to perform competently)	60.5% 78	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	12.2% 16
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	25.6% 33	somewhat competent (more training needed)	48.9% 64
I can identify my reactions that are based on stereotypical beliefs about different ethnic groups:		competent (able to perform at a high level)	34.4% 45
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	1.5% 2	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	4.6% 6
somewhat competent (more training needed)	13.0% 17	I can explain how factors such as poverty, and powerlessness have influenced the current conditions of at least two ethnic groups:	
competent (able to perform competently)	62.6% 82	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	6.1% 8
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	22.9% 30	somewhat competent (more training needed)	36.6% 48
I can give examples of how stereotypical beliefs about culturally different persons impact the counseling relationship:		competent (able to perform competently)	47.3% 62
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	1.5% 2	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	9.9% 13
somewhat competent (more training needed)	26.0% 34	I can discuss research regarding mental health issues among culturally/ethnically different populations:	
competent (able to perform competently)	63.4% 70	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	32.1% 42
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	19.1% 25	somewhat competent (more training needed)	42.7% 56
I can articulate the possible differences of the five major ethnic groups (i.e.: African/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American, European/White):		competent (able to perform competently)	22.1% 29
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	9.4% 12	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	3.1% 4
somewhat competent (more training needed)	48.4% 62	I can discuss how the counseling process may conflict with the cultural values of at least two ethnic groups:	
competent (able to perform at a high level)	35.9% 46	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	9.9% 13
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	6.3% 8	somewhat competent (more training needed)	42.0% 56
I can articulate the possible differences between the verbal behavior of the five major ethnic groups:		competent (able to perform competently)	40.5% 53
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	8.4% 11	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	7.6% 10
somewhat competent (more training needed)	49.6% 66	I can list at least three barriers that prevent ethnic minority students from using counseling services:	
competent (able to perform at a high level)	35.9% 47	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	5.4% 7
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	6.1% 8	somewhat competent (more training needed)	41.1% 53
I can discuss the counseling implications for at least two models of racial/ethnic identity development:		competent (able to perform competently)	41.1% 53
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	16.0% 21	extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	12.4% 16
somewhat competent (more training needed)	49.6% 65	I can discuss the potential bias of two assessment instruments frequently used in the schools:	
competent (able to perform at a high level)	28.2% 37	not competent (not able to perform at this time)	24.6% 32
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	6.1% 8	somewhat competent (more training needed)	43.8% 57

competent (able to perform competently)	31.5%	41
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	7.7%	10
I can discuss family counseling from a cultural/ethnic perspective:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	17.7%	23
somewhat competent (more training needed)	43.1%	56
competent (able to perform competently)	31.5%	41
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	7.7%	10
I can anticipate when my helping style is inappropriate for a culturally different student:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	4.6%	6
somewhat competent (more training needed)	39.7%	52
competent (able to perform competently)	48.1%	63
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	7.6%	10
I can help student determine whether a problem stems from racism or biases in others:		
not competent (not able to perform at this time)	7.7%	10
somewhat competent (more training needed)	39.2%	51
competent (able to perform competently)	43.1%	56
extremely competent (able to perform at a high level)	10.0%	13

Table 2. School Counselors Perception of their n=131 Multicultural Competency

current conditions of at least two ethnic groups,

- Ability to discuss research regarding mental health issues among culturally/ethnically different populations,
- How the counseling process may conflict with the cultural values of at least two ethnic groups,
- Ability to list at least three barriers that prevent ethnic minority students from using counseling services,
- Ability to discuss the potential bias of two assessment instruments often used in schools,
- Ability to discuss family counseling from a cultural/ethnic perspective,
- Ability to anticipate when counseling/helping style is inappropriate for a culturally different student, and
- Ability to help a student determine whether a problem stems from racism or biases in others.

All of the above findings are an indication that professional school counselors need to take the necessary steps to continuously improve and continuously maintain their multicultural counseling competency. However, 42.4% of the participants indicated that they had not attended any multicultural workshops in over 2 years. This seems to indicate that although school counselors work with a multicultural diverse population they are not attending nor receiving any type of training in the area of multicultural counseling

competence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As stated by Pederson (2002), with the level of multicultural diversity that is facing counselors in today's society it has become imperative that counselors maintain their own level of multicultural competency throughout their professional lives. When counselors work with diverse populations, it is their responsibility to understand the cultural values of their clients, and particularly, how these values influence what happens in the counseling process (Robles-Pina, 2001). The results of this study have made clear the need for counselors in the system studied to avail themselves of knowledge and training, in order to assure that all students receive equal and adequate services (Evans et al, 2011).

With the rapidly changing demographics in schools, this objective can only be attained if school counselors can demonstrate multicultural counseling competencies. Academic coursework for multicultural counseling has not always resulted in greater multicultural counseling competency among entry level school counselors (Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnson, 2008). Further, those school counselors who graduated from a non-CACREP accredited program, or before the AMCD Multicultural Counseling Competencies were introduced in 1991, may not have been adequately exposed to multicultural counseling issues in their academic training.

Since 42% of the participants in this study indicated that they had not received training on multicultural counseling issues in the last two years, and 43.2% indicated that they were not familiar with the multicultural competency document, the mandate for training appears to be clear. The literature underscores the need for counselors to be knowledgeable and competent in issues of diversity. The results of this study supported the need for counselors surveyed to better prepare themselves to meet students' concerns and the challenges of today's education environment.

Although this study focused on a specific school system, the participants' educational background was varied. While wholesale generalizations cannot be made, the

results do suggest that adequate emphasis on multicultural and diversity issues is lacking in the educational backgrounds represented by the participants of this study.

The results of this study could, perhaps encourage counselor educators to include a greater emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in school counselor training programs. School counselor training programs might make additional coursework in multiculturalism and diversity available to students returning for continuing education. Professional counseling organizations, such as state associations, might include an emphasis on current and effective training that focuses on the issues of multiculturalism and diversity in the school setting at their annual conferences. School districts and school administrators can encourage and support their counseling staff to seek additional training.

It is hoped that this study will create an awareness among professional school counselors that serves as an impetus to gain a greater understanding of multiculturalism and diversity, and that future research will be conducted in other geographic areas to ascertain data and compare the needs of school counselors across the different regions of the United States.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary G. Mayorga is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Counseling, Texas A&M University in San Antonio.



Karen Furgerson is currently working as an Associate Professor of Counseling, Texas A&M University in Kingsville.



Katrina Cook is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Counseling, Texas A&M University in San Antonio.



Elizabeth Ann Wardle is currently working as a Professor of Counseling, Texas A&M University in Kingsville.

