

Guidance Counsellors' Work as a Transformative Activity: Supporting Social Justice through Advocacy

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Abstract

Advocacy has been identified as a relevant way for counsellors to respond to the social inequalities facing certain groups in the world of work and education in today's neoliberal context. This article draws on a qualitative study conducted with three groups of guidance counsellors in school settings in Quebec to analyse their advocacy work as a world-transforming activity from a social justice perspective. Analysing counsellors' activity helps underline not only systemic barriers that guidance counsellors try to address in their day-to-day work in schools, but also, and more importantly, the particular way school counsellors perform advocacy in line with their professional genre: 1) building an alliance with influential actors, 2) building and upholding credibility, and 3) daring to create opportunities. The study highlights the urgent need to create collective conditions within the profession to overcome the organisational constraints associated with the ubiquity of economic rationality in education.

Keywords: Advocacy, career guidance, school counsellors, social justice, clinic of activity, transformative activity

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Introduction

Even though career guidance has strong historical roots in social justice (Arthur, 2014), it seems necessary to reaffirm this fact in a context of neoliberalist economic and social policies (Sultana, 2014). The political views behind such policies value and normalise individualism, self-construction and 'individual responsibility for social and professional well-being (Sultana, 2014). In this outlook, inequalities and social injustices—and their consequences for school and career guidance—may be disregarded. This context brings into question theories, methods and paradigms that guide intervention-based approaches for populations, especially the most vulnerable (Arthur & Collins, 2014 ; Lee, 2018 ; Metz & Guichard, 2009 ; Toporek, 2018). In both the research domain (Stetsenko, 2016) and intervention practice (Hooley et al., 2018), the emphasis has been placed on individuals' adaptation to the world in which they live. Yet the decisive nature of the current structural and contextual forces and their deleterious effects on individuals' health and well-being require the development of research and intervention practices that can transform life and work contexts (Blustein et al., 2019). To this end, various organisations in the field of counselling highlight the importance of advocacy in this domain. Examples include the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG, 2013), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015) and many professional associations that have formalised competencies or enshrined advocacy in their mandates.

As outlined by Beck and Lane (2019), despite the extensive literature reporting institutional initiatives, particularly to foster counselor training in advocacy, several researchers have recently recognised the importance of documenting how counselors are actually putting these skills into practice. Empirical research on this topic has focused on very specific issues and populations including exemplary practitioners (Beck & Lane, 2019) and those who have

been trained in advocacy (Kozan & Blustein, 2018). The present study, conducted in a context where no specific training in advocacy is provided within counselling training programs in Quebec, sought to document how advocacy manifests in the daily practice of “ordinary” school counsellors.

Advocacy in Guidance and School Counselling

Although concern for social justice has been present since the earliest days of the profession, calls for social justice practice remained largely marginalised in the field of counselling and guidance until the turn of the 2000s. In the early 2000s, several professional counseling associations included advocacy in their competency frameworks for professional development. Under the impetus of several researchers in the field, the American Counseling Association (ACA) developed a model that has become a reference (Toporek & Liu, 2001). Advocacy has been defined as an “action taken by a counseling professional to facilitate the removal of external and institutional barriers to clients’ well-being” (Toporek & Liu, 2001, p. 387). Advocacy in the school setting has also become a major component of skill development, according to various professional associations (e.g., the American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; CACREP, 2009). The competency frameworks became prescriptions that school counselor training was expected to align with (Dixon et al., 2010).

In the field of guidance and school counselling, advocacy involves actions aiming to remove systemic barriers that hinder ‘individuals’ ability to find their educational and professional paths (Picard et al., 2015; Snow, 2013; Storlie et al., 2019). These barriers can take various forms, such as discrimination, poverty, racism, physical or psychological violence, and perceptions of social roles in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or socioeconomic origin, all factors that can restrict a student’s range of vocational options (Baranowski et al., 2016; Collins et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2011). Moreover,

public policies can directly discriminate against marginalised populations or limit fair access to high-standard guidance services by maintaining a social status quo or ethnocentric discourse (Burwell & Kalbfleish, 2008 ; Dionne and al., 2018; Fickling & Gonzalez, 2016). In addition to these barriers that directly fuel discrimination against certain populations and their ability to find their educational and professional paths, certain barriers indirectly affect these populations by preventing them from getting access to quality guidance counselling services, or even just guidance counselling services at all (Leahy et al., 2016). For example, the lack of knowledge or clarity of guidance services can contribute to keeping marginalised populations away from the labour market (Bélisle & Bourdon, 2015). Misrepresentations about the profession by school principals and other decision-makers can also limit access and prevent quality work for guidance counsellors working with marginalized populations (Beck & Lane, 2019). Therefore, as Myers and colleagues (2002) have pointed out, social-justice advocacy requires counsellors to advocate for their profession in order to defend working conditions that allow them to work according to their professional ethics. ASCA's definition of a "school counselor advocate" meshes with this perspective (ASCA, 2016).

The literature documents many actions aiming to lessen these social and professional barriers: taking more sociodemographic parameters (age, gender, social position, socioeconomic origin, etc.) into account in evaluation and intervention practice (Gess, 2016); initiating or consolidating strategic alliances between professionals to improve or secure services for populations (Brat et al., 2016); mobilising research findings to influence public policy making (Douglas, 2011); leveraging political engagement and lobbying by calling on the government or putting pressure on representatives (Chan et al., 2019); and teaching clients their rights and raising their awareness of power relations (Fickling, 2016). In fact, there is no shortage of suggestions for advocacy actions in the scholarly literature, but most of the studies

report initiatives related to training for school counselors or the skills needed to conduct these actions. Few studies have focused on the actual advocacy that counselors do.

Kozan and Blustein (2018) conducted a qualitative investigation to document the advocacy work of counseling psychologists trained in the context of a program that specifically incorporated these skills. At an individual level, counsellors testified about their daily efforts to ensure access to their services for marginalised populations, to integrate experiences of inequality into their discussions with their clients, and to help their clients actually reach resources that can be helpful to them. At the organisational level, counsellors are involved in various diversity and social justice committees, thus acting in support of people in minority situations while examining their own privilege in relation to those minorities. Specifically, in school settings, Beck and Lane (2019) looked at the advocacy experiences of 14 exemplary school counsellors. Their research findings highlight the need to view advocacy as an ongoing process that involves taking risks and learning about one's own effective strategies. At the same time, they show the importance of taking pride in one's profession and not hesitating to defend one's expertise and even to promote it effectively. Finally, Singh et al. (2010) previously conducted a survey of 16 school counsellors who specifically self-identified as social justice advocates. Based on grounded theorising, they identified seven strategies used by school counsellors in their advocacy role: using political savvy to navigate power structures, consciousness raising, initiating difficult dialogues, building intentional and positive alliances and relationships, teaching students self-advocacy skills, using data for marketing purposes, and educating others about the school counsellor's role as an advocate.

Building on the voices of counselors themselves, these studies provide relevant insights from the experience of counselors who already self-identify as advocates, are convinced of the importance of advocacy, are trained in the role, and are even particularly skilled at advocacy.

Our study proposes to expand this field of knowledge by documenting the actual advocacy work done by guidance counselors who do not necessarily identify as advocates, who have no prior training in advocacy, and who are not necessarily recognised for their advocacy skills. The study is rooted in the reality of Quebec (French population in Canada) which, to date, has not sought to formally integrate advocacy into the field of educational and vocational guidance. This specific context can also be linked to other national contexts where advocacy work is not part of the training curricula for counselors.

Cultural and Political Context of School Counselling in Quebec

In Quebec, Canada, school counsellors¹ are part of a larger profession, namely guidance counsellors. The admission and practice of guidance counsellors are regulated by a professional order, the *Ordre des conseillers et des conseillères d'orientation du Québec (OCCOQ)*. Specialised graduate training (master's degree) is required to legally hold the title of guidance counsellor (C.O.). This training aims to impart skills in 1) evaluating the situation of the persons assisted, 2) designing guidance interventions, 3) performing direct intervention, using individual, group or organisational methods, 4) acting as a consultant for other actors, 5) evaluating the impact of the interventions carried out, and 6) managing their practice ethically (*Ordre des conseillers et conseillères d'orientation et psychoéducateurs et psychoéducatrices du Québec [OCCOPPQ], 2004*). No specific training in advocacy is provided in the initial training programs for the practice of the profession.

Most guidance counsellors work in schools (OCCOQ, 2020). In general, the role of guidance counsellors in school settings is to give guidance and support the fulfilment of youths'

¹ The expression "school counsellors" will be used to designate guidance counsellors working in school settings.

vocational projects and educational pathways. They provide counselling to individuals and groups. They also hold consultations on counselling issues with principals, other school stakeholders and parents (Viviers et al., 2019). Among other things, they support teachers in integrating educational and career guidance issues into their teaching activities. This is an institutional means of supporting student motivation and preventing school dropout.

Quebec's schools are largely public schools, each of which is overseen by a school board that is also responsible for vocational training and adult education programs. The average counselor/student ratio in these public schools is 1:1760, ranging from 1:277 to 1:8236 depending on the school board. In addition to the public education system, there are also "private" schools, which are independent of one another and run by boards of directors that determine their working conditions. These private schools are governed by different legislation than the public schools. Although subsidized in large part by the state, private schools charge a few thousand dollars a year for student enrolment and therefore cater to more socio-economically privileged families. The *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (CSE) revealed in 2018 that only 6% of students in Quebec's public schools are in privileged schools, compared to 20% in Canada. To compete with private schools, public schools have also developed selective special programs (e.g., "international" program, sports-study, etc.), which attract the highest-performing students. Ultimately, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning disabilities are overrepresented in regular public school classrooms, which can create contexts in these classrooms that are less conducive to academic learning and achievement (CSE, 2016).

Since 2012, certain specific professional activities have been legally reserved for guidance counsellors, since they apply to groups that are more likely to be harmed by

malpractice. These activities include:² 1) assessing (in a guidance counselling context) a person suffering from a mental or neuropsychological disorder attested by a diagnosis or evaluation by an authorised professional; 2) assessing mental retardation; and 3) assessing (in a guidance counselling context) a handicapped student or a student with a social maladjustment with a view to formulating an individualised education plan in accordance with the *Education Act*. Despite the passage of this law, several barriers seem to persist in its practical implementation as one study showed that few guidance counselors were performing these reserved activities (Viviers et al., 2019). One such barrier that appears to play a decisive role is principals' lack of knowledge of the role of guidance counselors, their expertise and their professional field.

On a more macro level, guidance and counselling services in schools are confronted with significant advocacy issues. First, access to these services is restricted by the counsellor/student ratio, which fails to take certain risk factors into account (disabled students, learning or adaptation difficulties, immigration, poverty, etc.) (Dionne et al., 2018). As Sultana (2014) argues, access equity is poor in various countries because of recent cuts to public funding for guidance services, despite the growing demand for them. Second, several organisational constraints associated with the ubiquity of economic rationality in public services exacerbate the difficulty of highlighting the contribution of counselling in guidance services. Furthermore, as Irving (2010) and Crook, Stenger and Gesselman (2015) argue, in order for counsellors to promote social justice, they need time and resources to engage youths and adults in discussion. This discussion can be, for instance, about how social class, ethnicity, culture, gender and

² Although the terms “mental retardation” and “handicapped student” are no longer appropriate, these are the terms used in the legislation.

sexual orientation impact the distribution of opportunities, or can involve reflection on the reasons behind and manifestations of discrimination.

In spite of the presence of such issues, advocacy as a professional activity has not been formalised in Quebec, and little is known about how it is integrated into daily professional practices. Using a qualitative research design, this study aims to examine the advocacy work of school counselors in Quebec as a world-transforming activity from a social justice perspective.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

The framework of this study is based on cultural-historical activity theory, which, according to Stetsenko (2016), has equity and justice as its key underpinnings. According to this perspective, “labor is thus the fundamental human activity, the one that changes nature, as well as creates culture and human beings” (Dionne & Jornet, 2019). The focus of this theory is to conceive work in terms of its potential, as an activity, to transform social conditions and advance human development. Indeed, in conceiving individuals’ relationship to their environment this framework implies a transformative posture (in comparison with an adaptive one). Stetsenko (2016) claimed that individuals’ development is achieved by collaborative action to transform their work or social conditions, including those leading to social inequalities. Accordingly, collective work and advocacy actions enable counsellors to play a role as agents of change in order to design a fairer social future. As mentioned earlier, this requires addressing systemic barriers in terms of people’s access to counselling services and their educational and occupational opportunities. However, the working conditions described above can hinder the possibilities for addressing these barriers.

This theoretical framework that underpins the methodology uses dialogue as a way to generate collective contradiction which allows for investigating the “real of the activity,” in

other words, what workers actually do to enact their work, what they would like to do but are prevented from doing, what they could have done, etc. (Clot, 2017). This analysis of work challenges the “professional genre,” defined as an occupational community’s heritage of facts and gestures that serves as a resource for judging what is acceptable, what is valuable and what needs to be cared for in their work (Viviers, 2019). In this context, cultural-historical methodologies are designed to stimulate and sometimes restore subjects’ agency and power to act on their occupation and work conditions (Dionne & Jornet, 2019). In the present research, initially focused on interprofessional collaboration, advocacy emerged as a means to enhance counsellor’s ability to address inequalities in their work and to carry out their duties with vulnerable populations.

Methodology

This study uses data collected from research on interprofessional collaboration experienced by school counsellors in Quebec, which was conducted with the formal approval of the local human subject ethics committee at the institution of the first author. The methodology is founded on a “clinic of activity” (*clinique de l’activité*; Clot, 2017) approach, in which various methods are used to transform and shed better light on—and hence enhance understanding of—a given activity. As put forward by Scheller (2014): “It is only through a *transformative experience* that psychological activity can reveal its secrets. Development is not only the objective of psychology, but its method.” (p.78). Through dialogue on participants’ work experience, the activity clinic methods “force” them to take a different look at their work activity, to redirect their attention towards the “real of the activity,” in other words towards the unrealised possibilities of their activity. They open the field of consciousness with the aim of developing their range of action within or at the borders of their professional genre.

In this study we used the “instruction to the double” (*instruction au sosie*) method. This method uses speech acts and discussion with peers and researchers to uncover the “real of activity,” which is not accessible directly. For example, many counsellors in the groups were not conscious of certain social injustices or of the impacts of structural or cultural barriers on their clients and on the possibility of doing quality work. This qualitative method, and the discussion about work that it entails, made it possible to verbalise such considerations. The instruction to the double begins when an instructor describes their work to the researcher (double), in such a way that the latter could replace the instructor without anyone realising it. The instructor must tell the double what to do, who to talk to, what not to do (even if they want to), and who not to talk to. The other members then question the instructor to specify the instructions to the double. After the session, the instructor writes a commentary on the experience based on a verbatim transcript. Finally, the commentary is discussed within the group in relation to each member’s work activity. This space allows for discussion of controversial issues and quality of work criteria within the occupation (Dionne, Viviers & Saussez, 2019). All of the meetings with the group were videotaped, and a transcription of the group’s interaction was produced. The research was conducted with three groups at three different sites. Three instructions were done per group (total of four meetings), and the participants were all members of the groups. Table 1 presents the characteristics and school settings of the participants. All participants were recruited through an invitation to participate in a study about interprofessional collaboration. This invitation was approved by the ethics board and distributed via the mailing list of the professional body for guidance counseling in Quebec. Interested counselors were invited to get in touch with the research team.

[insert Table 1]

Although advocacy issues were not specifically part of the research objectives, they were noted in the course of our privileged contact on the ground. Advocacy work was not a specific question that was asked of the participants, but it was identified when they described their work, and within the collective discussion generated by the methodological approach. Therefore, we decided to proceed to a thematic secondary analysis of this research object. As researchers in the clinic of activity, we are engaged in our clinical work to support participants' and groups' power to act. The three authors uphold values of social justice and are actively involved with Quebec's guidance-counselling body in a global reflection on how to integrate advocacy competencies into the guidance counselling profile. As recommended by Kozan & Blustein (2018), we engaged in reflective practices throughout each step of the research to document how our researchers' positionality affected the study. The integrity of the methodology was the subject of reflexive discussion among the researchers during the process to be sure that the methodological choices were relevant for participants and consistent with the research objectives (Levitt et al., 2016). We proceeded to conduct thematic analysis, which is a flexible method "for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.79). We conceptualised three principal categories of themes in our analysis of participant's advocacy work, which revolves around actions aiming to remove systemic barriers that hinder individuals' capability of finding one's educational and professional path. These categories of themes were guided by our conceptual understanding of advocacy, based on Toporek and Liu (2001). We identified three major theme categories that are not mutually exclusive: advocacy issues, advocacy actions and strategies, and conditions that support or hinder advocacy actions. This analysis offers a way, first, to identify advocacy issues on which school counsellors intervene, and second, to categorise their advocacy actions in the context of their work activity into themes and favourable conditions for implementation.

The results are presented according to these categories. The names used in the presentation of results are pseudonyms.

Results

Thematic analysis of the verbatim transcripts from the instruction to the double process reveals three categories that provide insight into what advocacy looks like in the day-to-day work of these counsellors who have not been trained in or who do not identify with the role of advocate: advocacy issues, advocacy actions or strategies, and conditions that support or hinder advocacy actions.

Advocacy issues

The analysis identifies systemic barriers that guidance counsellors try to address in their day-to-day work. In general, guidance counsellors agree that “any struggle for the sake of a student is a good struggle.” Lack of knowledge of their professional role, especially on the part of school principals, is a significant obstacle since it sometimes leads to the assignment of inappropriate tasks.

[The challenge is] to seize opportunities [when they are assigned inappropriate tasks] to try to say that this is not my expertise. So, being confined to administrative tasks is not where I have the greatest impact on my community, it's not where I'm most useful, I think we could have more impact elsewhere. (Simon-Pierre, Instructor, site 3)

For sites 1 and 3, the main barrier for guidance counsellors is the lack of knowledge about their newly reserved acts. A better understanding of their role would lead to a better use of their counselling skills, especially with vulnerable youth, which would reduce the risk of harm to

these individuals (e.g., limited vocational opportunities). For site 1, access to guidance services is a major challenge for advocacy, in particular the reserved act of assessing mental retardation.

Your³ contribution to the mental retardation assessment issue is to move this issue forward, you know, it's advocacy. It's really more about advocating... and also making demands, in order to improve access to services for the students who need them. Eventually, perhaps it will lead to the assessment of mental disorders [another reserved act], but for the time being we're more interested in the mental retardation assessment. (Jérôme, Double, site 1)

Guidance counsellors are unevenly invited to meetings to develop and follow up on intervention plans for handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities. This leads to a possible prejudice for these students (e.g., being enrolled in an academic program that is not adapted to their full capabilities) in that, in the absence of a guidance counsellor, the educational and vocational pathway assessment is likely to be based on misconceptions, prejudices, misinformation or partial knowledge. As the following excerpt shows, teachers and other school staff often explain the problems experienced by pupils in terms of psychological factors, such as a lack of motivation, which neglects the influence of environmental conditions and their resulting inequalities.

Colette: Why should teachers send the students to my office right away and say, "well, it's a motivation problem," for example. Well, it's not always a problem with motivation.

Researcher: Yes, sometimes it's more complex than that.

³ During the instruction, the instructor normally addresses the double in the second person.

Colette: Yes, that's right, sometimes there's a family situation behind it! There are other things, sometimes there are learning problems that haven't been detected. But you know, why they take the student out of the class right away, sometimes they're expeditious. (Colette, Instructor, site 3)

In fact, given the influence of the actors who further them, misrepresentations may be the main barriers that guidance counsellors make it a point to intervene on. Guidance counsellors working in a middle- or upper-class environment (mainly at site 2) find that some parents have “commanded aspirations” and exert strong performance pressure on their children. In the following excerpt, the teacher’s conception of the importance of mathematics for a student’s vocational pathway can create a stigma for students who do not follow the most “desirable” pathway. Some misinformation can also be communicated about the impact of making the wrong choice.

In meetings, you've chosen to take on the battle against the words “strong math,” “weak math.” Your ears were bleeding every time, so you introduced a change in school vocabulary “regular math, enriched math” and you got the principal’s collaboration on that issue! [...] [referring to a classroom session] I did my job as a guidance counsellor by reframing the information given by the teacher: “You’d think that if you’re doing Social Studies, you should do Social Studies with math!” Or, “In your parents’ opinion, you might think, as the teacher told you earlier, that when you supposedly make a [career choice] mistake you miss a year’s salary”. So, you reframe the information, but you give the reasons why you’re reframing the information. (Pauline, Instructor, site 2)

In the organisation of school services, one of the systemic barriers identified by guidance counsellors is the lack of possibilities for intervening upstream, preventively, on the school dropout dynamic, by fostering meaning and students’ active involvement in their studies.

Guidance counsellors are all too often called upon to intervene in last-call moments when a student is about to be expelled from school or drop out. Some principals are prompt to expel students for absenteeism or major behavior problems, without considering the complexity of their situation. Finally, guidance counsellors also note the effect of the lack of resources (low ratios) on their ability to fully guide and support students’.

At one point, there was a meeting for an intervention plan, and I’ve already met with the student, but no one called me to that meeting. Seriously, you’re like “hello!, I’m here”! ... They almost never invite me. At my school, they will invite me if the student is about to drop out of school, period. (Vanessa, Participant, site 3)

I wrote a lot of things [in her comments], but to allow individuals to benefit from quality guidance, there are a lot of things I could do, but because of the lack of time, I have to limit myself, it hurt me sometimes. (Michelle, Instructor, site 1)

Advocacy Actions or Strategies

Analysing counsellors’ activity helps underline the particular way school counsellors perform advocacy in line with their professional genre (Clot, 2017). Three sub-themes emerged from this analysis that characterises this genre: 1) building an alliance with influential actors; 2) building and upholding credibility; and 3) daring to create opportunities.

Building an Alliance with Influential Actors

The advocacy exerted by the school counsellors is characterised by respect, recognition and partnership with others. Building an alliance with individuals, gaining their trust, and connecting with them are the central tenets that make it possible to influence student decisions, at least in some cases. To do this, they ensure that they have good communication practices:

adapting to their interlocutor, communicating at the right time according to the reality of the individual they are speaking to (which entails a good knowledge of their activity), and helping them feel secure if necessary. This obviously requires good listening and empathy.

Over the years, we have learned to work together, and basically I was not a threat to them, but on the contrary, someone who wanted to help them. But that requires a lot of communication, a lot of listening to the teachers' needs and understanding their situation, which, like mine, is a difficult one. For different reasons, they are squeezed by the school curriculum, they have a lot of things to do, a lot of students to manage. They are, like me, caught up in their anxiety, in their difficulties, which means that sometimes we arrive with a project or a demand and we have the impression that it is piling on one more task for them to do. But it's really to show them that we are really there to work together. (Marie-Ange, Instructor, site 2)

In order to foster positive and productive alliances with influential actors and to avoid shame when they make mistakes associated with guidance issues, many guidance counsellors adopt "strategic communication" and use concrete situations to bring about a transformation of practices to better respond to students' needs, in a fairer way. This strategy is achieved by giving central importance to maintaining a collaborative relationship with the other person.

One strategy is to use the student's case. I "played dumb" and said: "That student is gone, but I haven't heard anything about it. All I heard from the secretary was that his record was closed. I heard that she was signing up for an adult education center... Shouldn't I have been involved?" She said, "I didn't even know myself." That allowed me to say "Ok! That's it! Normally, I am involved." So, that made her think of me with another student in another case. I hope this will happen again..." (Regina, Instructor, site 1)

This relationship is also created through physical presence, by directly addressing the concerned actors, but also by being present in the common areas of the school (e.g., the hallways). Initially, the guidance counsellors are adamant about the importance of working with school personnel who are willing to work on the guidance counsellor's agenda. Over time, multiple communication channels open up, which must be maintained, kept open. This type of quality relationship with the various school actors helps leverage them to promote the conditions to support access to guidance and counselling services.

If we go back to the basics, to talk, to position ourselves in the school, to try to be friendly with everyone... because after that, everyone will win out... this game of interaction is super difficult, but so important for the success of our work afterwards [...] it's almost a game of chess... You see the teacher, you're fine, you're always engaged in a charm offensive: "Ah, hello! Ah thank you very much for having me here!"... We bring cookies (laughs)... you're like there all the time juggling to try to make allies. (Virginie, Participant, site 3)

Building and Upholding Credibility

For school counsellors, credibility is an undeniable asset in influencing decisions, and helping to remove systemic barriers to providing students with a supportive environment for their school and career guidance. Of course, experience and professional recognition are important in this respect (e.g., being called upon by external organisations for one's expertise); however, it is above all a matter of demonstrating one's competence explicitly. For instance, certain counsellors will cite findings of academic research to demonstrate the relevance of their point of view. Others will rely on the regulations issued by their professional body to emphasise their "expert" status and credibility. In the following excerpt, some adults were initially denied participation in a guidance counselling course by their local employment center, and a guidance

counsellor successfully advocated the relevance of this course for their vocational and educational pathway.

Last year, there was an Emploi Québec⁴ officer who didn't want a course code for guidance groups [disapproval of funding], because she said, "normally, when students enter adult education, they have a clear project. They don't have to go through the guidance process." So you requested a meeting with the team manager, and you prepared a presentation citing findings from a study called "Guidance for adults without a diploma." At the outset, you said that this research was funded by the Department of Employment [the officer's employer] and the Department of Education. [...] You had them listen. I think that is your strategy. You need to closely follow the research, you also have good contacts with researchers and with the Department of Education, so that when issues arise, you can rely on your academic knowledge. And generally, that helps your credibility. (Jérôme, Instructor, site 1)

Additionally, establishing one's credibility requires "being seen," but also committing and daring to share one's point of view in various forums, in order to advocate and make demands when necessary. In addition to being present in places of influence (e.g., the consultation table set up by the Department of Education), guidance counsellors stress the importance of a visible daily presence within their school community. This presence allows them to gather valuable informal information and to make themselves known.

I serve on several committees. I am everywhere: [she names committees], it's all connected, so I'm a person who has a good overview. That's why the principal would ask you, "What do you think" for an opinion or information. [...] I am the representative of

⁴ Emploi Quebec is the government agency in charge of the public employment service in Quebec.

the professionals on the School Council, I have been for several years. As I was saying, it's by choice because, by being there, I have a good grasp of many different matters. It also allows me to see with the parents how it all works: the parents approve certain decisions, and I can see their reactions to what we decide at school. You can see how the whole system works. (Natasha, Instructor, site 1).

Moreover, in the context of the fast pace of working life in the school environment, guidance counsellors highlight the need to “take the time” to sit down with colleagues from other professions to work in a concerted manner and thus contribute their expertise to promote a rigorous and credible intervention that takes into account the guidance needs of students. Finally, carrying out annual reviews of their activities makes their work visible and helps to establish their credibility.

In my yearly report, I refer to studies, anything that has to do with the needs of students, I search the literature to support what I say. Often in the professional body's magazine, I found some tips, it's often from the professional body that I would look for that. So, at first, it was just statistics like you, [...] but slowly I added stuff, I improved it, so that it really explains the guidance service, but why it works that way. (Pauline, Instructor, site 2)

Daring to Create Opportunities

All of the counsellors emphasised the need to be strategic, individually and collectively, when wishing to engage in advocacy. This means knowing how to create and seize opportunities, to open up avenues in order to move forward. It is important, to do so, to attempt to be at the right place at the right time, to act with the right people and to be in good spirits.

I think we should dare to disrupt the current state of affairs. That is where we will start to create flexibility, if we dare to go beyond and generate discomfort that we maintain, if we bring different points of view, it creates opportunities.... On top of that, we have job security, we are protected, we have the union that will be able to hear our vision if we want to share it, so I don't see why we don't enter the arena? It doesn't mean being unpleasant. It means coming up with a clearly stated vision, repeating things, trying to see if there are means that can be applied, proposing ways forward, asking for openness, and if that doesn't work, we have to change our strategy. (Simon-Pierre, Instructor, site 3)

To create a continuity of services for the students they serve, the counsellors stress the importance of an advocacy perspective of daring to go beyond the boundaries of the school and creating relationships with multiple community actors. This is especially important with a view to reaching certain socio-economically vulnerable populations.

To reach a clientele with a lower education level and that's more remote from adult education centres, you have to find ways to connect with this clientele. So you have to develop your network, in other words, you have to know the workers in community organisations well and have good, cordial relations with them. You know about referrals too, because you're going to have to refer the clientele. Like the mental health care team, for example, they will refer a lot of clients to you. An adult who needs guidance, who is thinking about going back to school, they'll call you directly. (Jérôme, Instructor, site 1)

Conditions That Support or Hinder Advocacy Actions

Finally, the work analysis identified professional conditions that support or hinder advocacy actions. The relationship with principals is a key factor. Guidance counsellors'

dependence on school principals (strong hierarchy that imposes work tasks) makes advocacy difficult, especially in contexts of precarious employment contracts, low collective representation (compared to teachers, for instance) and financial precariousness. Some guidance counsellors reported not feeling competent either, especially in terms of professional advocacy. In this context, having to do repetitive advocacy actions, including explaining their professional role, creates exhaustion.

But one thing is for sure, we're all under a lot of pressure. You know, even though I like to fight these battles that you [another g.c.] don't like so much and that exhaust you, there is pressure from the community to deliver the goods, we want to help our students, we want to make our guidance service shine, with the limited means we have, with the realities of the context. (Pauline, Instructor, site 2)

Among the conditions that support advocacy, our research tends to show that banding together to carry out these actions, rather than going it alone, helps promote meaning, enthusiasm, hope and satisfaction with the task that is accomplished, which in turn mitigates the exhaustion effect.

Discussion

This study aimed to develop new knowledge about advocacy in the field of counseling by documenting the actual advocacy work done by guidance counselors who do not necessarily identify as advocates, have no prior training in advocacy, and are not necessarily recognised for their advocacy skills.

Despite the presence of recognised social injustices and structural obstacles that challenge the possibility of doing quality work, advocacy as a professional counseling activity has received little attention in Quebec. Using data collected from a study on interprofessional

collaboration by school counsellors in Quebec, this study explored the advocacy work of school counselors in Quebec as a world-transforming activity from a cultural-historic theoretical perspective.

Advocacy Issues

Analysis of guidance counsellors' work from an interprofessional collaboration perspective has helped identify systemic barriers that arise in the performance of daily work and that hinder students' ability to find their pathway; the advocacy actions taken individually and collectively by guidance counsellors; and the conditions likely to facilitate or hinder the implementation of these actions. Regarding systemic barriers, the research highlights, first, a lack of knowledge of the role and expertise of guidance counsellors. Widely documented in Quebec (Viviers, 2016) and elsewhere (Fickling & Gonzalez, 2016), this lack of awareness and recognition advocates for the use of the expertise of guidance counsellors, particularly in prevention work (Leahy et al., 2016), in order to promote student persistence and well-being in their academic pathway. Indeed, it is the most vulnerable students, who would be most likely to benefit from the specialised knowledge and skills of guidance counsellors, who pay the price. More specifically, despite the legal provisions that should guarantee vulnerable students's access to specialised services, the results of this research show that the work organisation in schools does not allow these rights to be upheld (Burwell & Kalbfleish, 2008; Dionne et al., 2018; Fickling & Gonzalez, 2016).

Furthermore, prejudices, misinformation about careers, and individualising approaches to problems by various actors, including parents, teachers and principals, are all barriers that can reproduce social inequalities or create new ones. Participants revealed the pervasiveness of the negative psychological label of "lack of motivation" assigned to some students who are struggling in their school pathway. These kinds of explanations mask the complexity of

students' social, family, medical and personal situations, as they do contextual factors (Irving, 2010).

Advocacy Strategies and Actions

This qualitative research revealed three types of strategies that characterise the way in which guidance counsellors act with advocacy and thus situate their work as a human development activity within a cultural-historical perspective (Stetsenko, 2016); these are manifestations of what Clot (2017) calls the “professional *genre*.” Firstly, guidance counsellors use their professional know-how, their relational skills typical of the helping professions, to build and maintain a positive alliance with the actors likely to act on the sources of the inequalities suffered by pupils. This is in line with other research (Haskins & Singh, 2016; Singh et al., 2010) and recommendations underscoring the importance of *communication* and *collaboration* skills in advocacy (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Secondly, faced with the well-documented difficulties of having their professional identity recognised (Storlie, et al., 2019; Viviers, 2016), guidance counsellors report the importance of very explicitly demonstrating their professional credibility by justifying the relevance of their point of view, particularly through academic research or legal means, for instance. Douglas (2011) highlighted this strategy used by career guidance practitioners to cope with the managerial ideology that has been spreading for decades in Western school systems. It also echoes many American contributions that advocate the use of data to support advocacy efforts (e.g., Stone & Dahir, 2016). Moreover, this means being present in decision-making bodies, which corresponds to the use of political savvy as reported by some studies (Haskins & Singh, 2016; Singh et al., 2010).

Third, consistent with several other studies (Havlik et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2010), this research, emphasising the need for strategic competence, shows the critical nature of certain personal dispositions that encourage people to overcome fear and be proactive in order to create opportunities for advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged students. This strategy sometimes involves breaking out of traditional ways of practicing, for example by creating alliances with community actors (Haskins & Singh, 2016) or initiating difficult dialogues (Singh et al., 2010), which is not always easy in a highly institutionalised environment such as the school.

Conditions That Support or Hinder Advocacy Actions

Conducted on three different sites, this research juxtaposes several work experiences, and thus illustrates the importance of acting on the working conditions of guidance counsellors when it comes to promoting their profession. First, a low allocation of resources leads to always strategically prioritising what is most urgent, which in turn reduces the time apportioned to counselling (Dionne & Viviers, 2016; Leahy et al., 2016) that would take into consideration the complexity of the situations of the most vulnerable students. Guidance counsellors working in private schools, managed by local executive boards rather than by an organisation covering a large territory such as a school board, face more precarious employment conditions, with more variable job descriptions and no administrative entity that groups them together. They thus find themselves more isolated and more precarious in terms of employment; all of these conditions diminish their sense of power over the situation and, therefore, their advocacy efforts. They often find themselves alone in having to negotiate with their management, which makes them more vulnerable to power struggles. Our research, like many other studies (Dodson, 2009; Havlik et al., 2019; Lowery et al., 2020), shows that the relationship with principals is of paramount importance. Finally, the sense of not being competent to practice advocacy appears to be a major obstacle to engaging in it, as is the desire to avoid conflict (the “nice counsellor

syndrome”; Bemak & Chung, 2008), which argues for more sustained initial and ongoing training in this area. Spaces for discussion and dialogue, such as the one created in the context of this research, are also places for support, mutual assistance and collective action that can help develop a sense of personal effectiveness.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study is obviously related to the fact that it is a secondary analysis of data, which limits completeness. Thus, some avocational issues were probably invisible given that participants were not asked directly about this topic. The narrow focus of the research on interprofessional collaborative activity also contributed to this limitation of comprehensiveness. However, this article makes a very relevant contribution, in that the analysis of guidance counsellors’ activity brings out, “in spite of themselves,” these issues and strategies that we describe here as advocacy. This is a testament to the difficulties guidance counsellors face in doing their work adequately, but also their ability to mobilise to remedy them, as well as the inequalities experienced by the populations they serve. Another limitation of this study is the specific geographical situation of the study sites, which are relatively undiversified in ethnocultural and socioeconomic terms; this may orient and limit the advocacy issues in play, but also possibly the strategies used. At the same time, the study highlights the value of promoting the role of advocacy even in settings less affected by major inequalities. Related to the previous limitation, all of the study participants identified as Caucasian. This lack of racial diversity, considering the Canadian population, which is relatively diverse, constitutes another important limitation.

Based on the relevance, demonstrated in this study, of looking at the day-to-day activity of guidance counsellors who do not identify with or are not particularly trained in the role of advocate, future research should be conducted along the same lines but in geographic contexts

of greater socioeconomic and ethno-cultural diversity, and greater inequality with more diverse counselor populations. An international comparison of the presence of advocacy in the daily practice of guidance counsellors would also be a promising direction for future research.

Conclusion

The methodology of this research has made it possible to bring to light and discuss the strategies used in the current work activity of the members in our groups. It helps underline and illustrate the specificity and complexity of the profession. More specifically, gradually during group work, the real activity of others became visible thanks to the instruction to the double method, which generated affects, collective elaboration and, at two sites, actions to overcome some obstacles faced in their work. As we have demonstrated before (Dionne, Viviers & Saussez, 2019), collective reflections and professional debates inherent to this methodology have helped spark a progressively more conscious subjective and collective relationship to work activity, leading members to consider new opportunities for action. At sites 1 and 3, the clinic of activity methodology generated a collective advocacy movement aimed at raising awareness of their professional field and thus promoting better use of their expertise in school services, for the benefit of more vulnerable students (e.g., dropouts, students with disabilities). The counsellors realised, as Havlik et al. (2019) state, that “if we don’t define our roles, someone else will.” In doing so, they wanted to address an issue of knowledge of the profession that they felt prevented them from fully implementing guidance service that meets the needs of young people in an equitable manner in all schools under their school board. At site 2, during the group activity, support, validation, and controversy raised awareness of the need to address systemic

aspects (including professional advocacy). However, certain social and professional advocacy issues, prescribed by law, appear to have been eluded and rarely defended in school settings. It seems the context of private schools and the perceived impossibility of doing these activities led to a form of counsellor disengagement. In a context of time constraints and precarious employment for some members of the group, their reserved acts ranked as low priorities, compared to other activities. As Sultana (2014) points out, these counsellors struggle with the economic rationality at the school level that guides the organisation of their counselling services. This situation foregrounds the importance of more deeply considering social justice in guidance practices, in order to create collective conditions within the profession to overcome the organisational constraints associated with the ubiquity of economic rationality in education. In addition, this study demonstrates the importance of raising individual and collective consciousness of counsellors' resources in order to help develop the power to act, both for themselves and for the populations they serve.

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Table 1*Demographics and School Settings of the Participants*

Site	Number of group participants	Instructors	Instructors' occupational Experience	Instructors' setting	Other group participants
1	9	1 man, 2 women, Caucasian	More than 10 years	Public high school (2 instructors) Adult learning centre (1 instructor)	6 women, Caucasian
2	6	3 women, Caucasian	5 to 15 years	Private high school (precarious employment status for 2 instructors)	3 women, Caucasian, Private high school
3	9	1 man, 2 women, Caucasian	3 to 15 years	Adult learning centre (2 instructors) Public high school (1 instructor)	6 women, Caucasian