

School Psychology Practice during COVID-19: Individual and Collective Learning from a Multi-Country Study

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In early January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that a highly contagious respiratory illness, known as coronavirus disease (COVID-19) had begun spreading in Wuhan, China (Viner et al., 2020). As COVID-19 continued to quickly proliferate across countries, WHO declared it pandemic on March 11, 2020, to warn against the dangers of the illness (Viner et al., 2020). Subsequently, international leaders and government officials scrambled to prevent COVID-19 cases from further multiplying by rapidly closing school buildings across the world and moving learning online.

By mid-April 2020, 192 countries had closed their schools (Donohue & Miller, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Consequently, more than 90%, or nearly 1.6 billion, of the world's elementary and secondary students were impacted, forcing educators to abruptly transition their services from in-person to online learning platforms (United Nations, 2020). Distance learning or virtual delivery of educational services involved the physical separation of students and educators, and the use of computers, tablets, or other technologies to facilitate staff-student communication, learning, and school-based supports (Viner et al., 2020).

School Psychological Services

One educational professional group that was impacted by school closures and distance learning were school psychologists. According to the International School Psychology Association (n. d.), school psychologists provide “psychological services to children and youth within the contexts of schools, families, and other settings that impact their growth and development” (para. 1). School psychologists engage in counselling, consultation, crisis preparedness and response, and development of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional

interventions (Ritchie et al., 2021). A significant part of their role in many countries is completing assessments related to identifying students with disability, social-emotional concerns, or specific learning challenges (Walcott & Hyson, 2018). However, when schools closed due to COVID-19, school psychologists no longer had direct physical access to students (Brock & Holland, 2021), and accordingly, had to identify new ways to complete their duties, to support teachers and parents, and provide services to children.

Impact of COVID-19 on School Psychology Services

A small, but growing, number of studies have documented the impact that COVID-19 and school closures had on school psychology services. In Canada and the United States of America (USA), school psychologists reported working less hours, spending less time on assessment but more time providing counselling services to students (Ritchie et al. 2021; Schaffer et al. 2021). Likewise, a multi-country investigation of school psychologists across Germany, Australia, Canada and the USA found that a greater proportion of participants from the USA and Canada reported a decrease in working hours during COVID-19 (Reupert et al., 2021). Additionally, results showed that school psychology services across the four countries shifted from completing psychoeducational assessments to virtual counselling, consultation with parents and teachers, and the development/posting of online support directly to children or parents to use with their children (Reupert et al., 2021).

Current Study

The current study is another multi-country investigation into the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists during the COVID-19 pandemic, involving school psychologists from the USA, Australia, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Given the global impact that COVID-19 had on the delivery of school psychological services, there is a need to understand

what changes were reported by practitioners in the field. Additionally, there is a need to understand what factors supported school psychologists in the delivery of services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in each country. Lastly, there is a need to promote the internationalization of the field of school psychology in light of a global pandemic.

Internationalization can be defined as an intentional and intercultural collaborative process to understand how school psychologists apply their practices, address psychological phenomena, and synthesize knowledge generated through research on a global scale (Begeny et al., 2018a). One of the goals of internationalization is to show how the practice of school psychology may differ and extend beyond a particular nation, region, or culture to promote the international expansion of the field (Arfken, 2012). Therefore, internationalization seeks to create a culturally informed, inclusive, and internationally applicable profession to enhance training, improve international relations, and synthesize theories, practices, and/or data across countries (Begeny et al., 2018b). Through the lens of internationalization, the overarching goal of this research was to identify the individual and collective strengths and learnings across countries that could be shared to further enhance the delivery of school psychology services. The specific research questions which guided this inquiry included:

1. What changes to practice were reported by school psychologists across countries in response to COVID-19 restrictions?
2. What factors supported school psychologists in the delivery of services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in each country?

Methods

Research Design

A mixed methods multiple case study design drawing on the collated qualitative and quantitative data collected across countries was selected to respond to the research questions (Yin, 1984). A case study design was chosen to draw together information from different data sources in order to contextualise the experiences and responses to COVID-19 by school psychologists across participating countries and to identify individual and collective strengths and learnings. Case study design is an appropriate research design where the aims of research are to investigate complex contextual conditions as opposed to isolated individual variables (Yin, 1993).

Participants

A total of 1030 participants took part in the study (UK, $n = 92$; USA, $n = 665$; Germany, $n = 140$; Canada, $n = 48$; Australia, $n = 85$). The majority of participants were female (90.72%) and aged between 31 and 50 years of age (59.06%). Almost 60% of participants had between 0 and 10 years of experience (57.23%), with 42.77% of participants reporting more than 10 years' experience in their role. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of participants who took part in the study, including participants' working locations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost two-thirds of school psychologists in the UK reported a change in their working hours during the pandemic, with 19% each reporting an increase and a decrease to their hours of work. Approximately two-thirds of school psychologists (61.68%) in the USA reported a decrease in their working hours, with 18.73% reporting an increase in their hours, whereas over half of participants from Canada (57.45%) reported a decrease in their working hours, with just 4.26% reporting an increase in their working hours. Only 2.86% of school psychologists in Germany reported an increase to their working hours and 5% reported a decrease to their working hours and approximately a third (32.93%) of school psychologists in Australia reported

an increase in their working hours during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 9.76% reporting a decrease in working hours.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Information (N = 1030)*

Demographic Information	United Kingdom		United States of America		Canada		Germany		Australia	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age										
≤30 ^a / 21-29 ^b	20	21.74	171	25.71	5	10.42	19	13.57	20	24.39
31-40/ 30-39	31	33.70	248	37.29	19	39.58	44	31.43	27	32.93
41-50/ 40-49	17	18.48	147	21.11	9	18.75	30	21.43	30	36.59
51-60/ 50-59	17	18.48	78	11.73	14	29.19	24	17.14	5	6.09
≥61/ ≥60	3	3.26	21	3.16	1	2.08	11	7.86	0	0
NA ^c	4	4.35	0	0	0	0	12	8.57	0	0
Gender										
Male	10	10.87	52	7.82	3	6.25	18	12.86	6	7.31
Female	79	85.87	612	92.03	45	93.75	118	84.26	76	92.69
Gender variant/ non-conforming	1	1.09	1	0.15	0	0	1	0.71	0	0
NA	2	2.17	0	0	0	0	3	2.13	0	0
Years of Experience										
0-4 years	25	27.17	202	30.38	17	35.42	46	32.86	43	53.75
5-9 years	11	11.96	171	25.71	10	20.83	40	28.57	17	21.25
10-19	30	32.61	181	27.22	14	29.17	33	23.57	15	18.75
≥20 years	21	22.83	111	16.69	7	14.58	18	12.86	5	6.25
NA	5	5.43	0	0	0	0	3	2.14	0	0

Demographic Information	United Kingdom		United States of America		Canada		Germany		Australia	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Working from home		92.39	-	-	-	-	-	-		38.82
Working from a regional office		22.83	-	-	-	-		14.28		-
Working from regional office and schools		-	-	-	-	-		20.71		40
Working from home and regional office		22.83	-	-	-	-		-		-
Working from home, regional office and schools		22.83	-	-	-	-		36.43		15

Note. ^aResponse options in the USA/Canadian/Australian surveys. ^bResponse options in the German survey. For the UK survey we grouped participants' responses on their exact age to the response options used in the German survey. ^cNA = No response. ^dThis response option was added in the German survey, as school psychologists in Bavaria are trained teachers with an additional official examination in psychology.

Procedure

Survey administration

Ethics approval was sought from relevant committees in each country, with the exception of Germany on the advice of the [blinded for review] University ethics committee (due to the anonymous nature of the data collected and the lack of conceivable harm to participants associated with study participation). Following ethics approval, the survey was pilot tested with a small group of school psychologists ($N \leq 15$) in each country. No changes to the survey content or design were required following pilot testing. A convenience method was used to recruit participants in each country. The surveys were distributed within the networks of research teams, through professional associations and via a range of social media channels.

Materials

With permission, an online survey developed by the research team in the USA (Schaffer et al., 2020) was employed in this study. The survey was adapted to align with the specific context of each country, including translation of the survey to German and back-translation to English to ensure consistency of items. Items in the original survey were developed on the basis of a review of the scholarly literature in relation to the impacts of previous pandemics and crisis response (Schaffer et al., 2020). Survey items were designed to inquire about demographic information, services provided by school psychologists before and during COVID-19, and enablers for practice and methods of delivering support services to students.

Data Analysis

A mixed methods multiple case study design was selected to respond to the research questions. Quantitative survey items were analysed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences 26 (SPSS-26). Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables of relevance to the

current study, including frequencies and percentages for categorical and dichotomous variables, and means and standard deviations for continuous variables. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify codes and themes across open-ended survey items (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To ensure the validity of identified themes, members of research teams across different countries (BLINDED) reviewed and refined themes where necessary.

Results

What changes to practice were reported by participants across countries in response to COVID-19 restrictions?

United Kingdom

Participants in the UK identified a range of changes to their practice as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Of particular note, less non-statutory assessments were conducted during COVID-19 as compared to before COVID-19. However, the proportion of statutory assessments (assessment of a child's special educational needs) conducted during COVID-19 did not reduce substantially. Group consultations with students and parent training reduced during COVID-19. However, provision of consultation support to parents and consultation with individual professionals (including Special Educational Needs Coordinators, Teachers and Speech and Language Therapists) remained consistent during the pandemic. There was no reduction in the proportion of participants providing individual consultations to students, however much of this support was provided online during COVID-19 using online platforms (83%), engaging in video observations (35%), or by sending (email/posted) information about social emotional, behavioral or academic interventions to parents (70%). There was an increase in the delivery of webinars during COVID-19. Most participants from the UK (84%) reported that they anticipated longer term changes to their practice resulting from the pandemic, especially regarding the delivery of

online services and hybrid models of support which is expected to continue beyond the pandemic.

United States of America

Consistent with findings from the UK, participants in the USA reported spending a greater proportion of time providing consultancy services to parents and teachers, as well as developing interventions and supports related to student wellbeing to assist teachers and parents during COVID-19. Participants in the USA also reported spending a greater proportion of their time on Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and on providing counselling to students during COVID-19, as opposed to before the pandemic.

Almost half of participants from the USA (48.15%) reported providing telehealth interventions or telecounselling using webcam or telephone during COVID-19, with 30.81% of participants reporting that they developed or posted videos on interventions for parents to use to address the social-emotional, behavioral, or academic challenges of their children during the pandemic. Over a third of participants from the USA (38.96%) also reported using databases or websites to post social-emotional, behavioral, or academic interventions to support students' mental health during COVID-19.

Canada

As with the USA and the UK, participants in Canada reported no change in the proportion of time spent on the provision of counselling services for students during COVID-19. Participants in Canada reported providing psychological services using a range of delivery methods throughout the pandemic, including telehealth interventions or telecounselling to students via webcam or telephone (43.75%), developing or posting videos on approaches to address common social, emotional, behavioral, or academic concerns of students that

parents/caregivers can use with their children (33.33%), and the use of databases, such as Google classroom, to post social, emotional, behavioral, or academic activities to children (27.08%).

Participants in Canada also reported a changed focus for their role during COVID-19 in terms of greater provision of services involving consultation and collaboration with parents and teachers, as well as the development and sharing of resources.

Germany

Participants in Germany also reported no change in the proportion of their time spent on the provision of counselling services and consultations with parents during COVID-19, however they described a shift in the mode of delivery of these services. A large proportion (84.28%) reported providing telehealth interventions or telecounselling to students via webcam or telephone during the pandemic, with almost half (44.28%) of the participants in Germany reporting mailing packets or newsletters to parents with advice about social, emotional, behavioral, or academic strategies for students.

Consistent with other countries, participants in Germany reported an increased focus during COVID-19 on consultation with leadership and web-based resource development in order to support student mental health as opposed to before the pandemic. A large proportion (82.17%) of participants in Germany reported that COVID-19 will change the way school psychology services will be provided over the longer term, with many reporting a continued focus on the provision of online support and consultation using digital delivery methods beyond the pandemic.

Australia

As with other countries, participants in Australia reported no change in the focus of their role in relation to the provision of counselling support throughout the pandemic. Australian

participants also reported no change in the focus of their role in terms of identifying students at risk. Consistent with other countries, support was provided primarily via telehealth interventions or telecounselling to students via webcam or telephone (77.65%), with some (23.53%) reporting developing or posting informational videos on common social, emotional, behavioral, or academic concerns that parents/caregivers can use with their children. Some (25.88%) used databases such as Google classroom to post social, emotional, behavioral, or academic interventions to children and some psychologists (21.18%) adopted mailing packets or newsletters with social, emotional, behavioral, or academic interventions. Participants in Australia reported a greater focus on researching interventions and supports and the provision of universal social-emotional supports to school communities during COVID-19 as compared to before the pandemic. Over half of participants from Australia (56.67%) reported that COVID-19 would result in long term changes to practice, including increased provision of online service provision and use of online tools.

What factors supported participants in the delivery of services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in each country?

United Kingdom

Participants in the UK reported a number of factors that supported them in the delivery of services to students, parents and school communities during COVID-19. Thematic analysis of responses to open-ended survey items revealed two over-arching themes in terms of supportive factors: wellbeing of school psychologists and working practices and professional development. In terms of school psychologist wellbeing, a number of subthemes were identified including support from family, friends and pets; support from colleagues and connectedness to their team; support from virtual school psychology communities (i.e., through social media); keeping active

and getting outside; and mindfulness or resilience approaches. The sub-themes identified within the working practices and professional development theme included creativity with online working; flexible working arrangements and support from management; professional development and webinars; ICT support and access to technology from local authorities; breaks from screen time; and support from virtual school psychology communities.

United States of America

Participants in the USA were asked to identify which self-care activity was most helpful in coping with stressful times during the COVID-19 pandemic. The largest proportion of participants identified exercise (40.03%) as the most helpful self-care strategy, followed by spending time with family/significant others (13.09%), participating in outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, gardening) (11.57%), videoconference meetings with friends (6.39%), watching television (5.18%), meditating/mindfulness/yoga (4.72%), pet care/pet adoption (3.04%), playing games/puzzles (2.74%), listening to music (2.28%), arts and crafts (1.82%) and watching movies (0.91%).

Canada

Participants from Canada were asked to identify which self-care activity was most helpful in coping with stressful times during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with those from USA, the largest proportion of participants from Canada identified exercise (47.83%) as the most helpful self-care strategy, followed by participating in outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, gardening) (15.22%), spending time with family/significant others (10.87%), videoconference meetings with friends (4.35%), pet care/pet adoption (4.35%), watching television (4.35%), meditating/mindfulness/yoga (2.17%), playing games/puzzles (2.17%), listening to music (2.17%), arts and crafts (2.17%) and watching movies (2.17%).

Germany

Thematic analysis of responses to open-ended survey items yielded a number of themes in relation to the factors that supported participants in Germany during COVID-19. These included having access to alternative communication pathways (including multiple means of connecting with students, parents and staff); access to adequate resources; having a mobile workplace; effective collaboration with colleagues; efficient time management; work relief and motivation; and having access to additional information to support their practice.

Australia

Participants in Australia identified a number of factors that supported them during COVID-19, including access to a range of different communication pathways; peer support and supervision; the reduced requirement to conduct assessments (resulting in more time for the provision of other support to students, parents and school staff); increased collaboration with parents; having sufficient time to provide the support required; access to appropriate technology; access to a suitable work space (particularly if working from home); and workplace policies and procedure.

Discussion

COVID-19 related restrictions threatened to undermine the ability of school psychologists to carry out their regular duties, prompting a need to understand how these professionals adapted their practices during these times and how these adaptations may have varied between countries. When examining the impact of the pandemic on school psychologists' work patterns, a number of differences emerged despite the considerable overlap in their roles and responsibilities (International School Psychology Association, n.d.). For instance, over half of participants in the USA and Canada reported a decrease in working hours, which previous

studies have associated with reduced opportunities to perform psychoeducational assessments (Reupert, 2020; Schaffer et al., 2020). Conversely, the pattern was different in the UK, Germany and Australia, with more stability in working patterns observed due to a number of factors. For German school psychologists, the majority reported that their work patterns were largely unchanged. In the UK, participants were required to meet their statutory assessment responsibilities during the pandemic. In contrast, more than one third of Australian participants reported an increase in their workload during COVID-19.

In terms of changed practices, in all nations, school psychologists reported a shift to online working to support children, young people, their parents/carers and school staff. The speed with which school psychologists in this study were able to shift to online working arrangements to ensure that clients continued to access individual consultations and counselling at the same rate as pre-pandemic is notable. All participants shifted their practice focus from psychoeducational assessments to consultation and intervention, and through this process, they continued to support children's social-emotional and academic needs. This shift may highlight the usually underutilised skills of school psychologists to work within a preventative framework (Eckersley & Depler, 2013; Hill, 2013; McNamara et al., 2019). When changes to practice were examined between countries, the findings indicate that as UK participants were required to continue to complete statutory assessments within legally defined time frames, the proportion of statutory work completed did not change during the pandemic. This requirement led to national professional associations offering prompt guidance about online working and the use of standardised assessments (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2020; British Psychological Society, 2020). Working within this context provided the opportunity for UK school psychologists to embrace the creativity offered by online working, allowing them to take

advantage of the opportunity to move away from formal standardised assessment approaches and to provide greater consultation.

Regarding school psychologists in the USA and Canada, there was a significant shift in the focus of their work, from a perceived dominance of psychoeducational assessments to consultation and counselling, a finding found previously (Reupert et al., 2021; Schaffer 2020). Yet, participants in the USA made similar observations as those in the UK about the changes and developments made to embrace a wider skill set. This included telecounselling and spending more time supporting students through IEP meetings. The shift in practice is an important response to the increased mental health needs of students associated with the psychological impact of lockdowns (Campbell, 2020; Tso et al., 2020) and as such, it is perhaps not surprising that Canadian participants reported similar developments in online practice and described reaching a wider range of stakeholders in the school community to enhance their capacity to meet student's mental health needs.

Although German school psychologists reported no changes in the focus of their practice during the pandemic, the majority of participants described a shift in the modality of delivery, including the provision of telehealth interventions and counselling via webcam or telephone and the posting of resources to students to support their social-emotional, behavioral and academic needs. As was the case with Canadian participants, they also reported an increased focus on consultations with school leaders to enhance their capacity to respond to students' mental health needs. Finally, as far as Australian school psychologists were concerned, the majority of participants reported pivoting to provide counselling services using telehealth and telecounselling via webcam or telephone, and the development of online resources to support students' learning, and social-emotional needs. The Australian participants were the only group

to report their continued engagement with risk assessment, while working online. Although this crucial feature of the role may well be very challenging to operationalize whilst working remotely, given the global reports of increases in child protection and safeguarding issues during the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021), this finding might be of particular relevance for the internationalization of school psychology practices and highlights the need for future training and online at risk identification processes.

When asked about the likelihood of practice changes becoming established ways of working, participants noted that online working had proved both effective and efficient. Most UK participants indicated that they anticipated adopting hybrid models of work by integrating the best features of face to face and online working, post pandemic. The majority of German school psychologists explained that their experiences of online consultation and digital delivery methods would be beneficial in extending their service delivery in the future. Likewise, many Australian participants reported that there would be an increased use of online service delivery and tools in the future.

School psychologists from all nations highlighted the importance of self-care strategies. Participants described the importance of remaining socially connected with family and friends, with those from Canada, Germany, USA and the UK mentioning the importance of pets and/or animal adoption as part of their self-help and well-being strategies. Likewise, the majority of participants valued the role of physical activity and getting outside. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of maintaining connections with colleagues and the wider professional community via virtual professional networks, or by accessing supervision and support from line managers, seeing this as crucial to their well-being.

When reflecting on their experiences of working remotely during the pandemic, several key factors relating to resources were identified. Of critical importance was access to appropriate technology, IT support and training and identifying a suitable workspace in the home. Furthermore, having clear, consistent and timely workplace policies and procedures in place was also important. For example, having guidance on data protection requirements and for conducting online assessments was highlighted by school psychologists, especially for participants in Germany and Australia. Once assessment guidance was in place, an online mode of delivery facilitated creative responses for evolving school psychology working practices, including a shift to online consultation to support students, as well as using consultation to build the capacity of school staff and parents to support children and young people. These findings highlight how systemic structures and features, including appropriate resources, infrastructure, culture and leadership promote both individual and organizational resilience (as per Taylor et al., 2019). Broad systemic support is arguably even more important during emergency situations such as a pandemic and should therefore be part of future planning for such events.

Implications

This project explored how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school psychologists working in five different nations around the world and how they adapted their practice to support their communities during this time. The findings can inform international school psychology planning in response to future crises, and highlights the importance of:

- Timely practice guidance from professional associations and/or employers,
- Access to adequate resources, technology, technical support and training in its use, to support the transition to different modes of practice,

- Supervision and support systems to allow individuals to remain connected with colleagues and to support the sense of belonging during remote working,
- Targeted support to promote individual self-care and well-being, and
- Flexibility in working practices to support mental health and well-being, whilst managing the competing demands of home schooling and working and setting up a workstation in the home context.

Limitations

This study was conducted during the pandemic to capture different national responses of school psychologists to school closures and COVID-19. Although participants have many common professional characteristics, there are differences in their roles and functions and as such the data is not consistent across each nation. There were also some variations in the wording of survey questions to reflect these differences and there were variations in the response types to some items for particular countries. Not all nations have qualitative data for all items. Moreover, the results are limited to westernised and developed countries. Likewise, the demographic data of participants suggests a lack of cultural and linguistic diversity. Ethnicity data was collected differently to reflect national reporting systems but given the small samples from each nation, they may not be representative.

The successive waves of the pandemic impacted the nations involved this study at different times and with different levels of intensity, and this led to some differences in the timing of data collection. Some of the national responses reflect only the first wave of the virus, whilst others reflect their responses over two or three waves. Furthermore, given the convenience recruitment method, it was not possible to estimate the response rate. However, the variation in participant numbers reflects broad differences in student and psychologist numbers across

countries, due to differences in population size. The sampling methods may have introduced bias as links to the surveys were advertised on social media and some professional association webpages.

Conclusions

This study considered how the COVID-19 virus and associated school closures impacted on the practices of school psychologists in five countries. The majority of participants identified positive developments in practice that may remain as part of a future hybrid model of service delivery. The long-held desire in the profession to reduce the demands of assessment work to enable a relatively broader focus on consultation and intervention work has to some extent been achieved, however it will be important to explore if this shift is sustained as a longer-term outcome of the pandemic and the potential impact of this shift on student learning and wellbeing outcomes. The increases in parent and teacher consultations may have enhanced the capacity of school psychologists to respond to children and young people's needs. The need for travel will be reduced, if some consultations remain online, thereby reducing the profession's carbon footprint and promoting access for those who may not be able to attend face to face meetings. It will be helpful to evaluate the impact of new ways of working over the coming years to ascertain what changes become embedded in practice.

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