Perceptions of educational counseling as a profession: The role of education

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Abstract

This study examined the status of educational-counseling as a profession, as perceived by 311 counselors and teachers, using a Mixed-Methods Design. Findings exposed perceptions of the professional's unique knowledge, his sources of power and his future. While findings indicated a high degree of recognition of the counselor's power, knowledge and education were not deemed his major sources of power. The counselor's uniqueness and commitment were perceived to a lower level by participants with advanced degrees. Implications concern the role of education and specialization in the empowerment of the profession and the professional.

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1. Introduction

The counseling profession has long struggled to consolidate its status as a profession (Mellin, Hunt & Nichols, 2011). Despite attempts to define the counseling as a profession, it remains questionable whether counseling has achieved the status of a profession, as perceived by the professionals and by the population the counselors serve.

Educational counselors are seeking for recognition as unique powerful professionals within both the mental health care services (Wagner, 2003) and the education systems (Sears & Haag Granello, 2002), and education is considered an important factor in gaining that recognition (Smith & Robinson, 1995). Advanced level of education is currently a prerequisite requirement for counselors' licensure in many countries. Education is one of the characteristics that define a profession (Burrage & Trosendhal, 1990).

Therefore this study examined perceptions of educational counseling as a profession, as perceived by teachers and counselors, and in particular aimed at exploring the role of education in the recognition of the profession and the professional.

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2. Research questions

The overall goal of the study was to investigate counseling’s status as a profession, as perceived by counselors and teachers: perceptions of the professional's unique knowledge, his sources of power and his future. Moreover, the study examined, to what extent do differences exist in the way each of those aspects is perceived in relation to level of education (Bachelor’s degree versus advanced degrees)?

3. Methods

The methodology employed in the present study was a Mixed-Methods Exploratory Sequential Design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003). In this design, findings of the qualitative explorative phase of the study guide the development of the quantitative instrument, and the quantitative aspect of the study is emphasized.

3.1. Participants

For the qualitative phase, 20 school counselors, of diverse age and experience, were interviewed. In the quantitative phase there were 311 participants: 134 school counselors and 177 teachers.

3.2. Instruments

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview questions related to the role of the counselor, sources of empowerment, challenges and the counselor's future.

The quantitative instrument was a questionnaire, formulated on the basis of both the theoretical background and the content-analysis of the interviews in the qualitative research phase. Pursuant to the review of three experts and a pilot of 34 participants, several alterations were made and the final questionnaire comprised several parts, including:

- The counselor's unique knowledge- A scale included 6-point Likert scale items, regarding the uniqueness of the counselor's knowledge in the education settings (e.g., "If teachers had the time, they would almost not need a counselor at school"; "Much of the assistance rendered by the counselor can also be obtained from other sources"). The Cronbach's alpha was .639.

- The counselors' power- (a) A scale included 6-point Likert scale items (e.g. "The counselor has the power to influence the school system"; "The counselor occupies a central position at school"). The Cronbach’s alpha was .819; (b) A question in which the participants were asked to choose the counselor’s main source of power from a list. A categorical index was constructed, containing two categories: Professional (knowledge, education, skills) and Personal (personality and relationships with others at school).

- The counselor's future- An item on a 6-point Likert scale that examined the extent to which the respondents believed that the counselor would remain a counselor in the education settings.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed personally to counselors and teachers. The rate of response was 95%. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and honoured.

4. Results

4.1. The counselor's unique knowledge

Overall, a moderate degree of the level of recognition of the counselor’s power was found (among counselors M=3.76, SD=0.79; among teachers M=3.49, SD=1.04). A significant effect of level of education was found
[F(1,295)=6.69; p<.01]: holders of advanced degrees (M=3.45, SD=0.88) perceived the uniqueness of the counselor’s knowledge on a lower level than the holders of Bachelor’s degrees (M=3.76, SD=1.00).

4.2. The counselor's power

The overall level of recognition of the counselor’s power was high (among counselors M=5.20, SD=0.64; among teachers M=4.48, SD=0.95). Examining the perceptions of the counselor’s main source of power, professional (knowledge, education, skills) versus personal (personality and relationships), only 37.9% chose the professional aspect as the main source of the counselor’s power (32.5% chose skills, 4.3% chose knowledge, and 1.1% chose education), while 62.1% of the participants chose the personal aspect as the source of the counselor’s power (44% chose personality and 18.1% chose relationships).

4.3. The counselor's future

Differences were found with regard to the level of education [F(1,282)=8.50; p<.01]: holders of advanced degrees perceived the counselor's commitment to a lower degree (M=4.37, SD=1.42) than holders of Bachelor’s degrees (M=4.78, SD=1.30).

5. Discussion

The Counselors were perceived as having a power of influence in the education system to a high degree, both by counselors and teachers. But this is not the case as regards the counselor's exclusive knowledge: perceptions of the counselor as having a unique knowledge was found only to a moderate degree. This aspect of research into counseling as an exclusive profession is very important, in light of the struggle of the profession for recognition.

Alongside the moderate level of exclusive professional knowledge, education-related professional characteristics (knowledge, education, skills) were perceived as less central among the counselors' sources of power. This may shed light on the perceptions of lower commitment among holders of advanced degrees, as if level of education is not highly regarded in this profession, as Rubin (2008) found in her qualitative study: Despite the perception of the importance of studies, these were perceived as “inaccessible power” since they can't serve as empowering the counselor. Since advanced degree holders found the counseling profession less unique in the present study, one way of enticing them to remain in the system may be via specialization. Further specialization might also improve the recognition of the unique professional knowledge of the counselor.

The present study stresses the importance of placing the education level in the foreground as a factor that should be examined in studies in the field, a factor that has been so far neglected: to explore the meaning and contribution of professionalism, expertise, level of education and knowledge, to the counseling profession and to the professional. In addition, research implications for policy entail increased recognition of the need to entice high level educated counselors to remain in the system.

References