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Mandate and a New Resource for
Canadian School Counsellors
Jeff Chang and Kristy McConnell

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Social Justice: Do Canadian School Counsellors Play a Role?

Shelley Skelton and Dawn Lorraine McBride

Abstract

It is our purpose to report the results of a nationwide survey of school counsellors regarding their current level of understanding of social justice, perceptions of marginalization in Canadian schools and different forms of advocacy within this profession. The role of school counsellors in Canada continues to evolve as school counselling becomes more professionalized. Advocating for marginalized student populations often falls under the unofficial responsibilities and ethical role of the school counsellor. This study found that the majority of school counsellors engage in a number of different forms of social justice. However, their conceptualizations of social justice and marginalization as well as their level of engagement in social justice vary considerably.

The prevailing goal of school counsellors is “to have a positive impact on schools and communities” (Ockerman and Mason 2012, 7). One way to generate such an impact is through promoting social justice. However, no research has reported Canadian school counsellors’ descriptions of their roles and responsibilities with respect to social justice activities. To address this gap, we undertook a national survey to determine if and how school counsellors in Canada are involved in social justice issues. In this paper, we define social justice and describe the skills necessary to promote it, describe the survey methodology and results, and discuss the implications of this research

Social Justice: An Overview

Social justice is grounded in equity through the use of advocacy, often involving issues of equality, multiculturalism, ethical decision making, equity of resources and inclusion (Walker 2006). It is a process of human rights, fairness and access to resources and opportunities (National Pro Bono Research Centre 2011). According to the American Counseling Association (ACA 2014), social justice involves counsellors and community leaders

working toward ending oppression and injustices in such institutional systems as schools or places of employment. One significant common factor in the majority of social justice definitions is the concept of equity (ACA 2014; Gale 2000; Nastasi 2008; Walker 2006) and multiculturalism, each of which we introduce below.

Equity is about fairness and is not to be confused with equality. This distinction is particularly important when dominant and marginalized populations are involved. Marginalized populations are those who have been excluded from, or do not have equal access to, the benefits of mainstream social, economic, cultural or political life. Marginalization can be identified through a number of factors, including race, religion, language, sexual orientation, age, gender or socioeconomic status, to name a few (Givens 2008).

Social justice is an action that school counsellors and others take in response to oppression and injustices to marginalized populations. Therefore, social justice also requires a foundation in multicultural competence (Nastasi 2008). The underpinning of multicultural competence is awareness, both of self and others, particularly as it relates to attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills ... [to understand] the worldview of the other as well as to foster a working relationship that is sensitive to the person’s cultural (Arthur and Collins 2005, 48) albeit often marginalized group. According to Bruccoleri (2008), in order to foster the advocacy against oppression and injustices against marginalized populations, and to pursue equality for all, social justice involves four possible branches: legal, distributive, participative and liberative.

Branches

Social justice practice can be deconstructed into these four branches, each with specific competencies (Bruccoleri 2008). The legal justice branch involves knowledge about how laws and regulations affect social justice practice. School counsellors practise legal

justice when they advocate that school staff and other professionals adhere to privacy legislation, regulations and laws defining professional standards of practice, and to the principles of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

On the other hand, distributive justice is based on skills and knowledge used to promote equity (Bruccoleri 2008). This involves the distribution of resources according to need. For example, in a school this could involve the allocation of funds to purchase materials for a program that supports a marginalized group of students, such as a remedial program for a small number of students.

The last two branches overlap in empowering the marginalized to have a voice and presence. Participative justice ensures those who need advocacy are given a voice to express their needs and offer input into decisions affecting them. Likewise, liberative justice focuses on empowering and helping marginalized populations reach their potential (Bruccoleri 2008). In a school context, liberative justice could take the form of students from lower socioeconomic statuses having equal access to advanced classes or programming in their schools.

Competencies

To practise social justice, specific competencies, based on knowledge and awareness, are foundational. At the core of these competencies is self-awareness—understanding one’s cultural identity (Parikh, Post and Flowers 2011)—and how one’s identity has or has not contributed to privilege, power and oppression (Hunsaker 2011). This kind of intensive self-review supports multicultural competence and increases one’s awareness of how various cultures conceptualize struggles, healing and well-being. These competencies can be gained through personal and professional development (Kelly 2012). Also, reviewing one’s professional ethics (Nastasi 2008), using research (Carr 2008; Dahir and Stone 2009; Dowden 2010), becoming a leader (Walker 2006; Dowden 2010), collaborating and creating awareness (Hunsaker 2011) all play a role in social justice.

Given that some of these social justice competencies require political savvy (Singh et al 2010), it can be useful for school counsellors to study some of Ryan’s (2010) political tactics. Relationship building, organization, persuasion, experimentation, a subtle approach to advocacy and persistence are five political tactics that can be helpful to school counsellors.

Relationship Building

School counsellors have already learned skills in establishing relationships through their counselling training. These skills include active listening, maintaining objectivity, recognizing nonverbal communication, repairing ruptures in relationship, collaborating and

demonstrating empathy. These valuable competencies help facilitate relationships with students, parents, colleagues and administrators.

Organization

Walker (2006) believes it is essential to establish a framework that involves ethical considerations, leadership and accountability when school counsellors engage in social justice. Walker suggests that in developing a diversity plan of action, counsellors first list the social issues that are evident and what is needed to address inequalities. Then, effort can be directed to educating the school community about social justice issues through activities such as professional development, building community connections or facilitating student clubs. Conducting research in the school can provide the credibility needed to provide such leadership (Ryan 2010).

Persuasion and Experimentation

School counsellors can use action research to describe social inequities in their schools, and can both guide social justice work and support its legitimacy (Dowden 2010). The aim of action research is to find a solution to a specific issue or problem in a particular environment (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). Dahir and Stone (2009, 3) suggest the MEASURE method of counsellor-led action research; the first three letters of this acronym represent a mission, elements to be measured and analysis. Next, stakeholders, such as the principal, staff and members of the school community work together to create social change. The results of this social action are then assessed, and the school counsellor’s final step is educating others about the process.

Subtle Approach to Advocacy

Lewis et al (2011) recommend starting advocacy at the school level, beginning with the students (Dowden 2010) and then including staff, administrators and parents. Without the support of the principal, advocacy is unlikely to be successful (Ryan 2010). Moving onto a broader, more public platform, school counsellors may attempt to sway public opinion or impact municipal policy (Dowden 2010). This requires interdisciplinary collaboration (Bemak and Chung 2005; Lewis et al 2011) and involves shared decision making to redistribute power, visits to others’ workplaces to deconstruct boundaries, and a clear understanding of individual roles and responsibilities in the collaborative process (Schultz 2011).

Persistence

School counsellors who are prepared to face predictable barriers to social justice are more likely to be able to persevere through them. The most frequently noted obstacle to social justice work is attachment to the status

quo (Akos and Galassi 2004; Bruccoleri 2008; Dowden 2010; Higgenbottom and Friesen 2013). This can include resistant colleagues who lack knowledge about social justice (Lewis et al 2011), pre-existing norms and values about equity within the school (Nastasi 2008; Walker 2006), and one's desire to avoid conflict (Singh et al 2010). Navigating these potential obstacles requires relationship skills, communication, self-awareness and leadership.

The practical application of social justice through competencies and strategies can be summarized with five key points. First, knowledge precedes action. Second, social justice begins at the most conservative level working with students. Third, school counsellors already have some vital competencies for social justice. Fourth, advocating for social justice means becoming a leader. Fifth, because so many strategies are interdependent, the only way to move forward is to do so incrementally and intentionally by recognizing that small steps taken in the branches of social justice work builds simultaneous momentum within a number of competencies.

Methodology

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Lethbridge where the second author is affiliated. The online survey was self-authored in English and available through SurveyMonkey. It was distributed to potential respondents through two routes. After receiving approval from the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, we e-mailed the School Counsellors' Chapter membership and asked the leaders of provincial school counselling associations to send our request to their members. In the fall of 2013, 196 surveys were completed.

To be included in the study, participants were currently or recently employed in Canada as a school counsellor, or in a school position in which providing counselling was part of the job description. Demographically, the respondents were from Alberta (32.1 per cent), New Brunswick (20.4 per cent), British Columbia (18.4 per cent), and Newfoundland and Labrador (16.8 per cent), and Saskatchewan (5.1 per cent), with other provinces and territories contributing fewer than 5 per cent of the respondent pool. Professionally, 156 (79.6 per cent) described themselves as school counsellors; the rest described themselves as school psychologists (7), family-school liaison workers (5), social workers (2), resource teachers (5), career practitioners (1) and "other" (20). In terms of employment status, 140 (71.4 per cent) worked full time, 45 (23 per cent) worked part time, and 11 (5.6 per cent) described themselves as "no longer working." Seventy-nine (40.3 per cent) worked in elementary schools, 65 (33.1 per cent) in junior high, 92 (46.9 per cent) in senior high and 44 (22.5 per cent) at a combination of

grade levels. One hundred and nine (56 per cent) respondents stated that they worked in an urban area, 78 (40 per cent) in a rural setting and 9 (4 per cent) reported "other." Although we attempted to distribute the survey to all Canadian provinces and territories, no one from Nunavut, Ontario or Quebec responded.

The survey comprised 19 questions. Six were demographic. Eleven questions focused on social justice. These explored participants' understanding of social justice, which we introduce in this way: "Within the school context, social justice involves the advocacy for marginalized populations so that they may benefit as fully as the dominant population from the resources and opportunities within a society." We also inquired of their beliefs about social justice as part of their role in the schools, if they consider promoting the social justice part of their job, the social justice activities they have been involved in, obstacles to participating in social justice activities, their perceived level of success, and possible contributors to their success.

Two questions concerned marginalization, which we defined as unfair access to resources and opportunities in the school. One question required participants to give their definition; the other asked them to identify student populations they believed to be marginalized.

Data Analysis

Data were collected through SurveyMonkey in which 196 participants responded to multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Data shown in bar graphs represent multiple-choice questions that allowed participants to choose more than one answer from a list compiled by the authors. Data in either pie graphs or tables correspond to multiple-choice questions in which only one answer was permitted.

We employed a qualitative content analysis methodology for this study. We chose this method for its flexibility, in that researchers have the opportunity to read through the data, identify patterns to create clusters of data and draw inferences (Marsh and White 2006). Data representing definitions of restorative justice was set aside and not further analyzed. The remaining data was clustered into the two following categories: nouns and verbs. Frequently used nouns and verbs were then further subcategorized.

Social Justice

Definition

Participants were asked to define social justice. We identified the following themes from the participants' definitions. First, approximately 8 per cent of participants wrote definitions of restorative justice. Second, the word choice in the definitions was significant; nouns such as

fairness, equality and awareness appeared in 44 per cent of the responses. In addition, the frequency of verbs that were present in participants' definitions were advocating (23 per cent), supporting (16 per cent), working toward (15 per cent) and empowering (6 per cent). Subsequently, participants were given a definition of social justice in order to answer the following questions.

The next cluster of questions asked about respondents' participation in social justice activities. Question 14 asked, In your role as a school counsellor, have you ever been involved in social justice activities? Eighty-nine percent of respondents reported in the affirmative, 4 per cent stated they did not and 7 per cent were not sure. Question 15 asked the varieties of social justice activities in which respondents had participated. The participants who stated that they engage in social justice promotion identified a variety of activities both inside their schools and in the community. Ninety-one per cent stated that they thought social justice was, to some extent, part of their current job description. Under the category of other, participants gave examples of curriculum and

policy development, fundraising and group counselling as additional forms of social justice activities. More than 99 per cent reported some level of success with the majority of 96 per cent falling in the range of sometimes and often. The following questions further addressed school counsellors' success in this area. A comprehensive listing of these activities is found in Figure 1.

Question 16 asked respondents, If you identified any activities from question 13, overall, how successful were you? If this question does not apply to you, please skip this question. Forty-eight per cent of respondents thought that their efforts were sometimes successful, and an identical 48 per cent reported that their efforts were often successful, 3.5 per cent reported their efforts were always successful and .5 per cent reported not at all. Question 17 queried, If you did have some success with social justice activities, what contributed to your success? If this question does not apply to you, please skip this question. Respondents reported a number of substantial factors that contribute to a successful social justice activity. The most prominent are having skills in advocacy, the support of

Figure 1. Social Justice Activities Identified by Participants

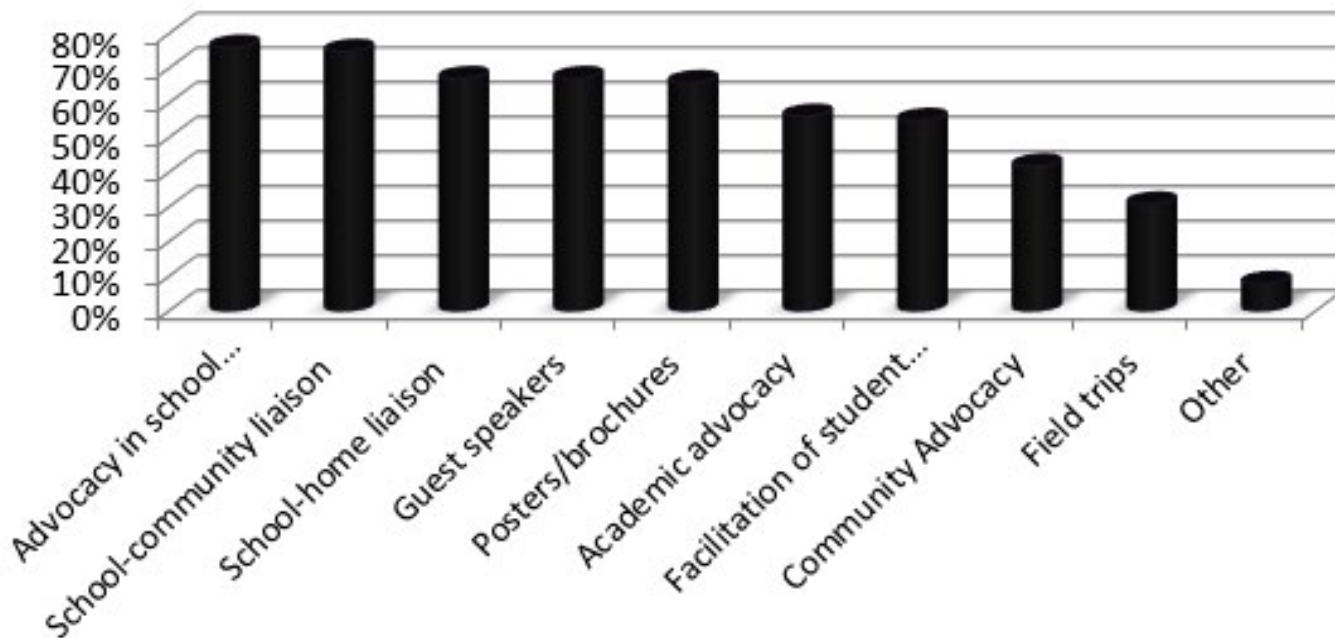


Figure 2. Contributors to the Success of Social Justice Efforts

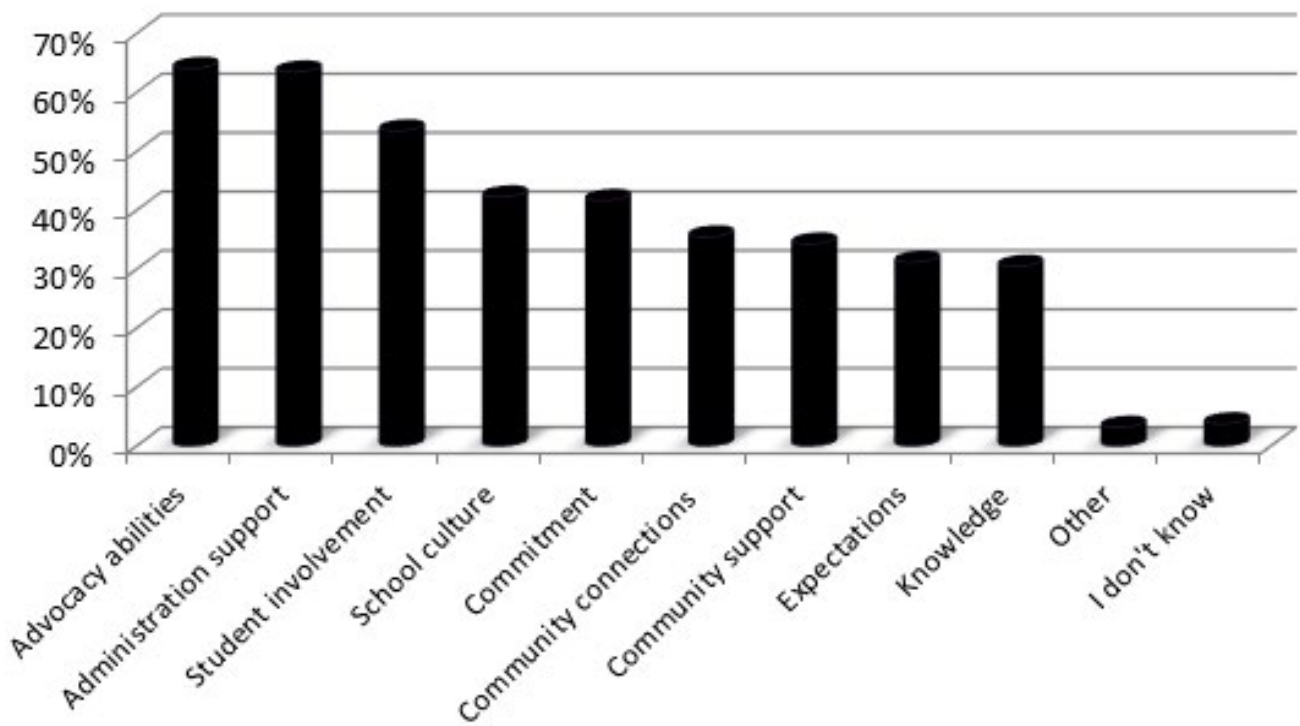


Figure 3. Conditions Preventing or Interfering with Social Justice Initiatives

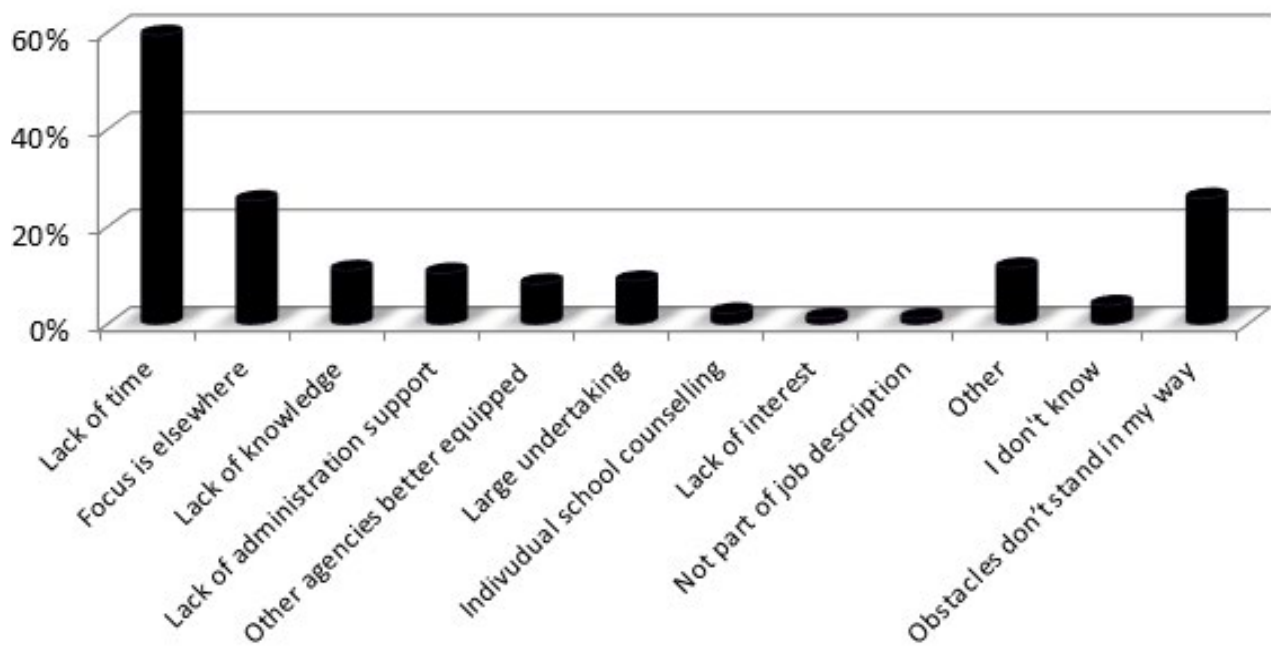
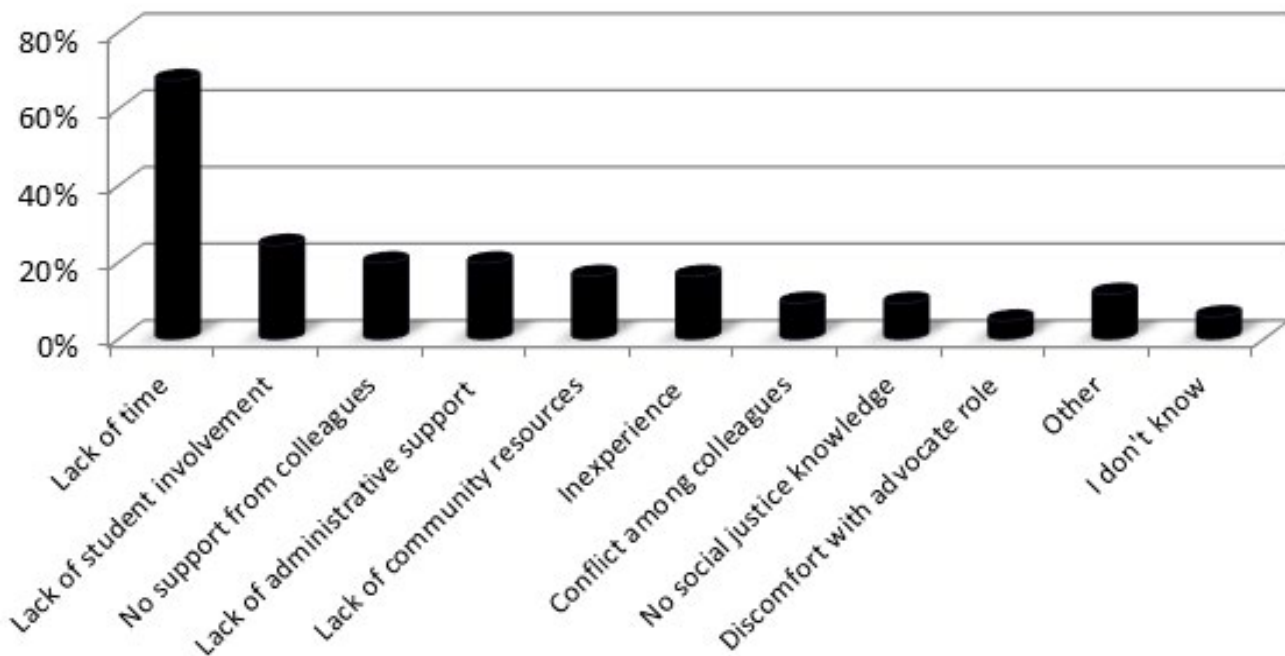


Figure 4. Inhibitors to the Success of Social Justice Initiatives



the school administration and student involvement. An exhaustive list is found in Figure 2.

Two questions examined impediments to social justice activities. Question 13 asked, What challenges/obstacles keep from engaging in social justice? Check all that apply. Conditions that prevented the respondents from taking action altogether are listed in Figure 3.

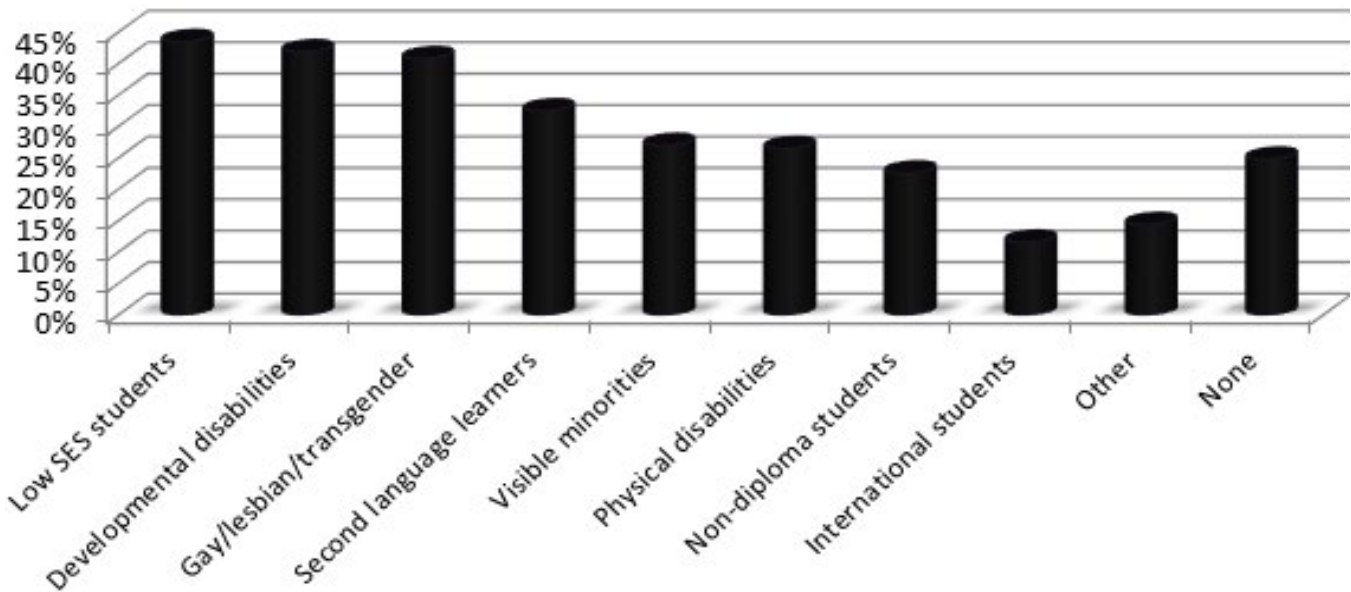
Similarly, Question 18 asked, If you were unsuccessful in social justice activities, what stopped you from being successful? If this question does not apply to you, please skip this question. In terms of the obstacles preventing school counsellors from implementing social justice initiatives, 67 per cent identified time constraints as the principle cause of unsuccessful social justice activities. Many other inhibitors of success are noted, which can be found in Figure 4.

Marginalization

When asked to define marginalization, school counsellors repeatedly identified common themes of a minority status, disadvantage and being on the outside. Word choice, again, demonstrated school counsellors'

beliefs and perceived impact of marginalization. The actions associated with marginalization in these definitions ranged from the absence of action ("not include") to unintentional action ("forget"), followed by added intention ("discriminate," "exclude" and "unfairly treat"), to the extreme of hostile intention ("banish," "shove aside" and "reduce"). Question 12 asked, Are there any student population groups in your school system that you think are treated unfairly in terms of resources and opportunities? If so, please identify. Check off all that apply. Among the marginalized student populations identified, participants stated that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with developmental or cognitive delays and students who identify as nonheterosexual are the most likely to receive unfair treatment in their schools. The 14 per cent who responded with "other" offered examples of students with mental health issues, students not yet diagnosed with learning difficulties and students in the criminal justice and foster care programs. Forty-five participants chose "none" to this question. A detailed list of populations respondents consider marginalized is found in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Responses to Question 12



Discussion

Canadian school counsellors clearly play a role in social justice. They are engaged in social justice for two main reasons: they think that it is part of their job description, and they are aware of marginalized students in their schools who need their help. School counsellors' social justice activities span the participative, liberative and distributive branches, meaning that social justice in Canadian schools is broad in both scope and practice.

More than 96 per cent of the participants stated that their efforts are often or sometimes successful. This suggests that many of the social justice competencies, such as knowledge, relationship building and organization are already in the respondents' repertoires. Knowledge, a precursor to action-based competencies, was identified by 34 per cent as a contributor for success; however, it still remains an obstacle for 11 per cent, who do not feel adequately knowledgeable. It is not clear if the knowledge being referred to is cultural competency, self-awareness or political savvy. The social justice activities listed by school counsellors represents the many ways in which relationships are being fostered with students, community members and staff. Also, the 135 (69 per cent) participants who identified liaison work, the 91 (46 per cent) who facilitate clubs and the 69 (35 per cent) who engage in community advocacy are examples of school counsellors demonstrating the competency of organization.

What is absent from the data is school counsellors' involvement in action research. This makes sense given that research requires a time commitment, and time was the most significant obstacle to social justice work, listed by 64 per cent of the participants. Knowing that administrative support is needed for action research to progress, and given that 10 per cent identified lack of administrative support as an obstacle, this implies that the remaining 90 per cent of the respondents regard their administrators as at least somewhat supportive. This means that if time can somehow be reallocated for action research, 90 per cent of school counsellors would likely receive the support of their administration.

The use of language in the participants' definitions of social justice was noteworthy. The use of verbs rather than nouns may suggest a higher level of engagement in social justice. In addition, the verb chosen, such as *working toward* or *supporting*, may suggest less clarity and commitment to social justice than verbs like *empowering* or *advocating*. Overall, how participants defined social justice implies a wide range of engagement and understanding.

The language used in the definitions of marginalization was also quite telling. Approximately half of the participants defined marginalization as a state of being and the other half described an action done to specific populations. This may reflect a similar finding in the social justice literature, implying that some school counsellors perceive

these phenomena from a more static or passive lens, while others view marginalization as resulting from concrete actions. For those who defined marginalization as an action, the verb choices ranged in levels of destructiveness from *forget* and *not include*, to *banish*, *reduce* and *shove aside*. This may also reflect the extent to which marginalization occurs in different school environments.

Absent from school counsellors' conceptualizations of marginalization is the perpetrator. Could the answer be that elusive that not one participant named it in their definitions? Perhaps school counsellors are not accustomed to working through a systemic lens, or approaching social justice at a systems level is beyond the parameters of their position. Finding the answers to these questions may provide further direction for school counsellors.

Limitations of the Study

The most significant limitation to this study was a lack of uniform representation of participants. Alberta was overrepresented with 32 per cent of the participants, whereas there was no representation from Ontario or Quebec. Also, 92 of the 196 participants (47 per cent) had five years or less experience as a school counsellor, so the respondent pool may not be representative of the school counselling profession. In addition, the researchers' interpretation of syntax in the content analysis is but one way to interpret the data. Last, participation was voluntary, and it is possible that participants who chose to complete the survey were more interested in social justice than those who did not.

Implications and Future Directions

There is a wealth of experience and competence among Canadian school counsellors advocating for social justice. Many in the profession engage in social justice in ways that are meaningful and manageable in their particular practice. Many school counsellors already experience success in this area, regardless of the many obstacles; it stands to reason that they have the potential to guide their colleagues to the same level of success. School counsellors already provide leadership in their schools, and perhaps it is time to extend that leadership outward to their colleagues.

It is our belief that a shift from working with students on an individual basis to group interventions may be a way in which to effectively and efficiently engage in social justice. This would alter the time structure of the school counsellor's day and ideally address the largest barrier to social justice work. This would also allow for the opportunity to implement action research because a stronger connection and understanding would develop with regards to social injustices. This, in turn, could provide a

stronger platform to address inequities at a higher systemic level.

There are plenty of future research possibilities in this area. Canadian school boards who are innovators in social justice could be studied to provide direction for others. Case studies in individual schools could be conducted to determine if the perspective of the school counsellor is aligned with students in terms of marginalized populations. Pre- and postassessment could be part of a research study to evaluate the effectiveness of action research in a school setting. Twenty-four per cent of participants stated that they did not believe that any student populations were marginalized in their school. Have these schools managed student equity and if so, what was their method? In order for this area of research to continue to move forward, its value must be recognized. Perhaps that can be part of the advocacy work that school counsellors propel forward in Canadian schools.

Conclusion

In this article, we defined social justice and reviewed the literature on social justice as it relates to school counsellors. Our survey of 196 school counsellors found that the vast majority of school counsellors promote social justice in the course of their work through a variety of means and generally feel supported. Respondents described barriers to their participation in promoting social justice and factors that interfere with the success of their efforts. Finally, we advocated for revising the role of school counsellors toward a systemic, rather than individual intervention, and recommended action research, descriptions of exemplary social justice activities, and pre- and postevaluation to measure the effects of social justice initiatives as potential avenues for future research.

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