



Part 1

School Counseling Policies

The Importance of Evaluation for International School-based Counseling

Michael S. Trevisan

Abstract

The need for K-12 school-based counseling programs and services across the world has likely never been greater. Depression, anxiety, suicide and trauma are at epidemic proportions throughout the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the challenges young people face. Without addressing these issues, it is difficult to see how effective instruction and learning can take place. I argue that those interested in school-based counseling must find ways to engage policy makers, gain their interest, and keep their commitment to effective school-based counseling.

Evaluation is one tool that can be employed to gain widespread support for K-12 school-based counseling programs and services. When done well, evaluation can provide information to broad stakeholder groups about the effectiveness of programs and services and how to improve the day-to-day activities of school-based counseling programs. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) has promoted a model of school counseling (ASCA National Model) that includes evaluation as an essential element. Using the ASCA National Model as a basis, and informed by the evaluation literature, Trevisan and Carey (2020a) provide an evaluation framework that could be used by school-based counselors worldwide. This paper will lay the groundwork for evaluation in the context of international school-based counseling.

Keywords: ASCA National Model, evaluation, evaluation standards, program effectiveness, program improvement

Introduction

School-based counseling has struggled to gain footing in US schools. The literature detailing why this is the case is decades long and well known to school-based counseling researchers, and many school-based counseling policy makers and policy advocates. Role ambiguity, ineffectively deployed by school principals, lack of resources, and an uneasy understanding and acceptance of mental health support for children, all conspire against school-based counseling being seen as a legitimate and

essential role within schools (Astramovich, 2016; Lambie et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). A similar phenomenon has occurred in other countries, such as India and South Korea, as some work toward policy implementation of school-based counseling (Thomas, George & Jain, 2017; Lee & Yang, 2017). The world has been in the throes of a pandemic for more than two years with no discernable end in sight. Concerns about mental health are articulated in news articles, the internet, and talks by government health officials on nearly a daily basis. I argue that this could be a time in world history where there is broad recognition for the importance of mental health, particularly among children, and that school-based counseling could be seen as having a legitimate role in schools in support of children's mental health.

The evidence

Individuals throughout the world who work with children and youth know that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused increased mental health problems. In addition, there are a growing number of research studies and reports that document the increased prevalence of different mental health problems among children and youth. All note significant increases in depression, anxiety, suicide, and trauma among young people, as well as other mental health issues (e.g., Unwin et al., 2022; OECD, 2021; Racine et al., 2021). These studies use survey results or information from databases and compare either rates of mental health issues from 2019 to 2020 or 2019 to 2021. These studies provide strong evidence of a world-wide mental health crisis among children and youth.

As mentioned, school-based counselors have struggled to gain sustained support within schools. In recent years, school-based counselors have been absent from most major education-oriented speeches, policy documents, and state or federal education budgets in the US. School-based counselors have also been absent from similar documents disseminated by the OECD, and the World Bank. This is now changing. A recent report by the U.S. Surgeon General recommended the important role school counselors can play in providing mental health support to students (U.S. Surgeon General, 2021). In addition, the report acknowledged the high, school counselor to student ratios across the US and implored states and school districts follow the guidelines recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) of a 1:250 ratio.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) provided a broad and detailed set of recommendations to support states, school districts, and schools dealing with mental health challenges among K-12 students. These recommendations include a significant expansion of the number of school counselors across the US, removal of administrative tasks from the school counselor workload so that they can focus on mental health support for students, and to set the ASCA recommended ratio of one school counselor to 250 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In short, there is no time in modern history for which school counselors have been so

broadly promoted as an essential professional in schools, at least in the US. In gaining a foothold in schools, perhaps this time is different for school counselors.

A set of recommendations in the USDOE document focuses on the use of data and evaluation to support program decisions. Cited in the document are limiting factors within the mental health infrastructure for schools, including poor program implementation, a fragmented school and mental health system, and a lack of focus on outcomes. These limitations could in part be addressed through effective program evaluation. Program evaluation in particular, has much to offer the school counseling profession and mental health system that supports K-12 school districts in the US. The remainder of this paper will address program evaluation for school-based counselors.

Program evaluation

Program evaluation is an emerging discipline and profession, with its genesis in the US in the 1960s. The benefits are largely twofold. One, program evaluation can be used to inform program personnel regarding ways to improve programs and services. Two, program evaluation can be used to determine impact and form the basis for program accountability. The first is called formative evaluation; the second summative evaluation.

There are several definitions of program evaluation in the literature. Gopal and Preskill (2014) provide a straightforward definition of evaluation by stating that “evaluation is a systematic and intentional process of gathering and analyzing data (quantitative and qualitative), to inform learning, decision-making and action” (para 2). The Joint Committee on Standards in Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) provide the most broadly accepted set of expectations on the practice of program evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2010).

Some professions have incorporated program evaluation as part of professional practice. School counseling in the US, is among these professions. Program evaluation is required and promoted by ASCA for school counseling programs and services to be accredited as an ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). The program evaluation component is largely focused on gathering quantitative information and completing a variety of forms and templates that when completed, meet the accountability expectations of the ASCA National Model. Given the decades long call found in the US school counseling literature for the benefits of school counselors conducting program evaluation, the expectation found in the ASCA National Model is progress. These expectations have considerable room for improvement, however, in particular, the ASCA expectations are not well connected to current thinking and practice in evaluation. The following framework was developed to address this issue and provide school-based counselors with the best in evaluation thinking and practice.

Evaluation framework

Trevisan and Carey (2020a) have recently offered a school-based counseling framework that incorporates the best program evaluation thinking from the evaluation field and integrates this thinking with school-based counseling professional practice and expectations. The framework has six components:

- (1) involve stakeholders,
- (2) construct a theory of action,
- (3) write evaluation questions,
- (4) develop an evaluation design and select methods,
- (5) conduct data analysis and report findings, and
- (6) communicate and use the evaluation results.

Component 1: Involve stakeholders

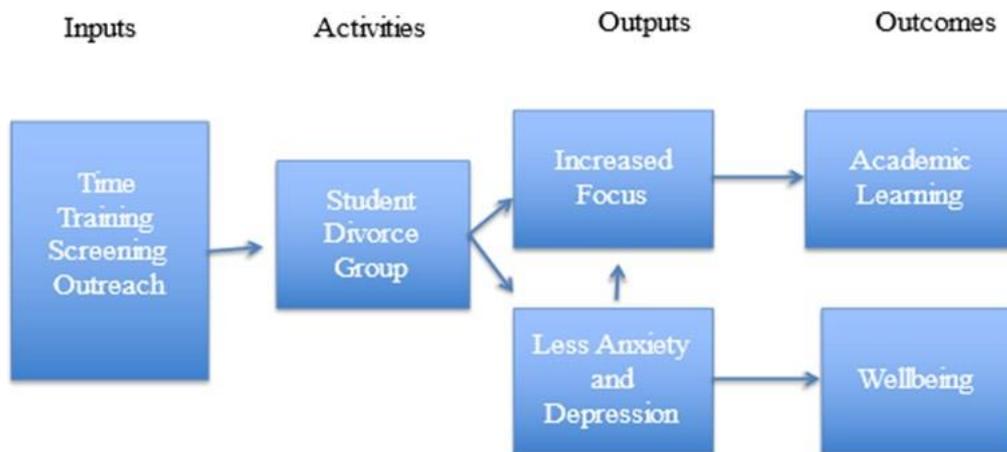
A key feature of high-quality evaluation is the involvement of stakeholders (Yarbrough et al., 2010). Stakeholders for school counseling programs include students, parents, teachers, school and district administrators and community members. While the ASCA National Model advocates involvement of stakeholders through the advisory committee, the framework expands on the idea of stakeholders in an advisory role to one of involvement in the evaluation. This could range from providing feedback on an evaluation before its inception, to being involved in collecting data. This of course depends on the expertise of the stakeholder(s), size of the school community, available resources, and the like. School counselors in the US have many school and community stakeholders and have a solid skillset for engaging a wide variety of people. Trevisan and Carey (2020a) provide several recommendations for implementing stakeholder involvement in the evaluation. Communicating regularly with stakeholders and thinking strategically about their involvement are fundamental aspects of these recommendations.

Component 2: Theory of action

Once stakeholders have been identified, a theory of action is developed. A theory of action is a description of how the resources and program components go together to generate outcomes. In short, it is the program logic. A common way to portray a theory of action is to develop a logic model. A logic model is a graphic representation of the theory of action and is composed of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The ideal is to involve stakeholders in the development of the theory of action. In addition, all assumptions about the program should be identified. If there are disagreements, work is needed to reconcile these differences.

Figure 1 shows a simple logic model.

Figure 1. Simple logic model



From: J. Carey & M. Trevisan evaluation workshop, Christ University, January 2020.

Component 3: Evaluation questions

Evaluation questions address what the school counselor and stakeholders want to know about the program and its services. The evaluation questions provide focus for the evaluation and signal the kind of data that are needed. Evaluation questions can be categorized into the four parts of the logic model and broadly into formative and summative evaluation. For formative evaluation, logical questions such as, “Are resources deployed as planned?” and “What is working well and what needs improvement?”, are typically included. For summative evaluation, “What is the impact of the program?” and “Were desired outcomes obtained?” are standard questions. Development of evaluation questions is a straightforward way of including stakeholders in the evaluation and provides the opportunity to convey what is essential about the program.

Component 4: Evaluation design and select methods

The development of an evaluation design and the selection of methods is driven by the evaluation questions and available resources, most often the resource of time for school counselors. Thus, tradeoffs between the strength of the design and feasibility are inevitable and necessary. Evaluation designs include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs. Quantitative designs typically make comparisons, such as comparison before and after an intervention. Numerical data such as test scores, fixed-response survey results, or behavioral data are used. Qualitative designs are useful to get an in-depth understanding of an entity, such as the program, intervention, or school. They can also be used to understand a particular phenomenon. Observations, interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of documents are typically used in qualitative designs. Mixed-methods designs are a

combination of quantitative and qualitative designs and associated data. They are often used to get a stronger, more focused understanding about some issue or component of the program.

Component 5: Data analysis and findings

Findings used to answer evaluation questions form the basis of recommendations for such things as program revision. Thus, keeping the connection between and among the evaluation questions, designs and methods, and data analysis and findings is essential for doing high-quality evaluation work (Yarbrough et al., 2010). There are a variety of data analysis techniques that can be used to determine findings. Statistical techniques are employed to analyze quantitative data. Identifying trends, patterns, outliers and the like, are central for analyzing qualitative data. In the end, the findings are obtained to answer evaluation questions, questions that the school counselor and stakeholders identified as important to know about the program.

Component 6: Communicate and use the evaluation results

Communicating about the evaluation is a central feature of high-quality evaluation work and reflected in the JCSEE Standards (Yarbrough et al., 2010). Think of evaluation work as having a beginning, middle, and end. Communication is tailored to the phase of the evaluation, the particular stakeholders involved, and any issues that may have arisen during the evaluation. Communication is inevitably connected to results and findings, and used to provide recommendations from the evaluation. This in turn, sets the stage for using the evaluation in some way. Evaluation use is the central reason for doing evaluation. Several types of use are possible. Certainly, the school counselor will use formative evaluation to consider program revisions. The evaluation could also be used to educate a broad stakeholder group on what the school counseling program does, has accomplished, and its importance to the school and community.

Benefits

The evaluation framework was in part developed to meet the ASCA (2019) standards. School counselors in the US can be assured that if they follow the framework, the tenets of the ASCA National Model will be met. There are several additional benefits to using the Trevisan and Carey (2020a) school-based counseling evaluation framework. In particular, the framework: (a) meets the JCSEE Standards; (b) incorporates the use of qualitative methods; (c) includes formative evaluation as a valued purpose; (d) embraces stakeholder engagement; and (e) fosters culturally-responsive evaluation.

A key benefit of the framework is that it meets the JCSEE Standards for educational evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2010). These standards are broadly supported within the evaluation community. In addition, the American Counseling

Association participated in the standards development process. Thus, the profession had a hand in shaping the standards to be useful and meaningful for the counseling community (Trevisan & Carey, 2020a). The real benefit here is that the JCSEE Standards represent the best thinking on doing quality program evaluation work, embraced by much of the evaluation community. School-based counselors can be assured that the evaluation framework will guide them to high-quality program evaluation.

The program evaluation expectations required for an approved ASCA National Model is almost exclusively focused on obtaining quantitative data for various aspects of the evaluation. While all types of data have strengths, they also have limitations. Some of the benefits of quantitative data are its conciseness, the fact that it is easily summarized, the data are used to document impact, and that quantitative data can be readily communicated. There are other benefits as well. However, quantitative data cannot be used to probe for more in-depth responses or develop a rich, nuanced appreciation of stakeholder views. Qualitative data can get at these aspects of stakeholder thinking. The JCSEE Standards call for use of qualitative data when the situation warrants. The use of qualitative data is part of the thinking of high-quality program evaluation promoted by the evaluation field.

The ASCA National Model is focused on summative evaluation. It addresses outcomes and impact. Except in a cursory manner, the ASCA National Model does not address formative evaluation. As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of formative evaluation is to improve the program and services. In turn, there will be a better chance of showing impact through summative evaluation. Thus, the Trevisan and Carey (2020a) school-based counseling evaluation framework maintains a key connection between formative and summative evaluation. In sum, both are essential for high-quality evaluation work. This is also reflected in the JCSEE Standards.

Being responsive to stakeholders is a fundamental difference between program evaluation on the one hand and research on the other. Evaluation requires stakeholder involvement; research does not. Stakeholder engagement is reflected in the JCSEE Standards. The ASCA National Model includes stakeholder engagement in a limited way. The evaluation framework includes stakeholder engagement for program feedback, as is the case with the ASCA National Model, but also in all aspects of the evaluation, if feasible and useful. The evaluation framework also includes a broader look at who the stakeholders are for a school counseling program, beyond parents, students, and school building staff. Including stakeholders in the evaluation is the surest way to increase the likelihood that the evaluation will meet their information needs. It can also build and sustain strong support within the stakeholder community for the school counseling program and its services.

Race and ethnicity are demographic characteristics throughout most communities in the US and increasingly so throughout countries in Europe. Ensuring that the evaluation of the school-based counseling program is responsive to people who do not come from the dominant culture is a unique challenge and responsibility of conducting high-quality evaluation. US scholars and professional organizations

have worked to develop and continually refine expectations for working with different demographic groups within the context of evaluation. Australia has worked on evaluation best practice within the cultural context of indigenous communities. A summary of this work is offered by Trevisan and Carey (2020b) and recommendations are reflected within the school-based counseling evaluation framework. Acknowledging the complexity of culture, recognizing power differences, and use of culturally appropriate methods, are among these recommendations reflected in the literature and framework (Trevisan & Carey, 2020b). And more recently, Trevisan and Carey (in press) have applied the framework to addressing racial inequalities within the context of evaluating school-based counseling programs.

Limitations

While the school-based counseling evaluation framework provides guidance for performing high-quality evaluation there are two limitations that are found throughout the literature addressing school counseling evaluation in the US. The first is the lack of time that school counselors have for conducting program evaluation (the most recent, Riechel et al., 2020). School counselors in the US for example, typically have administrative tasks that must be dealt with, along with a heavy caseload. Integrating program evaluation tasks and activities into the workday seems overwhelming and unrealistic. The second limitation is the lack of training opportunities for school counselors in program evaluation. Few graduate programs in the US maintain a course or set of pedagogical experiences in evaluation for pre-service school counselors. Once in professional practice, there are limited professional development experiences in program evaluation that address program evaluation in the context of school counseling.

There is some data indicating that school counselors are interested in program evaluation, see value in conducting program evaluation of their program and services, and would like professional development experiences (Astramovich, 2016). In addition, Trevisan and Carey (2020a) provide ways to make program evaluation tasks and experiences more efficient and less time consuming. Smaller data collection, rotating aspects of the program for evaluation in any given year, are among these strategies. The counselor to student ratio of 1:250 recommended by ASCA (2019), if enacted, could provide the necessary time to not only better address student needs but also provide time needed to effectively conduct program evaluation. More work is needed to address these limitations.

Framework pillars

There are three pillars that form the foundation of the school-based counseling evaluation framework, a framework that could propel the school-based counseling profession forward. These pillars are born out of the knowledge and experience of scholars and professionals in the fields of evaluation and school counseling as they

work to move their respective fields forward. First, the initial inception of evaluation in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, was that of large-scale evaluation done by evaluation researchers outside the programs being evaluated. The thinking at that time was that evaluation was largely a methodological issue. Consequently, sophisticated researchers were needed. Further, individuals outside the program were thought to be more objective about the evaluation and findings since they did not have a vested interest in the program being evaluated. Unfortunately, and despite the promise of obtaining useful evaluation findings, these large-scale external evaluations were not used and thus, the expenditure for these evaluations was called into question. Carol Weiss, a well-respected evaluation scholar, made the provocative argument that to increase use of the evaluation, particularly for program improvement and social betterment, those closest to the program should take lead on all aspects of the evaluation (Weiss, 1998). The idea being that program personnel know best what the issues are within the program and need evaluation that provides them direct feedback on those aspects of the program. The Weiss (1998) argument is so profound that it foreshadows any attempt within the evaluation field for external evaluation of programs, uncoupled from the program personnel who provide program services. The school counseling evaluation framework embodies this thinking. The framework is offered with the explicit assumption that school counselors are in the best position to evaluate their respective programs.

Second, while evaluation has been historically thought of as a methodological set of tasks, the current thinking is that evaluation is also a people-oriented undertaking (King & Stevahn, 2012). For example, for program evaluation to work well the cooperation of many people is needed to fulfill the evaluation activities. An effective evaluator, one with strong nontechnical skills, can be instrumental in gaining and sustaining stakeholder participation and support. In fact, part of the struggle that earlier external evaluators had in conducting evaluation was that many of them did not have the nontechnical skills (e.g., effective communication, interpersonal skills, ability to work productively in groups) to obtain and keep cooperation from people who are central to the program. Past president of the American Evaluation Association, Laura Leviton, called the evaluation field to task for not recognizing this issue and addressing it (Leviton, 2001). In point of fact, the lack of nontechnical skills among evaluators, at least at that time, either made doing evaluation work more difficult than it otherwise should be; or worst, put evaluations at risk. With respect to school-based counselors and evaluation, we think school-based counselors have a real advantage and are well-positioned for doing effective evaluation work, given their education, training, and natural predilection for working with people (Trevisan & Carey, 2020a).

Third, as previously mentioned school counselors in the US and in other countries such as India, have suffered from role ambiguity. Many school staff members don't have a clear idea what school counselors can or should be doing in schools. Lambie et al. (2019) explicated these issues in an article titled, "Who took "Counseling" out of the role of school counseling in the United States?" This issue is

reflected in the US school counseling literature over the past few decades and struck such a strong chord among readership of the *Journal of School-based Counseling Policy and Evaluation* (JSCPE), that the article won the first-ever Sink Award for Outstanding Publication in the JSCPE. What the authors of the article also argued is that program evaluation is a strong means to better define what school counselors do. This idea is also found throughout the literature, yet it comes across clearly in the Lambie et al. (2019) article as a means to put “counseling” back into the role of the professional school counselor. By evaluating the actual work of the school counselor, and documenting the accomplishment of desired mental health outcomes, the school counselor has a hand in shaping and clarifying the role of the school counselor. While continual evaluation also has the benefit of providing information for program improvement and for being accountable to the school and community, it is a powerful form of professional advocacy for the proper role of school counselors.

Conclusion

As the world continues to deal with mental health challenges among young people as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, this could be an auspicious time for the expansion of school-based counselors to address these challenges. Evaluation of the school-based counseling program by the school counselor could be a powerful means to shape the best program and services and interventions possible, and establish the school counselor as an essential school staff professional.

References

- American School Counselor Association (2019): *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs* (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Astramovich, R. L. (2016): Program evaluation skills and interest of school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 20(1), 54-64.
- Gopal, S. & Preskill, H. (2014, June 16): What is evaluation, really? <http://www.fsg.org/blog/what-evaluation-really>
- King, J. A. & Stevahn, L. (2012): *Interactive evaluation: Mastering the interpersonal dynamics of program evaluation*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Lambie, G. W., Haugen Stickl, J., Borland, J. R. & Campbell, L. O. (2019): Who Took “Counseling” out of the Role of Professional School Counselors in the United States? *Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation*, 1(3), 51-61.
- Lee, S. M. & Yang, N. (2017): School-based counseling policy, policy research, and implications: Findings from South Korea. In J. C. Carey, B. Harris, S. M. Lee & O. Aluede (Eds.) *International handbook for policy research on school-based counseling* (pp. 305-314). Cham: Springer.
- Leviton, L. C. (2001): Presidential address: Building evaluation’s collective capacity. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 22(1), 1-12.
- OECD (2021): *Health at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Racine, N., McArthur, B. A., Cooke, J. E., Eirich, R., Zhu, J. & Madigan, S. (2021): Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19: A Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 175(11), 1142-1150.

- Riechel, M. E. K., Beasley, J. J., Howard, E. & Culbertson, K. (2020): School counselors talk program evaluation in a class-based qualitative research project. *Professional School Counseling*, 23(1), 1-10.
- Thomas, E., George, T. S. & Jain, S. (2017): Public policy, policy research, and school counseling in India. In J. C. Carey, B. Harris, S. M. Lee & O. Aluede (Eds.) *International handbook for policy research on school-based counseling* (pp. 315-326). Cham: Springer.
- Trevisan, M. S. & Carey, J. C. (2020a): *Program evaluation in school counseling: Improving comprehensive and developmental programs*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Trevisan, M. S. & Carey, J. C. (2020b): Evaluating intercultural programs and interventions. In A. Portera, R. Moodley & M. Milani (Eds.) *Intercultural mediation counseling and psychotherapy in Europe* (pp. 188-210). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Trevisan, M. S. & Carey, J. C. (in press): Program evaluation in professional school counseling. In B. Zyromski & C. Dimmitt (Eds.) *Research in the schools: Advancing the evidence base for the school counseling profession*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- U.S. Department of Education (2021): *Supporting child and student social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.
- U.S. Surgeon General (2021): *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. surgeon general's advisory*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Public Health Service.
- Unwin, H. J. T., Hillis, S., Cluver, L., Flaxman, S., Goldman, P. S., Butchart, A., Bachman, G., Rawlings, L., Donnelly, C. A., Ratmann, O., Green, P., Nelson, C. A., Blenkinsop, A., Bhatt, S., Desmond, C., Villaveces, A. & Sherr, L. (2022): Global, regional, and national minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and caregiver death, by age and family circumstances up to Oct 31, 2021: An updated modelling study. *The Lancet*, February 24, 2022, 1-11, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(22\)00005-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00005-1)
- Weiss, C. H. (1998): Have we learned anything new about the use of evaluation? *American Journal of Evaluation*, 19(1), 21-33.
- Yarbrough, D. B., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K. & Caruthers, F. A. (2010): *The program evaluation standards: A guide for evaluators and evaluation users* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Author affiliation

Prof. Dr. Michael S. Trevisan, Washington State University, USA

Please cite this publication as:

Trevisan, M. S. (2022): The Importance of Evaluation for International School-based Counseling. *Comparative School Counseling*, 2, 9-19.

