



School Counseling in Latin America: Public Policy Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

Latin American school counseling (LASC) is historically, linguistically, culturally, and contextually diverse. Nonetheless, helping people make personal and educational decisions while successfully managing their lives and careers are shared purposes across the region. Currently, various challenges are hindering these purposes. For example, counseling specialized literature has called educational institutions, associations, and practitioners to debate policy and political issues affecting the counseling field professional advances while constraining LASC's contributions to individuals, families, societies, and economic progress across region countries. Another challenge is the development of new training and practice approaches that best assist individual and collective wellbeing and prosperity in the middle of the current worldwide health pandemic. In responding to these challenges, this presentation briefly discusses school counseling's common characteristics and distinctive features in three Latin American countries: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela. In addition, key historical events, the education systems, legislation, public policy, and current situations are described. In the end, recommendations on school counseling public policy development are offered, including assuming renovated philosophical foundations, developing new training strategies, and incorporating best practices and policies. These recommendations are preliminary results of current discussions within the International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRESA), Latin America.

Keywords: Latin America, school counseling and guidance, public policy, ISPRESA

Introduction

From Argentina to Mexico and including the Caribbean, a fundamental purpose of guidance and counseling practitioners in Latin America (LA) is to help people make personal and educational informed decisions and manage their lives and careers (Vera et al., 2017). Although there are distinct features among Latin American countries and their guidance and counseling services systems, there are common goals and shared challenges. Indeed, Latin American literature and research on guidance and counseling have noted the necessity for guidance and counseling practitioners to engage in policy-related debates and get involved in those political issues affecting the field development; as a discipline and a professional human-centered practice (Vera & Jiménez, 2015).

However, for active public policy and policymaking engagement, Latin American guidance and counseling practitioners need to consider how to include these matters in their training plans and professional counseling organizations' agendas. One step in that direction is understanding how public policy and policymaking are formed and how their participation is critical for advancing the profession. Another step is defining common policy development goals according to the realities and making decisions about engaging with policymakers, leaders, and other stakeholders (Martin & Vera, 2020).

In this paper, the following discussion describes school counseling's common characteristics and distinctive features in three Latin American countries: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela. The argument is organized around the following segments: historical events and the education system, legislation and public policy, and current situations and challenges. In the end, some recommendations are offered to address current needs and challenges. These recommendations are preliminary search results and recent discussion outcomes within the International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRES), Latin America group.

Historical events and education system

In LA countries, school guidance and counseling practices are historically and culturally diverse. Yet, there is a similarity in critical fundamentals. One common characteristic shared across Latin American guidance and school counseling is their origins; although there were connections with the fields of psychology and medicine, guidance and school counseling have mainly emerged within the Universities' Schools of Education. Likewise, counselors' practices have been shaped by international organizations (Vera et al., 2017).

Unlike in many other parts of the world, guidance and counseling in LA did not derive from the mental health field. Indeed, Schools of Education housed at universities are the home counseling training programs, not the medicine, psychology, or liberal arts schools. Accordingly, guidance and counseling have historically been conceptualized as an educative practice.

The first signs of guidance and counseling appeared in Mexico between 1912 and 1914. During these years, surveys that included counseling constructs and Verified Educational Conferences were developed to transform Mexican schools. Nevertheless, more advancements were achieved after 1923, once the National Institute of Pedagogy was founded. Two years later, the Mental Hygiene and Psychopedagogy Department was established beneath the umbrella of the Public Education Secretary. Eventually, the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM) was pivotal in promoting counseling conferences, founding the Medical-pedagogical Institute in 1935, developing the first school counseling training programs between 1940 and 1942, which were part of a Techniques of Education specialization in the career of Psychology. Years later, counselors will play significant

roles at the high school level, and the Psychopedagogical Center of Counseling was founded in 1950, but it was dissolved in 1960. By 1984, the National System of Educational Counseling was created to support students' vocational decisions and careers (Aceves & Simental, 2013). Currently, different endeavors struggle to expand the role of school counselors in areas such as addictions, teen pregnancy, and school violence.

In Venezuela and Costa Rica, the first signs of guidance and counseling practices began in the 1930s. In Venezuela, these practices developed quickly as educational counseling concerned with academic, vocational, and occupational issues. In Venezuela, during the 1940s, some formal guidance and counseling services were designed based on education, philosophy, and counseling according to an interdisciplinary perspective. By 1956, counseling services included mental hygiene and pupil hygiene. The Departments of Psychoeducation and Guidance, ascribed at the Ministry of Education, provided student assistance programs. Then, in the early 1960s, the national government created the first counselor education training programs at the Pedagogical Institute of Caracas. Professors from the United States went to Venezuela as trainers for the first official counselor degrees. The Ministry of Education's Guidance Division was created in 1965 (Vera et al., 2017; Vera, 2010). Until now, school-based services have continued under the Ministry of Education's supervision, albeit with some struggles. The US-based training of guidance and counseling professionals at master's and doctoral levels has also continued, sponsored chiefly through both public funding and private initiatives.

The guidance and counseling professional field developed faster in Venezuela, even though Mexican counselors may have more integration of education and medicine fields in practice. However, Costa Rican counselors were the first in inscribing educational guidance and counseling into fundamental laws. In 1957, the Fundamental Law of Education was approved. Article 22 establishes that the education system guarantees students access to educational guidance and counseling to explore their skills and interests, help them make career plans, and support their emotional and social development. In 1964, a formal professional training program was established at the University of Costa Rica in response to the needs of the Department of Education for professionally trained counselors. Since 1980, public and private institutions have provided different undergraduate and master levels training programs. Law in Costa Rica strongly supports guidance and counseling professionals. In 2010, the guidance and counseling field was further acknowledged as a public service by enacting the College of Professional Guidance and Counseling Law (Vera et al., 2017).

Legislation and public policy: a summary

Due to the vital educational component of guidance and counseling in Latin America, the professional counseling field is most shaped by education laws. For example, the Fundamental Law of Education of 1957 supports and shapes the school

counseling professional role in Costa Rica. Likewise, the Education Act of 2009 defines the school counseling family and educational goals to best national support development. Meanwhile, in Mexico, the General Law of Education of 2019 delineates the roles and functions of school counselors. These legislations, subsequent regulations, agreements, public policies, and programs are unfolded.

The Costa Rican Fundamental Law of Education of 1957 refers to the guidance and counseling field and its social role in contributing to people's personality formation, favoring Christian values, developing aesthetic and ethical reasoning, and preparing the youth for civic life and patriotism. In parallel, based on the Central American Agreement on Basic Unification of Education (1962), the country has assumed school and vocational counseling as "an educational process by which the student is helped, on the one hand, to adapt to the school environment and, on the other, to correctly choose an occupation, prepare, enter and progress in it" (Article 80). Accordingly, the country compromised on establishing school and vocational counseling services (Article 82) across all educational levels and entrusting the management of these services to specialized personnel to best coordinate family, school, and state actions (Article 83). With this, Costa Rican school counselors have gained some experience developing public policies and programs across the country's scholar regions. Baldares (2014) pointed out that counselors are involved in guidance and counseling program evaluation by offering consultation to policymakers.

The Education Act of 2009 recognizes guidance and counseling as a political and human right for every citizen in Venezuela. Article 6, F "guarantees counseling, health, sport, recreation, culture, and wellness services to students involved in the educational process in co-responsibility with the relevant bodies". It is essential to consider that the Education Act is one of the most important and influential pieces of legislation from a constitutional perspective. The Constitution of 1999 establishes that "education and work are the fundamental processes for guaranteeing the state's purposes" (Article 3).

It is also important to understand that the Constitution (1999), Education Act (2009), and the school counseling services are rooted in the Liberator Simon Bolivar's philosophical, political, and pedagogical ideas found in the Angostura Address of 1919. Some of the ideas are:

- "The most perfect system of government is the one that produces the higher sum of possible happiness, the higher sum of social security, and the higher sum of political stability."
- "Popular education must be the firstborn care of the Congress' paternal love. Morals and enlightenment are the poles of a republic; morals and enlightenment are our first needs."
- "An ignorant people is the blind instrument of its own destruction."

In pragmatic words, Bolivar's philosophical-political-pedagogical principles enlighten a specific political-juridical framework (Constitution) that sets up a concrete juridical-pedagogical context (Education Act) for school counselors at all public and private schools (Vera & Barreto, 2020). This also acknowledges the need

for and defines the importance of the counselors' profession for national development and prosperity. According to the Venezuela legislation on counseling matters, every educational institution, from preschool to high school, should employ one counselor to work in a counseling center on a staff-pupil ratio of 1:10 class sections (Vera et al., 2017). The situation has created a more robust legal-political platform for developing guidance and counseling activities under the Ministries of Education and University Education's supervision. Often, these activities occur in the Centros Comunitarios para la Protección y el Desarrollo Estudiantil (CECOPRODEs) [Community Centers of Student Protection and Development], Coordinaciones de Protección y Desarrollo Estudiantil (COPRODEs) [Student Counseling and Protection Coordinations], and Sistema Nacional de Orientación (SNO) [National Counseling System] (Vera & Vera, 2020).

The Mexican new General Law of Education (2019) states that "it will promote a humanistic approach, to favor students' socio-emotional skills, acquire and generate knowledge, strengthen the ability to learn to think, feel, act and develop as a member of a community and in harmony with nature" (Article 59). Therefore, the student's right to educational and vocational counseling services should be guaranteed. Within this framework, the General Law of Teacher's Carrier System (2019) outlines that counseling services should be guaranteed by members of the public school system, including teachers, teaching technicians, pedagogical, technical advisors, directors, and supervisors. Due to several social issues, education and school counseling practitioners have been allocated actively at the high school level. As a result, every public school offering high school education has at least one counselor. Here, it is possible to find schools with specific education and vocational programs to assist students holistically. On the other hand, private schools at every educational level (elementary, high school, and higher education) have developed a more robust counseling services network for students, including counseling for human development, academic, vocational, and family purposes.

Current situations and challenges

Guidance and counseling are activities and processes that have been around for more than one hundred years of promoting people's wellbeing and prosperity, individually and collectively, in Latin America. Nevertheless, this does not mean that guidance and counseling practitioners have been fully recognized for their skills and contributions to the human and social development of countries, nor that they have gained the power to lead their own professional field, nor that they have been capable of fulfilling the services required by the law to promote individual and collective wellbeing and prosperity, and the subsequent implications for Latin America's development. This situation has been acknowledged by scholars, practitioners, and counseling country-based associations, such as Federación de Asociaciones Venezolanas de Orientadores (FAVO) [Venezuela Federation of Counselor Associations], Asociación Mexicana de Profesionales de la Orientación (AMPO)

[Mexican Association of Counseling Professionals], Colegio de Profesionales en Orientación (CPO) in Costa Rica [Professional Counseling College], Asociación Argentina de Counselors (AAC) [Argentine Counselors Association]. Other regional and international organizations have pointed out these situations, including Red Latinoamericana de Profesionales de la Orientación (RELAPRO) [Latin American Counseling Professional Network] and the International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRESOC) (Barreto, 2020; González, 2008; Vera & Jiménez, 2015; Vera & Barreto, 2020; Vera et al., 2017).

ISPRESOC, with its Latin American regional leaders and members, has been meeting with scholars and public policymakers to discuss current circumstances and outline country-based challenges that counseling practitioners face. In this regard, some of the most urgent challenges are as follows:

- Lack of enough training programs and qualified professionals: although many countries understand the need for school counseling services and try to promote them, the number of qualified counselors is insufficient. Venezuela is an example. According to the legislation, a school counseling professional should be hired per 10 class sections. However, there are insufficient professionals to satisfy the legislation and the students' counseling needs (Vera & Vera, 2020). The situation complicates by 1) the fact that only two colleges have consolidated training programs at undergraduate levels and 2) currently, many counseling practitioners are retiring from service. Hiring psychologists, teachers, and social workers has partially covered this shortening of school counseling professionals. Still, these professionals are not trained and qualified to provide school counseling services, nor do they hold the official degree of "counselor" required to practice in the school system. In Venezuela, the official degree is a bachelor's degree in Counseling and Guidance. In this country, graduate degrees do not authorize free practice. However, free professional practice is allowed for those who hold undergraduate degrees. Therefore, undergraduate degrees have two functions: making professional competencies visible and worthwhile socially; and degree holders are licensed to practice freely. Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and other countries have similar situations.
- Lack of understanding about counseling as a professional field and attention to policy research in the general community: there is a long history of guidance and counseling in LA, and laws and formal public policies are identifiable in most LA countries. However, the issues those policies cover and how those laws and policies have designed, implemented, and evaluated counseling services are not extensively understood (Vera et al., 2017). Overall, there is an equivalent lack of understanding of the social function of the guidance and counseling profession. In addition, there is a lack of attention to policy research issues in the professional literature across LA countries. Research indicates a significant lack of awareness and understanding by counselors, communities, legislators, and policymakers of

the relationship between policy and policy research and how the work of practitioners can support the wellbeing of people and the economic development of countries (González, 2008; Vera & Jiménez, 2015).

- Low influence of counselors in developing counseling public policies and legislation: practitioners have been trying to promote specific public policies and regulations at the national level in several LA countries, but it does not mean that they have succeeded. It is true that Costa Rican guidance and counseling practitioners have been involved in program evaluations and offered consultation to policymakers, but this is not the norm; it is the exception. And the fact that guidance and counseling practitioners are consulted does not mean that their recommendations are always considered. There were debates and discussions in Mexico to create the General Law of Education of 2019. But despite the Mexican Association of Counseling Professionals (AMPO)'s efforts, counselors were powerless to promote specific clauses to enlarge their professional recognition and work benefits. There is not even a specific national law to regulate the guidance and counseling professional practice in Venezuela, even though regulations and codes of ethics are stipulated by the Federation of Venezuelan Counseling Associations (FAVO).
- Ambiguous professional identity: the professional identity of counselors in Latin America is not clear enough even to counselors. Psychologists are psychologists in every LA corner, which is apparent to psychologists and other professionals. However, counselors do not share the same story. In fact, the profession can be called differently in the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. There is not even uniformity in the name. "Counseling", "Orientación", "Consejería", and other terms are common names used to call the same profession. Furthermore, even within counselors' conversations, the role of counselors is subject to debate. Are counselors more related to educators? Are counselors more related to psychologists? Are counselors a more multidisciplinary helping professional? Should school counselors be concerned about vocational decisions only? Do counselors have a broader scope of action within schools and form students' personalities to best adapt to social environments and become the best of themselves? What is the role of counseling in society? What are counselors? These questions and other concerns do not find quick and standardized answers in the LA counseling community. This situation affects professional development in different areas, including when counselors must introduce themselves before policymakers and legislators to promote their professional interests and objectives (Vera, 2013).
- A strong influence of foreign theories and practices: different LA authors have argued about rethinking the guidance and counseling field from a more LA perspective. They say that counseling's "philosophical, conceptual, procedural, and methodological body of knowledge has been heavily

influenced by theories and practices produced in contexts that are historically, culturally, politically, and economically dissimilar from Latin American countries” (Vera & Barreto, 2017, p. 457). The United States and Spain have been highly influential in both counselors’ training and the development of counseling professional organizations. According to Barreto (2020), this situation may speak about coloniality in a helping profession that should promote equality, freedom, justice, and inclusion. As Barreto says, how would the US or European counseling theories and approaches understand LA aboriginal societies and their life aspirations? How can Holland’s RIASEC model understand the career development of aboriginal populations or people who live in rural areas? How would a US individualistic concept of “independence” approach the collective Latin American construct of “interdependence”? How would foreign family system approaches understand Latin American family dynamics, traditions, values, and struggles?

Final thoughts from ISPRESC Latin America

Although constitutional principles and legislation on guidance and counseling exist in several LA countries, laws regulating the profession’s free practice can only be found in Costa Rica and Puerto Rico. Without these legal instruments, the guidance and counseling profession will remain constrained and under the control of outside forces from the field. As a result, guidance and counseling professionals will be limited in how much they can participate in creating public policy. Therefore, counselors will not properly inform and assist policymakers in their work.

Even though the region’s most influential guidance and counseling associations are well organized and invested in high-quality research and fostering professional encounters, critical discussions about political issues and rigorous research on policy matters are primarily absent from the agendas of these associations. Unless this situation changes, the profession’s influence will likely be missing in debates about appropriate public policies and legislation. As a result, the current status of favorable legislation found in some countries could disappear. Public funding for guidance and counseling activities could be eliminated or restricted. These alarming predictions are already coming true in Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil.

We can reach high levels of professional development based on our diversity and long-standing counseling culture in the LA hemisphere. Today, it is recognized that the profession and its functions are of immeasurable strategic value for individuals, society, government, and public institutions. This awareness is achieved when counseling organizations, thinkers, and practitioners join efforts and work together to achieve the following:

- 1) Active participation in counseling public policy formation.
- 2) Work with legislators on counseling matters.
- 3) The inclusion of public policy education into counseling training programs.

- 4) Common agendas across counseling institutions and associations.
- 5) Linkages with counseling peers and organizations across borders.

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