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Students' Perception Index of the MUGC School Psychology Practicum : A Correlation of Course Work with Practicum Experiences

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Students' Perception Index of the MUGC School Psychology Practicum:

A Correlation of Course Work with Practicum Experiences

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By

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Abstract

The perceived consistency between the course work and practicum of the Marshall University Graduate College school psychology program was investigated. The magnitude of consistency was determined by a Spearman correlation coefficient comparing students' subjective rankings of the relative importance of various school psychologist activities as emphasized in the program's course work with the relative importance of those same activities as relevant to the practicum setting. The findings suggest a significant degree of correlation at the (.05) significance level between what is emphasized in the program's coursework and what is relevant to practicum experience.

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has answered the question “Who are school psychologists?” in the following terms: “School psychologists have specialized training in both psychology and education. They use their training to ensure that every child learns in a safe, healthy, and supportive environment. School psychologists understand school systems, effective teaching and successful learning...” (Fagan & Wise, 2000). While this may be the “best yet” general descriptive definition of overall school psychology, like most definitions, it does not delve into the many specific facets of what is being defined as school psychology practice.

The precise definition of what a school psychologist actually is has traditionally tended to be quite elusive (Fagan & Wise, 2000), yet may be most accurately delineated by consideration of what school psychologists do; that is, the various professional activities that may be performed by school psychologists may be among the best indices of the roles of school psychologists. At the forefront of professional practice, the basic skills utilized by school psychologists include the assessment of individual children, the planning and implementing of interventions, and consultation.

Historically speaking, Fagan & Wise (2000) consider school psychology to have become a “thoroughbred” discipline and practice in the 1970s; this ushered in the resultant professional title of “school psychologist.” Until the 1990’s, school psychology training programs generally reflected the preeminent role of school psychologist as psychometric diagnostician. This historical paradigm provides baseline evidence of the

evolving change in this profession as exemplified by the contents and order of many school psychology programs' required courses. Ten years ago, about half of America's nationwide programs neglected behavioral assessment courses, and research suggested the call for expansion of the role of school psychologists to go beyond that of a strict diagnostician (Kramer & Epps, 1991). Some of the identified roles that were considered appropriate for school psychologists, other than psychoeducational evaluations that answer referral questions and link assessment to interventions, included consultation, program planning, research, and curriculum based assessment (CBA) (Foster, 1990). In addition, the paradigm shift of the role of the school psychologist not only involved a networking to gain support from special education teachers, but also an increase in the time spent supporting regular education teachers and students (Cole, 1991).

In the practice of school psychology as delineated in the above findings in an applied perspective, the standards and guidelines of the state of Kansas (derived from the supplement of School Psychology, effective July 1, 1990) may be one of many indicators as to the scope of psychoeducational services provided circa a decade ago. Kansas was selected as an example because the model utilized closely reflects the definition of school psychology as illustrated by NASP. The school psychological services thereby specified in Kansas are defined as the special services which provide: (1) consultation with other school staff to plan individual programs to meet the special needs of children as indicated by interviews, behavioral evaluations, and tests; (2) the administration and interpretation of psychological and educational tests; (3) the consultation with teachers and other school

staff concerning child behavior, modes of learning, and the development of a positive learning climate; and (4) psychological counseling for children and parents.

The above review of the historical perspectives of school psychology suggests an expansion of roles engaged in by the school psychologist to that of problem solver. While many professional activities of school psychologists fall under the heading of assessment, the results are considered as useful empirical data to help the school psychologist determine the appropriate solution to the “problem” of the discrepancy between desired and current academic performance (Deno, 2002). So, while “assessment” may remain as the most conspicuous school psychologist activity, the scope of assessment itself has expanded with that of the role of the school psychologist. In fact, Tilly (2002) expounds on the call for referring to school psychology as a “problem-solving enterprise.” Such a notion espouses the use of lower level interventions (indirect services attempted before direct services) to reduce the call for the refer-test-place model of interventions.

The importance of the practicum to the school psychologist in training is beyond question; it is certain that the practicum experience as the cornerstone of training to future school psychologists plays a crucial function in expanding the professional roles of school psychologists (Kramer & Epps, 1991). The perceptions of the novice school psychologists themselves (e.g., regarding consultant roles) are susceptible to alteration during a practicum experience (Salmon, 1993), and may prove to serve these anticipated role changes well in the field of practice. Perhaps the most important aspect, however, is the recognition that practicum experiences purport to directly correspond to the training

program's objectives regarding content, supervision, and evaluation (Fagan & Wise, 2000). This suggested consistency of training programs with practicum experience is the focus of the current study.

Varying program evaluation strategies have historically been applied to the educational specialist level of training of school psychologists (Gavilan, Smith, Ryan, & Anderson, 1977), and the rank order approach has been utilized to assess the trainers of such programs. In one investigation of school psychology trainers (Slate, 1986), responding program directors cited a marked overemphasis on assessment (which results in limited opportunities to engage in such activities as consultation and cognitive/behavioral interventions) as the most serious problem that influences the overall practice of school psychology. This focus on the preferred school psychologist activities suggests a changing emphasis regarding the school psychology role according to trainers and supervisors. Other studies have utilized the rank order approach with students' perception of their supervisors' activities (Ward & Brantley, 1981), but a rank ordered index of students' perceptions of the consistency between coursework and practicum experiences of Marshall University Graduate College's school psychology program is needed.

Marshall University Graduate College's definition of School Psychology includes the concepts of data based problem solving, multifaceted practice in a variety of settings, and commitment to quality comprehensive service delivery. The MUGC student handbook purposes and goals section also addresses indirect school psychology services, such as problem solving within a collaborative consultation model, as well as primary,

secondary, and tertiary prevention. Thus the school psychology program of Marshall University Graduate College is appropriate in the general investigation of professional activities, since it reflects the vanguard practice of the activities of school psychologists in training.

Practicum students of the 2002 MUGC School Psychology program were asked to rank order their perceptions (of anticipated professional activities) based on their previous coursework in the program. This rank ordering was correlated with students' rank ordered perceptions of the various activities that they were actively engaged in (or had the opportunity to participate in) during their practicum experience. The derived correlation coefficient indicates a measure of consistency regarding how closely students' perceptions of their graduate program coursework subjectively match with their subsequent practicum experiences.

Method

Participants

The pool of subjects consisted of eleven students completing Marshall University Graduate College's school psychology summer practicum (SPSY 740), a program requirement. Gender composition was nine female students and 2 male students. Individuals who participated on-site as intermediate students (i.e., for the "Practicum I" course requirement) and known returning practicum students were excluded from the study. That is, only first time "Practicum III" (SPSY 740) students (i.e., from the MUGC school psychology's revised plan of study) were used in this research.

Materials

The instrument utilized was a rank ordered evaluation of students' perceptions of anticipated school psychologist professional activities in order of relevance/importance, as based on their program coursework (Part A, see Appendix 1); and a rank ordering of those same activities as experienced in the school psychology practicum in terms of opportunity to practice those activities (Part B, see Appendix 2). The included activities were derived from some of the titles of school psychology courses in Marshall University's graduate program, the practicum syllabus objectives, and empirical literature relevant to school psychology. Said listed activities included Problem Solving Method (General), Crisis Intervention, Achievement Testing, Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA), Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA), Intelligence Testing, Personality Evaluation, Consultation, Primary Prevention, Secondary Prevention, Tertiary Prevention (Treatment), Counseling (Individual), Group Counseling, and Other. If a student

perceived that the listing of activities failed to include a key item, he or she could fill in the blank next to the activity listed as “Other.” In order to make the blatant correlation design somewhat less obvious, the presented activities in Part B were randomly rearranged from those listed in Part A.

Design and Procedure

The MUGC school psychology students were asked to participate in a brief evaluation of the practicum, which would require less than twenty minutes to thoughtfully respond. The administration of the instrument was conducted during a meeting on the evening before the final practicum day. Upon individual completion of Part A (evaluation of coursework perceptions), the student was provided with Part B (evaluation of practicum experience). The students filled in their names on Part B to ensure correct individual matching of data; each respective section (Part A and Part B) was completed within 10 minutes.

In evaluating the data, the rankings for “other” (if utilized by any of the students) were omitted. The purpose for including the “other” (as specified by the student) activity was to facilitate responding in case the student perceived that an important activity was neglected from the list; this also allowed for further analysis of what students thought was most relevant in coursework and practicum experience. A simple default procedure was used for activities ranked after (lower than) “other”; a value of one was subtracted from each, giving those items one higher rank than as indicated by the student. Tied rankings were kept and utilized; and forms that contained responses that were illegible were discarded.

Analysis

The rank ordering of Part A was correlated with the rank ordering of Part B, utilizing the Spearman rank-difference correlation coefficient. The resultant r [sub S] (see Table 1) serves as an index of each student's satisfaction, suggesting that anticipated professional activities were appropriately experienced in the practicum.

A simple nondirectional (two-tailed) test was performed at the (0.5) significance level. For each student, the individual null hypothesis was that the ranking of Part A (coursework) is not correlated with Part B (practicum ranked activities). The obtained Spearman correlation coefficient (.5702) exceeded the critical value (.5675), $p = .01$.

Discussion

A salient issue herein may be that a likert-type scale could be feasibly applied to such an evaluation for a more direct and straightforward approach to measurement of student satisfaction with specific areas of the practicum. However, the chosen correlation methodology was so selected as to avoid the tendency for students to evaluate the activity with "across the board 5's", or all perfect scores. With the current forced rank order approach, more consideration is ideally given to each activity; and hopefully in relation to the other activities performed by professional school psychologists.

However, there exist several noted issues that should improve the design of similar studies to this that may be conducted in the future. In future investigations, it may be preferable to have the students complete Part A before the practicum, and administer Part B after the practicum. Also, there were two activities listed under "Other"; these were report writing and classroom guidance. It may be noted that both of these suggested

activities were listed for Part B. Future studies may include a consideration of these two suggested activities along with the other considered professional activities ranked in this study. Other studies may also be enhanced by a comparison of coursework and practicum activities with internship activities and actual professional experiences.

The results suggest that practicum experiences satisfactorily address expected school psychologist professional activities, as delineated through, and depicted in, coursework. However, it is realized that students are given a certain amount of freedom, or leeway, in selecting and going about their practicum activities. This self-direction may cause a tendency of resultant stronger correlations due to actual experiences being dictated by personal preferences.

However, this noted self-direction of school psychologist professional activities is implied with the ever-broadening scope of the roles of the school psychologist. The NASP conference of November 2002 in Indianapolis, Indiana serves as a reaffirmation of the relevance of the above study. Its mission statement included achieving a consensus on current and future demands of school psychological practice, as well as an actual conceptualization of the practice of school psychology; these issues are crucial to the training of future school psychologists at Marshall University Graduate College, and elsewhere.

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Table 1

Mean & Individual Spearman Coefficients of Ranked Coursework and Practicum Activities

M=.5702

Individual r [sub S] values

.7857

.6648

.5742

.5714

.3736

.6209

.6538

.6923

.1538

.4835

.6978

Appendix 1

*****MUGC School Psychology Summer Practicum Evaluation Instrument*****

Name:

Birth date:

Gender:

PART A: Ranked anticipated activities based on coursework

Please rank in order, from greatest to least, the below listed school psychologist activities that your program coursework seemed to emphasize and prioritize the most. Therefore, the activity that you anticipated spending the most time engaged in should be ranked first. Please use all rank numbers from 1-13, as the activity filled in as “other” should be filled in with any activity that is missing.

- Problem Solving Method (General)
- Crisis Intervention
- Achievement Testing
- Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)
- Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA)
- Intelligence Testing
- Personality Evaluation
- Consultation
- Primary Prevention
- Secondary Prevention
- Tertiary Prevention (Treatment)
- Counseling (Individual)
- Group Counseling
- Other (List any relevant/preferred activity not included above) _____

Appendix 2

Name:

PART B: Ranked School Psychologist Practicum Activities

Please rank in order the listed school psychology activities, according to how often you experienced them in the practicum. That is, list first those activities in which you personally feel that you spent the most time engaged in. Each of your ranked activities should be followed by ranked activities of which you spent less time engaged in. Again, you may fill in one activity not listed below (listed “other”), but please rank all of the activities by using all numbers from 1-13 (1 being the rank for the most prominent activity).

- Tertiary Prevention (Treatment)
- Secondary Prevention
- Primary Prevention
- Problem Solving Method (General)
- Group Counseling
- Counseling (Individual)
- Personality Evaluation
- Consultation
- Crisis Intervention
- Intelligence Testing
- Curriculum-Based Assessment
- Functional Behavior Assessment
- Achievement Testing
- Other (List any practicum activity not included above) _____