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UTILIZING ACTION RESEARCH TO IMPROVE COUNSELING EDUCATION COURSE WORK FOR CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article informs counselor educators and psychologists on how to utilize action research to evaluate diverse students, course work, and to improve classroom instruction. A paucity exists in research investigating educational needs of diverse counseling students. The present action research study examined educational experiences of diverse counseling students enrolled in a research course. The sample consisted of 70% Hispanic/Latino students, and a little less than half were older adults; 80% of the participants were female. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed. Findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Action Research, Quantitative, Qualitative, Diversity, Counseling Students, Older Students, Hispanic/Latino Students, Female Students.

INTRODUCTION

While there are a great number of articles published on multiculturalism and diversity (Smith, Ng, Brinson, and Mityagin, 2008), there is a paucity of research investigating educational needs of counseling students from diverse backgrounds. For example, Smith et al., (2008) found that over a 17-year period the Counselor Education and Supervision Journal (CE&S Journal) did not publish articles pertaining to academic achievement of diverse populations. This particular journal is the official publication of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and its scholarly focus is on preparation and supervision of counselors in agency or school settings, and in colleges and universities at the local, state, or federal level. Searching the CE&S Journal for articles pertaining to diversity published between 2006 – 2016 showed that less than 30 articles were focused on multicultural or diversity concerns during this time frame. Only two of these looked at minority student experiences in counselor education programs. Some authors

attempted to justify the lack of diversity in sampling by citing the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which reported that the counseling profession is predominantly Caucasian (Prosek and Hurt, 2014). This stands in contrast to the fact that counselor education programs increasingly serve students from diverse backgrounds. For example, over 40% of all college undergraduate students are older adults (Husson and Kennedy, 2003) and predominantly female (Kinsella, 1998). Frequently, members of this fastest growing student population have families and are employed full time. This may lead to increased vulnerability to stress (Home, 1998; Kasworm, 2003).

Culture, ethnicity, and other diversity factors can create challenges for students. Hu and Kuh (2003) reported on the findings published in the 2001 edition of Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, which indicated that minority student enrollment in the most populous states ranged between 33% - 51%. More recent data showed that, overall minority enrollment across the U.S. totals 39.4% (The Chronical of Higher Education Almanac, 2014).

Students bring to the classroom differential learning styles and varying skill levels due to diversity as well as other factors, which can create challenges. Another problem is that counseling students tend to not view research skills as a necessary core competency for practitioners (Gerig, 2012; Wang and Guo, 2011). This is despite the fact that evidence based practice requires the use of research to formulate and justify client treatment strategies (Patel, Hagedorn, and Bai, 2013). Counselors are increasingly asked to show evidence that their treatment of clients is cost effective (Whiston, 1996). There are numerous articles discussing research training for doctoral level counseling students however, there is still a lack of focus on master's level students (Steele and Rawls, 2015), especially considering those from diverse backgrounds.

1. Action Research

Action Research is defined as a systematic inquiry that searches for workable and effective solutions to problems in professional as well as community settings (Stringer, 2014). It was developed by Kurt Lewin who worked as Social Psychologist. His goal was to integrate research and practice in order to positively impacting ethnic and racial minorities and to foster independence and equality (Adelman, 1993). In the 1930s and 1940s Lewin focused his social justice work on counteracting colonization and exploitation through the means of action research (Adelman, 1993). Action research does not utilize hypotheses as such; rather it is developmental in nature. In addition, the goal is not to obtain a representative sample or generalizability— rather, the focus is a specific setting, institution, or problem area. It can be quantitative, qualitative, or both. It offers a hands-on approach to identifying and resolving problems, which is often lacking in traditional research. Action research frequently asks: “Is what we are doing effective? If so, what are the effective aspects of what we are doing? How can we enhance what we are already doing?” (Guiffrida, Douthit, Lynch, and Mackie, 2011, pp. 283-284). Action research is of continues nature, sometimes including several cycles of data collection and action stages (Norton, 2001).

2. Purpose of the Study

Today, action research has many applications such as in primary and secondary education settings however, it has also been successfully used in college environments (Gershuny and Rainey, 2006). Due to its adaptability, action research is also uniquely suited to assess master's level students' educational needs. The purpose of this study was to investigate educational experiences and needs in a research course of diverse counseling students in order to improve course delivery. Another goal was to inform counselor educators on how to utilize action research as an assessment tool to evaluate students, the effectiveness of course work, and to improve classroom instruction.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Student participants were recruited from counseling research classes at a public southwestern university over the course of several semesters. A total of 51 students participated in the study; 19.6% (10) were male and 80.4% (41) were female. The majority of students were either single (33.3% - 17) or married (49% - 25). A majority of students (70.6% - 36) were employed or self-employed. A total of 86.3% (44) stated they had a B.A., 11.8% (6) had a master's, and 2% (1) reported a doctoral degree. Table 1 depicts the age range of the participants and Table 2 lists the ethnicity of participants. A total of 41.2% (21) of participating students were of non-traditional college age (age 35 – 64), and 77.6% (38) were minority status students. A total of 54% (27) had been out of school one year or less; 26% (13) had been out of school between 1.5

Age Range	n	%
18-24	10	19.6
25-34	20	39.2
35-44	10	19.6
45-54	8	15.7
55-64	3	5.9

Table 1. Age Range of Participants

Ethnicity	n	%
Black/African American	4	8.2
Hispanic/Latino	34	69.4
White	10	20.4
Other	1	2.0

Table 2. Ethnicity of Participants

– 5 years, 12% (6) had been out of school between 6 – 10 years, and 8% (4) had been out of school between 12 – 29 years. Overall, 20% (10) of participants had been out of school between 6 – 29 years. Also, 25 students were recruited for the follow-up data collection.

Stakeholder participants included three course instructors and a librarian who taught or provided library services to the participating students. These stakeholder participants provided narratives of their experiences teaching the research course, what worked, and what did not work. Narratives were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software HyperRESEARCH.

3.2 Measures

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected. A Likert Scale survey instrument was used to collect quantitative data from the participating students. Open-ended questions were also posed to elicit short answers. Participating course instructors and the librarian furnished narratives pertaining to their experiences teaching the research courses.

3.3 Procedure

Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board permission to conduct the study was obtained. All participants completed the pen and paper survey instrument, which was administered by delegated students at the end of each semester. Data was collected over the course of three semesters. The average administration time of the instrument was 15 minutes. Narratives were collected from the participating instructors and librarian at the conclusion of the study. A follow-up data collection was also performed after changes based on the findings of the original data collection were instituted.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 Initial Data Collection

A total of 72.5% of participants strongly agreed, and 23.5% agreed that the classroom visit by the librarian was useful. In addition, 62.7% of participants strongly agreed, and 37.3% agreed that the power point presentation on common APA Style mistakes was helpful. Also, 58.8% of participants strongly agreed and 31.4% agreed that the

APA sample paper furnished to the students was useful.

There were four open-ended questions to which students responded. The first question was: What was your biggest apprehension/fear/worry about taking a research class? The biggest worry students reported was writing a semester long research paper (45%; n=18). A Chi-square analysis showed that there was a relationship between age group and worries about writing the research paper ($\chi^2(4, N = 51) = 9.329$, exact p = .049). While age group 25-34 constituted 39.2% of the participants, this group cited more concerns with writing the research paper (61.1%; n=11) than any other age group.

Also, age group 35-44 constituted 19.6% of the participants; these students cited less than expected concerns with writing the research paper (0%; n=0). Figure 1 highlights the age range categories and the frequency of being worried about writing a semester long research paper. Approaching significance (p = .075), male students were more concerned about the research paper than female participants. In total, 60% (6) of the male participants reported worries pertaining to the semester long research paper; in contrast, only 29.3% (12) female participants reported these worries. Ethnicity was not a significant factor in terms of worries about the research paper. Participating students also reported concerns pertaining to the research topic and APA Style

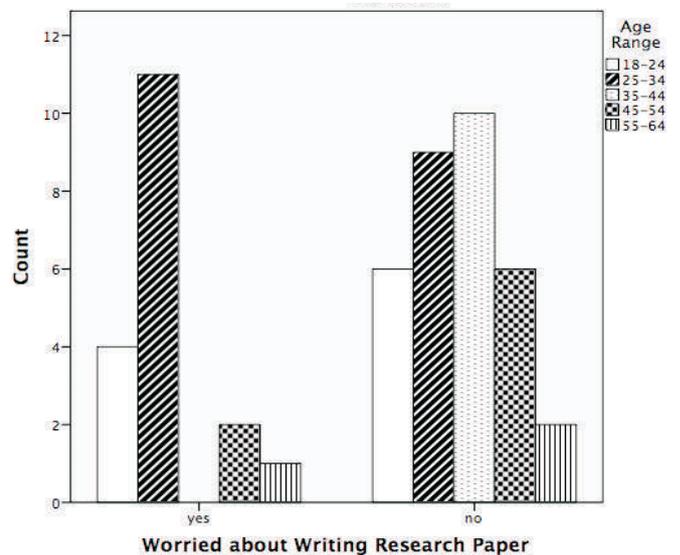


Figure 1. Bar Graph – Age Range and Worried about Writing Research Paper

formatting (10% each).

The second question was: What would you have liked to learn more about? A total of 10% (5) of students wanted more current counseling research integrated into the course work, and another 10% (5) stated that they would have liked to conduct their own research. In addition, 8% (4) wanted to learn more about APA style/writing, and another 8% (4) wanted to learn more about research designs and methods. The third question was: What is still unclear? The response rate to this question was relatively low; most students either did not respond to this question or stated that there were no unclear areas. A few students expressed not being clear about the bell curve, identifying types of research, or understanding data/results sections. The final question was: What was the most enjoyable part of the course? A total of 23% (12) of students reported that they enjoyed individual instructors. They cited warmth, supportiveness, and a sense of humor as traits they liked in their instructors. A total of 10% (5) of students reported that they enjoyed hearing about classmates' research projects, 14% (7) stated they enjoyed the research process, and 10% (5) said they enjoyed the writing process.

4.1.2 Follow-up Data Collection

Several survey questions were added based on the findings from the initial data collection. In addition to the initial survey questions, the 25 students who participated in the follow-up data collection were asked about their first generation college students status. They were also asked if they ever completed a statistics or research course prior to enrolling in the current Master's program. Table 3 lists the results pertaining to these follow-up questions. It is of interest to note that 66.7% (8) of first generation college students completed a statistics course prior to enrolling in the Master's program, versus 92.3% (12) of those participants who were not first generation college students. Additionally, 50% (6) of first generation college

Question	Yes	No
First Generation College Student	48% (12)	52% (13)
Did you ever complete a statistics course?	80% (20)	20% (5)
Did you ever complete a research course?	56% (14)	44% (11)

Table 3. Follow-up Questions

students completed a research course prior to enrolling in the master's program, versus 61.5% (8) of those participants who did not report first generation college student status. Also, since initial data collection revealed student anxiety pertaining to writing the research paper, a student research manual was added to Blackboard. The research manual offered tips on writing, handouts, and other materials pertaining to the research course, which 88% (22) of students found useful.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Faculty and librarian narratives were analyzed using HyperRESEARCH software and the results were sorted into two themes. The first theme concerned problem areas encountered by participating faculty and librarian and were as follows:

- (1) Ideally, counseling research should be taught by counseling faculty with an understanding of the Scientist-practitioner model. This is not always the case, which may cause problems with student engagement.
- (2) Students tended to lack self-confidence, felt intimidated, and often cited negative experiences with math and/or statistics courses. Some had no background in statistics at all or lacked basic research skills. Students frequently were unclear of the reasons they had to take a research class.
- (3) There were also issues with being part of a new university that is still working on infrastructure to assist non-traditional students.
- (4) The University Writing Center was frequently not a good resource for graduate students. Some students were not used to scholarly writing and composing lengthy papers; they seemed fearful or resistant to the process.

The second theme that emerged from the faculty and librarian narratives highlighted what was seen as effective: (1) Students responded well to reviewing current counseling research and connecting research to the profession. (2) Small adjustments by faculty/librarian resulted in significant, positive student outcomes. (3) Partnership and supportive relationships between librarian, faculty, and students was essential and effective. Face-to-face and online availability of faculty/librarian was essential. (4) Librarian/faculty had to teach basic

research and academic problem solving skills lacking in students. (5) Structure, check-in, follow-up, and continuous feedback was effective in keeping students on track. (6) Students were most successful, if they were able to select a topic they were passionate about. (7) Students appreciated the peer editing process and hands-on (in class) research activities. (8) Students gained a deep sense of accomplishment through turning in and presenting their finished projects to the class.

5. Discussion

The present study included a large number of students from diverse backgrounds with close to 70% being Hispanic/Latino, a little less than half were older students, and over 80% were female. Keeping the diverse student background in mind, the present study provided a wealth of useful information. An important finding was that, many students were very concerned about writing a semester long research paper, especially male students in age group 25-34. Also, many students found the classroom visit by the librarian and provided resources helpful. The findings of the study also reinforced teaching strategies such as maintaining a warm and supportive classroom presence. Research can be a difficult subject of study and infusing the course work with some humor was also appreciated by students.

Due to the cyclical nature of the action research process and critical evaluation of findings, it was noted that the survey instrument needed to be updated to include a question regarding first generation college student status. As shown above, follow-up data revealed that 48% (12) of students were first generation college students. Inquiring about prior statistics and research course work was also fruitful in that it showed that first generation college students were at a disadvantage. Fewer first generation college students had been exposed to statistics or research course work in comparison to those students who did not claim first generation college student status.

Overall, it appeared that students benefitted from more hands-on research activities, warm and supportive instructors, and a librarian visit occurring not later than the second or third class day. Also, it was helpful to maintain

an electronic student research manual containing writing aids and other informational materials to help with the research project, statistics, and the writing process. In addition, it seemed crucial to foster a close connection to students, and to maintain and improve the course structure by tailoring it to the needs of specific student population represented in the classroom.

Conclusion

Action research is an effective tool that is easily implemented by instructors who wish to gain more insight into their students' educational background and educational needs. It can be used to improve course work and provide students with a more targeted educational experience. Implications of the current study are that programs and instructors may assume they are familiar with enrolled students and their educational needs, but unless methodical assessments are utilized, there are no guarantees that programs provide appropriate learning experiences for diverse students. The present action research provided instructors and librarians with rich information and sometimes surprising findings, including male students' high anxiety pertaining to the scholarly writing process. This helped instructors to more carefully focus on male students in the class. Other unexpected results revolved around the fact that ethnicity was not a factor in any of the problem areas. This, however, may have been due to the non-equivalent student sample in which almost 70% of the participating student identified as Hispanic/Latino. Finally, it may benefit counselor education programs to recruit counselor educators or psychologists with counseling experience to teach counseling research courses instead of faculty from other backgrounds. Counselor educators and experienced psychologists are more familiar with current trends in the counseling profession and are able to offer students a richer educational experience in counseling research.

There are several limitations to consider in regards to the current study. Generalizability is not a main concern when conducting action research and the findings of the present study only apply to the particular setting in which the data was collected. Also, some of the results may be skewed by the non-equivalent group design used in this

study. There are several recommendations for future research. The present study is one of very few studies focusing on diverse counseling students. Additional research is needed that concentrates on diverse counseling students and their educational needs and experiences. Also, the present study should be replicated in other settings and with other groups of students to obtain a more holistic understanding of the increasingly diverse counseling student population.

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