

## Investigating guidance counselors' perceived sense of preparedness and support in carrying out their job

**Sharline Cole** \*, The University of the West Indies, Mona, Department of Educational Studies, MEd in Educational Psychology, Kingston, Jamaica

**Avalloy McCarthy-Curvin**, The University of the West Indies, Mona, School of Education, Kingston, Jamaica

**Canute Thompson**, The University of the West Indies, Mona, School of Education, Kingston, Jamaica

**Verna Knight**, The University of the West Indies, Mona, School of Education, Kingston, Jamaica

**Therese Ferguson**, The University of the West Indies, Mona, School of Education, Kingston, Jamaica

**Allison Montgomery**, The University of the West Indies, Mona, School of Education, Kingston, Jamaica

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### Abstract

Guidance Counsellors play a critical role in the education and psycho-emotional well-being of students. They work in schools to promote and advocate for students' social, emotional, and cognitive needs. This cross-sectional research sought to investigate Guidance Counsellors perceived sense of preparedness and the support they received in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. The research utilized quota sampling to collect data from 131 Guidance Counsellors across four Caribbean countries: Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago. The results revealed that Guidance Counsellors are satisfied with their preparedness and the support they receive. In addition, Guidance Counsellors who are prepared are also very likely to receive professional and social support. There is no difference in the support received and preparedness for their job based on school type and location. The findings suggest that Guidance Counsellors are prepared and receive the necessary social and professional support to effectively and efficiently deal with the challenges they face.

**Keywords:** Caribbean; counseling; guidance; guidance counselors; preparedness; support.

### 1. Introduction

\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Sharline Cole, The University of the West Indies at Mona, Department of Educational Studies, MEd in Educational Psychology, Kingston, Jamaica  
E-mail address: [sharline.cole02@uwimona.edu.jm](mailto:sharline.cole02@uwimona.edu.jm)

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Due to a wide range of factors such as the high incidence of violent crimes and other deviant behaviors such as lottery scamming that have beset the Caribbean in recent times, the continued emergence of new careers, and changing attitudes towards sexuality, guidance counselors need more structured support for their work to upskill them and improve their level of efficiency and responsiveness. It is common to have teenagers or young adults who have faced the justice system re-entering schools and being adaptive; however, it is the job of guidance counselors to assist in this reintegration process (Snodgrass Rangel et al., 2020). They must cope with more trauma than in times past and are duty-bound to counsel students through significant challenges that were less common in previous times. Some antisocial behaviors including fighting have increased since the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also falls within the remit of guidance counselors to address these. Guidance counselors must also demonstrate high levels of awareness about global trends that affect young people immediately and in the long run. As such they ought to be alert and proactive. The role of the guidance counselor has become increasingly stressful. Consequently, provision needs to be made for their own mental and emotional well-being. Their effectiveness will likely be increased by policy-level support from the various Ministries of Education and appropriate collaboration with a variety of entities and stakeholders.

According to the American School Counselor Association (2021), school counselors are leaders employed by their respective schools to develop and implement guidance and counseling programs that advocate for and support all students through collaboration with other school personnel in fulfilling “the school’s academic mission and school improvement plan”. Fyffe writing from the Jamaican perspective states that;

*Within our Jamaican schools, the school counselor’s primary role is to assist each child and his or her parents in mapping out the most appropriate educational program to ensure effective career plans and to facilitate life-long learning, good decision-making skills, and goal-setting (Fyffe, 2019).*

Maynard’s (2014) writing from Barbados expressed the view that Guidance Counsellors are highly trained advocates on behalf of students so that they can achieve their true potential. In addition, there is a collaboration between counselors and school personnel in implementing programs and activities that meet the needs of students to support their overall success (Maynard, 2014).

According to Maynard (2014), “highly trained guidance counselors are needed who will advocate for a high-quality education for all children in schools and nurture the holistic development of every student’s academic competence, and emotional, social and spiritual well-being”. Kelly (2003) suggested that Guidance Counsellors in schools are likely to succeed with the necessary support from the relevant stakeholders in developing a comprehensive guidance program.

There are benefits to having Guidance Counsellors in schools. According to Nkechi et al., (2016), school counselors benefit students in meeting 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges as a result of their academic, career, personal, and social development. In addition, students benefit from career exploration and develop effective interpersonal skills and the necessary resilience to cope in a dynamic environment.

Often, Guidance Counsellors only see students whenever they engage in disruptive behaviors, and not much time is available or scheduled for preventive exercises (Maynard, 2014). The Guidance Counsellor to advocate for students’ success and wellbeing requires the necessary skills and competencies to equip them for the job (Ertelt et al., 2022). Their professional preparedness and psychosocial well-being are critical to their effectiveness. In addition, Maynard (2014) states that “if the guidance and counseling programs are to continue to be an asset to the school system, more of the counselors need to be adequately trained” in identifying and developing the appropriate interventive, supportive, preventative and administrative programs that meet the needs of students.

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Cheruiyot and Orodho (2015) in their study on Guidance Counsellors' preparedness in providing effective service in Kenya found that teachers who work as Guidance Counsellors are not equipped with the relevant training required and are not qualified for their job to deliver Guidance and Counselling services. The quality of delivery of guidance services is affected by the inadequacies in facilities that provide counseling, materials, and resources. Camadan et al., (2020) in addition, reported that school counselors require psychosocial support in performing their job. Therefore, it is important to examine carefully how Guidance Counsellors are prepared for their job, considering the different realities they face in Caribbean schools.

Not much research has been done on the Guidance Counsellors' preparedness and the support they require to do their job in the Caribbean, considering the diversity of students who are influenced by the ecological system and its substructures. This research will provide a platform for the analysis of Guidance Counsellors' preparedness and the support they receive within the Caribbean add to the relevant literature and bridge the gap that connects research in the Caribbean and the world.

## **1.1. Literature Review**

### **1.1.1. Guidance and counselling in the Caribbean**

According to the Ministry of Education in Jamaica, its Guidance and Counselling Unit ensures that school amenities facilitate the holistic development of students, to enable them to lead fulfilling lives. The unit creates 'services and programs for the personal/social, educational, and career development of all students. It also coordinates the training and development of counselors in schools and has responsibility for many programs including the HIV/AIDS Program in Schools, the Program for Alternative Student Support, the Safe Schools Program, and the Health and Family Life Education in Schools. (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2020)

The Guidance and Counselling Unit in the Ministry of Education and Youth in Jamaica developed a policy aimed at creating certain objectives, strategies, and performance standards for the guidance and counseling profession in schools. The policy provides a structure and point of reference for the tasks to be executed by guidance counselors and also serves as a means of holding the 'counselors and schools accountable to the expectations of the Ministry'. The creation of the policy was described by the then Minister of Education Minister, Senator the Hon. Ruel Reid, as being representative of a continuation of efforts to improve governance in schools. The minister also referred to guidance counsellors as 'game changers in the lives of our children' signaling the key role that they play.

The mission of the Caribbean Counselors' Association (1968-2013) which is based in Trinidad *is to serve as a stimulus in the development of professional competence among its members in guidance services and counseling; to improve services provided to our students; to maintain ethical and professional procedures and standards; offering one another cooperation individually and in corporate efforts and programs; and to adhere and support the purposes, goals and objectives of [the] National Association for College Admission Counselling (NACAC) and The College Board.*

In 2021, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Commission in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched a revised handbook for school counselors, the intent of which is to restructure regional approaches to guidance counseling. The effort was described as [a] major development from the education sector. It was noted that the handbook came at an opportune time as schools contend with the emotional challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic'.

On the situation in Dominica, Rabess (2018) reports that: 'counselors across Dominica are currently advocating for a more solidified and uniform professional identity, more counselor assignments throughout primary schools, and legislative changes that would better support the connection between the education and social welfare departments.

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In 2018, the co-coordinator of guidance counseling attached to the Ministry of Education, St. Lucia, Jocelyn Eugene, advised that the school counselors in that country are 'guided by a framework of standards and competencies' (Peters, 2018).

The formalization of the role of guidance counselors was useful in helping to create a level of professionalism and a sense of clarity about what the role entails. Guidance counselors are expected to assist with the shaping of behaviors encouraging positive values and attitudes among students and providing psychosocial interventions for students as necessary. The policy takes its cue from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and other key international guidelines.

According to Maynard (2014), Barbados began earnest efforts to develop guidance and counseling interventions in the early 1980s in a bid to address challenges with which young people were grappling such as 'struggling with identity, experimenting with illegal substances, exploring their sexuality and engaging in risky sexual behavior'. Such issues began to affect the previously 'healthy, productive learning environment'. Due to growth in class sizes, teachers could no longer deliver the curriculum effectively as well as treat dysfunctional behaviors among students satisfactorily. Guidance counselors were therefore retained 'to help students resolve emotional, social or behavioral problems and help them develop a clearer focus or sense of direction'.

Maynard (2014) asserts that Guidance Counsellors have fought over the years to establish themselves within the education system as professionals and not addendums to teachers.' Over time, the role of guidance counselors has taken shape and there has been greater clarity about the functions of such school personnel. The formation of the Barbados Association of Guidance Counsellors is an affirmation of their professional identity. There is still considerable room for improvement as there is neither a professional code of ethics nor a formal counseling structure to support the efforts of counselors. There is a need for counselors to be perceived as officers who engage in proactive and preventative measures and not simply persons who react to crises. Maynard (2014) observes that '[t]he guidance counselor in the Barbadian system largely has to function as a crisis manager, substitute teacher, social worker, nurse, family counselor, mediator, and several other roles rather than as a proactive agent for positive change.' The author described guidance and counseling programs as 'an asset to the school system' while noting that there is a need for more counselors 'to be adequately trained'.

The Student Support Services (SSS) Division of the Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago provides services in guidance, counseling, and social work at primary and secondary schools throughout the country. According to the ministry, the overarching aim of these initiatives is to increase student success by providing support through:

- Counselling and specialized intervention strategies for students on extended suspension and other at-risk students.
- Specialized services for students with moderate or severe special educational needs.
- Social work services for students with psychosocial and behavioral difficulties at selected primary schools in each Educational District.
- Early intervention, diagnosis, and remediation for selected primary schools in each Education District.

The suite of services includes counseling, referral, and consulting. Social work facilities include 'casework and intervention, counseling, referral and consulting, home visits, and parent education, social justice and court preparation and processing support, psychological skills development, crisis management and intervention training, and community outreach and linkage'.

### **1.1.2. Role of guidance counsellors**

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The role of guidance counselors in schools may be explained as follows: 'to work with students and parents to help guide students' academic, behavioral and social growth' (Learning.org., 2022). Maynard (2014) refers to guidance and counseling as 'an essential component of the overall school system'. The role of guidance counselors is therefore a very valuable one. Within the Caribbean context, such counselors usually operate within primary and secondary institutions. Given that their work involves interaction with persons of various backgrounds, temperaments, and circumstances, guidance counselors must have a high level of empathy and discernment, well-developed interpersonal skills, high levels of emotional intelligence and patience, and genuine concern for the well-being of young people. Counselors ought to keep abreast of emerging issues that affect their constituents and seek knowledge about new career paths and appropriate avenues to which students may be referred to access requisite support where psychosocial and welfare assistance is needed. Guidance counselors should pursue continuous professional development in a bid to provide quality advice and direction to students. The role of school counselors will be very central as responses are fashioned to address the post-pandemic behavioral decline among several students who are said to need resocialization.

### **1.1.3. Guidance Counsellor Preparedness**

Guidance or school counselors are called to offer various sorts of support to the children within their schools to ensure that student's personal, social, academic, and vocational domains are catered to and that these young persons have good mental health (Yuksel-Sahin, 2012; Walsh et al., 2022). Easy transitions in school change either from primary to secondary or change in schools (Beatson et al., 2023). Additionally, they must assess risk for various tendencies or behaviors, such as suicide (Becnel et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2020), support vulnerable or marginalized populations such as students who may be homeless (Camp et al., 2019), domestic violence (Münger & Markström, 2019), English learners (Grissom & Kelchner, 2020), or transgender students (Abreu et al., 2019), and support Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in the classroom. Indeed, there is consensus that school counselors are those at the forefront of addressing mental and emotional health issues for school students (Springer et al., 2020). Quite understandably then, researchers have highlighted the importance of training counselors to adequately support student needs, for instance, supporting vulnerable populations (Camp et al., 2019), as well as the need for training of teachers who may need to offer guidance and counseling services to students (Cheruiyot & Orodho, 2015).

Even though counselors must engage in these supportive roles, the extent of the training and support that they receive has been called into question. For instance, drawing on the literature, Becnel et al., (2021) point out that even though school counselors "are more likely to assess youth for suicide risk than any other mental health professional", "many school counselors lack appropriate crisis intervention and suicide assessment training". They cite various national (USA) studies in their article that highlight counselors feeling unprepared to assess suicidal students, unprepared for students' death by suicide, and other issues related to suicide. In their research involving 226 school counselors, 38% of their participants reported not being prepared for suicide prevention during their graduate training programs. Similarly, Springer et al. (2020) also shared findings from various studies that highlighted counselors' feelings of ill-preparedness to handle school crises (such as suicides), recognize at-risk students, and assess students for specific issues such as suicide.

Alongside these findings, some school counselors have reported receiving no formal training during graduate and postgraduate training to support vulnerable populations such as students who are homeless (Camp et al., 2019). In a study by Abreu et al. (2019) that involved 174 school counselors in the USA, results showed that their participants experienced a lack of training about transgender issues, both during their programs of study as well as in their job situations. Concerning SEL specifically, teachers have voiced their lack of proficiency and confidence in incorporating SEL strategies into their classroom practice (Grissom & Kelchner, 2020), a sentiment experienced by

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guidance counselors as well. For instance, despite the evolution in guidance and counseling in Barbados, Maynard (2014) posits that currently “there is evidence of a lack of awareness, understanding, and programming concerning the social-emotional and career development needs of students.

Even where options such as practicums are a part of training programs, some individuals indicate gaps between the knowledge delivered in courses and the actual demands and needs of field settings (Belser et al., 2018). Maynard (2014) highlights that in Barbados, only about 50% have Master's level qualifications and that these are in fields related to guidance/school counseling such as mental health counseling or counseling psychology. In their qualitative study of school counselors in Barbados, Griffin and Bryan (2021) shared that their participants emphasized the importance of school counselors having specific training inclusive of a Bachelor's degree and certification, alongside authentic practical classroom/school experiences interacting with children. Thus, the literature reviewed, which is by no means exhaustive, highlights the existence of some gaps in training for school counselors and issues with counselors' own perceived level of preparedness to deal with the various issues for which they hold responsibility.

#### **1.1.4. Support for guidance counselors**

Whilst guidance counselors play a critical role in offering various types of support to the students within their remit, they need support mechanisms- including psychosocial help- to be in place to facilitate their work. One issue pertains to the fact that they are sometimes assigned responsibilities that are outside of the scope of their substantive duties (Lowery et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2020). One way to address this and to contribute to guidance counselors' successful undertaking of their roles is through principals' support of and collaboration with counselors. As Lowery et al. (2018) outline, “School administrators are in a position to support school counselors by sharing their value of the profession with others, actively engaging in activities to learn more about the school counseling profession, and having conversations with counselors about their roles”. The literature also highlights that when principals support and/or collaborate with counselors there is higher counselor satisfaction, the performance of counselors' roles, and low counselor turnover (McConnell et al., 2020). Based on the research of Lowery et al. (2018), their findings indicated a need for training for principals/administrators concerning the counselor role and how best to support it, for counselors to have their time and duties appropriately assigned, and for the requisite resources and professional development opportunities to be in place.

In addition to the support from principals concerning undertaking their roles, guidance counselors may also need appropriate psychosocial support as relevant. Mahomed et al., (2020) point out that stress and burnout are probable results if guidance counselors do not practice self-care due to the very nature of their roles (e.g., dealing with mental and emotional health amongst students, crises, exposure to traumatic events, etc.). Additionally, Kim and Lambie (2018) point out the job demands of school counselors, including, large caseloads, paperwork, meetings with parents, and duties not related to their substantive roles as counselors. Roxas et al., (2019) voice: “Counselors are humans too. They may also experience burnout, dissatisfaction, distress, and negative emotions themselves”. Thus, researchers highlight the importance of self-care (Mahomed et al., 2020) as well as the significance of social support from various sources, inclusive of “supervision, peer support, and support from family and friends” (Manning-Jones et al., 2016). Support of this nature can reduce stress and burnout, enhance coping capabilities, and offer professional support (Manning-Jones et al., 2016).

In addition to principal support, social support, and self-care, specific entities may be in place to offer various forms of professional and other support to guidance counselors (Harrison, 2023). The Caribbean has pockets of support for guidance counselors via Ministries of Education and independent entities. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Information in Jamaica has a Guidance and Counselling

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Unit that among other things 'coordinates the training and development of counsellors in schools. This unit also launched a policy aimed at developing 'objectives, strategies and performance standards for the guidance and counseling profession in schools' (Bryan, 2018). This policy details a framework around the operations of guidance counselors and outlines a strategy to hold counselors and schools accountable to the expectations of the Ministry.

The Gleaner reported in its July 1, 2022, publication that some guidance counselors in Jamaica benefited from training in underage gambling prevention education; this initiative was made possible through a memorandum of understanding signed between the Ministry of Education and Youth and RISE Life Management Services. According to Senior Education Officer, Guidance Counselling Unit, Region 1, Ministry of Education and Youth, Tamika McCreath, at the end of the training, the guidance counselors will leave with a six-week Lesson Plan for Underage Gambling Prevention to be implemented in the various schools. Ms. McCreath hailed the partnership observing that it will "build our guidance counselors' capacity in getting that message out to the younger set of students, so that the early onset of gambling is reduced". The 3-day training used a lesson plan created by RISE Life Management Services in collaboration with the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Commission (BGLC).

The Community Counselling and Restorative Justice Centre (CCRJC), an outreach arm of the Northern Caribbean University (NCU) in Jamaica hosts webinars that have been helpful to a wide range of stakeholders including guidance counselors. The Guidance and Counselling Unit of the Ministry of Education and Youth in Region 5 has incorporated initiatives of this center into some of its strategies for its COVID-19 Response Plan. (Northern Caribbean University, 2020).

CHOICES Career & Education Advice (2022) which is based in Jamaica has as its mission: to promote the development of an educated, productive, and well-trained workforce by disseminating information to people who wish to pursue life-long learning and make informed decisions regarding their education, career and life. According to this entity, it has conducted guidance counselor and teacher training in Caribbean territories such as Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, Barbados, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Vincent & The Grenadines, and Dominica.

## **1.2. Theoretical Framework**

### **1.2.1. Bandura's self-efficacy theory**

Self-efficacy describes the capabilities and confidence in oneself to complete a task or execute actions required for an outcome (Bandura & Wessels, 1994; Brown et al., 2013). Individuals who have a strong sense of self-efficacy are likely to have a greater sense of well-being and accomplishment. In addition, individuals with strong self-efficacy are likely to persevere and recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments. The thought processes, behaviors, and emotions are influenced by one's sense of efficacy (Bandura & Wessels, 1994). According to Bray-Clark and Bates (2003), "positive self-efficacy beliefs can increase the extent to which teachers are willing to transfer skills learned during in-service training to the classroom". Bray-Clark and Bates (2003) also believe that self-efficacy provides a sound theoretical background in understanding teachers' development and designing in-service training for teachers. Subsequently "teachers for whom values such as novelty, freedom, and choosing one's own goals are important for their perception of efficiency feel more efficient in their teaching activities when they feel independent from external conditions" (Barni et al., 2019).

According to Bandura & Wessels (1994), four sources influence a strong sense of self-efficacy: mastery experience, vicarious experience/modeling influences, social persuasion, and somatic and emotional states. Whenever one has an awareness of their skills and capacities in particular areas, mastery is developed with the necessary rigor involved. Therefore, the experience of mastery is associated with consistently high outcomes (Bandura & Wessels, 1994; Brown et al., 2013). Mastery experience is considered the most important factor in increased teachers' self-efficacy (Mohamadi, et al., 2011). Therefore, concurring with Ooi et al., (2021) that "the school counselors' authentic

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experience of success in counseling cases (mastery) boosted their confidence and self-belief in delivering services and care”.

When individuals observe others achieving successful outcomes after working hard those individuals are very likely to copy the same behavior. This is also linked to the influence of the model. Models provide certain standards that are associated with the capabilities from which the observer learns. The competent model transmits information through their actions, beliefs, and ways of thinking to the observer. The observer is likely to complete a task or develop competency for an area one aspires to be based on the observation of a model completing the task. In addition, the observer learns from the model how to deal with different demands (Bandura & Wessels, 1994; Brown et al., 2013).

Self-efficacy improves when one is persuaded that one can excel and do well (Bandura & Wessels, 1994). Social persuasion is convincing individuals that they can successfully manage a situation or complete a task that is perceived as difficult (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2020). Individuals who are persuaded verbally that they can do well are likely to put in more effort that is sustained over time to achieve success (Bandura & Wessels, 1994). Consequently, contributes to the improvement of one's sense of efficacy in attempting and completing a task that was considered difficult (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2020)

Affective/emotional arousal (somatic and emotional state) explains how an individual feels at a particular time and could influence their sense of efficacy and their ability to complete a task (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2020). In addition, the emotional and physical state experienced in attempting and engaging in a task determines how likely it is that one will have a high or a low sense of self-efficacy. Consequently, being prepared for a task influences a positive emotional state that has a direct influence on improvement in efficacy (Brown et al., 2013). Depending on the state of arousal one can successfully perform the task or may experience a sense of helplessness or fear in completing the task (Mohamadi, et al., 2011).

The extent of the preparedness of Guidance Counsellors will influence their sense of efficacy when carrying out their functions and roles. This is linked to their sense of mastery in working with students and delivering effective guidance programs. Having the opportunities to practice what was learned. “High-level self-efficacy shows a proactive effect on challenges and difficulties and helps to develop a successful orientation period in various stressful circumstances” (Aliyev & Tunc, 2015). Mitcham–Smith (2005) found that school counselors who had a higher sense of self-efficacy were likely to have positive perceptions about their roles and were likely to be involved in actual practice. On the other hand, Kebongo and Mwangi (2020) report that self-efficacy is likely to be lower among Guidance Counsellors who have no formal education and training and/or limited professional development. Guidance Counsellors with low self-efficacy may encounter more challenges addressing issues that affect children like sexuality, substance use, and abuse, and are likely to Kikongo encounter difficulties providing psycho-social support.

### **1.3. Purpose of study**

This research seeks to examine Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness for their job and the support they receive to carry out their work in Caribbean schools.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent Guidance Counsellors are satisfied with the support provided?
2. What are the support systems provided for Guidance Counsellors?
3. How satisfied are Guidance Counsellors about their perceived preparedness
4. To what extent there is a relationship between Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness and support in carrying out their job?



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5. Is there a difference in the support system and sense of preparedness based on the type of school and location?

## **2. Method and Materials**

### **2.1. Design**

To achieve the objectives of this research a cross-sectional survey design was utilized. This approach was chosen since it was ideal to address the study's objectives /research questions that require descriptive and correlation statistical results (Creswell, 2020). This investigation aimed to measure Guidance Counsellors' preparedness and the support they receive in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. Consequently, the data collection instrument was designed to address such areas.

### **2.2. Data collection instrument**

The items for the instrument were written based on the literature on the skills and training of Guidance Counsellors (Kelly, 2003; McCarthy, 2004; Ockerman et al., 2015) and knowledge of the Caribbean context, for each of the areas the research sought to address. This first draft was examined by two members of the team, one of whom is a trained guidance counselor who utilized the Ministry of Education's appraisal document and job description of Guidance Counsellors (Jamaica) to add and modify some of the initial items that were placed on the questionnaire. Questionnaire development was consistent with the job description, the different roles and responsibilities, and how Guidance Counsellors are appraised by the Education Ministries (Forbes, 2018; Professional Development Unit, 2008).

After the survey was revised it was circulated among three members of the team to ensure that all necessary considerations were given to the language used (i.e., void of ambiguity, sentence construction, and grammar) and that the questionnaire adequately measures each construct as well as to evaluate the presentational features of the questionnaire. All the responses were on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

#### **2.3.1. Legitimation (reliability and validity)**

After the instrument was designed, several steps were taken to ensure its reliability and validity. The survey was circulated among a community of practitioners (members of the Caribbean Centre for Educational Planning) to evaluate whether the items on the instrument measured what was intended, for instance, whether the items for each construct aligned with the research questions the study aimed to address. Few members provided feedback and minor revisions were made.

The instrument was pilot-tested with 30 Guidance Counsellors who were randomly selected from a database accessed by the Ministry of Education, Jamaica. The Cronbach Alpha Reliability for all the items of the instrument is 0.919 which denoted a high degree of reliability (George & Mallery, 1999). The Cronbach Alpha Reliability coefficient for preparedness for the job was 0.866, social support to carry out their job was .812, and professional support to carry out their job was 0.797.

The final instrument had 44 questions of which 20 questions were selected for this paper. The overall reliability of the 20 questions was .853 and the survey evaluated three areas pertinent to this research; preparedness for the job with a c-alpha of .872, social support with a c-alpha of .813, and professional support with a c-alpha of .746. The reliability coefficients for these three areas were found to be within acceptable levels (George & Mallery, 1999). In addition, 12 questions captured demographic data

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted with the instrument to assess construct validity; four components were extracted. Factor 1 consisted of 10 items, factor 2 had five questions, factor 3 had nine questions, and factor 4 had 12 questions. Factor one explained 25%, of the variance with factor

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loadings from .553 to .814, factor 2 explained 10% of the variance with factor loading from .517 to .827, factor 3 explained seven percent of the variance with factors loading from .471 to .838, and factor 4 had four percent variance with factors loading from .500 to .848.

Revisions were made to the instrument and factor analysis was carried out on the final instrument based on the variables required for this paper, three components were extracted. Factor 1 consisted of eight items, factor 2 had six items, and factor 3 had six items. Factor one explained 29.73% of the variance with factor loading from .473 to .833, factor 2 explained 14.97% of the variance with factors loading from .596 to .767, and factor three explained 8.45% of the variance with factors loading from .574 to .706.

### **2.3. Participants**

Quota sampling was used to select Guidance Counsellors/Officers of which 131 responded to the survey that was made available through their respective Ministries of Education in the three Caribbean islands. Quota sampling allows the researcher to make the survey available to members of a population and once the quota (the predetermined number of respondents) has been reached the data collection phase would be over (Taherdoost, 2016). The Guidance Counsellors/Officers were employed at three levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary) in the four Caribbean territories (Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago). For this study, the sample size was determined using a Bukhari Sample size calculator, with a confidence of 95% and, a margin of error of 5%.

### **2.4. Procedure**

Letters explaining the research and seeking permission were sent to the respective Ministries of Education of the different islands. Consent was given through the provision of contact persons in the ministries who will work with the researchers. The contact persons sent out the consent letters and surveys to the Guidance Counsellors. The survey was created using the Google Forms feature and was made available using email to guidance counselors through their ministry representatives. In addition, they were informed that by clicking the button labeled "Fill out Form" they have consented to participate in the survey.

### **2.5. Data Analysis**

Given that the research questions are primarily designed to gather descriptive data, the main statistical analyses conducted were descriptive statistics to summarize the data. Computing of different questions into specific variables was done to be able to conduct inferential statistics. The inferential statistics utilized were correlation and independent samples t-tests.

### **2.6. Ethical Guidelines**

All ethical protocols were observed. Firstly, the research received ethical approval from the University of the West Indies, Mona Ethical Review Board. After extracting the data from the Google spreadsheet and the appropriate cleaning of the data the questionnaire was deleted from Google Docs. In addition, only the team of researchers had access to the shared file of the data set that will be password protected. Participants' names were not required, instead, a time stamp was used which was later changed to ID numbers.

## **3. Results**

In assessing Guidance Counsellors' satisfaction with the support provided, the questions that addressed this construct were computed into one variable and then recoded into levels of satisfaction (unsatisfied, undecided, and satisfied). The findings revealed that 50% of the Guidance Counsellors (N=131) were satisfied with the social support received to do their jobs while all were satisfied with

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the professional support, they received to do their job. The support system provided for Guidance Counsellors professionally is considered satisfactory accounting for 95% and 92% respectively of members of staff and Guidance Counsellors from other schools. In addition, professional support from their respective ministry of education and their school leadership were considered satisfactory which accounted for 99% and 98% respectively.

In assessing Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness for their job the findings show that they are satisfied with their preparedness for the job. Most of the Counsellors (97%) reported being satisfied with their preparedness for the job. Of all Counsellors working in tertiary institutions, 98% from secondary schools and 90% from primary schools reported that they are very satisfied with how they are prepared for the job. Further, the findings were also consistent with their perceived level of preparedness to conduct their job as guidance counselors in different types of schools. For corporate area schools, 95% reported that they were satisfied, and for rural schools 97% were satisfied. This suggests a similar degree of positive perception of their preparedness to teach in different school types.

In determining the relationship between Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness and support received in carrying out their job Pearson correlational analysis was done. The findings show that there is a moderate positive correlation between guidance counselors 'sense of preparedness for the job and professional support received ( $r = .514$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and a low positive relationship with social support ( $r = .209$ ,  $p < .05$ ). the investigation into the extent to which Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness for their job and the support received to carry out their job, revealed a significant influence on professional support received ( $R^2 = .264$ ,  $F(1,129) = 46.352$ ,  $p < .00$ ) which explained 26.4% of the variance. The data suggest that the professional support required for them to do their job was addressed during their preparation.

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare Guidance Counsellors' perceived preparedness, and professional and social support available to them based on school type and location. There were no significant differences in scores for school type and location about preparedness. Single sex schools ( $M = 34.22$ ,  $SD = 3.46$ ) and co-educational schools ( $M = 33.60$ ,  $SD = 4.19$ ) ( $t(df) = 129$ ,  $p = .732$ ) and schools in rural areas ( $M = 34.07$ ,  $SD = 3.375$ ) and schools in corporate areas ( $M = 33.34$ ,  $SD = 4.76$ ) ( $t(df) = 129$ ,  $p = .379$ ). Similar findings were reported for social support where there was no significant difference between single-sex schools ( $M = 20.00$ ,  $SD = 3.91$ ) and co-educational schools ( $M = 18.30$ ,  $SD = 4.8$ ) ( $t(df) = 129$ ,  $p = .245$ ) and schools in rural areas ( $M = 18.71$ ,  $SD = 4.74$ ) and schools in corporate areas ( $M = 17.84$ ,  $SD = 4.80$ ) ( $t(df) = 129$ ,  $p = .327$ ). Additionally, no significant difference between school type; single sex schools ( $M = 25.44$ ,  $SD = 32.70$ ) and co-educational schools ( $M = 26.03$ ,  $SD = 2.53$ ) ( $t(df) = 129$ ,  $p = .542$ ), school location and schools in rural areas ( $M = 26.22$ ,  $SD = 2.37$ ) and schools in corporate areas ( $M = 25.55$ ,  $SD = 2.82$ ) ( $t(df) = 129$ ,  $p = .179$ ). Therefore, a similar level of support and preparedness was available for Guidance Counsellors working in single-sex and coeducational schools and schools located in rural and corporate areas. The findings also suggest that the level of preparedness and support received is satisfactory for all school types and locations.

#### 4. Discussion

While the Caribbean region maintains a fairly well-organized network of schools that allow for almost universal access to education for all children, there have been concerns raised about the quality of the schooling provided, and the systematic challenges that present difficulties for students in terms of achieving quality learning (Cobbett & Younger, 2012; UNICEF 2017). The employment of guidance counselors over the last few decades has been well supported by education stakeholders as a valuable mechanism for helping these students successfully navigate their schooling journey where difficulties may present. However, the success of this school-level initiative has always been

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dependent on the effective training and preparation of these counselors, as well as the quality of the counseling services they provide. Their professional preparedness is therefore critical to their effectiveness. In other words, it is the well-trained and competent counselor who is best able to help students achieve their full potential (Maynard, 2014; Nkechi et al., 2016). Given the limited number of research done on counseling support for students within Caribbean schools, paired with the increasing student diversity due to inclusion policies in support of increasing access to quality education for all, research surrounding the competencies of current guidance counselors working in schools has therefore become very important.

Guidance or school counselors are called upon to offer various forms of psychosocial support to children within schools to ensure that students' personal, social, academic, and vocational development needs are well addressed. The first research question therefore sought to determine the extent to which the individuals currently serving as Guidance Counsellors in Caribbean schools perceived themselves as being sufficiently prepared by their training for the realities, they face in their day-to-day work with students within the school setting. Unlike Cheruiyot and Orodho (2015), who found from a similar research study conducted in African schools, that teachers reported being ill-equipped with relevant training to deliver the required services, the Caribbean findings were comparatively highly positive. The findings from this current study, for example, showed that across all school levels, the Guidance Counsellors generally had high confidence in their competencies/preparedness for the work they do.

The research also examined guidance counselors' perceptions of the support system provided to them for their work. The findings suggest that the Guidance Counsellors perceived there to be a satisfactory degree of support provided to them. To be even more specific, 100% and 50% of the Guidance Counsellors reported that they were being provided with adequate professional and social support. The findings suggest that notwithstanding the caseload that Guidance Counsellors may have there is professional and social support provided. McConnell et. al (2020) highlighted the importance of the support provided by the school principal. In addition, Manning-Jones et al., (2016) reinforced the importance of social and professional support to Guidance Counsellors which can improve their sense of well-being and reduce burnout.

The data analysis therefore subsequently sought to determine the extent to which a correlation existed between these Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness and the social and professional support received in carrying out their job in the Caribbean. The findings were indicative of there being a moderate, positive correlation between guidance counselors 'sense of preparedness for the job and the professional support received. The findings therefore suggest that unlike other jurisdictions where Guidance Counsellors felt unprepared to perform their roles effectively (Becnel et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2020), these Guidance Counsellors working in Caribbean schools tend to have a higher level of self-efficacy. This high self-efficacy is especially valuable given the challenging environment of schools today, as past research has been supportive of there being a correlation between high levels of self-efficacy, and relatively higher transfer of skills to the workplace, as well as higher chances of such individuals would persevere and recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments (Bray-Clarke & Bates, 2003; Mitcham-Smith, 2005). In addition, the professional support they receive enhances their sense of preparedness.

## **5. Conclusion**

There is no difference in Guidance Counsellors' perceived sense of preparedness and the support they receive based on school location and school type. Within the Caribbean the training program for Guidance Counsellors is similar. In addition, the respective Ministries of Education have ongoing training and professional development sessions with all Guidance Counsellors. Furthermore, there are Guidance Units and Guidance Education Officers who support Guidance Counsellors.

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The responses from the Guidance Counsellors are further suggestive that from the perspective of these Guidance Counselors, existing challenges surrounding the quality of guidance counseling should not be attributed to the professional competencies of these practitioners or the support received/available but rather to other factors external to them.

## 6. Recommendations

Bandura & Wessels (1994), would have highlighted four main influences on high self-efficacy - mastery experiences, vicarious experiences or modeling influences, social persuasions, and somatic or emotional states. Further research is needed to determine which of these (if any) is the most critical source of influence underlying this high self-efficacy among Caribbean counselors.

Another key question for further investigation raised by the current study is - What was the nature and structure of the training received by these guidance counselors (modality, curriculum, practical components)? The research findings of Griffin and Bryan (2021) based on qualitative investigations in Barbados, and the highlight of the need for higher qualifications, and more authentic school-level interactions with students as part of training, also support this need for subsequent examinations of the program structures used to prepare these guidance counsellors. A more in-depth understanding of the nature of their preparation and training can therefore have important implications for the strengthening of such program of training and development within tertiary institutions in the Caribbean. Response to this question can provide useful insight for informing current discussions on quality programs for developing guidance counselors, especially if mastery is confirmed as being a key influence underlying the self-efficacy of these practitioners.

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