

The provision of counseling services in the secondary schools of Perak state, Malaysia

Jin Kuan Kok*, Sew Kim Low, Mah Ngee Lee, Phaik Kin Cheah

Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kampar, Malaysia

Abstract. Counselling helps to attend to the social emotional needs of the school students to remove obstacles of learning, thus it is an integral part of education. Counselling service in the secondary schools in Malaysia has been established since 1963 and almost all the National Secondary schools in Malaysia has at least one school counsellor.

This study aims to identify the perceptions of their role and job scope of the counseling provision in the secondary schools of Perak state, Malaysia. A questionnaire was sent to 235 secondary schools in Perak. Altogether 13 school counsellors were interviewed using semi-structured questions. The findings suggest that the counselling provision is well established as a form of service in the government secondary schools. The guidance programme was found to be centralized, unpopular, and the experience of the counsellors was needs driven, rather than a whole school integrated approach. The perception from the counsellor on how this provision of counselling can be improved to help the school children better cope with the emotional and behavioural problems is captured. A more integrated whole school collaborative approach which draws in all the stake holders of education is proposed.

Keywords: school counselling, whole school approach, eco-systemic, secondary school counselling, school counselling model

1. Introduction

The counselling services in Malaysian schools gained momentum with the setting up of the Guidance and Counselling section in the Education Planning and Research division in 1963. It was considered as a panacea for social evils such as drug addiction delinquency and indiscipline in school [1]. Hence in Malaysia, counselling is not well received by students, teachers and school communities [2]. Most of the students are involuntarily clients. This unpopularity of counselling services among school students is also further supported by studies conducted by Aminah Hashim [3] and Zulkifli Hamid [4] which found that students were inclined to turn to their friends or family members when they have problems.

According to Schmidt [5] a comprehensive counselling and guidance programme should cover the educational, career, personal and social development of the students. Besides, prevention and remedial programmes are also important in helping to prevent social ills in schools. Chai [6] in his studies found that only 16.6% of students actually utilised the counselling services for emotional or mental problem. This is because students are unwilling to disclose their problems to another person due to their culture and difficulty in expressing their feelings and emotions. However, they are more willingly to seek counselling services for school work or career problems. Counsellors are ranked low as a source of help in personal problems. They will only seek counsellor assistance when their primary support system has failed to effectively solve their problem [2]. This findings were also supported by western researchers like Gysbers and Henderson [7] who proposed a school comprehensive counselling programme to take note of supporting the pupils and the

* E-mail: kokjk@utar.edu.my, lowsk@utar.edu.my, leemn@utar.edu.my, cheahpk@utar.edu.my

supporting network of the pupils which include all the stake holders of education. The findings also go inline with the work done by Parham & Tinsley [8].

In the United Kingdom, the provision of counselling services has undergone a shift from an individual focus to a community and multidisciplinary focus [9]. The same scenario happened in the United State whereby the provision of school counselling services has changed from focusing on vocational emphasis to mental health, and later to a comprehensive guidance programme approach to work collaboratively with the community resource [10; 7] Myrick [11] advocates that school counsellors should consult the adults, especially the significant adults in the students' lives, for the benefits of the school children. This community based that take note of the wider environment of the children actually has a theoretical framework originated by Bronfenbrenner [12; 13]. Based on this foundation, Myrick [11] proposed a comprehensive developmental model of school counselling to include the developmental, preventive and the remedial aspect of school counselling.

The school counselling service in Malaysia secondary school system appears to be well established and it has been implemented that every secondary school is funded with a full time school counsellor. However, there was a lack of research into the role and function of those services, especially from the perspective of the school counsellors on how they experience these roles, and how they think the counselling services could be better improved to benefit the school children.

2. Methodology

This research sought to examine the school counsellors' perceptions of their role and job in the secondary schools system in Perak, Malaysia to further explore the development of a comprehensive school counselling model that would benefit the school community. Two focus groups comprised school counsellors, one from urban city and the other from rural part of the state, were held prior to the research. Themes emerged from the focus groups helped to design the questionnaire which contained both structured and open-ended questions. A large scale survey questionnaire was sent out to 235 secondary schools in Perak state. Perak state was chosen as all the researchers work as academic staff in one of the universities in Perak, and the research funding of this studies has a strong educational interest to provide intellectual services in the state. Initial response from the posted questionnaire was not sufficient for the research to be carried out, only 15 respondents replied. It was decided to contact the randomly chosen schools individually by telephone calls and personal visitations. The choice criteria followed the proportions of school size. Equal opportunity was given to different school size (Schools with more than 1000 students were considered big size; schools with student enrollment of 500 to 1000 were considered medium size; schools with less than 500 students were considered small size). Eventually, 83 schools responded and 13 school counsellors were interviewed.

Interviews with volunteered school counsellors were carried out by a team of 4 researchers. Semi-structured questions were prepared to provide a general guidelines and structure for the interview sessions. The whole process of research followed the general ethic and guidelines of the research community. Permission for conducting the research was obtained from the Ministry of Education.

Respondents were informed of their right and were encouraged to share their experience and thoughts. They were also assured that materials made public would not reveal any personal information or the name of their school.

The structured question data were entered and analysed by SPSS to give simple statistic figures of participating schools. While the open-ended questions were analysed via Nvivo to identify emerging themes and patterns. Interview sessions were transcribed and all the verbatim transcripts were clustered into themes via the node coding using Nvivo. The thematic analysis process followed the principles proposed by Miles and Huberman [14].

2.1. Frequency and percentage of school in the number of counsellor

Seven out of 82 schools have only 1 counsellor. While 35(43.7%) schools have 2 counsellors; 31(38.3%) schools have 3 counsellors; 7 (8.6%) schools have 4 counsellors; and only 1 (1.2%) school have 6 counsellors

2.2. Demography of the school counsellors

The gender and the demography of school counsellors are shown in the tables below.

Table 1: Gender of counsellors

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	28	35
Female	52	65
Total	80	100

*There are total 82 counsellors, and 2 considered as missing data.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of counsellor in different age-group

Age group of counselor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
25-45 years old	53	66.25
46-57 years old	27	33.75
Total	80	100

*There are total 82 counsellors, and 2 considered as missing data.

Table 3: Counsellors' Years of experience

Experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 3 years	17	21
Between 3-10 years	41	50.6
More than 10 years	23	28.4
Total	81	100

*There are total 82 counsellors, and 1 considered as missing data.

Table 4: Frequency and percentage of counsellors' ethnicity

Ethnicity of counselor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Malay	54	75
Chinese	11	15.3
Indian	7	9.7
Total	72	100

*There are total 82 counsellors, and 10 considered as missing data.

Most of the counsellors claimed that it is their choice to be in a counsellor position and most of them obtained a counselling degree.

Table 5: Choice of counselors

Choice to be counselor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	75	92.6
No	6	7.4
Total	81	100

*There are total 82 counsellors, and 1 considered as missing data.

Table 6: Obtained a Counselling Degree

Counseling Degree	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	70	86.4
No	11	13.6
Total	81	100

*There are total 82 counsellors, and 1 considered as missing data.

The six school counsellors who mentioned counselling was not their choice of job ended doing counselling as appointed by the Ministry of Education.

The data reveals that all of the national secondary schools (SMK) have at least one school counsellor and most of the counsellors are well-trained with a formal professional degree from a university.

3. Findings

Three themes emerged from the data analysis, namely implementing guidance programme & handling disciplinary cases, lack of understanding & stigmatization, and yearning for a collaborative counselling approach were found from the open ended and qualitative data analysis derived from the 13 interview scripts.

3.1. Implementation of comprehensive counselling programme and disciplinary counselling

When asked the job scope of counselling in schools, most of them mentioned the guidance programme immediately "Students need motivation, and they need to know how to study, they are lazy sometimes, and they need to learn lots of skills...". So it appears that the job are very needs driven. Not all schools conduct exactly similar programmes as there were some flexibility and the implementation of programme which was very much needs driven. All of the participants mentioned they normally had to plan, organise, and implement programmes such as leadership training, talk on relationship with parents, anti-drug, police talk on gang activities etc.

Besides, running the school guidance programme, they are all involved in dealing with disciplinary cases. "If the school suspends a student, counsellor will be informed.

The guidance activities could be classified under preventive (anti-drug and police talk), development (career and skills development) and remedial (disciplinary case belong to remedial and intervention)

The types of cases counsellor normally handle were summarized as follows:

Table 7: Frequency and percentage of the types of cases counselors normally handle:

Types of cases	Frequency	Percentage
Academic	77	93.9
Personal	76	92.7
Family issues	65	79.3
Career	67	81.7
Disciplinary cases	77	93.9
Others	22	31.0

Among the 82 respondents, very high percentage of the school counsellors are dealing with academic issues (93.9%) by teaching study skills, exam skills or conducting motivation workshops; working with personal issues (92.7%) and family issues (79.3%) account for big part of the job; most of them (81.7%) also give career guidance by organizing education and career fair, whereas many of them (93.9%) need to deal with disciplinary cases.

The above diagrams suggest that the provision of counselling services in secondary schools are rather centralized which was initiated and funded by the central government. Almost all the government schools in Perak state has been assigned with at least one school counsellor. However, there were some overarching negative themes relate to stigmatization, lack of understanding and supports, discovered from this research,

3.2. Lack of understanding and stigmatization

There was a prevalent lack of understanding about what counselling is all about in the secondary school culture. Counselling services are seen as dealing with problematic students or part of the disciplinary system. This deferred students from seeking counselling voluntarily. One participant shared her experience “I waited from morning till 4 pm every day, but there are not many students come in, except those referred by disciplinary master/mistress.” Due to this lack of understanding from the school, some counsellors were given irrelevant jobs such as delivery documents to Ministry of Education, making photocopies, doing spot checking like if the students were wearing their attire properly, cutting the hair and nails, doing their homework etc. Counsellors need “to persuade, to advise, to admonish, to scold, or to make friend with” the students so that they are well behaved. One counsellor mentioned he no longer scolded the students, but talked them out. The misconception seems to be strongly link to the school culture, as school is always a place to conform, and academic achievement is the emphasis of school culture.

The stigmatization came from three sources, the school, the students and the parents. Counselling services in school as a whole do not receive sufficient support in terms of understanding from the school staff. Students referred for counselling were seen as having problems. Counsellors said “We are not supposed to interrupt the normal class”. Most schools have their guidance programmes conducted after school hours, but a few counsellors who have their time slots during school hour “We are given 2 hours to run programme for each class during school hours, however, “some teachers are not willing to give the time to us as they prefer to use those hours for teaching.” “The teachers may think the students go out from class and seek counselling as an excuse to skip those classes, and they do not think the students will listen to us.” Another respondent described that other school staff see her doing easy job “just talk to the students only”. Parents are also reluctant to have their children sent for counselling. It appears that the counselling service was seen as being stigmatized as problematic. This stigmatization has aroused much frustration for school counsellors. It has become a barrier to the counselling services in schools.

Table 8: Frequency and percentage of the restriction/ barrier to counselling service: Students think counselling is not helpful

Students think counselling not helpful	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	22	32.4

Table 9: Frequency and percentage of the restriction/ barrier to counselling service: Stigmatization

Barrier to counseling : Stigmatization	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	55	70.5

No	46	67.6	No	23	29.5
Total	68	100	Total	78	100

* There are total 82 counselors, 14 considered as missing data. * There are total 82 counselors, 4 considered as missing data.

Table 8 shows that there are 22 counsellors who said the students thought counselling is not helpful to them (32.4%), Table 9 shows that there are 55 counselors who mentioned stigmatization is the barrier that restrict students from seeking counselling (70.5%)

3.3. Collaborative Approach

Counsellors acknowledged that a better collaboration among all the stake holders from the educational community will benefit the students and enrich the provision of counselling service in schools. All the respondents mentioned the family and the community in which the students come from are the root cause of the students' problem. Therefore they very much hoped that parents "keep an open mind about counselling" and support the counselling services in school. They emphasized "Counselling is not for the problematic students. It is also for the normal students to better develop their skills such as time management and career planning". They lamented normally letters sent to parents were ignored and sometimes the parents responded in a negative manner, "Counselling for what, it is no use. Let my child just go through the disciplinary procedure". They believed that working together with the parents will be "a win-win situation for the betterment of the students".

Counsellors also think highly about the role of the teachers, "Teachers are doing counselling as well. They have the advantages to identify the students' problems". Another counsellor claimed "actually teachers know the students better". One counsellor who was assigned to the job involuntarily said, "Sitting there face-to-face with the student, I only can guess and I was not sure if the students were telling lies". To solve this problem, they very much hoped that teachers could directly inform them the students' problems and refer students to them. More importantly, working collaboratively with them. One counsellor said she worked very hard to de-stigmatize the mis-conception of counselling by inviting the form teacher into the counselling session with students, and now "when there is no class or during recess, they would come into the counselling room for a chat". One counsellor walked out of his counselling room to join the teachers or students, so that they could talk with each other in an informal way, "This is an easier way, so that the teachers and students can approach me and refer students to me".

When asked "How do the community help the school counselling service to further benefit the students", some counsellors identified working closely with other educational institutes to invite them to come into the schools for career talk and educational fair. Another counsellor mentioned she used to work with the social worker from Perak Family Planning centre to give talk to the students. One counsellor suggest working closely with peer students' leaders so that they can refer friends for counselling when needs arise.

4. Discussion

The overall school culture described by the school counsellors was one that emphasizes on academic performance. School is a place to nurture students' overall development and facilitate all aspects of growth [14]. It thus seems that the schools are not working with a holistic view to treat the social affective growth as important as the academic aspect. Counselling service is thus not able to be integrated into the school system as an integral part of education.

The findings of this study are in line with Tan's study [2] that counselling was not popular in secondary schools. It is a worrying as there was not much change after 12 years since the studies by Aminah Hashim [3], Zulkifli Hamid [4] and Tan [2]. The counselling services in secondary schools are still being mis-conceptualized by students, parents and school staff. Chai [6] has also found that most of the students in school were referred for counselling either by administrators or other staff member and students preferred to seek help from friends for their personal, academic and career concern. This explains the reason why most of the participants in this studies feel that there is lack of understanding and support to the services they provide.

Counsellors acknowledged and yearned for a more integrated whole school approach to draw in teachers, school administrators, peer counsellors, parents to work together for the social and emotional development of

students. The collaboration between all the stake holders of education, including the parents, school administrator, and even local community in providing a conducive school climate will further enhance the counsellor self efficacy. This holistic approach in counselling will assist in the mental, physical, social and emotional development of students. School counsellors can neither increase students' educational outcomes alone nor build partnership alone hence they must team and collaborate with family, community and school staff members to develop and implement comprehensive counselling and guidance programme of partnership to meet the needs of students

5. Conclusion

It takes a whole community to raise a child. How to connect the school counselling service to a wider community has been well debated in the well-developed western world. However, in order to make that possible, much effort is needed to de-stigmatized the misconception of counselling service and raise the awareness from all parties to work together for the development of our school children.

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