



School Mental Health and Counseling (Critical Issues)

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Schools are areas where children grow and learn the laws of life. It is also the battle ground where many psychological problems may affect our children. This paper explores the challenges encountered by the present day school counselor in the school setting, the roles that he/she needs to play along with the various challenges faced on all fronts while working in schools. It enlightens the need for a school counselor in every school and future strategies to enhance the effectiveness of school counseling services, need for knowledge among people in this area and the importance of a multidisciplinary approach in child psychology and psychiatry.*

Introduction

Schools have always been the second family of our children. They have been conducive to the mental and emotional development of our children, avenues for them to learn cultural norms and the path towards skill acquisition. A child spends on an average 6-8 hours a day in his school. If we are in anyway concerned about the mental health of children or counseling with children, then there is no doubt that schools are the place to be in. Today more and more consultants are providing interventions in schools. A school is an area that in fact needs the skills of all mental health disciplines. Mini clinics have become more frequent on school campuses and 'school intervention' as a broader term has now replaced school counseling [1].

School based interventions are essential as studies worldwide have reported that 3-10% of school going children have some psychopathology [2]. The heartening fact remains that 75% of the studies on school interventions have reported positive outcomes of that intervention [3]. This article looks at the status of school counseling today, the multiple roles a school counselor has to play and the various challenges it faces.

The role of the school counselor

The most important function of the school counselor is to recognize the diverse needs of everyone in the school. It is important to realize that just like other human beings different people in schools have different priorities. The teachers aim at good teaching and classroom behavior control, the parents want their children to do well and get the best from the school. It is important that parents realize that school counseling does not undo bad parenting and is not a substitute for good parenting. It helps in repairing a certain amount of damage that is done. Their job does not end once the counselor starts working. Many principals on the other hand aim to protect the name and integrity of the school at all costs while aiming for a 100% result score-line for the school. The counselor has to handle all of them [4]. The school counselor has to provide direct consultation to the students without losing out on classes (a distant dream), help the teacher in classroom behavior interventions and advise the principal on various policy matters that may benefit the school. The counselor must share the anxiety of the parents and the teachers and help in building alliances between the students, parents and the staff. They must cultivate respect for everyone and help in constructing effective alliances that shall help in future collaboration. Their role is to view the child holistically from the biopsychosocial

point of view and help others to see the child in a different light at times. They have to assume various roles of a teacher, guide and friend in order to get maximum from and empower the staff [5,6].

Challenge 1 : Move away from just the special children

It is noted that only 1/3rd of children in all schools receive effective mental health consultations from counselors. With schools in countries like ours where there is no funding for child mental health either from the government or private agencies, the counselor has to learn to be cost effective and to maximize the limited resources in the schools. The first daunting task is to not just focus on the special children. Very often it is felt that the role of the school counselor is to help the child with special needs and the other children can manage themselves. The special child is already in the limelight and often is getting help from and outside the school. These comprise often just 1-3% of the normal school population. The school counselor in a mainstream school must move away from just helping special children, their parents and the problems of inclusive education and must focus on the remaining non disabled children that also need help [7]. Very often the school authorities keep referring these children time and again to the counselor with the same problems and the children that may need help for study problems, time management and exam stress are often left out.

Challenge 2 : Making your presence felt

It is important that school authorities are made aware of what the roles and responsibilities of the counselors are. They must be explained why counselors are there and what are their abilities. From time to time presentations have to be made to the staff about the various mental health problems, academic issues and problems like developmental disabilities or learning disabilities that are seen in schools and the role of the counselor in alleviating them [8]. It is important to remember that in schools we are dealing with diverse stakeholder groups and hence each group must realize that the counselor is the neutral authority and has the best interests of the child at hand. It is important to note that school based interventions have greater acceptance and often is an early intervention. The parents often view the counselor as part of the school authority and respect what he / she says. It is important to exploit this viewpoint to the maximum to enhance the effectiveness of the intervention [9,10].

Challenge 3 : Building partnerships with teachers

It is very important for the counselor to build good relationships with the teachers. This enables the counselor to extract maximum from them in their interventions

and also involve them in the therapeutic process. Often with children involving a teacher that is dear to them enhances the intervention and the child may even open up more easily [11].

Teachers can be educated easily and even made to rectify their errors if the counselor has a good working relationship with them. The expectations from the intervention must be clarified with a particular teacher and time frame needed to achieve results must be specified. Teachers often feel that with one referral to the counselor there shall be a rapid resolution of the child's problems which is not always the case. The teachers must also be made aware of the various referrals that have to be made to the counselor. Very often in schools, the counselor is viewed as an adjunct disciplinarian and children that the teacher cannot handle in school is often referred to the counselor when all their problems are in fact a part of normal adolescence and different facets of child development [12].

Building relationships with the teachers also helps in effective classroom interventions that shall be carried out to the core. This is all the more important in secondary schools, where unlike primary schools where the same teacher is present most of the day, the teachers change every half hour and hence a uniformity of classroom handling is needed. Teachers must be sensitized to the child's needs and the importance of confidentiality in many cases must be stated. Teachers often have the habit of talking about children to other teachers and slowly the word of particular child's problems may spread in the school. A child that loses the trust of confidentiality in the counselor shall never be receptive to any intervention thereafter [13,14]. It is important that the counselor takes building partnerships further in playing a pivotal role to build partnerships between parents and teachers thus completing the school triangle.

Challenge 4 : Using age appropriate interventions

It is important that the counselor makes the school authorities aware regarding the appropriate age of referral. It is important that the teachers are taught not to jump prematurely and label children as well to judge the severity of the problem and thereby choose appropriate referrals [15]. It is also important that premature psychological testing and intelligence assessments are not encouraged by the counselor, reports of which may at times prove detrimental to the further progress of the child. The awareness of appropriate age associated interventions and psychological tests as well as their proper use is essential for the counselor. Sometimes behavior interventions are tried too prematurely in children with hyperactivity that at times may be a part of the normal developmental process are carried out to no avail [16]. With the aim of judging age appropriate interventions it is essential that counselor has an in depth knowledge of normal child development and also is inept at differentiating between what is normal and what is not [17].

Challenge 5 : Reaching out to all age groups

It is important that the counselor reaches out to various age groups in the schools. It is important to realize that psychopathology and the need of counselors may often exist in areas where we feel them least. The kindergarten is an area of the school where counselors rarely venture into but it is important to note that problems needing attention may be lurking here. Early child development in a successful manner is a must for further development. The isolated, banal and beleaguered atmosphere of the KG class may be an area where the child develops separation anxiety that may at times be difficult to tackle. The kindergarten child has to deal with daily separations and reunions with his parents and parents need to be trained to handle their children [18].

It is important that teenagers in a school are handled in a

proper manner. Often many schools are large and impersonal to teenagers. The counselor must be sensitive to the developmental needs of adolescents as well as must exhort school authorities to realize the same [19]. Teenagers often develop a detachment from parents in their search for independence. Appropriate student parent conferences organized by the counselor may play a pivotal role in promoting respect and healthy relationships between parents and teenage wards [20]. Teenagers also need to be watched and early detection and interventions in problems for them are a must. Problems like violence and substance abuse are common among teenagers and these issues need to be addressed regularly in schools [21,22]. Educating the teenager on issues like sexuality, substance abuse as well as handling relationships in a mature form of regular lectures and workshops is a must on the part of the counselor [23]. Very often teenagers find solace in the counselor when they feel no one understands them. It is important that the counselor is equipped to handle teenage infatuations and feelings that may arise from the teenager during the counseling process and during their interactions with the counselor [24]. It is also important that the counselor is well equipped in handling transitions seen as a result of children from different schools and cities that may develop psychological symptoms adjusting to a new environment.

Challenge 6 : Need to incorporate school counseling in Teacher & Psychologist training and education

There is a growing need for training in school counseling both at the college level and post degree level for both psychologists and teachers. Exposure to school mental health and child psychiatry shall be helpful to both psychologists and teachers in their later contacts with students. In the past it was often difficult to find counselors that were trained in school mental health. It is necessary for the psychologist and psychiatrist to be familiar with school settings, classroom format, potentials and terminology to be able to present relevant and clinical views of children and adolescents in schools [25].

Psychologists undergoing training in the university as well as psychiatrists in training must be posted in schools to enhance their skills in dealing with children. It is important to remember that the school is not just an area that encompasses child psychiatry, but often the counselor deals with adults (parents) that may have psychopathology as well as grandparents that in turn leads to exposure to wide variety of people and across all ages, sexes, races and religions. The school counselor has also at times the opportunity to participate in special projects that may be carried out in the school. Thus schools are a fertile ground for a myriad of experiences that may be challenging, frustrating and rewarding at the same time [26].

Challenge 7 : Maintaining commitment despite poor gains

Finally though we all do not always work for money, it is important that we earn enough to be happy and according to what we think is a fair sum for our efforts. One major deterrent in the stability of school counselors in various schools is the poor pay scale for both full and part time counselors as well as the reluctance of schools to spend more than a certain amount on counseling services while a lot is spent on sports, extracurricular activities and academic pursuits. Counselors in India earn far little compared to those abroad leading to many seeking greener pastures from time to time as well as many crossing seven seas for better prospects. This has led to a paucity of school counselors and instability in school counseling and mental health services. It is high time our school authorities give school counselors their dues.

Future Strategies

The world is progressing and we are progressing at the same

pace. Yet today in certain sectors visits to counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists are viewed as stigmatizing. There is a need to make people accept the basis and rationale of school interventions today. A child benefits from intervention by people who understand him and the environment he is in along with the stressors he faces. Parents and certain elders in the family feel that visits to the school counselor may mean that their child is singled out and labeled as having a psychological problem. Sometimes a good counselor may be undermined by an external opinion sought by parents that may suit their minds which is at times, bulldozed upon the school. It is essential that the school and its teachers have full faith in their counselors and the interventions that they suggest. People have to realize that interventions take time and waiting is definitely rewarding.

There is a need for expert clinicians and experts from various fields to come out of their glass houses and move into

schools if we have to achieve the objective of positive school mental health for all. These clinicians have to realize that moving into schools does not degrade or undermine them but rather enhances their own skills and makes it accessible to a wider audience. Their suggestions and expertise shall go a long way in building a committed team of school mental health experts working hand in hand with counselors.

Child psychiatry and psychology has taken a back seat here in India. We hear everyday of suicides in children, children having exam stress and the aftermath of bad parenting in our dailies and newspapers. This must serve as a wake up call to all those in the field of child mental health to work towards the betterment of all our children. Practicing child psychology, child psychiatry and school counseling in India is a grave challenge but once the challenge is taken up it must be met!

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