Counsellors in Indian Schools
Enabling Optimal Development

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Abstract

Counsellors are important stakeholders in the school community who can significantly influence student mental health and well-being, catering to all students in this regard. With changes occurring in the sociocultural milieu, there is an ever-increasing need for gearing up counselling provisions in indian schools. The article is based on a review of research on counsellors in the school setting, their role, need, barriers and facilitators in the counselling process. Currently, in india, the role of school counsellors is ambiguous, and most schools do not actually have a person functioning in this role. To play a more productive role, counsellors that are in schools must aim to provide comprehensive mental health services. The significance of the Counsellor's role is gaining momentum in india and there needs to be greater recognition of their likely contributions, for the benefit of students and of society.

INTRODUCTION

The role of schools is to facilitate the optimal development of children in all domains of life (NCERT, 2015). At each stage of development, children present particular needs that must be met adequately.

The much popular ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted how a child's

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development is influenced by and in turn also influences the various contexts in which the child lives, works and plays. School is one such context where children spend a large part of their day and by virtue of the time spent in a school system has an important impact on children's cognitive and social development (Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash and Seidman, 2010). Though schools can be potent forces to enable holistic development of all children, it is often academic excellence which is valued more than mental health of children, which is mostly overlooked or considered secondary (CBSE, 2014).

Mental health has been defined to be inclusive of emotional, psychological and social well-being and influences how we think, feel and act (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). It is also seen to exist on a continuum with both positive and negative aspects involving well-being or positive functioning at one end and problems including everyday hassles and chronic stressors to more severe mental health symptoms on the other end (Rossen and Cowan, 2015). There are certain risk factors that children might encounter which may lead them to experience mental health issues. Some of these include experiencing disruptions in family functioning, death of a loved one, experiencing bullying or abuse, discrimination, having health difficulties, burden of caregiving, having long-lasting difficulties at school and adjusting to a new place.

A family crisis may include parental conflicts or separation, financial hardships, mental or physical health concerns of a family member or getting involved in legal trouble. A child or adolescent might have to perform a caregiving role for an adult or siblings, which could lead to feelings of frustration, anger and loneliness. Health problems could include a chronic condition like asthma or a sudden or severe infection that may last for only a week but is still capable of causing disruption in the child's life. Discrimination, be it on the basis of gender, socioeconomic status, disability, appearance, can make people feel excluded and result in low self-esteem. Bullying in school, verbal, relational or physical can lead to not just feelings of low self-esteem, helplessness, isolation or difficulties in concentrating on academics. Adjusting to the movement to a new city or a new school can be a more transitory period for some while more ongoing for others. In this case, there is often loss of social support with feelings of loneliness (Wille et al., 2008).

Thus, children present with different needs require different levels of support. In a country like India, where mental health professionals are scarce, counsellors in schools may be the first and sometimes the only mental health professionals that children and families have access to. The National Mental Health Survey, 2016 stated that all states except Kerala didn't even have the minimum

requirement of at least 1 psychiatrist per lakh population (Gururaj et al., 2016). Also, stigma associated with visiting a mental health professional is one of the barriers in seeking help and reducing public stigma is one of the goals of the National Mental Health Policy, 2014 (Gaiha, Salisbury, Koschorke, Raman and Petticrew, 2020)

COUNSELLING IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

Counsellors are becoming an elementary part of the modern-day school support system. Much of the written material on the role of the school Counsellor has been presented by authors in various parts of the world, although much less so in India and other developing countries (Tammana, 2016). The American Counselling Association defines counselling as "a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (American Counselling Association, 2010). School counselling has been associated with not just improvement in personal and social functioning of students but also academic success. Effectiveness of school counselling has been demonstrated in various settings, including schools in high poverty areas. Regular access to a school Counsellor has been found to enable less suspension rates, higher college enrollment and students feeling more positive about school life,

more so in schools where counsellors were available from kindergarten than those where they were present from standard six (American School Counsellor Association, 2010).

Role of a school Counsellor as suggested by House and Martin (1998 as cited in Tammana, 2016) includes promoting student advocacy, developing higher career aspirations in students and identifying educational practices that may help or hinder student progress. While McLaughlin (1993 as cited in McLaughlin et al., 2012) highlights that counselling in schools has three significant elements which include educative, reflective and welfare functions. The educative function is about helping students develop personally and socially, something which happens within interactions with other people like teachers or peers. The reflective function includes assessing the impact of the school and classroom interactions on the personal and social development of students. It involves understanding issues of learning styles, classroom climate and other school practices. The welfare function can focus on aiding decision-making and problem-solving of students, identifying students at risk or experiencing pressure, to respond to their needs. Research supports the role of counsellors at different levels or using the multi-tiered system of support, ranging from preventive services for all students to more focused and intensive work with some students

(Hess, Magnuson and Beeler, 2012). It is a three-tiered system, with the first tier focusing on universal interventions for all children, which often includes programs for socio-emotional learning or interventions to build resilience and promote healthy behaviours among children. Educating parents and teachers about various developmental needs of children and adolescents is also a part of this tier. Tier two is about focusing on children who may be at a greater risk for developing negative outcomes and works like a stitch in time saves nine. Here, counsellors can work in groups like forming a study group for students in the same grade who are experiencing a difficulty in a particular subject. While tier three involves facilitating students experiencing intense crisis and providing them with more individualised and intensive support, like supporting a child diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in dealing with his emotional issues.

One reason that a school is a special setting when it comes to counselling services is that the school space can be accessed by all students within the school and leads to less demand for the family's resources in terms of time and finances in meeting a professional outside the school setting (Macklem, 2011). A Counsellor can be available to children without many formalities or procedures and without the need for parents to accompany the child (Kodad and Kazi, 2014; Sinha, 2006). Also in schools,

counsellors can work with children, both individually and in groups, for addressing common issues faced during important developmental stages. School counsellors are in a better position to understand the dynamics of interactions amongst and between peers, teachers, and students and have been recognised to provide support not only to students but also to their families, school teachers and other staff (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016). It has been indicated in research that the quality of teacher-student relationship has a role to play in the interpersonal, academic and behavioural development of the child, with interventions focusing on building positive teacher-student relationship as helpful in the child feeling well-adjusted in school. A follow-up study with preschool teachers who had been taught play therapy training skills by a school Counsellor reported benefits for trained teachers, when compared to a group of untrained teachers. The trained teachers began to value children's voice much more, felt more confident in their role as a teacher and provided more empathetic responses to students in the classroom (Hess, Post and Flowers, 2005).

A state-wide study conducted with 22601 seventh graders in Missouri, United States indicated that those students who were in schools with better implemented school counselling programs were more likely to report higher grades, felt that their

education was preparing them well for the future and their school had a more positive climate which included feeling a sense of belongingness and safety at school, better relationships with teachers and peers who behaved well (Lapan, Gysbers and Petroski, 2001).

However, a Counsellor's ability to perform their role is influenced by factors like resources available in the school, assessed need, presence or absence of other mental health professionals, their role as perceived by administrative staff, and policies of the state (O'Connor, 2018; NCERT, 2015). Counsellors in schools need to function keeping in view the limitations of a school setting. These include difficulty in maintaining a quiet, disturbance-free space while engaging in one-on-one sessions, having realistic and achievable goals with the limited time and resources available (Lines, 2006).

ORIGINS OF SCHOOL COUNSELLING IN INDIA: POLICY PERSPECTIVE

The need to provide guidance and counselling in schools has been emphasised since the time of independence in India (NCERT, 2015). Counselling services in education initially focused on vocational guidance, though it widened to encompass a more holistic approach to well-being. To begin with, the Secondary Education Commission (1952–53), also known as the Mudaliar Commission, recommended setting up centres in the country to train career masters and guidance officers to be placed in all educational institutions. For conducting research in educational and vocational guidance, the commission recommended setting up a central research organisation. As a result, the Central Bureau of Educational and Vocational Guidance was established in 1954. Bureaus were also established at the state level (Thomas et al., 2017). The diploma course, 'Education and Vocational Guidance', by NCERT also began in 1958, with the focus of training teachers, teacher educators, and postgraduates in counselling skills. The important Education Commission of 1964–66, known as the Kothari Commission, expanded the role of guidance to include more than just vocational guidance. Guidance was seen as valuable not just at the secondary level, but important at every stage of schooling beginning from the primary years (NCERT, 2015). It was proposed that one school in each district would serve as a model for a comprehensive program in guidance/ counselling. Teacher training, pre or in-service, was suggested as being suitable for introducing teachers to the concepts of guidance. The Programme for Action initiative in 1992 emphasised the importance of establishing an infrastructure for guidance and counselling, with a focus on providing information on vocational and educational guidance not only for students, but also for students, parents and teachers (Thomas et al., 2017).

The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 was a milestone document in highlighting the holistic development of children. It stressed the significance of guidance/counselling from elementary to higher secondary school (NCERT, 2005). Building the right attitude towards self, helping students discover their interests and aptitudes, career planning, meeting their psychological needs with an emphasis on the adolescent years, was recognised as being essential. Teachers were expected to play the role of a facilitator to help children with their everyday problems, and teacher education was seen as important to build this attitude. Guidance and counselling were also seen as critical in helping children deal with stressful periods of preparing for their board examinations. Even though not articulated comprehensively, the NCF seemed to have indicated the role of the Counsellor in Indian schools better than other documents till then.

The National Policy for Children, approved in 2013, identified the need to provide mental health services to all children including career counselling and vocational guidance while the National Plan of Action for Children, 2016 aims at the implementation of the priority areas defined by the policy (MWCD, 2016). Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, a flagship program by the government, was launched in the year 2009 with its aim to universalise secondary education recognised both the preventive and remedial roles of school counselling. Counselling was seen significant to help children continue their schooling, achieving academic success, cope with stressors in their lives, build positive attitudes towards self and others, as well as develop insights about future career paths (NCERT, 2015). The recent National Education Policy, 2020 took mental health of students into consideration in a number of ways. It focused on holistic learning with an increased emphasis on conceptual than rote learning and allowed students the flexibility to choose their learning programmes. Another component of holistic learning was highlighting the need for life skills like teamwork and communication. It also recognised the need to support and sensitise parents and teachers in fostering development of children. It recognised the role of overall health including mental health in facilitating learning and how related problems could hinder optimal learning. The role of well-trained counsellors has been emphasized multiple times. Mental health of teachers influences their engagement with students in the classroom and NEP recognises this by recommending positive working environment for teachers along with professional development (NEP, 2020).

SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN INDIA

School counsellors in the country come from disciplines of social work, psychology, human development, and education. Counselling in

urban areas is gaining momentum, though in rural areas it is yet to gain recognition (Sriram, 2016). Also, there is no check or regulation by a central body or a policy of licensure for counsellors, and neither are ethical standards regulated. The Rehabilitation Council of India is the only body that maintains records of professionals, who, in this case, deliver services as rehabilitation professionals for persons with disabilities. The Central Board of Secondary Education Affiliation Bye-laws, 2018, has made it mandatory for every secondary and senior secondary school affiliated with the CBSE, to appoint a 'Counsellor and wellness teacher' on a full-time basis (CBSE, 2018). To qualify, the person should be a graduate or postgraduate in psychology, a postgraduate in child development, or a graduate/post-graduate with a diploma in career guidance and counselling. Those schools that have less than 300 students in secondary and senior secondary classes may appoint a Counsellor on a part-time basis.

Over the past few years, more schools are appointing mental health professionals to look after the needs of students but, the quality of these services and the adequacy of counsellors are areas of concerns (Meghana, 2019). The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) conducted a survey in 3200 schools of Delhi-NCR and found that there was a drastic shortage of counsellors in both government and private schools. Only 3 per cent of schools had a Counsellor, with most of these schools being high fee-paying schools (The Hindu, 2016). Absence of a regulatory mechanism to govern the functioning of counsellors compounds the problem of quality of healthcare being delivered to students (Meghana, 2019) and evaluation of counselling services in Indian schools is almost nonexistent (Rajagopal, 2013). The role of a Counsellor in schools has been surrounded by ambiguity more often than not, both in India and other parts of the world, and they are burdened with tasks other than counselling (Venkatesan and Shyam, 2015). Those schools in the country, which do have counsellors, often don't see them as an integral part of the school system, rather, as auxiliary. Another recent newspaper report pointed out that 93 per cent of schools in the country do not have a professional counsellor (Ghosh, 2019).

Based on her personal experience of briefly working as a school Counsellor with children primarily from lower-income families in Mumbai, Tammana (2016) highlighted influences as well as challenges in carrying out her role. Though the issues stated were based on her personal experience, they seemed to be relevant in the context of school counselling. Firstly, she emphasised that school culture or environment, like teacher and child relationship or school norms like disciplining methods had a role to play in impacting

well-being of children and therefore required attention from the school Counsellor. For example, the teachers in her school frequently engaged in giving corporal punishments which students shared was one reason for feeling very fearful of their teachers. Secondly, confidentiality of children was often at stake, with teachers and principals wanting to know the details of the counselling sessions and this often became a dilemma for the Counsellor. Another issue noted was the use of labels by teachers and administrators for children with difficulties. Also, teachers typically overlooked their role as a facilitator in the classroom, with many being of the view that difficulties experienced by children were not the responsibility of the school. They were often not particularly happy with the time invested by counsellors in listening to children, perceiving this to be 'spoiling' the already problematic students. Counsellors had to work hard to justify their roles in schools where they were not considered to be an integral part of the system.

It is important to add that the picture is not all bleak. Based on my observations and experiences in schools while doing my post graduation (Human Development and Childhood Studies) my training course as a Counsellor I came across a few private schools in Delhi NCR (5), all high fee paying except one, that seemed to be taking children's mental health seriously. These schools not only had more than one Counsellor for the entire school, but also involved teachers and peers. Teachers were oriented towards needs of children and the possible emotional and behavioural difficulties through workshops. Also, two of these schools regularly organised workshops for parents. An attempt was made to also sensitise peers, especially in case when there was a child with special needs in their class. The schools delivered life skills classes, screening and identification of children at risk, as well as individual counselling for children who were referred by teachers or wanted to talk voluntarily.

BARRIERS IN PROVIDING AND ACCESSING COUNSELLING SERVICES IN SCHOOLS

With academics being the priority in schools, counsellors have to compete for recognition and resources in schools (Lines, 2006). A counsellor's role may be unclear to school authorities, which makes it challenging for the Counsellor to work with and communicate their role to the students (Ohrt et al., 2016). In both developed and developing nations, counsellors have reported being engaged in tasks outside their professional purview. Engaging in tasks that are irrelevant to their role, like administrative jobs, leaves them with limited time for student interactions (Gamble and Lambros, 2014; Splett et al., 2013). Venkatesan and Shyam (2015) undertook an exploratory study to understand the job profile of a Counsellor from the

perspective of different stakeholders in national and international high schools of Karnataka. The different stakeholders included counsellors, teachers, students and administrative staff. Counsellors perceived their role as centered on student issues, like providing career counselling, dealing with behaviour problems, and advocating for children's rights. They considered clerical tasks to be the least appropriate. Parents also considered the need for a Counsellor's role to be focused on student issues. Students preferred counsellors to help them in career-related decisions. On the other hand, administrators viewed the most significant role of the Counsellor as facilitating dialogue between teachers, parents and administrators.

High student-to-Counsellor ratio, which is certainly true for many schools in India, that have only one Counsellor for the entire student population, prevents them from functioning optimally and may ultimately be of little help to children (The Hindu, 2016; Ohrt et al., 2016). Also, with a focus on remedial aspects, the preventive tasks of a Counsellor may take a backseat (Nitza et al., 2015). Also, when a Counsellor cannot work effectively in the school system, collaboration with other stakeholders is often challenging (Gamble & Lambros, 2014; Splett et al. 2013). A hindrance to the effective delivery of services includes the absence of adequate clinical supervision that enables professional development and ensures client welfare (DeKruyf et al., 2018). The supervision which counsellors receive the most, and sometimes the only one, is administrative. But administrators are not equipped to supervise counsellors' work, and neither do they share the same ethical principles. Counsellors have also reported not having a place or room of their own in schools, which can compromise on the confidentiality and comfort of a student who may want to share his experiences (Venkatesan and Shyam, 2015). Counsellors are sometimes viewed with a sense of distrust. They may be thought of as being deceptive or as being a challenge to the school management. Over time, matters such as these can lead to counsellors feeling emotionally drained and dissatisfied with the job.

A significant barrier in accessing counselling services by students is the stigma associated with mental health concerns. It is one of the frequently cited reasons for students and their families for avoiding visiting counsellors (Sriram, 2016). Help-seeking has been associated with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, as individuals feel unable to solve their problems by themselves (Rajagopal, 2013). Also, students worry about confidentiality not being maintained or may have not positive experiences with school counsellors, like coming from a professional who is patronizing (Meghana, 2019). This can act as a barrier in seeking help the next time.

WHAT CAN FACILITATE A COUNSELLOR'S ROLE?

The role of teachers as untapped resources has been emphasised time and again (Padhy, 2013; Ranganathan, 2008). Especially in a country like India where the number of counsellors is inadequate, pre- and in-service training of teachers in basic counselling skills would be very helpful (Ranganathan, 2008). It would also be worth the time, when a school has a designated counsellor, to clearly define the counsellor's role at the beginning of the school session so that they can invest their time in counselling rather than on less relevant tasks (Gamble and Lambros, 2014). Greater participation by parents and staff in student development are ways in which counsellors could carry out their responsibilities more effectively. Lowering the ratio of students-to-counsellors would also leave counsellors with more time to plan and undertake their involvements more efficiently and effectively (DeKruyf et al., 2018).

Counsellor training courses should offer coursework that has adequate practical exposure to working with children and should be in congruence to the everyday realities of the school system (O'Connor, 2018). Training courses must provide experiences in the multiple tiers of intervention possible in a school setting (Splett et al., 2013). As a single training experience may not do justice to the plethora of skills that a counsellor requires and the changing needs they face, in-service training of counsellors should also be carried out at regular intervals to keep them abreast of important skills and knowledge in the field. Counsellors can expand the support system available to them by networking with relevant individuals and bodies like mental health specialists outside the school and/or NGOs working in the area of child mental health.

CONCLUSION

Promoting and developing the well-being of children is as much a responsibility of the school as it is of the family. Counsellors in schools are an indispensable step in this direction. Research on school counselling is scant in India and is one area that requires particular attention. There has been frequent mention of the need for school counsellors in Indian education policies, frameworks and commissions, though recommendations have not been adequately implemented. More institutions for the training of counsellors is critical and must be aimed for. Though school counsellors are gaining recognition in India, especially in metropolitan cities, their professional identity is still unclear and this negatively influences their relationship with the students and other stakeholders in schools. A counsellor needs support from all other stakeholders in the school system, as alone they

can achieve only as much. It would be helpful if they communicate their role to the other members of the school community including teachers and administrators as well as students, making them more visible in the school system. Also, arranging workshops for teachers, parents and administrators, on various issues about child and adolescent development can be helpful. Counsellors can expand their role as advocates for enhancing programs for all students, and not just those who are identified to have a problem. It would also be useful for counsellors to engage in professional development and enhancing their skills. Needless to say, each school must have a counsellor and the existing ones should consider having at least one at each level including primary, middle and secondary school.

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