COUNSELING NEEDS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: EXPLORING TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The limitations for incorporating the counseling services as an institutional mechanism at school level have gained recent attention in the context of Pakistan. The current study aimed to explore teachers' perspective regarding their role and practices in meeting the counseling needs of the high school students.

Study Design: Qualitative inquiry using thematic analysis approach.

Place and Duration of Study: Rawalpindi Region Schools, from Jan to Jun 2017.

Methodology: A sample of high school teachers (n=30) employed in Government owned schools of Rawalpindi region were approached. Five focus group discussions were conducted within school premises. Each group comprised five to six teachers. A focus group protocol was developed considering the literature mapping and study objectives.

Results: Focus group analysis using thematic analysis approach signified the interplay of various implicit and explicit factors which can hamper the learning and progress of students in various ways. The analysis demonstrated that other than academics, students are concerned to seek assistance and guidance in personal/ self- development, social, interpersonal and vocational domains.

Conclusion: The study findings highlighted the recognized need and receptivity for initiating structured counseling services at school level addressing the academic, career and social issues of high school students.

Keywords: Adolescents, Counseling needs, Institutional development, Personal development, Teaching skills.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence age marked by rapid physical, emotional, social and cognitive changes, influences affective responses and alter social interaction[1]. Transformations and changing perspectives on family and peer relations along with the context of educational environment can have a massive impact on the later life of adolescents[2]. The challenges and obstacles associated to adolescence age prevent the school students to excel socially, behaviorally and academically[3]. It has been observed that one in every five students has some emotional or behavioral problems that meet the criteria of some diagnosable disorder[4]. Students who are vulnerable to face psychosocial stressors may experience socially undesirable behaviors and acute mental health troubles that go far along in adulthood[5].

Students face emotional and social challenges in the spheres of cooperative work, empathy, effective communication, self-control, conflict resolution, problem solving and self-awareness. Students who confront such issues are in need of additional mentoring and support beyond merely academics[6]. If stresses and difficulties related to this developmental period are tackled in a preventative way, it may leads towards improvement in students' ability to do well in school and positive recuperation in inter-personal relationships with teachers, parents, and peers. This results in optimistically improving their sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, emotional intelligence and academic performance[7]. This further stresses the need to address the guidance and counseling mechanism into schools[8].

Guidance and supervision at high school for adolescence is of immense worth. School is an institution where students have ample margin to achieve their developmental landmarks and to learn and experience the positive development.

As school acts as a bridge toward improving academic achievement, personality grooming, and productive development; eventually in long run aids in national development[9]. There is strong need that educational programs should be improved, assessed, and developed in provision of guidance and counseling programs[10]. In context of exploring the counseling needs of students and the role of school teachers, the personal, social and emotional counseling needs of the students along with academic needs are given dominant preference in school settings[11]. Extending the academic and personal needs, effective studying skills, better time management, reducing anxiety, helping to gain confidence and stress management have gained attention in school counseling [12].

Teachers are in a unique position because they not only help students at the time of need but they also identify their needs and problems that in turn help to refer the child to specialized services e.g., to a counselor[13]. Many countries including Pakistan has presented the idea of distributed counseling within which teachers' are taken as advisors in the crew of students' support network and counseling[14]. Considering the importance of counseling needs and the mentoring role of teachers in educational system, the present research intended to explore the perception of teachers towards students' problems/issues in the personal, interpersonal, social, and academic domains. The study addressed the current practices and the role of teacher in mentorship and guidance along with exploring the preparedness and feasibility of introducing a formal counseling training program within Pakistani school settings.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Protocol

For conducting the focus groups with the group of teachers, a questionnaire was developed comprising 15 questions. The questions were formulated on the basis of reviewed literature and were meant to explore the perceptions of teacher about various academic and interpersonal needs of the students. The questions were formulated to know the strategies they do employ in everyday class to respond to students' problems and issues. Moreover, the questions were meant to explore teachers' perspectives regarding their own role in the process of guidance and mentoring of the students. The face validity of the protocol was carried out using committee approach of experts in the field. The pilot test was conducted to see how well the sequence and content of the questions appear effective to tap the underline objectives. Some of the example questions are: i) what do you think are the needs and issues related to academics and interpersonal life students usually face during their school life?; ii) how do you perceive a teacher as a student guider, mentor or counselor?.

Sample

The sample comprised 30 school teachers employed in five public schools of Rawalpindi District (Punjab region of Pakistan). The current study was a subsequent step of the first phase where a survey was conducted to assess the counseling needs of adolescents enrolled in high school. The data collection and the execution time for current study was carried out during January to June 2017. Teachers for focus group were recruited from same schools which were included in the first phase of the project to maintain consistency and for triangulation purpose in later stages of the project findings. The school selection was done using random procedure at stage one. However at stage two, only those schools were approached which allowed recording of the focus group discussion. Teachers were selected on basis of consent and availability.

In order to conduct the focus group, three things were kept into consideration 1) Written consent from participation for audio/video recording; 2) The teacher should have at least one year teaching experience; 3) A teacher who is teaching at the high school level. In order to avoid any biasness, the survey results conducted with students were not discussed with their

teachers at this stage. The participation was voluntary at this level.

Out of 30 teachers, there were six female and 24 male teachers. A total of five focus groups were carried out. Teachers' ages ranged from 23 to 55 years. The education level of participants was between Matriculation (high school) and M. Phil. Majority of participants hold Master Degree and two had M. Phil degrees. Among participants, 14 were teaching arts subjects while the rest were science teachers. Teaching experience of participants ranged from 3 years to 30 years.

Procedure

A formal permission process was initiated by securing the consent of schools administration and Education Directorate Officer (Rawalpindi) for visiting schools and to approach school teachers within the school premises. Based upon the permission granted from educational authorities, five government owned high schools of Rawalpindi district were selected as sampling units. Teachers were conveyed about the study objectives. The prior consent of teachers was secured.

Each focus group was carried out for 50-60 minutes. The recording was done after consent of participants. A research team comprised of Co-Principal Investigator, one research fellow and two Research Assistants carried out the FGDs. Co-PI and Research Fellow served as moderator and Research Assistants took notes during FGDs. Before the analysis, any information that may reveal the identity of participants has been omitted. Pseudo names of participants were used in the analysis part.

Analysis of Focus Groups

Five focus group discussions were conducted in the respective school premises. Each group comprised five to six teachers. The technique of thematic analysis was employed to analyze the content generated out of focus group sessions. A structured protocol was used on basis of literature mapping and considering the parameters of the study questions. A master code sheet was developed with the help of Need Assessment Questionnaire[15] and the research objectives. Later on using inter-coder reliability, coding was analyzed by research team members and one expert through peer review process. The content was categorized into three units of analysis: 1) priority areas of counseling needs; 2) teachers' perspectives on contextual issues/ problems; 3) teachers' practices to counsel and guide the students.

RESULTS

The findings revealed the perspectives of school teachers about counseling needs, contextual problems and the possible managerial implications. The content was categorized into three units of analysis: 1) priority areas of counseling needs; 2) teachers' perspectives on contextual issues/problems; 3) teachers' practices to counsel and guide the students.

1. Priority Areas of Counseling Needs

The focus group findings presented in table provided meaningful insight in categorizing six major areas of counseling needs i.e. academic needs, vocational needs, personal needs, social needs, interpersonal needs, and other needs. The academic needs include emphasis on study skills of the students. The vocational needs look into the area of career planning. The personal needs include areas of self-regulation with emphasis on anxiety management, anger management, dealing with hopelessness, suicidal ideation, self-esteem, and building self-confidence. The social needs put emphasis on communication and interaction skills. The interpersonal needs emphasis upon handling peers relationships. The areas categorized as other needs include issues related to safe environment, bullying, and physical (punishment in schools) and psychological abuse. Among most preferred counseling needs, 9 out of 30 teachers pointed out personal needs e.g., 'Self-Confidence' as the first preference. The second preference area was given to academic needs i.e., 'Study Skills'. The third order of preference was the area of 'Social Skills'. Along with these, 'Career Planning' as vocational needs has emerged as an important domain for counseling high school students.

2. Teachers' Perspectives on Contextual Issues/problems

During focus group discussions, teachers were asked to describe the potential contextual problems they face while dealing with students' problems. The identified problems were particularly related to teacher vs. student interaction, social, and economic domains. In explaining teacher vs. student interaction, teachers reported classroom strength as a potential barrier to effectively respond to students' needs on individual basis. They explained that individual attention to students could not be given in schools due to large class strength. This is empirically supported that teachers with larger class sizes have many difficulties such as problem in interacting with all

psychosocial dysfunction (i.e., stress, depression, aggression, anxiety) and face more educational difficulties compared to the children of literate parents[16]. The present findings came out with similar evidences of students' stress because of hindrance to have academic assistance from their less educated family members.

Teachers reported that students are usually stressed because of poor financial conditions that lead towards psychological problems such as depression. Another member of focus group was of view that parents influence the career choice of their children which is a major problem. Parents ignore their children's interests, potentials and capabilities. Mostly, parents want their children

Table: Frequency (f) of teachers reported preferred counseling areas (n = 30)

1st Preference Area	Frequency	2nd Preference Area	Frequency	3rd Preference Area	Frequency
Study Skills	5	Study Skills	11	Depression	2
Career planning	1	Depression	1	Social Skills	10
Self-Confidence	9	Social Skills	4	Career Planning	6
Self-Esteem	3	Bullying	1	Self-Confidence	3
Depression	4	Anger Management	2	Study Skills	4
Suicide Ideas	1	Self-confidence	1	Abuse (Physical or Psychological)	1
Abuse (Physical and Psychological)	2	Stress Management	3	Self-esteem	1
Anxiety	2	Abuse (Physical and Psychological)	2	Career Planning	4
Peer Pressure	1	Self-esteem	1		
Anger Management	1	Career Planning	4		
Bullying	1				

students, trouble in monitoring learning process, and individual attention to all students cannot be given.

Parental involvement is important for obtaining good results for students. Findings highlighted that most of schools in relatively less developed areas are facing parental negligence e.g., parents are not taking interest for their children education and mostly do not attend parent-teacher meetings. Kids of uneducated parents are usually more vulnerable to acquire

to opt science subjects even when children wish to study arts subjects. In this situation, students can face many difficulties while achieving their future career goal. Teachers shared that in their schools, many students do part time jobs after school just because of poor financial condition of the family. In this situation, it is difficult for students to concentrate and perform well in education and may lead such circumstances to experience psychological problems among students such as stress and anxiety.

Importance of school infrastructure is one of the contributory factors in evaluating the academic output[16,17]. Linking with this, while explaining the dearth of infrastructure; teachers stated that number of chairs in classrooms are not proportionate to the strength of students.

3. Teachers' Practices to Counsel and Guide the Students

Personal Grooming of Students: Personality development and character grooming of pupils are considered as integral objectives of the educational system. Students learn from their teachers' attitude and it influence their way of life. Teachers can best help their students in self-awareness, motivation, goal settings and realizing their potential[18]. In correspondence to a question inquiring the role of teacher for personality grooming of students and teachers' role as a student counselor, it was stated that teachers themselves should act as a role model because students always follow them. Element of spirituality and religious role models can be discussed with students in connection to inculcating civic and righteous values. Teachers should atend to 'skills building' approcah which should match with students' interests. They can play a vital role in grooming their students by enhancing their communication skills and to impart knowledge about latest technologies in the field. Moreover, teachers should also teach students by giving them practical examples of famous personalities and by improving their teaching pedagogy.

Teachers stressed that extracurricular activities should be arranged to groom the personality of students, such as by arranging different kinds of sports events in school. Involvement in extracurricular activities serves as a best way to channelize the energies of adolescents[19].

Focus on Goal Achievement: Different point of views emerged when asked from teachers how students can complete their school or other life roles goals more efficiently and productively. Teachers are of the view that students can complete their school or other life roles tasks more

efficiently when they have self-awareness. As[20] congruently described that self-awareness is a key component for developing meaningful goals of life. Good personal choices and effective goals setting are built on deep understanding of the self. Another respondent was of view that students should have information regarding different colleges and subjects which various colleges offer in order to pursue the career of their interest.

The efficient reading, writing and communication skills of students were emphasized in focus group discussion, as they help in completing school or other tasks of life roles. Students' motivation, counseling and guidance by family and teachers make them able to perform their tasks efficiently and productively.

Lack of Proper Mechanism: All focus group members were of consensus that there are no proper mechanism of counseling in schools when they were asked to tell about the initiation of any counseling/ mentoring service in their school. Teachers strongly stressed the need of structured counseling and guidance programs at each level of education.

Problem Reporting at Schools: In response to a question investigating about the mechanism of grievance and problem reporting cells for issues e.g, bullying, harassment and quarrels, all respondents were in consensus that students do not mostly report their problems with teachers or administration. They further added that teacher-student communication is at minimal level primarily because of lack of self-confidence. The healthy and positive classroom environment is a key aspect that teachers need to look for in efforts to foster healthy student teacher interaction and developing positive attitudes and potentials[21].

DISCUSSION

The personal and academic needs of students have remained an important area of interest for academicians and school psychologists. Current study highlighted that among most preferred counseling needs, 30% of teachers pointed out personal needs e.g., 'Self-Confidence'

as the first preference. The second preference area was given to academic needs i.e., 'Study Skills'. The third order of preference was the area of 'Social Skills'. Along with these, 'Career Planning' as vocational needs has emerged as an important domain for counseling high school students. Current findings have emphasized self-confidence and study skills as the most dominant counseling needs. Self-confidence and study skills both are considered as important areas for counseling high school students[22]. There is strong need to emphasize teachers' role and to train them so that they can help students in learning effective study skills e.g., by inducing goal oriented learning and by creating effective learning environment. Self-confidence as a personal need refers to identification of one's own abilities and has been treated as an important psychological construct affecting the academic performance of students.

Among academic needs, teachers mentioned that students usually have poor writing skills and are hesitant while interacting with teachers when they were asked to tell if they have come across dealing with students who have special needs. With reference to career needs, focus group findings highlighted that usually high school students' exhibit lack of information regarding different kinds of jobs or careers and subject choices leading to different occupations. Among social needs, it was stated by the respondents that usually high school students exhibit lack of communication skills such as they cannot properly interact with teachers because of shyness and low self-confidence and mostly do not share their difficulty regarding education with instructors.

The analysis of the study signifies the need of counseling services provision at school level in Pakistan. Pertinent to the first research objective about teacher's perception towards common problems of students, it was pointed out that personal issues and academic related problems were most important for maintaining a healthy sense of wellbeing of student. This is in accordance with the developmental needs of adolescents age

where they are more sensitize for personal needs[23].

The major academic problems observed/ experienced by the teachers include poor writing skills and problems in interpersonal communication e.g., reluctance in communicating with teachers. A number of social factors lead towards this situation like large number of pupil in class, illiterate parents, social norms and emphasis on cramming habits in primary school. These problems can be catered with the help of study skills training which include regular study, listening to the lectures, taking notes, efficient writing expression, active listening to the lessons, doing homework, and exam preparation[24].

Another important issue highlighted in this research is the lack of information regarding different kinds of jobs or careers among high school students. Moreover, students also lack knowledge regarding various colleges offering courses that are linked with their career interest. This can be related to career needs and personal development too. Role of teachers in career counselling is also important as they act as informal counselor s guiding students in their choices of career paths and subjects. Students gave too much value to their teachers' guidance and advice related to career choice as well as toward the selection of subjects and also see them as their role model[14], because in Pakistani school system there is no mechanism of career counseling & aptitude testing. It has been pointed out that lack of knowledge for future paths leads towards unemployment, lack of ambition and personal dissatisfaction. The situation demands for service provision in terms of aptitude testing, networking between higher education institutes and schools, career path seminars etc.

On exploring the role of teacher as counselor (objective two), all of them agreed that teacher is the first person outside family setting who can influences the life of child to a great extent. A number of strategies were discussed in this regard including personal success stories, discussion about role models and provision of infor-

mation about different professions. An important deliberation was evident in discussions stressing the need for introducing character based curriculum e.g, discussion forums on social issues and structured programing for trainings in area of social skills. However, introducing preventive and psychoeducational interventions in schools/ colleges as part of institutional development must be integrated with educational and institutional policy and require the support of administrative bodies for the implementation

At this point, the capacities and capabilities of teachers for evaluating their preparedness for counseling the students is a key factor to consider in promotion of guidance and counseling in schools. Preparing and training teachers in counseling related skills can potentially contribute in promoting efforts to address the counseling needs of the students. The provision of economic, technical and growth opportunities for teachers must need to expand. Teachers can act powerfully in developing healthy self-concept by knowing their own strengths and weaknesses. The professional development of teachers in promoting healthy minds and positive attitudes of students should be given utmost priority. This component has been addressed in further part of the research project, where school teachers have been trained using a 'Teacher Adolescent Psychoeducational Counseling Model' and the effectiveness of this training is measured and discussed in another research, not published yet.

Potential Sources of Bias in Current Research

Because of homogeneity of focus groups that is inclusion of teachers from same schools employed under same administrative authority might let them to respond favorably in context of institutional affiliation. Another potential biasness was the condition of audio-video recording. Some respondents did not open up due to this factor; however, after the closing of camera they participated quite well through informal discussion. Controlling the biasness coming out of experiential difference of teachers' for instance their previous exposure and sensitivity toward

understanding the behavioral dynamics of classroom issues was difficult to maintain. The role of teacher training institutes has not been discussed sufficiently for critically evaluating the existing curriculum of teachers' training programs.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Every research has certain biasness and limitations and current study is not an exemption in this case. The first major limitation is absence of school administration's perspective in exploring the problems and needs of students. Furthermore, parental views were also not taken into account especially for the areas related to social development and parental expectations. The sample represents the government sector, a potential barrier to see how a uniform implication can be adopted later consistent for both public and the private sector. The first limitation has been catered at the later stages of project, however parental perspective still needed to be explored by future researchers.

CONCLUSION

The study findings highlighted the need for introducing mental health care programs in schools/colleges. There is strong need recognition alongwith the receptivity within institutional setup to initiate the structured counseling services as a mean to address the academic, career, interperosnal and social problems of adolescents.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This study has no personal consideration and financial conflict of interest to be declared by authors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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