

ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN PROMOTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract- The present study explores the role of school counsellors in enhancing the socio-emotional development of middle school students. The study included a sample of 28 participants, comprising students from grades 6 to 8. Additionally, four counsellors were selected for the study. The students and counsellors belonged to government as well as private schools. Interviews and focus group discussions with students revealed insights into their perceptions of counselling services.

While many recognized its importance, especially during situations like exam anxiety and bullying, some felt they only needed counselling during challenging times like family problems or when facing mental health issues. There were misconceptions among students regarding the extent of counsellors' responsibilities, particularly in academic planning and disciplinary actions. Overall, students perceived counselling as beneficial in improving communication, academic performance, relationship with parents, and emotional well-being. However, there was a need for greater awareness and access to counselling services in educational settings.

The counsellors stressed the importance of building rapport and professionalism in their relationships with students, alongside maintaining confidentiality and empathy. They utilize various methods, including psychometric tests and interactive activities, to assess students' emotional and behavioural needs comprehensively.

The evaluation of middle school students' using the Developmental Assets Profile reveals a generally optimistic outlook. They show confidence, a sense of control, and optimism about the future, along with strong academic engagement, positive social relationships, resilience, and commitment to values like honesty and helping others. While some areas like safety awareness and conflict resolution skills need improvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of social influences, language development, cognitive growth, self-actualization, culture, and numerous other developmental influences are combined with the study of emotional development in a complex and integrative field known as socio-emotional development.

1.1 Middle School Students

According to Williamson (1993), middle school should not be thought of as just a smaller, more preparatory type of a high school. Instead, it should be viewed as an educational setting to address the social, psychological, and academic requirements of early adolescents.

1.2 Needs of Middle School Students

According to Moore-Thomas and Lent (2007), "young adolescents' developmental needs mandate uniquely designed comprehensive, developmental, and systemic school counselling programs and services". High-quality educators who can handle students' emotional and social needs are needed. Teachers of middle grades also need to be aware of and capable of meeting the special social and emotional needs of these students (Raphael & Burke, 2012). Also, students do not need much assistance with career development. More personal, social, and emotional issues were what they indicated they needed a lot of assistance with (Barell, 2009).

1.3 Challenges Faced by Middle School Students

Middle school students face challenges such as changing classes, reduced parental involvement, increased teachers, no recess, peer pressure, developmental differences, uniqueness, fear, responsibility, unrealistic expectations, dealing with older students, extracurricular activities, school schedules, longer assignments, and adolescent physical development (Schumacher, 1998; Weldy 1991).

According to Ministry of Education (2022), children face concerns related to eating patterns such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, they face issues related to bullying, get involve in substance use and other addictive behaviours, body image concerns, issues related to self-esteem and gender identity, anxiety, depression, behavioural problems associated with conduct issues and delinquency, concerns about sleeping patterns, increased screen time leading to problematic internet use, relationship issues, and self-harming behaviours.

1.4 Social-Emotional Development

When social and emotional development converge, it is known as socioemotional development. This type of development takes into account how social relationships affect the emotional state of an individual such as anxiety and depression along with the management and prevention of these emotional issues. Throughout life, socioemotional development is crucial. Children and adolescents develop cognitive and socioemotional abilities that influence most facets of their personalities and are necessary for adjusting to social roles as adults (Thompson & Virmani, 2012).

2. FACTORS AFFECTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS

Going through a difficult and unhealthy adolescence with a high prevalence of mental illnesses can have an effect on their long-term health and wellbeing of adolescents. Genetic profiles significantly influence emotional and social behaviour in children. Warm, secure parent-child relationships enhance socioemotional outcomes for children with negative or inhibited behaviour. Peer relationships are the first that a child encounters when they move out from their family (Sinha, 1981). It has long been acknowledged that children's need for acceptance and affiliation with their peers is fundamental (Brendt, 1982). Peer relationships are the most significant aspect of school culture (Lamox, 1978). Many academics believe that in order for students to successfully transition to adulthood, value education must be incorporated into the curriculum. The curriculum should strike a balance between social and intellectual activities (Gandhi, 1943; Peters, 1966; Beck, 1990).

2.1 Need of Counselling Services in Schools

Students in school require emotional and academic support to reach their full potential and proceed to the next stage of development. Counselling helps students cope with social and academic challenges, broadens their knowledge, and helps them make wise educational and career decisions (National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement, 2022).

2.2 Barriers in Counselling

In the field of education, providing guidance and counselling is frequently disregarded and its importance is not acknowledged. There is a lack of qualified mental health specialists in the Indian mental health system. Furthermore, the majority of children and families cannot access them because they are mostly found in cities and larger towns. Often, people use stigma as an excuse for not obtaining or fully utilising mental health treatment. Other possible reasons include the absence of a designated physical space, the unwillingness of the school administration to collaborate, the reluctance of teachers to refer students who need assistance, the infrequency of counsellor availability on campus, and the lack of privacy (Raman & Thomas, 2023).

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the counselling experiences of middle school students regarding their social and emotional concerns.
- To profile the approaches used by school counsellors in addressing social and emotional issues of middle school students.
- To explore the facilitating factors and barriers faced by school counsellors in their work on social-emotional needs of middle school students.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Sample

The sample for the study consisted of a total of 28 participants. They were selected from classes 6th to 8th. Four counsellors were also selected. The students and counsellors both belonged to government as well as private schools.

4.2 Sampling Technique

Contact sampling was utilized to directly approach four school counsellors each from government and private schools who had agreed to participate. To ensure representation from middle school students, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed.

4.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The students of classes 6th to 8th from both government and private schools were included in the study. The junior school students and senior school students were excluded from the study.

4.4 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Delhi, after having initially considered Haryana where school counsellors were not available in the locations accessed by the researcher.

4.5 Methods of data Collection

The following methods were used for data collection:

- Semi-structured interview with counsellors
- Semi-structured interview with students
- Focus group discussion with students
- The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) checklist with students

5. DATA ANALYSIS

As the study is qualitative in nature, the data collected was subjected to qualitative analysis. The data obtained from the interview schedules with counsellors and students and focus group discussions with students were descriptive in nature and were subjected to content or thematic analysis.

6. DISCUSSION

The role of school counsellors in promoting social-emotional development in middle school students is both critical and multifaceted. The period of adolescence is marked by significant changes, both physically and emotionally, making it a crucial time for intervention and support. School counsellors serve as vital resources for students navigating these changes, offering guidance, support, and tools to manage challenges effectively.

While many students did not feel the need for counselling, a significant proportion of them recognized its importance, with reference to exam anxiety, bullying, and other difficult situations. Students expected multifaceted support from counselling. They desired guidance not only in academic matters but also in emotional and interpersonal aspects of their lives. Students felt that some barriers can arise when considering seeking counselling. These could include negative influence from friends and family, concerns about reactions from teachers and school authorities, fear of judgement or stigma, worries about counsellors' responsiveness, and situations where counselling may not be considered necessary, such as during times of happiness or when facing minor issues.

Students generally expressed positive views on expected relationships with counsellors, highlighting a desire for a friendly and approachable person with whom they can feel comfortable talking. While some students reported that they may initially feel nervous, they hoped for a gradual progression towards openness and trust. It was also found out that students highly value the role of counsellors in providing support, guidance, and solutions for addressing difficult situations and promoting social-emotional skill development. However, there are misconceptions among students regarding the extent of counsellors' responsibilities, particularly in academic planning and disciplinary actions.

According to students, counselling can have a significant impact on students' daily lives and well-being, providing various advantages and opportunities for personal growth. Students emphasized the benefits of counselling in helping others, coping with personal challenges, and correcting negative behaviours. While most students value counselling as beneficial, some expressed scepticism about its effectiveness.

The findings suggest that talking to a counsellor can improve relationships with peers by promoting effective communication, conflict resolution skills, and understanding among students. It was perceived that the counsellor's guidance can help students resolve conflicts, behave more politely, and find solutions, ultimately fostering healthier peer interactions. The responses from students highlight how school counsellors can significantly address stress and emotional difficulties among students. According to students, counsellors can help them relieve stress, understand stress triggers, and provide guidance during challenging times. They can offer strategies, share relatable experiences, and encourage students to face challenges with confidence.

There was a positive perception of counselling among students, emphasizing its potential benefits in improving communication, academic performance, relationship with parents and emotional well-being. However, the lack of direct exposure to counselling sessions indicates a need for greater awareness and access to counselling services in educational settings. The students had varied experiences with accessing counselling services, with some finding them readily available while others facing occasional restrictions or lack of awareness. Recommendations included increasing availability, providing dedicated rooms, hiring more counsellors, and improving communication.

According to the counsellors, rapport building is the most important aspect in the counsellor-student relationship. Alongside rapport, counsellors also emphasized professionalism, confidentiality, empathy, and the counsellor's unique role as a trusted confidant in students' lives. Talking about the identification and assessment of students' needs, it was evident that counsellors employ diverse methods, including psychometric tests, observational cues, and interactive activities, to comprehensively assess students' emotional and behavioural needs.

In providing students social-emotional support resources the counsellor creates non-judgemental, confidential environments that are crucial for students to share concerns comfortably. They employ diverse approaches like self-introspection, collaborative problem-solving, utilizing stakeholders, talk therapy, and activity-based assessments, while also recognizing the importance of professional boundaries, recommending specialized assessments be outsourced for optimal student support. And, for techniques and strategies, counsellors provide a supportive, non-directive environment, alongside tailoring counselling methods to students' learning styles. They

emphasized diverse approaches, including behavioural, person-centered, and gestalt therapy.

The interventions discussed by the counsellors have shown encouraging outcomes in raising awareness, fostering healthy relationships, managing behavioural issues, and supporting students facing academic and emotional challenges. Through personalized approaches and empathetic guidance, students have demonstrated increased awareness, improved coping strategies, and enhanced academic performance.

The counsellors' varied perspectives on parental involvement highlighted the importance of bridging the gap between home and school for effective support of students. By offering parenting skills, creating supportive environments, and facilitating understanding between parents and children, counsellors play a pivotal role in fostering holistic development and well-being of students.

As reported by counsellors, innovative strategies are being implemented to enhance the effectiveness of school counselling. These include creating conducive environments, designing interactive activities, including theatre techniques and activities to address life skills and behavioural issues, implementing peer educator systems, and utilizing creative engagement methods.

All the counsellors highlighted the significance of technology in counselling, ranging from utilizing YouTube and Google for resources to empowering students through multimedia presentations. And, the insights provided by the counsellors on addressing puberty and individuality in counselling sessions highlighted the importance of acceptance, guidance, and education as key components in supporting adolescents through this transitional phase. The counsellors' accounts collectively emphasize the pivotal role of ongoing professional development and training in refining counselling competencies and meeting the diverse needs of students. Their accounts showcase a range of experiences, from specialized courses and hands-on internships to diploma programs emphasizing ethical practice and vocational rehabilitation, all contributing to their commitment to providing effective support and guidance to students.

The challenges outlined by the counsellors highlighted the multifaceted nature of middle school counselling, including barriers related to student reluctance, resource scarcity, administrative constraints, parental resistance, and socio-economic disparities. However, the emphasis on building rapport, creating supportive environments, advocating for equitable treatment, and addressing systemic issues reflects a commitment to overcoming these challenges and providing effective support to students in need.

Counsellors emphasized the importance of various support systems and initiatives within the school environment to facilitate success. These include dedicated counselling rooms, anti-bullying committees, and aligned counselling interventions. Additionally, engagement from stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and peers, along with the utilization of available resources, plays a crucial role in supporting students' social, emotional, and educational needs.

The assessment of middle school students through the Developmental Assets Profile indicates a generally positive outlook among the students. They demonstrate confidence, a sense of control over their lives, and optimism about the future. Additionally, they exhibit strong academic engagement, positive social relationships, resilience in problem-solving, and a commitment to important values such as helping others, honesty, and acceptance. While there are areas for improvement, such as safety awareness and conflict resolution skills, the overall findings highlight the strengths and resources that contribute to the healthy development of middle school children.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement strategies to increase awareness and accessibility of counselling services among students, such as through announcements, posters, and information sessions.
- Integrate counselling information into student handbooks or school websites to ensure all parents and students are informed.
- Counsellors could conduct classroom visits, hold counselling sessions, and participate in school events regularly.
- Provide training to counsellors on new counselling techniques, understanding diverse student populations, and staying updated with mental health trends.
- Workshops should be organized on topics like adolescent development, effective communication, and mental health awareness that can foster better collaboration and understanding among all stakeholders.

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