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## Category: Research Article

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# School Counselors' Training in Secondary Schools in Sri Lanka (Badulla District, Welimada Educational Zone)

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 30 June 2020

#### Keywords

School counselor, Training, Perception, Knowledge

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### ABSTRACT

Counseling is an important service for students in the developing countries due to the challenges faced by the students in their learning process. It effects into both internalizing and externalizing problems of a student. The paper explores the status of school counselor's training, knowledge and skills in secondary schools in Sri Lanka. Further, it describes the school counselor's perception towards the existing school counseling services and the readiness to attend counseling trainings in order to develop their counseling skills. The sample for the study was 62 school counselors from 16 secondary schools in Badulla District, Welimada educational Zone and the data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The findings indicated that there was a less training among school counselors in secondary schools. Though most of the school counselors participated in trainings and seminars, their skills, knowledge and awareness of school counseling principles were very low. Also, school counselors' perception towards counseling services in schools was good and their degree of readiness to attend counseling training were positive ( $M=1.39$ ,  $SD= 0.554$ ). So, school counseling services are needed to be enhanced through provision of school counseling trainings towards teachers who are appointed to serve as school counselors in various secondary schools. From these findings, we can recommend that, workshops and seminars for increasing the awareness as well as long term trainings are very much important to make school counseling services effective. Therefore, future researchers can also observe the extent to which the counseling component is taught in teacher colleges and universities so as to test the rationale for appointing teachers to work as school counselors even without any specified training on counseling.

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### 1. Introduction

School counseling programs can provide a suitable preparation for school counselors to engage and handle issues that are disrupting the learning process of students, especially those from low-income backgrounds and from the marginalized communities. With the support of the school community, counselor educators can give school counselors the strength and preparation so that they can make a significant contribution towards schools through provision of counseling services to school children who are currently facing different challenges in their environment [1]. Furthermore, Martin (2002) [2] contended that changes focusing on improving school counseling services are not optional in this society and school

learning system. This is due to the competition among children for the limited resources and services in schools. For the successive provision of counseling services in any school setting in Sri Lanka, different requirements are required such as trained school counselor, counseling facilities, guidance and counseling guideline as well as infrastructures [3].

Therefore, the paper highlights to understand the current situation for school counselors' training in Sri Lankan secondary schools, the level of knowledge and their counseling skills as well as the perception they have towards the importance of counseling training for teachers in schools. It



assesses their degree of readiness to attend a course in counseling if required for the purpose of supporting students in managing and dealing with the pressure from the schools and the society.

### 1.1 Background

Basically, guidance and counseling in schools is primarily concerned with individual behavioral processes of the students. This means that counselors need to have a tough training so as to deal with the personal world of students and help them understand themselves when building the relationship with their internal world. It is further mentioned that guidance and counseling is based on the recognition of the dignity and worth of the individual student and right to choose what is good for him/her. It is the responsibility of the school counselors to establish environment where their students can attend for counseling voluntarily and seek help willingly [4].

Counseling is the change and life enhancement in individuals' life. Therefore a skillful counselor can help clients to develop themselves and make rapid changes in their lives. Also a skillful counselor should have some professional skills such as relationship, diagnosis, helping counseling, strategies, case conceptualization, and interventions. These are the competencies ranging from the basic and simple level to the more advanced and complex [5]. Therefore counseling relationship must be formed upon trust and caring to make sure that the service form an integral part of each student's study path.

For an effective counseling process, the school counselors need to be aware of the demographics of the changing student populations and resources to provide multicultural guidance and obtain needed skills. Counselors need professional preparations to provide services for changing culturally diverse populations.

The outcome of the study also says that even the untrained teachers do not cover sufficient courses in guidance and counseling to enable them effectively render the guidance and counseling services. It is further recommended that seminars and workshops need to be offered as a continuing process in educational guidance and counseling as this will help equipping teacher-counselors with latest theories and techniques of counseling to make them effective counselors. The teachers will be updatable. In this aspect, there is a real need for trained personnel in guidance and counseling arena as this will help to produce effective guidance and counseling services in schools and make student's learning effective and efficient, to make a successful study path.

### 1.2 The Demand for the Counselors and Guidance and Counseling in Schools

School counseling is unique and it acts multifaceted roles in different specialization areas. The process of training school counselors gains a serious importance. Because school professional counseling includes the application of mental health, psychological, or human development principles through cognitive, effective, behavioral or systematic intervention strategies that address wellness, personal growth, or career development as well as pathology [6].

Thus, a core counseling perspective may be thought of as containing five foundational areas including professional counseling knowledge, skills, ethics, values, and worldwide view which are also critical to school counselors.

Counselor education programs must include different features that are professional orientation, ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationship, group work, assessment, and research and program evaluation [7]. These guidelines are intended to ensure that counseling professionals especially those in schools gain knowledge of human development, behavioral, group dynamics, relationship, culture, health and wellness, and illness and psychopathology. This knowledge also enhances a professional ability to understand the complexities of clients or students brought to counseling as well as the full range of possible ways to address their needs. Each counseling specialization encompasses additional specific knowledge and competencies to address the specific areas of expertise required [7]. This is why we need to train school counselors so as to make them effective in provision of counseling in schools. Because of that, values and worldwide view competence for the counselor is an important aspect in the counseling profession so as to help students to accept their situation in consideration to reality.

The positive forces of counseling emphasize on wellness, growth, self awareness, justice, strengths, and relationship, interaction between the individual and her context, and acknowledgement of the importance of the cultural frame [8, 9]. As Ponto and Duban (2009) [10] noted; "In whatever specialty counselors practice, they are asked to provide expertise to the problem of balancing an individual needs, strength, and identity with the group as society within which that individual function". This suggests that the values of counseling profession are articulated and reinforced through the establishment and affirmation of ethical codes.



### 1.3 School Counselors' Perception on their Counseling Roles in Schools

Many researchers in the field of guidance and counseling such as Corey (1996) and McLeod (1998) [11, 12] identified qualities of a good counselor. Furthermore, the extent to which teachers implement any curriculum is largely dependent upon and influenced by their attitude and perception towards it. That is why several authors have recommended that teachers' perception and attitude towards any program and the confidence in providing the counseling program must be assessed prior to engaging them in its delivery. Perception is the first and foremost link between individuals and their environment; society. It is the ability to derive information from the environment where they live, interpret the information, and act upon. After considering the explained facts, school-counselors' perception towards the counseling services they give to students in schools can influence the success or the failure in effective provision of this service in schools and students. We as human beings live in a society and our lives are not in isolated, but in social world an individual selects, organizes, and interprets information to create a meaningful picture of the world. In general, perception depends not only on the physical stimuli, but also on the stimuli's relation to the surrounding field and on conditions within the individual. This implies that the school counselors perception on guidance and counseling activities reflect the level of effectiveness and the nature of the required improvements and issues to address to make counseling services an effective one.

Secondary education in most of the countries is the springboard into the world of work or into tertiary institutions for further preparation of gainful living. This is a fact which is well known and valued by both students and their parents. This means that a programme on guidance and counseling at secondary school level should also combine with educational, vocational and personal or social counseling. The objectives such as helping individual students to understand and appreciate school regulations and rules for healthy and responsible school community are very much important [13]. Because of the inappropriate guidance and counseling services in schools, the government of Sri Lanka tries to institutionalize this service in schools. The government through the Ministry of Education instructed all heads of schools to make sure that there are school counselors at least to guide students on how the school subject is studied and the world of work. The instruction highlighted on the need for the selected teacher-counselor to assist students in

application for careers and training for students, occupational information and their requirements as well as supporting students to make plans of study.

The National Dangerous Drugs Control Board noted the increase in the rate of problem behaviors in Sri Lankan schools that were revealed through school rules, school absenteeism, destruction of school and public property, use of illegal drugs, use of alcohol and engagement in sexual practice, hence stressed the need for introducing guidance and counseling in schools and colleges [14].

Some students drop out in secondary schools because of the problems related to reasons which are mentioned above and include, truancy, pregnancy and misbehavior, suggesting some weaknesses in guidance and counseling services in schools in Sri Lanka. In addition to that, 13.7% children dropped out of school in the same year due to parents' failure to meet students' basic needs [14]. In general, presence of large number of school children dropping out of school for reasons related to problem behaviors such as truancy, misbehaviors, and pregnancy as indicator of early engagement in sexual activities suggest a weakness in school offices responsible for guidance and counseling the area which this paper intends to explore.

When considering about the school counseling services in Sri Lankan secondary schools, there are several challenges identified by different studies in inadequacy of counseling knowledge and skills among teacher-counselors and difficulty in shifting a role from a teacher to a counselor which is seen as the result of inadequate counseling skills and knowledge for teacher counselors. Hence this observation calls for the attention on the need to provide a better knowledge and skills to school counselors through various training programs to school counselors in various situations.

### 1.4 Statement of the Problem

Officially, school counseling services programs were introduced to Sri Lankan schools to overcome the frequent disciplinary incidences. Following this decision a few trained teacher-counselors have been provided to some schools so as to make this service effective in schools. There are evidences of ineffective provisions of counseling services in schools reflected by the serious behavioral problems and ineffective guidance and counseling services in schools. The crucial situations which are currently been faced by the children in schools are contributing largely to dropout due to truancy, pregnancy among school girls and other misbehaviors such as fighting, theft, destruction of school properties, use of illegal drugs and alcohol. Due to this fact this paper seeks to examine the



level of training, skills and knowledge held by school counselors in secondary schools in Sri Lanka.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study were;

- To examine the extent to which school-counselors have attended trainings in guidance and counseling
- To assess the school-counselors' awareness of principles of guidance and counseling in schools
- To assess school-counselors' perception and their roles in guidance and counseling in schools

## 3. Methodology

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches and emphasized that, quantitative and qualitative approaches to research are complimentary; they have to be used together to maximize the strength and minimize the limitations of each. The cross sectional survey research design was used and was considered to suffice the study demands because it allows collection of data from schools with different characteristics [15]. Moreover, Gay, Mills & Airrasian (2006) [16] emphasize that cross sectional survey is one of the best designs for collecting information in a relatively short period of time and making predictions. The study was conducted in Badulla District, Welimada Educational Zone, Sri Lanka. The target population for the present study included school counselors in different secondary schools in the zone who were purposefully selected in consideration to their duties in schools. School counselors were an interesting subpopulation due to the reasons that they are currently dealing with counseling services provision in school. The sample of the present study was 62 secondary school counselors as indicated in Table 1.

Data were collected through questionnaires where major sections representing various clusters were computed to frequencies and determination of descriptive statistics were done through statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 15.0. Furthermore, the qualitative information obtained through interviews was descriptively analyzed and major summaries were reported together with some direct quotations from respondents in providing more insight on the answers provided by respondents.

Table 1. Sample of the Study

Socio-demographic variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Type of school	Public	10 (16.1)
	Private	52 (83.9)
Gender	Females	44 (71)
	Males	18 (29)
Education level	Diploma	26 (41.9)
	Degree	30 (48)
	Postgraduate	6 (9.7)

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 The Extent to which School counselors are Trained in Guidance and Counseling

Table 2. The extent to which school counselors are trained in guidance and counseling

Statements	Agree		Sure		Disagree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
I have no any training in guidance and counseling	18	29	0	0	44	71
I did guidance and counseling in my teacher training	11	17.8	2	3.2	49	79
I have a professional training in guidance and counseling	00	00	00	00	62	100
I did guidance and counseling in a seminar/workshop	16	25.8	00	00	46	74.2
I did guidance and counseling as in-service course	24	38.7	00	00	38	61.3

According to the above findings, results of training status for school counselors indicated that 18 (29%) respondents agreed that they have no any training in guidance and counseling while 44 (71%) respondents acknowledged to have guidance and counseling training of some extent. In attempt to identify the specific types of training they have attended, the results revealed that 11 (17.8%) respondents said to have done counseling as a course in their teacher training, 16 (25.8%) respondents in seminar and workshops and 24 (38.7%) respondents in a specific designed in-

service guidance and counseling training course. No any respondent agreed to have a professional training in guidance and counseling when this question was asked as indicated in table 2. Also the respondents provided more insight during interview, this was evident in the following comments;

"I comment to be given support by the school and government on short and long course training so as to be knowledgeable in school guidance and counseling rather than working without any good training" (A school counselor from one of the private schools recommended). Another school counselor from one of the government school made a comment that;

"Training is very important because it can help me with knowledge and principles for guidance and counseling which will help in handling students' psychological, social and academic problems".

The facts obtained in this study depicts the level at which the demand for training of school counselors is required. Most of the school counselors seem to have attended some training and there was evidence that in-service training is now the only window to enhance training of school counselors in school. According to this observation, it is good to strengthen the pre-service training so as to reflect the demand for skilled school counselors to increase the window for more teachers and school psychologists to be trained so as to help students in schools. Behalf of that, it is time to have specific professional training program in counseling to have professionals focused in this area centrally to the current situation where there is no single school counselor who is working in schools with qualification in counseling.

The observation in this paper is totally opposite to the effort showed by the government of Sri Lanka by introducing counseling services in schools so as to overcome the existing school challenges faced by the students. The findings are also in line with what Biswalo (1996) [13] reported in his work which revealed the presence of untrained school educational counselors performing the roles of educational guidance and counseling.

#### 4.2 School counselors' Awareness, Knowledge and Skills of Guidance and Counseling.

This is the attempt to test the counseling knowledge and skills which the school counselors hold, the results revealed low level of knowledge, awareness and general counseling skill required by a counselor in provision of counseling services in any situation. The responses were evident in table

3 when school counselors were required to state the importance of confidentiality in the counseling activities. Under this aspect 43 (69.4%) of respondents indicated that they are not aware if confidentiality is important while 14 (22.6%) respondents seem to be aware of the need for maintaining confidentiality in counseling services. Another area which was tested in this aspect was in the need for separating counseling services and discipline issues, in their response 49 (79%) respondents commended that discipline cases should be dealt together with counseling services, the comment which disagree with professional counseling principles and guidelines.

Table - 3 Teachers' Awareness, Knowledge and Skills of guidance and counseling

Statements	Agree Not		Sure		Disagree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Guidance and counseling is a new phenomena for me	21	33.8	2	3.2	39	62.9
I know that guidance and counseling is not a voluntary activity to students in schools rather a must	42	67.8	7	11.3	13	21
Guidance and counseling should go hand in hand with discipline issues to students in schools	49	79	0	00	13	21
Students' problems raised in counseling session should be shared to other teachers so as to help students easily	43	69.4	5	8.1	14	22.6
I know the challenges which courses students to seek for guidance and counseling in schools	48	77.4	4	6.5	10	16.2

\* F=Frequency, %=Percentage



Respondents were required to comment on whether professional counseling in schools should be treated as a voluntary service or not. Their comments and understanding in this part indicate that counseling activities in schools is not a voluntary activity at the frequency of 42 (67.8%) which reveals the inadequate awareness among the school counselors in schools. The study was interested to understand if the school counselors understand the reason for students seeking guidance and counseling in schools. In this aspect their response indicate 48 (77.4%) of them are aware of different challenges facing students and the reasons for seeking counseling services. While having the interviews, some teachers raised some observations which indicated the need for more skills and techniques in school counseling to help them in their duties as;

"Actually I am not comfortable with students' counseling because I always use my experience in teaching which sometimes doesn't work. It is much better to attend intensive seminars and training in order to know the rules and skills in guidance and counseling". Another school counselor commented on that as;

"Seriously I am not much comfortable in doing student guidance and counseling because as a counselor I have to know the rules and regulations which guide the counseling activities".

The responses obtained reveals that the school counselors in many schools in Sri Lanka needs effective training to provide knowledge, awareness and skills for successful counseling provision in schools in the country. Some weaknesses that occur in the provision of counseling services in schools can also result in suffering for students in the schools.

### 4.3 Teachers' Perception and Evaluation of Guidance and Counseling Provision in Schools

Here it tries to assess the school counselors' perception and evaluation on the provision of counseling services in schools. The responses revealed good attention on the need for training school counselors in schools. After asking about the need for training school counselors 60 (96.8%) respondents agreed that this is the right time to train school counselors in schools. Forty three (85.5%) respondents acknowledged that school counseling activities in schools should be done by trained counselors and not any teacher to be appointed by the head of schools or students. Furthermore, respondents also acknowledged that counseling training is important to teachers in schools so as they can serve as school counselors, this was evident when 58 (93.8%) of respondents

indicated disagreement with the statement which proposed that counseling courses are not important to school counselors. 44 (66%) of respondents commented that they are able to do counseling to students in schools even without further training, this may be influenced by their current engagement in counseling activities which exposed them to the task without any serious training.

Table 4. Teachers' perception on guidance and counseling provision in schools

Statements	Agree Not		Sure		Disagree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
I believe that guidance and counseling can be done with an experienced teacher even without training	20	32.2	5	8.1	37	59.1
I believe that guidance and counseling need to be done by a trained teacher-counselor	43	85.5	5	8.1	4	6.5
I believe that challenges which are facing students in schools does not necessarily need a trained counselor	5	8.1	4	6.5	53	85.5
I think guidance and counseling training is not so much important for me as a teacher	2	3.2	2	3.2	58	93.5
I feel that, I am able to do guidance and counseling even without any training in guidance and counseling	41	66	5	8.1	16	25.8
I believe that this is the right time to train teachers to serve as counselors in schools	60	96.8	00	00	2	3.2

\* F=Frequency, %=Percentage



During the interview with school counselors, several comments were pointed out in line with what they believe and perceive in the school counseling provisions, some of these comments were such as;

"I am not comfortable in this task of students counseling and I perceive myself as irrelevant person in this assignment because counseling should be provided by any individual after attending specified training or a course in this field"

A comment from another teacher counselor from one of the private schools visited revealed the readiness for these school counselors to engage in school counseling though challenged with inadequate training on their side as noted;

"Absolutely Yes. I am comfortable with this duty though there are difficulties faced by students which I also fail to resolve. I think training is very important because it can help us with skills for handling students' cases and challenges and we are updated by new facts."

The observed comments suggest that school counselors are aware of the need for training in counseling in order to improve their counseling knowledge and skills so as to provide psychological guidance and support in schools. This implies that if a good training is introduced school counselors will actively participate in the training and obtain knowledge and skills required for students' counseling in schools.

The findings in this aspect go hand in hand with the recommendation made by Corey (1996) and McLeod (1998) [11,12] who pointed out that a good counselor should be open for learning, respecting themselves and others and considering positively their counseling duties and responsibilities which they are engaged. This demand is evident in this study because school counselors in schools indicate high degree of readiness for engaging in training for school counseling and then provision of this service to students in schools.

**4.4 The extent of readiness for teachers to attend a training in guidance and counseling**

Table 5. The extent to which school counselors are ready to attend training

	Statistic			Std. Deviation		
	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Error	Statistic
Rt						
Valid N (list wise)	62	1	4	1.39	.070	.554

Here it attempts to assess the school counselors' readiness to attend training courses in counseling if this opportunity is provided, all 62 (100%) respondents agreed. In calculating the degree of their agreement the mean was determined in a scale with assigned numbers ranking from highly interested (1), interested (2), not sure (3) and not interested (4). In determining the response, respondents showed good agreement (M= 1.39, SD=0.554.) which is the positive state according to the scale used. An interview was done with respondents on the need for training, In this interview one of the respondents made a comment that; "We are performing this duty without any serious training in guidance and counseling. Though we know the challenges faced by students, it becomes very difficult to help them due to complications and complexities in their cases" (A teacher counselors from one of the private schools said).

Teacher counselor from one of the government schools included in the study made a comment that; "I am not comfortable in doing school counseling without any training, this is because many students' problems need specific skills to deal with them which we currently fail to solve due to lack of these skills". It tells that, respondents appreciate the difficulties in cases reported by students, this might be influenced by the inappropriate skills they possess in school counseling. In such conditions it is evident that if any program is introduced in our institutions for the purpose of providing counseling education to the current group of school counselors there is a possibility of attracting them to the training. This can help them to be in a position of helping school learners in their social, academic and psychological concerns as emphasized in the government notice numbers 11 of the year 2002 provided through the Ministry of Education and vocational training.

This study is more likely to ensure that counseling professionals in schools help them to gain knowledge of human development, behavior, group dynamics, relationship, culture, health and wellness as emphasized by CACREP (2009) [7].

**5. Conclusions**

The paper has established new understanding on the need for providing intensive training for school counselors in secondary schools in Welimada Educational Zone and Sri Lanka in general. From the findings it can be concluded that, students' in many schools in Sri Lanka in general are at risk which can be the results of different



circumstances ranging from social, psychological, economic and academic. The risk can be attributed to the current lack of effective trained school counselors in schools. Therefore, these findings are unique to Welimada Educational Zone and Sri Lanka and call for the Government, education stakeholders and schools to improve school counseling services by training the appointed school counselors.

## 6. Recommendations

The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training should establish a properly coordinated school counseling unit in the ministry which will focus in preparing counseling services effective in Sri Lankan schools. The findings of this study might have largely reflected school counseling services in Welimada Educational Zone. We can generalize

these findings for whole Sri Lanka. Since this study was based on cross sectional survey, a longitudinal study ranging from primary schools to colleges would be essential so as to show in detail the causes and effects of inadequate counseling services in education institutions in the country.

## Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the participation and effort extended by postgraduate diploma in education and Masters of Education academicians of the University of Peradeniya who tirelessly devoted their energy for data collection throughout the study. Principals and school counselors in the visited schools in Welimada Educational Zone are also acknowledged.

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