

School-Based Counselling Services: Contemporary Challenges and Future Possibilities

Childhood is a journey, not a race.

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Background

Children are the most important assets of any country and the most important human resource for overall development. Schools are among the settings outside the home where children can acquire new knowledge and skills to grow into productive and capable citizens who can engage, support, and help their communities grow and prosper. We have entered the new millennium, and as part of a rapidly changing society, we must appraise the psychosocial needs and influences on the child and adolescent who is carrying the baton of the human chain into the 21st Century.

With nearly 10-12% of children in our country needing professional help and guidance for emotional and behavioural problems, the role of school counsellors for a positive school climate is indeed paramount. The need to work with schoolchildren with such problems was recognised as early as the beginning of the 20th century, especially in the USA. By the middle of this century, it had drawn the attention of several professionals – social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and psychometrics. Each one is contributing towards the development of these services. It soon influenced educators and mental health professionals in our country as well. N.C.E.R.T. & C.B.S.E. have often highlighted the growing need for effective school-based counselling services.

Wise to remember that the school plays a crucial role in the development of cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional and moral functions and competencies in a child. Schools have a profound influence on children, their families and the community. They can act as a safety net, protecting children from hazards that affect their learning, development and psychosocial well-being. In addition to the family, schools are crucial in building or undermining self-esteem and a sense of competence. School-based counselling programmes are effective in improving learning, mental well-being, and managing mental disorders.

In the last decade, School mental health has expanded to address school violence, sexual harassment, bullying, substance abuse, discrimination and healthy discipline. School consultation focuses more on early identification and intervention at the individual and system levels to help attain immediate educational and behavioural goals and prevent long-term negative outcomes for children's overall personality. But despite this understanding, the reality is that the majority of the public schools have no counsellor or social worker, yet schools are being asked to deal with more of the mental health needs of their students.

Due to this growing awareness of mental health issues in both children and adolescents on one hand and paucity of health professionals on the other, schools have to explore the potential to promote mental health both through curriculum and with the provision of supportive learning environments. There is a strong need to create an environment for School Counselling programs in every school, as they are collaborative efforts that benefit not only students but also parents, teachers, administrators, and the broader community. Therefore, school counselling programs should be an integral part of students' daily educational environment, and school counsellors should be partners in student achievement.

Keywords: Children; Schools; Counselling; Mental well-being

Benefits of School Counselling Programs (SCP)

School counsellors help children face challenges, peer pressure, friendship problems, depression and more – all that can be roadblocks to future success. Among other interventions, school counsellors can promote students' positive mental health. School counselling services are therefore relevant to both our education and health systems. In our country, it appears to be more closely associated with the former. School counsellors can play a vital and undeniable role in the early identification and management of students', teachers' and parents' mental health needs.

Bringing about a behaviour change enables the student to live a more productive and satisfying life. Improving the student's ability to establish and maintain relationships enhances the quality of relationships with others. Many students have problems relating to others, probably due to poor self-image, which causes them to act defensively in relationships, or to inadequate social skills. A counsellor can help the students develop and maintain healthy relationships with others. Enhancing Coping Skills is another important dynamic of counselling.

For a variety of environmental, biological, and psychological reasons, children may find it difficult to cope with the adversities and challenges of everyday life, e.g., examinations, peer pressure, failures, emotional setbacks, and trauma. The student may exhibit physical and psychological problems like frequent headaches, inability to sleep, etc. The counsellor works with the student to develop healthy coping skills. Promoting decision-making helps students obtain information and clarity, and helps them sort out personal issues and emotional concerns that may interfere with or be related to decision-making.

It helps students understand not only their abilities, interests, and opportunities, but also the emotions and attitudes that can influence their choices and decisions. Facilitating students' potential to improve personal effectiveness is another positive outcome of school counselling.

Challenges and Road Blocks in School Counselling

Unfortunately, school counselling has lacked a consistent identity from state to state, district to district and even school to school. This has led to a misunderstanding of what school counselling is and what it can do for a school. As a result, SCPs are often viewed as ancillary programs rather than a crucial component of student achievement, and school counsellors have not been used to their fullest potential. The question has often been posed, "What do school counsellors do?" The more important question is, "How are students different because of what school counsellors do?" Also, the responsibilities of school counsellors have increased tremendously over the years.

Responsibilities of a Counsellor – The New Paradigms

Towards the Students: A professional school counsellor has a primary obligation to the student, who is to be treated with respect as a unique individual. They are concerned with the educational, career, emotional, and behavioural needs of each student and encourage the maximum development of each student. The counsellor refrains from consciously encouraging the student's acceptance of values, lifestyles, plans, decisions and beliefs that represent the counsellor's personal orientation. They are responsible for staying informed about laws, regulations, and policies related to students and strive to ensure that students' rights are adequately protected.

Towards the Parents: A professional school counsellor also respects the inherent rights and responsibilities of parents for their children and endeavours to establish, as appropriate, a collaborative relationship with parents to facilitate the maximum development of the student. They adhere to the laws and local guidelines when assisting parents experiencing family difficulties which interfere with the student's effectiveness and welfare.

Towards the School: A professional school counsellor supports and protects the educational program against any infringement that is not in the best interests of the students. She must inform appropriate officials of conditions that may be potentially disruptive or damaging to the school's mission, personnel and property. They assist in the development of a) Curricular and environmental conditions appropriate for the school and community; b) Educational procedures and programs to meet the students' developmental needs, and c) a systematic evaluation process for the comprehensive school counselling programs, services and personnel. School counsellors often feel that, while their responsibilities have increased, their role is ill-defined, and expectations of what constitutes a good educational outcome may not

align with a good psychological outcome for the student. While counselling children, or anyone for that matter, counsellors often are faced with ethical issues that need to be dealt with delicately. These ethical issues relate to:

Confidentiality: Counsellors are ethically obliged to keep students' information confidential. This means that a counsellor should not discuss the student's problems with anyone without the client's prior permission.

Professional Disclosure: A counsellor must accurately represent their professional qualifications and experience to the student.

Professional Relationship: Counsellors need to respect and protect their students. This means that counsellors should not engage in any other relationship with a student that could call into question the counsellor's objectivity and judgment, or interfere with the therapeutic process.

Disclosure to competent authority: Whenever the best judgment and evaluation points towards potential harm to self, others or property, disclosure to a competent authority or guardian should be made.

These ethical issues pose the greatest challenge to a school counsellor who has to walk a tightrope between the principal, school management, other colleagues, and the student client. In this emerging context, India needs to take a serious stock of school-based counselling services as the planning bedrock for implementing, enhancing, and monitoring the holistic development of children. School counselling has to be a value addition to the other landmark educational reforms.

Recommendations for School Counselling Services in India

- Identify the overall needs of counselling services for children attending the regular schooling system.
- Sensitise the schools about the growing need for comprehensive counselling services and well-being.
- Streamline the structure, protocols, and guidelines for school counselling services nationwide to strengthen existing infrastructure and human resources.
- Set up uniform guidelines/centres of excellence of health research in partnership with the education system, to enhance the psychosocial well-being of children attending schools.
- Link the education system with local/regional mental health services and professionals for qualitative monitoring of the programme.

These initiatives should include collaborative national workshops and a longitudinal, multicenter pilot study to evaluate the implementation of these recommendations. To address these objectives, Expressions India has promoted the formation and development of the Association of Indian School Counsellors and Allied Professionals (AISCAP) and provided technical resources to the Association. This association aims to create a framework for School Counselling Programs to ensure they are comprehensive in design and delivered systematically to all students.

AISCAP provides a forum to empower, support, and streamline the work of school counsellors and allied professionals in their roles, effectively promoting child and adolescent wellbeing in an inclusive environment. Over a year since its inception, AISCAP has grown and has 85 members across the nation, including school counsellors from Chandigarh, Dehradun, Bangalore, Odisha, Hyderabad & Maharashtra. Its main objective is to help school

counsellors design and implement programs that meet the National Standards and establish school counselling as an integral part of the academic mission of their schools.

SCPs are likely to be more effective in improving learning, mental well-being and channelising management of mental disorders when they are:

- Part of the school mental health programme.
- Implemented through regular full-time qualified counsellors in the school.
- Supported and support families and parent groups.
- Brought in through the Principals, who recognise that poor social and emotional functioning interferes with learning.
- Brought in through school management or the Board that recognises that schools are a good setting to improve the functioning of the children.

In summary, as India moves towards universal education through the RTE, schools are finding it necessary to expand their role by providing health services, including school counselling, to address factors that interfere with schooling. Knowledge about health, positive attitude and health-promoting behaviours affect the well-being of all students and teachers. SCP can make an important impact on the identification and handling of psychosocial and mental health problems. The need of the hour is a holistic education system that incorporates biological, psychological, and social variables into the academic curriculum of a developing child.

We need individuals who have an infinite capacity for not knowing what can't be done.

- Henry Ford

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