Brief Research Communication

Emerging Challenges and Role Transitions of School Counsellors in Contemporary Indian Educational Settings

Dr Smita Desai[1], Ms Madhura Pathare[2] , Ms. Ribea Krupauya Golapalle[3], Ms Elisha Aranha[4]

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[1] Dr Smita Desai; Drishti, Founder- Director, Drishti; dr.smitadesai@drishtionline.com

[2] Madhura Pathare; Drishti, CEO, Drishti; madhura@drishtionline.com

[3] Ribea Krupauya Golapalle; Drishti, Program Director- Psychology; ribea_g@drishtionline.com

[4] Elisha Aranha; Drishti, Cluster Coordinator;elisha_a@drishtionline.com

[*] Correspondence: dr.smitadesai@drishtionline.com; Tel.: +91 9820147216

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Abstract

The mental health and psychosocial needs of children, adolescents and youth in India have become increasingly complex, creating a growing need for psychological counsellors in educational settings. Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and other policy

frameworks emphasise the holistic development and well-being of students, the systemic implementation of school and university counselling services remains inconsistent. As a result, counsellors often take on responsibilities beyond their defined professional roles, which may lead to role ambiguity, work overload, and work-related stress. This study aims to explore the role transitions and other emerging challenges faced by school counsellors in contemporary educational settings in India. Employing a descriptive, qualitative, and exploratory research design, data were collected through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with 27 practising school counsellors (female; M age = 30 years; M work experience = 6 years, minimum work experience = 2 years) from Mumbai and Bengaluru, India. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key areas of concern. The findings revealed an expansion of school counsellors' roles, accompanied by greater complexity in their responsibilities and workload. Counsellors reported difficulties in balancing student mental health needs with administrative tasks and classroom responsibilities. Furthermore, the quality and effectiveness of counselling services were adversely affected by poorly defined job roles and responsibilities, inadequate institutional support, and an inappropriate student-counsellor ratio. By documenting the evolving roles and systemic challenges faced by school counsellors in 2 metro cities in India, this study provides insights to inform policy planning and implementation, professional training, and institutional practices aimed at strengthening school-based mental health support.

Keywords: Mental Health; School Counsellor; Roles & Responsibilities; Indian Educational Settings

1. Introduction

The psychological well-being and mental health of school children and adolescents have been considered a growing concern within the Indian educational system. Increasing academic pressure, socio-cultural changes, technology use, stress from family expectations, and the post-pandemic psychosocial impact have significantly altered scholars' behavioural and emotional needs over time. Schools are not only seen as spaces for academic learning but are also expected to play a strong role in promoting mental health, emotional growth, and early identification of psychological concerns (Pokhriyal, Bhargava & Kalra, 2022).

In response to increasing demands, the role of the school counsellor has evolved. Earlier, school counselling in India primarily focused on career guidance and facilitating academic choices. Over time, this role has expanded, and counsellors are taking on a wider range of responsibilities, including individual and group mental health sessions, crisis intervention, life skills education, parent-teacher psychoeducation, and policy-related responsibilities within schools (Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015). Despite these developments, the professional identity, role clarity and institutional expectations of school counsellors remain fuzzy in the Indian education system. Variations in school management systems, education boards, resource availability, and mental health awareness frequently result in work overload for school counsellors.

The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the need for guidance and counselling services in schools; however, it offers limited guidance on the role of a counsellor, training standards, and workload management in schools. Hence, school counsellors often find themselves working through expanding expectations without adequate systemic support or clearly defined professional boundaries. The present study examines the growing challenges and role transitions faced by school counsellors in contemporary Indian educational settings, using a qualitative, exploratory approach. The study aims to contribute

practice-oriented perspectives to clarify the school counselling role, address institutional expectations, and improve mental health support for students.

2. Literature Review

Historically, school counselling in India has been largely shaped by an academic and career-oriented lens rather than a holistic focus on emotional well-being and student well-being. Earlier, counselling programs focused on career guidance, academic performance, and quick behavioural management, leaving limited time, resources, and scope for psychological, emotional, and social support. Research has shown a lack of standardised training practices and regulations, leading to inconsistent service delivery and affecting service quality across schools (Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015).

A recurrent theme in the literature is the ambiguity surrounding the role of school counsellors as professional service providers. Studies show that school counsellors are often expected to go beyond their practice and assume roles such as discipline management, administrative tasks, child protection, and parenting skills. Venkatesan and Shyam (2015) reported that multiple counsellors faced role ambiguity, differing expectations from teachers and school administrators, and unclear job roles. This vagueness in the counsellor's work life may hinder them from successfully carrying out their primary functions of counselling and mental health support, as they may frequently have to take on additional duties unrelated to their job description.

Another factor in the literature is that counselling services are heavily influenced by institutional variables, such as demanding school schedules, a lack of private counselling spaces, high student-counsellor ratios, and insufficient administrative support, which affect the efficacy of counselling services (Dhiwal, 2019). Moreover, long-term counselling interventions are also fundamentally hampered by the fact that many educational institutions place a higher priority on academic success than on mental health. Counsellors frequently report feeling pressured to demonstrate rapid behavioural or academic improvements, which may not be consistent with therapeutic and ethical protocols (Pokhriyal et al., 2022).

Pokhriyal et al. (2022) share that while schools are beginning to take mental health more seriously, the approach remains largely an emergency response to crises after they occur rather than building a supportive environment from the ground up. Additionally, adolescents in India are increasingly reporting mental health burdens related to anxiety, stress, peer conflict, difficulties with emotional regulation, family pressure, and identity-related challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened these issues, highlighting the importance of school-based mental health services (NCERT, 2020). Despite growing awareness regarding the importance of student mental health, there remains a gap between student requirements and institutional capabilities. Counsellors are often required to handle complex mental health issues without enough professional support networks or referral mechanisms.

Looking at these studies together, common concerns of institutional limitations, role ambiguity, and the widening gap between mental health needs of students and available support within schools are evident. While existing research documents the structural and professional challenges faced by school counsellors, there remains a limited understanding of how counsellors themselves navigate these competing expectations and workplace realities in their day-to-day practice. The present study attempts to address this gap by examining the lived experiences and professional challenges of school counsellors within educational institutions.

2.1. Research Gaps

The existing literature recognises the growing acceptance of the need for school counselling in India; however, there remains a dearth of practitioner-focused, qualitative studies examining counsellors' lived experiences of role development and institutional challenges. Most available research focuses on training programs or policy frameworks, paying limited attention to how counsellors address these changes and challenges in their daily work. The current study examines school counsellors' experiences in practice across several educational boards. It offers varied insights into emerging challenges and role transitions in contemporary school settings in India.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design with a descriptive and exploratory approach. The design was chosen to understand the complexity, depth and nuanced distinctions of a school counsellor's experiences within Indian educational settings.

3.2. Research Objectives

1. To understand the key challenges school counsellors face while providing mental health support in an educational setting.

2. To explore the evolving roles and responsibilities of school counsellors in response to changing student and institutional needs.

3. To understand how institutional structures and systemic factors affect the day-to-day effectiveness of school counselling practices.

4. To propose practice-oriented recommendations for strengthening and supporting the role of school counsellors.

3.3. Participants

The participants were practising school counsellors with at least 2 years of professional experience. The counsellors were from schools affiliated with the state (SSC) and national boards (CBSE and ICSE) to ensure diversity in the sample.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

3.4.1. Sampling Method

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to identify the participants who could provide experiential insights relevant to the research objectives.

3.4.2. Sample Size

The study comprised 27 female school counsellors from Mumbai and Bengaluru, India (M age = 30 years; M work experience = 6 years; minimum work experience = 2 years). This sample size aligns with qualitative research conventions and was considered adequate to achieve data saturation.

3.4.3. Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using:

- Semi-structured interviews with practising school counsellors.
- Professional reflections based on field experience.
- Review of literature and policy frameworks, including NEP 2020.

3.4.4. Semi-Structured Interview's Key Questions

The following key questions were asked in the interviews:

1. What would you consider to be the 3 main functions in your role as a school counsellor?
2. What are 3 key challenges you face while providing mental health support as a school counsellor?
3. What might be 3 new roles and 3 new responsibilities of school counsellors that you have observed/experienced in the past 1-3 years?
4. What 3 institutional factors at school might affect the daily effectiveness of school counselling practice for you?
5. What are 3 important practice-oriented recommendations you would propose for strengthening and supporting the role of a school counsellor?

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and the data were used solely for academic research.

3.6. Limitations of the Study

The study employs a qualitative design and relies primarily on self-reported data, which participants' personal experiences may influence. A larger sample size could lead to greater generalizability. Future studies may consider mixed-methods designs and incorporate insights from all stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, and students, to enhance the research findings.

3.7. Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from practising school counsellors were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. Audio-recorded interviews and manually documented interview responses were transcribed and

repeatedly reviewed to familiarise the researcher with the data. Initial codes were generated based on recurring patterns, significant statements, and shared experiences reported by participants. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into central themes aligned with the study's objectives.

The analysis focused on understanding counsellors' perspectives on evolving professional roles, workplace challenges, institutional influences, and recommendations to strengthen school counselling services. Themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure conceptual consistency and relevance across participant responses. To maintain the authenticity of participants' perspectives and minimise researcher bias, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the data were interpreted through repeated engagement with the transcripts and careful reflection throughout the analytical process.

4. Findings

The analysis's findings are discussed below in four thematic categories.

4.1. Expanding roles beyond traditional counselling

The findings highlight several positive institutional practices that have strengthened the school counselling framework. There has been increasing openness towards psychological assessment and intervention, along with the acceptance and validation of counsellors' decisions by school management and teachers. The participants reported that their work now extends beyond individual student counselling. They described being actively involved in classroom interactions, behavioural interventions, parental guidance, life-skills education, socio-emotional learning programs, and collaboration with teachers and school administrators. Several counsellors described their role as a bridge between parents, teachers, and students, particularly in addressing behavioural and emotional concerns. One participant described the expanding nature of the counselling role by stating, "Our work now goes beyond individual counselling. We are constantly collaborating with educators and parents while addressing emotional, behavioural and academic concerns together." (Participant 1)

The shift from a reactive, problem-focused model to a more preventive, developmental and empowering approach to student mental health is evident. One of the counsellors highlighted the growing preventive and developmental focus within schools: "Life skills sessions, classroom-based interventions and discussions on sensitive topics have become an important part of our role in recent years." (Participant 2).

However, participants noted that many of the additional responsibilities have evolved rather than been included in the formal role description. This was also mentioned by participant 3, "Counsellors are now expected to support students emotionally, guide teachers, work with parents and simultaneously contribute to institutional responsibilities."

4.2. Difficulties in Balancing Mental Health, Academic and Administrative Responsibilities

Counsellors reported that increasing stakeholder receptiveness, combined with flexibility in how sessions are structured and conducted, has enabled them to guide students more effectively. A recurring theme from the responses mentioned the challenge of balancing

counselling duties with academic and administrative demands. Several participants highlighted the challenge of balancing counselling responsibilities with institutional expectations and limited time allocation. One counsellor stated, “Teachers prioritise marks and academic classes, which often makes students unavailable for counselling sessions.” (Participant 1). Another participant described the practical limitations of counselling within school schedules: “There is hardly enough time for sessions. One period gets over in bringing the child from class and sending them back.” (Participant 8). Participants reported challenges such as excessive caseload, limited time for one-on-one counselling, frequent class substitutions, and the assignment of non-counselling duties. Some participants also highlighted that priority was always given to academic performance over mental health needs. A participant also reflected on the emotional and professional burden associated with increasing student needs: “Managing the growing complexity of students’ emotional, behavioural and learning concerns while balancing classroom expectations has become increasingly difficult.” (Participant 3).

Concerns related to confidentiality, delayed parental response to emergencies and unrealistic expectations for immediate behavioural change were also emphasised. Participants also repeatedly raised concerns about confidentiality and unrealistic institutional expectations. These challenges impacted the overall effectiveness of counselling services.

4.3. Counselling services are being affected by institutional and systemic constraints

With respect to mental-health support responsibilities within schools, the psychoeducation of teachers is gradually emerging as a significant strength. Teachers are increasingly demonstrating readiness to understand students’ psychological needs, apply classroom-based strategies aligned with counselling inputs, and collaborate more effectively with counsellors. However, counsellors indicated that counselling services are not yet fully integrated within institutional decision-making processes and support systems. Participants repeatedly described institutional limitations that affected the effectiveness of counselling services within schools. One participant shared: “There is no designated room for counselling, which makes maintaining confidentiality very difficult.” (Participant 1). Another counsellor highlighted the lack of privacy within school settings: “I am placed in the library with other teachers around, so students often do not feel comfortable opening up fully.” (Participant 8).

Institutional environmental factors have emerged as a significant barrier to implementing best practices in school counselling. The research study participants listed stringent school time-tables, limited awareness of mental health among the school staff and limitations in institutional support (such as a lack or paucity of private space for counselling sessions, interruptions during counselling services, pressure to prioritise behavioural discipline over therapeutic processes, conflicting expectations from principals and teachers and poor confidentiality boundaries) as the main challenges faced regularly. A participant also pointed towards limited awareness and collaboration within schools: “Teachers and coordinators sometimes try to manage concerns independently instead of referring students to the counsellor.” (Participant 3). Several counsellors further reported that mental health concerns were not always understood with the seriousness they required within institutional systems. Participants indicated that a lack of institutional recognition and limited understanding of the counselling role contributed to professional dissatisfaction and uncertainty regarding their

roles. The effectiveness of counselling services was further impacted by role ambiguity, frequent shortages of teaching faculty, and exacting administrative expectations.

4.4. Importance of support, role clarity and professional recognition

Some participants reported that strong lines of communication, the coordinator's visibility, and institutional readiness have created a safe environment in which they can carry out their duties. Other participants emphasised a strong need for institutional trust, professional recognition and clear job descriptions. Participants strongly emphasised the importance of institutional trust, structured systems and professional recognition in strengthening counselling practices. One participant recommended: “Scheduling counselling sessions properly for students who require support is extremely important for effective intervention.” (Participant 1). Organised counselling schedules, reduced administrative work, and healthy collaboration with the school administration were among the recommendations. Another counsellor stressed the need for mental health awareness within schools: “There should be more mental health campaigns and awareness programmes to reduce stigma and improve understanding.” (Participant 4). A participant also highlighted the need for stronger institutional collaboration: “Teachers, coordinators and counsellors need to work together with clearer communication and understanding of each other’s roles.” (Participant 10). To maintain effective practice, counsellors also emphasised the importance of continuing professional development, professional supervision, and policy-level support.

5. Discussion

The study highlights the evolving roles of school counsellors in contemporary Indian educational contexts. Counsellors reported undertaking responsibilities beyond traditional guidance, mental health support, and stakeholder coordination. Keremutt, A. (2023) similarly highlighted changes in school counselling practices in response to students’ growing emotional and psychosocial needs.

Participants reported difficulties in balancing mental health responsibilities with incremental administrative expectations. Similar concerns were noted by Akos, Jain, & Gurjar (2014), who observed that school counsellors in India are expected to take on administrative and non-counselling responsibilities. Diversification of role expectations, institutional interference, ethical ambiguity, and limited resources, such as insufficient counselling infrastructure, a high student-to-counsellor ratio, and limited time allocation among school counsellors, have also been identified by Keremutt (2023) in his thematic analysis. Similarly, Shah et al. (2021) reported that although school-based mental health services are widely accepted, challenges related to role clarity, implementation processes, and institutional readiness limit the effectiveness of services delivered.

The research findings highlight the importance of transparency, teamwork, and institutional support in improving school-based mental health care. More effective student support can be achieved through teacher alignment with suggested strategies, counsellor flexibility, and acceptance of counselling interventions. A supportive environment for mental health treatment is further reinforced by leadership involvement and the school's preparedness.

Research conducted in Indian school settings indicates that when counselling services are well-structured and institutionally supported, they can enhance students' emotional well-being. Kathuria & Pandya (2023) noted that even brief counsellor-led sessions benefited students, particularly in schools with adequate support. The findings of this study also suggest a gap between the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its implementation in schools. Although the policy focuses on holistic development and student mental health, existing research (Singh & Pawar, 2005; Sheerha, 2025) identifies gaps in role clarity, training expectations, and workload management.

Overall, this discussion emphasises the need for clear roles, institutional support, and greater professional recognition, as these factors limit the effectiveness of student counselling services. Addressing these gaps is necessary to ensure that counsellors deliver effective mental health services without compromising ethical standards, professional identity and job satisfaction.

5.1. Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following implications and recommendations are suggested for enhancing school counselling:

5.1.1. Implications

- The expanding scope of school counselling reflects a shift from traditional guidance-based roles toward preventive and developmental mental health frameworks within educational settings.
- Continued role ambiguity may weaken therapeutic effectiveness and contribute to professional stress among counsellors.
- The disparity between the vision of NEP 2020 and its school-level implementation underscores the necessity for clearer operational translation of policy into practice.
- Inconsistencies in professional standards across educational boards can lead to variations in the delivery and quality of counselling services.
- Institutional recognition and appreciation of school counsellors as mental health professionals is essential for strengthening professional identity and service credibility.
- There is a need for further practitioner-focused research that examines lived experiences across diverse school systems.
- Further research should incorporate multi-stakeholder perspectives, including administrators and teachers, to better understand institutional readiness and systemic dynamics.

5.1.2. Recommendations

- Integrate a structured mental health framework into school policies.
- Position counsellors as key stakeholders in school policies and wellbeing initiatives.
- Provide periodic training and professional supervision to school counsellors.

- Develop a clear job description for school counsellors.
- Provide dedicated time and private spaces for counselling sessions.
- Limit administrative and non-counselling responsibilities.
- Establish and mandate national standardised guidelines for school counselling best practices across educational boards.
- Optimise the student-counsellor ratio to improve service quality.
- Strengthen collaboration among all stakeholders.
- Conduct awareness programs about counselling services within schools.
- Recognise school counselling as a specialised and integral component of the educational system.

6. Conclusions

The present study explores the emerging challenges experienced by school counsellors in the contemporary Indian educational context. Although the expansion of counselling services has increased the recognition of student mental health, it has also resulted in role confusion, systemic constraints and workload pressure. Based on the participating counsellor's experiences, the study emphasises the need for defined roles and responsibilities, stronger institutional support, and policy integration to strengthen school counselling practices. The study contributes to the generation of practice-oriented recommendations for policymakers and to Indian research on school mental health.

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