

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Guidance and counseling services in primary schools play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional, social, and academic well-being. However, their implementation faces various challenges that may affect the effectiveness of these services. This study aims to identify the key challenges encountered by Guidance and Counseling Teachers in providing guidance and counseling services in primary schools. One of the identified challenges is the stigma associated with counseling, as society still perceives counseling negatively, causing students to be reluctant to seek help. Additionally, school administration plays a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of these services, as a lack of supportive leadership can limit the duties and roles of Guidance and Counseling Teachers. The expectation that guidance and counseling services function merely as a supplementary element also poses a challenge in delivering more comprehensive interventions. Furthermore, the counseling training curriculum remains generic and lacks emphasis on the actual needs of primary schools, restricting Guidance and Counseling Teachers's ability to address student issues effectively. Lastly, the competence and professionalism of Guidance and Counseling Teachers are also a challenge, as not all teachers possess adequate skills to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Therefore, understanding these challenges is essential for developing improvement strategies to strengthen guidance and counseling services in primary schools.

Keywords: Guidance and counseling teachers, Counselor competence, Counseling stigma, Guidance and counseling, Challenges in guidance and counseling

INTRODUCTION

Counseling services are essential for individuals to achieve their personal and professional goals. In more developed societies, counseling services become increasingly crucial as individuals' roles in these societies become more specialized and complex. Recent studies highlight the growing importance of counseling services in addressing individuals' challenges. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school counselors observed an increased need for mental health support among students, underscoring their essential role in educational settings (Savitz-Romer et al., 2022). The integration of counseling services within educational institutions has been recognized as vital for student development. Counseling aids students in their social lives, helping them understand themselves and effectively interact with others, thereby promoting a healthier society (Aluede et al., 2023). The role of school counselors has evolved to include both preventative and responsive approaches, addressing the diverse needs of students across all educational levels. This evolution reflects the profession's commitment to clear role definitions, ethical standards, structured guidelines, competency development, and the

certification and licensing of counselors (American School Counselor Association, 2024). Recent research underscores the increasingly critical role of counseling services in educational settings and society, emphasizing their necessity for individual well-being and public health

The concept of guidance and counselling in Malaysia's education system has evolved significantly over the decades. It was first introduced in secondary schools during the late 1960s, primarily focusing on career guidance. At that time, the objective was to help students choose suitable educational and vocational paths that aligned with national development needs. The Malaysian government took a more structured approach in 1975 by launching the Pilot Guidance and Counselling Programme, which expanded the role of counselling beyond career advice to include personal and social support. By the 1980s, the government recognized the increasing need for counseling services and took steps to strengthen their implementation in schools. A major milestone came with the Education Act 1996, which made guidance and counselling an essential component of the school system. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw further improvements, including the introduction of full-time school counsellors in secondary schools. With growing awareness of student well-being, the government expanded these services to primary schools. This shift became more evident with the introduction of the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which emphasized mental health, emotional well-being, and early intervention in student development. Today, guidance and counselling in Malaysian primary schools focus on nurturing children's emotional health, promoting positive behavior, and supporting academic progress from an early age. This development ensures that students receive the necessary guidance to navigate their school years with confidence and resilience.

IMPORTANCE OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Guidance and counselling play a crucial role in primary schools as they contribute to the holistic development of young students. According to Sapora Sipon and Ruhaya Hussin (2011), counseling and guidance services in schools play a key role in the nation's education agenda, particularly in realizing the goals of the National Education Philosophy and addressing the challenges of Vision 2020. Achieving this significance requires systematic planning of counseling programs, quality services, and effective implementation. However, this aspiration is no easy feat due to various obstacles and issues faced by full-time counseling and guidance teachers in performing their duties and responsibilities.

During early primary school years, children may face various emotional and psychological challenges, including anxiety, bullying, and family-related issues. A proper guidance and counselling program provides them with a safe space to express their feelings and develop emotional resilience. Additionally, these programs support academic growth by fostering positive study habits, effective time management, and motivation for learning. These services also promote social skills by teaching children the importance of cooperation, empathy,

and respect, which are essential for their personal and interpersonal development. Furthermore, guidance and counselling in primary schools introduce students to career awareness at an early stage, helping them understand different career options and the importance of goal-setting. Early exposure to career awareness helps students develop informed decision-making skills for their future. Another significant benefit is the prevention of negative influences such as peer pressure, bullying, and exposure to harmful behaviors. Through counselling, students gain awareness of personal safety, online security, and strategies to handle challenges in a positive manner. Overall, guidance and counselling ensure that students grow into well-rounded individuals, both academically and socially, preparing them for future challenges.

THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Guidance and counselling teachers in primary schools play a crucial role in supporting students' overall well-being and development. They help students manage emotional challenges through counselling sessions, teaching them strategies for resilience and emotional regulation. These teachers also promote positive behavior by guiding students in developing social skills, fostering empathy, and preventing bullying through structured programs. Additionally, they provide academic guidance by assisting students in setting goals and overcoming learning difficulties, often collaborating with classroom teachers to design effective interventions. Working closely with parents and teachers, they ensure students receive holistic support, whether addressing concerns or offering classroom strategies. In primary schools, they also introduce students to basic concepts of career awareness, inspiring dreams for the future. Guidance teachers are instrumental in crisis intervention, managing emergencies like emotional outbursts or traumatic events, while fostering inclusivity for special needs students to create a supportive environment. Ultimately, they serve as a bridge between students, teachers, and parents, ensuring children thrive both academically and personally.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING COUNSELING SERVICES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

The implementation of counseling services in Malaysian primary schools faces several challenges despite its growing importance. These challenges are discussed below:

Competence and Professionalism of Guidance and Counseling Teachers

Counseling services in schools are essential for helping students address personal, social, academic, and career-related challenges (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). However, not all counseling teachers possess the necessary competence and professionalism to deliver effective services. A major issue is the shortage of trained counselors. Many primary schools either lack dedicated counselors or rely on teachers who may not have formal qualifications in counseling. This shortage limits the effectiveness of counseling

services, as teachers often struggle to balance their teaching responsibilities with the demands of providing emotional and psychological support to students.

Several factors contribute to these limitations, including insufficient academic qualifications, limited experience in counseling, and inadequate knowledge of current issues. The sudden demand for counseling services in Malaysia led to the profession being staffed mainly by individuals with bachelor's degrees, whereas counseling in other countries typically requires a master's degree. This lack of advanced theoretical and practical knowledge reduces the effectiveness of interventions. Additionally, deficiencies in personal maturity and interpersonal skills create challenges in fostering positive relationships with colleagues and administrators.

Stigma Towards Counseling

Another challenge is the lack of awareness and acceptance of counseling services among parents, students, and even educators. In some communities, especially in rural areas, counseling remains stigmatized, with parents believing that seeking counseling indicates serious problems. This mindset discourages students from seeking help, even when necessary.

Seeking counseling services is often viewed as socially unacceptable, leading to underutilization of these services (Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, & Fancsali, 2022). The stigma is exacerbated by the perception that counseling is exclusively for individuals with mental illnesses requiring treatment (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2024). As a result, negative stereotypes contribute to avoidance behaviors, preventing individuals from seeking counseling services. Public stigma reinforces self-stigma, further discouraging students from accessing necessary support.

The Role of School Administration

The perception and support from school management also influence the effectiveness of counseling services. In some cases, counseling is viewed as a service meant only for troubled students rather than a holistic approach to student development. This perception can result in limited support from school administrators in terms of funding, staffing, and integrating counseling into the broader educational framework.

Many administrators and headmasters in primary schools fail to grasp the importance of counseling services and counselors' roles within educational institutions. Examples include:

- Headmasters requiring counselors to teach full-time.
- Administrators compelling counseling teachers to serve as substitute teachers daily, exceeding the permissible limit of eight substitution hours per week.
- Lack of basic facilities, such as comfortable and therapeutic counseling rooms, to conduct sessions effectively.

- Limited awareness of the significance of counseling services in schools.
- Negative perceptions and mistrust of counseling services by administrators and headmasters.

Such scenarios create dilemmas and conflicts for counseling teachers. Administrators who do not understand counseling concepts often leave teachers feeling helpless, conflicted, and resigned due to frequent changes in leadership. Furthermore, administrators' inability to allocate tasks effectively results in counselors being assigned unrelated duties (Carlson & Kees, 2019). This task conflict, arising from a lack of understanding of counseling services (Baker & Gerler, 2023; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2021), forces counselors to spend more time on non-counseling activities, leading to resentment among other teachers due to counselors' lighter teaching loads (Clemens & Milsom, 2020). These misunderstandings hinder counseling effectiveness and create significant challenges for those serving in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Additionally, headmasters often repurpose counseling rooms as recovery rooms, reducing their effectiveness. This limits counseling teachers' ability to create a conducive environment for meaningful interventions. When school administrators fail to prioritize counseling services, inadequate funding and support further hinder proper implementation.

Student-to-Counselor Ratio

The high student-to-counselor ratio poses a significant challenge. In many schools, a single counselor may be responsible for hundreds of students, making it difficult to provide personalized support. This issue is exacerbated by limited infrastructure and resources, such as private counseling rooms, assessment tools, and engaging counseling programs tailored for young children. Many schools lack adequate physical facilities and essential resources, affecting the overall quality and accessibility of counseling services. Without these crucial resources, counselors struggle to create a safe and comfortable environment where students feel encouraged to share their concerns.

School Expectations Toward Guidance and Counseling Services

Counseling services are often perceived as complementary to the teaching and learning system. However, in reality, confusion exists regarding the roles and responsibilities of school counselors. Furthermore, some school stakeholders remain unclear about the processes involved in delivering counseling services. Research by Norezdianie and Mohd Tajudin (2020) highlights that these misunderstandings hinder counselors' tasks and create significant challenges for those serving in schools. Therefore, it is crucial to educate the school community about the counseling profession to ensure continuity of services and optimize counselors' expertise (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2021).

Counseling Training Curriculum

An analysis of the counseling curriculum reveals that the syllabus remains outdated and overly generic (Norezdianie & Mohd Tajudin, 2020). Universities must re-evaluate their current counseling programs to align with the needs of Malaysian society (Jabatan Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2011). Further studies indicate similar concerns, emphasizing the necessity of restructuring counseling curricula to meet modern demands (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2021; Baker & Gerler, 2023).

Counseling teachers report inadequate training due to overly compressed programs, overlapping mandatory courses, and excessive extracurricular requirements (Zins et al., 2024). While they manage routine academic and disciplinary issues, they struggle with more complex situations involving parents and external stakeholders (Savitz-Romer et al., 2022).

Another major challenge is the lack of depth and practical exposure in counseling-related courses. The most critical issue is the absence of essential clinical practice, leading to ineffective skill development. University-level programs often provide limited exposure to real-world counseling processes, leaving graduates unprepared for practical challenges. Additionally, school counselors may not be well-trained to handle complex parental concerns, such as domestic conflicts, child neglect, or parental pressure, which require specialized skills in family counseling. Some parents remain uncooperative or defensive when approached about their child's behavioral or emotional concerns, making intervention difficult. Without proper training and collaboration between schools and parents, addressing these challenges becomes increasingly difficult.

Additionally, many counseling teachers face competence gaps in addressing psychological and social issues. Since counseling techniques continue to evolve, continuous professional development and specialized training are necessary to improve the quality of counseling services in primary schools.

Professionalism in Primary School Counselors

According to Baker and Gerler (2023), while primary school counselors effectively manage routine academic and disciplinary matters, they often struggle with challenges involving parents and external stakeholders. A lack of adequate teaching facilities and outdated counseling curricula further undermine professionalism in this field.

Time Constraints and Curriculum Demands

Time constraints and academic demands make integrating counseling sessions into school schedules difficult. Teachers and students are often occupied with academic subjects, leaving little time for counseling programs or activities. Schools may also lack clear guidelines on incorporating social and emotional learning into curricula, reducing the overall impact of counseling services.

Another significant challenge is the excessive workload of counseling teachers. In many primary schools, they are assigned additional responsibilities unrelated to counseling, such as administrative duties, teaching other subjects, or managing extracurricular activities. This additional burden diminishes the time and focus needed to support students effectively, ultimately reducing the program's effectiveness.

Despite these challenges, the Malaysian government continues to enhance counseling services in primary schools through policies and initiatives outlined in the National Education Blueprint 2013–2025. Addressing these issues requires increased funding, improved training programs for teachers and counselors, better infrastructure, and greater awareness among parents and the community regarding the benefits of counseling for young students. Furthermore, school management must recognize counseling as an essential service and provide the necessary support to ensure its success.

EFFECTIVE AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO IMPROVE COUNSELLING SERVICES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

To address the challenges of implementing counselling services in Malaysian primary schools, both the Ministry of Education (MOE) and school administrations must adopt strategic and practical measures. These efforts should focus on increasing the number of trained counsellors, enhancing infrastructure, raising awareness, reducing workload, providing continuous training, strengthening parent-school collaboration, and improving multicultural counselling approaches.

One of the most pressing concerns is the shortage of trained counsellors in primary schools. To resolve this, the MOE should allocate more funding for recruiting full-time, professionally trained counsellors. Additionally, providing scholarships and incentives for aspiring school counsellors can encourage more individuals to enter the field. School administrations should advocate for more counselling staff and encourage teachers to obtain professional counselling certifications. Establishing a clear career pathway for school counsellors will ensure recognition and structured progression within the education system.

Another crucial improvement involves enhancing infrastructure and resources. Many schools lack dedicated counselling rooms, making it difficult for students to seek help in a safe and private environment. The MOE should allocate funds to build suitable counselling facilities and provide essential materials, such as psychological assessment tools and therapy-based learning aids. Schools can collaborate with NGOs and private organizations to secure additional resources and financial support.

In addition to resource constraints, misconceptions about counselling services remain a significant barrier. Many parents and educators perceive counselling as a service meant only for "troubled students." To

change this perception, the MOE should launch awareness campaigns promoting counselling as a tool for overall student development. Schools can support this effort by organizing workshops for parents and teachers on the importance of emotional well-being and implementing peer support programs where senior students help younger ones understand the benefits of counselling.

Furthermore, counselling teachers in primary schools are often burdened with additional administrative and teaching responsibilities, limiting their ability to provide dedicated support to students. The MOE should implement policies ensuring that counselling teachers focus primarily on counselling-related tasks, while schools should reallocate responsibilities and provide digital tools to reduce unnecessary paperwork. Increasing support staff in schools can also help reduce the workload of counselling teachers, allowing them to concentrate on student welfare.

To maintain the effectiveness of counselling services, continuous training and skill development are essential. Some school counsellors may lack up-to-date knowledge in handling complex family issues, trauma counselling, or child psychology. The MOE should provide regular training programs and workshops in collaboration with universities and mental health organizations. Additionally, schools should encourage counsellors to participate in international seminars to stay informed about global best practices in school counselling.

Another critical area that needs improvement is strengthening parent-school collaboration. Many counselling issues involve family-related concerns, and some parents may be uncooperative when approached about their child's well-being. The MOE should introduce mandatory parent-counsellor engagement sessions and develop educational modules that teach effective parenting strategies. Schools can organize family counselling workshops and establish an anonymous feedback system, allowing parents to voice concerns about their child's emotional and social development.

Finally, Malaysia's cultural and linguistic diversity presents a unique challenge in school counselling. To ensure inclusivity, the MOE should introduce multilingual training programs for school counsellors, enabling them to communicate effectively with students and parents from different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, counselling approaches should be culturally inclusive, respecting the values and beliefs of Malaysia's multiracial society. Schools can further promote understanding by celebrating multicultural awareness days, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment.

By implementing these strategies, the Malaysian education system can significantly enhance the effectiveness of counselling services in primary schools. Addressing key challenges such as staff shortages, infrastructure limitations, awareness issues, workload concerns, and multicultural inclusivity will ensure that

students receive the emotional, psychological, and social support they need. These improvements will not only benefit individual students but also contribute to the overall well-being and development of future generations.

THE SKILLS NEEDED FOR GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING TEACHERS

Guidance and counselling teachers require exceptional interpersonal and communication skills to excel in their roles. They must actively listen and empathize with students, parents, and colleagues while maintaining clarity and trust through verbal and non-verbal communication. Their ability to address sensitive issues with diplomacy and tact is vital to creating a safe and supportive environment.

Equally important is emotional intelligence, which allows them to regulate their own emotions, empathize with others, and inspire confidence and resilience in their students. Problem-solving and conflict resolution are fundamental skills for tackling the various challenges students face. These educators need to design strategies for academic, social, and personal growth while mediating conflicts and responding quickly with effective solutions.

Their expertise in counselling techniques, such as cognitive-behavioral or solution-focused therapy, enables them to facilitate individual and group counselling sessions and create spaces that encourage open communication. Sensitivity to cultural differences is also essential, as guidance teachers must adapt their approaches to diverse backgrounds while fostering inclusivity and equity.

Collaboration is at the heart of their work. Guidance teachers need strong teamwork skills to effectively partner with parents, teachers, and external professionals. By working together, they can address students' needs holistically and enhance the overall learning experience. Organizational and planning skills further contribute to their success, allowing them to maintain confidential records, implement structured programs, and manage their time efficiently to balance multiple responsibilities.

Adaptability and flexibility are equally crucial for adjusting their methods to suit each student's unique needs and handling unexpected crises with professionalism. Their knowledge of child development theories, learning styles, and school policies ensures they are well-equipped to support academic progress. Additionally, ethical awareness underpins their practice, as they must maintain confidentiality, uphold professionalism, and prioritize the well-being of students and the school community.

By integrating these diverse skills, guidance and counselling teachers create environments where students can thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. Their role is indispensable in building a foundation for lifelong learning and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

Guidance and counselling teachers play a unique and indispensable role in primary schools, shaping the hearts and minds of young learners during their most formative years. Their work transcends traditional teaching, as they become mentors, confidants, and advocates for students' emotional, social, and academic growth. Through their dedicated efforts, these educators help children navigate the challenges of childhood, from managing anxiety and building resilience to fostering empathy and developing conflict-resolution skills. They inspire positive behavior, cultivate a sense of belonging, and provide students with the foundation for lifelong learning.

In collaboration with parents and teachers, guidance and counselling teachers form a critical support network that ensures students receive holistic care. Whether addressing individual needs, designing interventions for struggling learners, or offering strategies to enhance classroom experiences, their contributions resonate throughout the school community. Their role is equally vital in creating inclusive environments, where students with special needs feel supported and valued. By addressing crises with compassion and professionalism, they stand as pillars of stability, ensuring that every child feels safe and understood.

At its core, the impact of guidance and counselling teachers goes beyond the confines of the school. They encourage young minds to dream, fostering aspirations and introducing students to the possibilities that lie ahead. Their work plants seeds of hope, ambition, and confidence in students, preparing them not just for academic success but for life itself.

In essence, these educators are silent architects of a brighter future, leaving an enduring legacy in the lives they touch. Their unwavering commitment and passion embody the very spirit of education, making them indispensable to the fabric of any school community.

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