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Research Article

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELORS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAMESE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam's education system lacks well-established school psychological counseling services, despite the crucial role they play. As the country grapples with increasing mental health issues and intense academic pressure among its youth, there is an urgent need to expand counseling programs. This article explores the advantages of comprehensive school counseling initiatives led by licensed mental health professionals. Extensive global evidence indicates that effective integration of counselors enhances mental well-being, academic performance, graduation rates, and overall development. Unfortunately, Vietnam currently only has one counselor available for every 35,000 students, leaving a significant portion of the youth without access to psychological support. Vietnam is advised to take certain actions to strengthen its counselor workforce, incorporate counseling services into schools' objectives, and establish a multitiered approach. These recommendations include the recruitment of more counselors, the implementation of licensing requirements, a focus on secondary schools initially, the delivery of targeted prevention and intervention services, close collaboration with educators, and the collection of program evaluation data. By making a concerted effort, Vietnam can fully harness the potential of school counselors to promote the well-being and success of the next generation. While expanding counseling services may require investment, the long-term benefits for youth development far outweigh the costs. The time has come for Vietnam to prioritize and expand this crucial aspect of education.

KEYWORDS

School counseling; Mental health; Academic pressure; Counselor workforce; Youth development.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of mental health issues among young people worldwide, including in Vietnam, is on the rise. Recent studies conducted by Reavley et al. (2018) and UNICEF (2019) have shown an alarming increase in conditions such as depression, anxiety, and trauma. In Vietnam specifically, a national survey revealed that 27.6% of secondary students reported experiencing anxiety, while 8.9% admitted to having suicidal thoughts within the past year (UNICEF, 2019). Simultaneously, Vietnamese students face immense academic pressures from an early age. The educational system in Vietnam places a strong emphasis on academic achievement, with students consistently ranking high in international assessments of math, science, and reading proficiency (OECD, 2020). This combination of escalating mental health needs and intense academic stress underscores the crucial significance of implementing school-based psychological counseling services.

School counselors are professional mental health practitioners who assist students in their social-emotional well-being, academic progress, and career planning requirements (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Apart from conducting individual and small group sessions with students, school counselors also provide classroom lessons on essential life skills, organize group workshops, collaborate with teachers, and make referrals for students to external mental health services when necessary (Candamil, 2019). A comprehensive school counseling program offers a wide range of services that encompass education, prevention, early intervention, and treatment domains, ensuring the holistic development of all students (Lapan et al., 2012). These programs aim to support students in various aspects of their growth and provide the necessary resources for their overall well-being.

Although teachers play a crucial role in mentoring students, they cannot replace licensed mental health professionals in schools. Regrettably, Vietnam has been slow in implementing school psychological counseling. According to one estimate, there is only one counselor for every 35,000 students in Vietnam, compared to one counselor for every 250 students in the United States (Trust for America's Health, 2008; Vietnam News, 2018). This lack of counseling services means that most students who do not have serious disorders are unable to receive assistance in dealing with increasing stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges. This article explores the advantages of school counselors and provides recommendations for incorporating more comprehensive psychological counseling programs into Vietnam's education system. By establishing robust school counseling programs led by licensed professionals, there is a great potential to enhance the mental well-being, academic achievements, and career readiness of Vietnamese students.

BENEFITS OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselors play a crucial role in improving the overall well-being and achievements of students through various means. Research conducted in different parts of the world consistently shows that when schools have qualified counselors who provide comprehensive services, students experience better mental health, academic performance, and personal development outcomes. These findings highlight the importance of having licensed counselors in educational institutions to support and guide students effectively.

Improved Mental Health Outcomes

School counselors undergo specialized training to provide assistance and guidance in the social-emotional development and mental well-being of students. They impart valuable knowledge on how to effectively manage stress, anxiety, grief, and other obstacles encountered in life. In addition, counselors play a crucial role in recognizing the early warning signs of emerging mental health issues. A comprehensive meta-analysis conducted on various school-based counseling interventions worldwide revealed that students who received one-on-one counseling experienced significant improvements in their mental health. Specifically, they reported reduced levels of depression, anxiety, anger, trauma, and disciplinary issues when compared to their peers who did not receive counseling (Baskin et al., 2010). These positive effects were observed across all grade levels, including elementary, middle, and high school students.

School counselors play a pivotal role in providing mental health support to students grappling with psychological illnesses and emotional turmoil (Erford, 2019). They offer crucial help to students dealing with issues such as depression, anxiety, trauma, eating disorders, and thoughts of suicide, through various strategies including consultation, assessment, coordinating referrals, and direct intervention (Walley & Grothaus, 2013). Evidence from controlled studies underscores the efficacy of school-based counseling in mitigating symptoms of internal distress in diagnosed adolescents (Baskin et al., 2010), while concurrently showcasing substantial advancements in their academic performance (Brown et al., 2019).

Furthermore, counselors play a pivotal role in fostering trust and stability in relationships, which significantly boosts the sense of belonging, school connectiveness, and propensity to seek assistance among students grappling with emotional and behavioral problems

(Clemens et al., 2010). There is a wealth of research from diverse cultural backgrounds such as China (Liu et al., 2020) and Turkey (Eskin et al., 2016) that underlines the positive impact of supportive counseling on the mental well-being of at-risk youth. In Vietnam, this is especially crucial given that a nationwide survey in 2021 involving 10,000 students discovered that 34% were dealing with anxiety and 18% had considered suicide in the preceding year alone (Tuoitre News, 2021). These alarming figures are likely to be the result of extreme academic stress (Tran et al., 2018).

The fact that students are more likely to reveal mental health concerns and self-endangerment risks to school counselors over teachers or other staff members (Rossetto et al., 2017), underscores the life-preserving importance of their availability. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to ensure the existence of thorough, unified, and evidence-supported counseling programs throughout Vietnam. These programs aim to encourage seeking help, prevent suicide among young people, and widen the scope of care for the projected 15-25% of students who are believed to have diagnosable conditions (Vuong et al., 2010). The prioritization of counselors is a necessary step in addressing the nationwide crisis of adolescent mental health.

Enhanced Academic Performance

School counselors play a crucial role in supporting students' mental health and academic development, as well as preparing them for college and careers. Extensive research has shown that comprehensive school counseling programs are directly linked to improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, increased motivation, and effective postsecondary planning (Lapan et al., 2012; Wilkerson et al., 2013). One of the key responsibilities of counselors is to work individually with students,

helping them set academic goals and providing support in accessing special education services if needed. They also focus on enhancing study habits to ensure students' success. Additionally, counselors deliver engaging classroom lessons that cover important topics like career exploration, resume writing, interview skills, and navigating the college admissions process. For instance, a study conducted in the United States revealed that students who participated in counseling programs achieved significantly higher GPAs and graduation rates compared to those who did not participate (Wilkerson et al., 2013).

Furthermore, school counselors are adept at identifying early warning signs of potential dropout cases, such as chronic absenteeism. By recognizing these signs, they can promptly intervene and provide the necessary support to help struggling students get back on track academically. In a society like Vietnam where students face immense pressure to excel in exams, counselors can play a vital role in keeping young individuals engaged and motivated in their education. Overall, school counselors have a multifaceted role in promoting students' mental well-being, fostering academic success, and guiding them towards future career paths. Their involvement has been proven to have a positive impact on various aspects of students' lives, from achievement and graduation rates to motivation and postsecondary planning. By providing individual support, delivering engaging classroom lessons, and identifying early warning signs, counselors contribute significantly to the overall educational experience and success of students.

Improved Developmental Outcomes

Comprehensive school counseling programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in not only improving

mental health and academic performance but also in enhancing various aspects of students' overall development. Counselors play a crucial role in nurturing essential life skills, aiding in the formation of identity, promoting career readiness, and fostering the capacity to build meaningful relationships as students' progress in their educational journey.

Life Skills Development

School counselors play a crucial role in teaching students essential life skills that are fundamental to their overall development. These skills include responsible decision-making, understanding and managing emotions, resolving conflicts, self-care, and learning effective coping strategies to deal with adversity. In order to impart these skills, counselors often conduct classroom lessons on various topics such as stress management, resisting peer pressure, fostering a growth mindset, conflict resolution, and avoiding risky behaviors. By providing these psychoeducational interventions, counselors empower students with the necessary tools to navigate the challenges they may face and ultimately thrive in life (Villares et al., 2011).

A study conducted in Singapore revealed the positive impact of a school counseling program that focused on teaching adaptive coping skills. It was found that this program significantly reduced levels of stress among students and increased their utilization of productive coping strategies (Lai & Mak, 2009). Importantly, these benefits were sustained even at a 6-month follow-up. This finding highlights the importance of teaching healthy stress management techniques, particularly in high-pressure academic environments like Vietnam.

In conclusion, school counselors have a vital role in equipping students with the necessary life skills to effectively navigate challenges and develop into well-

rounded individuals. By teaching them how to make responsible decisions, manage their emotions, resolve conflicts, practice self-care, and employ effective coping strategies, counselors empower students to lead successful and fulfilling lives. The positive impact of counseling programs on stress reduction and the promotion of adaptive coping strategies further emphasizes the significance of these interventions in supporting students' overall well-being.

Identity Development

The formation of a personal identity is a pivotal undertaking during the teenage years, laying the foundation for one's self-perception, life objectives, and a feeling of fit (Erikson, 1968). School guidance counselors are key forces in assisting students during this period through strategies designed to enhance the clarity of self-concept, unity, and positive self-regard (Luyckx et al., 2014). Contemporary meta-studies have highlighted the efficacy of such counseling methods focusing on identity in various cultural settings for boosting wellness results, such as self-regard and contentment with life (Şahin et al., 2021).

Moreover, the role of counselors in promoting a positive sense of ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is crucial for the adaptation and resilience of minority youth. The cultivation of ERI involves a journey of self-discovery into one's ethnic-racial roots, and resolving any dissonance between minority and mainstream cultural values (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). There is growing evidence that counseling, which has been adapted to be culturally sensitive and encourages ERI, can lead to improved mental health among Vietnamese heritage youth (Dinh et al., 2020). It can also enhance self-belief and academic achievement among youth from various ethnicities (Williams et al., 2020). Given the rich cultural tapestry and intricacies of Vietnam, school counselors

are ideally suited to provide specific interventions that encourage a healthy formation of identity.

Career Development

School counselors play a vital role in nurturing students' understanding and aspirations for their future careers. They introduce students to a wide range of career paths that align with their interests and abilities. Furthermore, counselors provide instruction on how to explore different career options, assist with the college search and application process, and support students in developing essential skills for the workplace. Research conducted in countries like Singapore and South Korea has shown a positive correlation between school-based career counseling and various outcomes including increased self-confidence in making career decisions, greater motivation, better preparedness, and more focused aspirations (Jun et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2019). In Vietnam, where success is often narrowly defined by high scores on exams, counselors can play a crucial role in expanding students' perspectives on what it means to succeed.

By engaging with school counselors, students are exposed to a wealth of knowledge about different careers and the pathways to achieve them. Counselors help students identify their strengths, interests, and values, which in turn helps them make informed decisions about their educational and career journeys. Additionally, counselors offer guidance on researching colleges and universities that offer programs aligned with students' career goals. They also assist with the application process, providing valuable insights on how to present oneself effectively in applications. Moreover, counselors help students develop important workplace competencies such as communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and teamwork. By incorporating real-world scenarios and

experiential learning opportunities into their counseling sessions, counselors equip students with the practical skills necessary to thrive in their chosen career paths.

In summary, school counselors have a significant impact on students' career development by exposing them to diverse career opportunities, assisting with the college search and application process, and fostering essential workplace competencies. Their guidance expands students' views of success beyond mere scores and helps them make informed decisions about their future endeavors.

Relationship Skills

With the increasing prevalence of mental health problems among young people in Vietnam, it is crucial to provide targeted counseling that focuses on building their ability to form and maintain relationships. This approach can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and disconnection that many young individuals experience. Additionally, developing positive peer relationships is essential for their social and emotional growth.

School counselors have a vital role to play in facilitating the overall development of students, going beyond academic achievements. By implementing comprehensive counseling programs that address various aspects of students' lives, these professionals have the potential to make a significant positive impact on Vietnamese youth. Through their guidance, students can learn important interpersonal skills such as respect, perspective-taking, effective communication, and friendship-building. They also provide strategies for managing peer pressure and conflict resolution. Evidence-based approaches like Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) are employed to

empower young individuals with the tools they need to cultivate healthy relationships and prevent conflicts.

By focusing on relationship-building skills, counselors can contribute to reducing the sense of isolation and disengagement experienced by many young people in Vietnam. Moreover, fostering positive peer connections can enhance their social and emotional well-being. In conclusion, school counselors play an indispensable role in nurturing students' holistic development, recognizing the significance of interpersonal skills alongside academic success. The implementation of comprehensive counseling programs has the potential to bring about substantial positive change in the lives of Vietnamese youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM'S SCHOOLS

In order to address the increasing mental health and academic support needs of students, it is essential for Vietnam to enhance the availability of licensed psychological counselors, alongside the valuable guidance provided by teachers. To achieve this, it is recommended that comprehensive school counseling programs be implemented across the country, based on evidence-backed suggestions. This approach will ensure that students have access to the necessary support and guidance to thrive academically and maintain their mental well-being.

1. Recruit more licensed psychological counselors

Priority initiative: It is crucial to prioritize the recruitment, training, and employment of licensed counselors in every secondary school. It should be mandatory for these counselors to possess a master's degree in counseling or psychology, along with completing specialized coursework in areas such as child development, counseling skills, ethics, and more. Additionally, implementing financial incentives like

loan forgiveness programs can serve as effective measures to attract a larger pool of potential trainees.

The primary focus should be on ensuring that each secondary school has access to qualified counselors who can provide necessary guidance and support to students. By requiring counselors to hold advanced degrees and complete specialized coursework, we can ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to address the unique challenges faced by students. Moreover, offering financial incentives like loan forgiveness programs can help alleviate the burden of student loans for aspiring counselors. This can make the profession more attractive and encourage more individuals to pursue a career in counseling.

By taking these priority actions, we can improve the overall quality of counseling services in secondary schools. Students will have access to professionals with the necessary expertise to assist them in navigating academic, personal, and emotional challenges. This will contribute to their overall well-being and academic success.

2. Implement multitiered counseling programs

Counselors have the responsibility of delivering a variety of services, encompassing both preventive and intervention-based approaches, following a tiered model of public health. This model consists of three tiers:

- **Tier 1 Universal Services:** In this tier, counselors take a proactive approach by providing essential counseling curriculum to all students through classroom lessons. These lessons focus on teaching coping strategies, social skills, and exploring options for college and career paths.

- **Tier 2 Targeted Services:** The second tier involves offering short-term counseling in small groups to students who are considered at-risk and require additional support. These sessions address a range of issues such as grief, trauma, academic difficulties, and conflicts with peers.

- **Tier 3 Intensive Services:** The third tier involves providing ongoing individual counseling to students with the most significant needs. This includes addressing mental health conditions, offering crisis intervention, and helping students navigate thoughts of suicide.

By employing this tiered approach, counselors ensure that they are able to reach all students and provide the necessary support based on their specific needs. Whether it's delivering universal curriculum, conducting targeted group sessions, or providing intensive one-on-one counseling, counselors play a vital role in addressing the diverse mental health needs of students in a comprehensive and effective manner.

3. Expand counseling beyond secondary schools

Over the course of time, it is also recommended to deploy authorized counselors within primary schools, ensuring a minimum ratio of one counselor for every 500 students. These primary counselors are equipped to educate students on effective coping mechanisms and social skills, offer targeted assistance for short-term issues, and aid in the early detection of any special needs that may arise.

4. Integrate counseling into schools' mission

Recognizing counselors as essential members of the educational staff rather than simply providing support is crucial. It is important to involve counselors in school leadership teams and foster close collaboration between them, administrators, and teachers in

developing student development plans. Encouraging teachers to refer at-risk students to counseling services is also beneficial.

5. Increase mental health screening

In order to enhance the identification of students who may require counseling interventions, it is recommended to conduct yearly surveys aimed at assessing their mental health. Additionally, it is crucial to provide teachers with training that equips them with the skills to recognize and refer students who display potential indicators of anxiety, depression, trauma, or self-harm risk. This proactive approach will contribute to a more comprehensive mental health support system within the school community. By implementing these measures, schools can ensure that students in need receive the necessary help and support, promoting their overall well-being and academic success.

6. Raise awareness of counseling services

To effectively reach out to students and their families, it is crucial to promote services through various channels such as school websites, pamphlets, and counselor introductions during assemblies. The key here is to ensure clear and concise communication so that students feel at ease in seeking proactive support before issues become more serious. It is essential to normalize the act of seeking mental health assistance, breaking down any barriers or stigmas that may exist. By creating an open and supportive environment, students will be more inclined to access the help they need without hesitation.

7. Evaluate programs

Gather information regarding the efficacy of school counseling initiatives by conducting surveys, analyzing academic achievements, and assessing mental health

indicators. It is crucial to ensure that these programs are flexible enough to address the changing needs of educational institutions. With sufficient resources and systemic backing, school counselors possess the capacity to greatly contribute to the positive growth and overall well-being of students in Vietnam. While implementing these changes may require an initial investment, the long-term benefits in terms of the health and success of young individuals will far outweigh the costs.

CONCLUSION

School counselors play a vital role in addressing the increasing mental health concerns and academic pressures faced by students in Vietnam today. However, the field of school counseling is still in its early stages of development in the country. The current ratio of one counselor for every 35,000 students means that most young people who do not have severe disorders do not receive the necessary support to cope with emotional distress and life challenges. This situation urgently needs to change, especially given the alarming rates of anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and youth suicide in Vietnam, as well as the intense academic expectations placed on students from a young age. By integrating licensed mental health professionals into schools as counselors, it would be possible to provide much-needed psychological care and support to students before their problems escalate.

Evidence from around the world clearly shows that school counselors can have a positive impact on mental health, academic achievement, graduation rates, and overall student development when they provide comprehensive services that are tailored to local needs. With proper training, hiring practices, and integration into the education system, school counselors in Vietnam could make a significant

difference. To achieve this, it will be necessary to initially invest in the recruitment and training of more counselors from Vietnam across the country. The compensation provided must be attractive enough to entice dedicated professionals. It is recommended to prioritize placing these counselors in secondary schools first, as there is a greater need for mental health support for adolescents. As time goes on, the goal should be to expand these services to primary schools as well.

In addition, it is crucial that counseling services are fully integrated into the missions of schools through close collaborations with leadership, teachers, and families. Implementing multitiered counseling approaches that offer both preventative and intervention services based on students' needs is also essential for making a significant impact. Continuously collecting data to evaluate program effectiveness will ensure that there is ongoing improvement in the quality of services provided. With a concerted effort, Vietnam has the ability to develop a strong school psychology workforce and comprehensive counseling programs that are necessary to support the mental health and success of the next generation. If these evidence-based best practices are implemented nationwide, the long-term benefits for the well-being of young people will be substantial. The time is now for the education system to invest in expanding these vital school psychological counseling services.

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