

E-Age School Counseling: A Retrospective Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to look into various channels by which students reach a school counselor, hence determining how the school counseling services can be maximally utilized. 1302 students from three different schools were retrospectively analyzed via the counseling records maintained over a span of 5 years. Results show that a school counselor has to be highly pro-active in his/her discharge of duties, and not just provide with responsive or curative measures, but preventive as well. Many other suggestions are made on the basis of results, regarding effective implementation of a school counseling program.

INTRODUCTION

Few years back CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) made it mandatory for every school to have a school counselor. It was one of the most positive steps in Indian education history. The development of a separate specialty of counseling in schools has in part resulted from the decline of the traditional pastoral roles that teachers used to take on (Bor et al). They often find little time to undertake the extracurricular activities – including counseling - which in many countries were the normal expectation for all teachers. Moreover, students have become more aware of their 'rights' and are often the ones asking for counseling support to help them face the emotional hazards of growing up as well as academic issues. The parents of young adults and children are keen to have a supportive adult in school with whom their children can share problems (Bor et al).

School counseling has a long and proud history, and the story of professional school counseling, its influences, and major players are key components of the collective professional identity that unites all those within school counseling (Paisley et al). School counseling in India has apparently been an enigmatic area for application, research and analysis. Just as counseling has evolved and is evolving, society has also evolved tremendously over the last few decades and more so because of the introduction of e-age that we are living in. The increasing importance of school counseling has brought us to a stage where we have to re-orient ourselves to the newer needs and aspirations. Having been a school counselor for around 5 years, a retrospective analysis of my work will shed new light in this area.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

These were three different schools with different ethnic managements. Incidentally, even the religious orientations of these 3 schools were different. The students belonged to different socio-economic strata, even within a given school.

SCHOOL NAME	TIME PERIOD	DURATION (approx.)
Sant Nischal Singh Public School (SNSPS)	Jan '13 – Jul '13	6 months
Sacred Heart Convent School (SHCS)	Jul '13 – Oct '17	4 years 3 months
Dyal Singh Public School (DSPS)	Oct '17 – Mar '18	5 months

In all three schools, it was observed that students reach school counselor through different channels.

1. Self-referral: Identifying areas in self that need attention or counseling, a student approaches the counselor on his/her own.
2. Parents: Parents (or guardians) request counseling for their ward.
3. Via teachers/non-teaching staff/principal: School personnel notice something amiss in the student and direct him/her to the counselor.
4. Peer referral
5. Teacher-as-parent referral: Teachers refer their own wards for counseling.
6. General Calls - Keeping in mind the status of counseling in India, and the taboo(s) associated with it, I added a 6th source so that more number of students could know about my counseling services, plus, benefit from it. In these 'General Calls' I would call students from 6th class onwards, roll number wise, to assess for any potential problematic areas. A general conversation would usually ensue between the student and myself, during these calls.

The students who availed of my school counseling services (total = 1302) from 3 different schools formed my sample.

RESULTS

An analysis of data was undertaken whereby cases presented in counselor's office were categorized according to the channel via which a particular student reached the office.

Tables presented show the numbers and percentages of students in each category for all three schools. Two separate tables have been made for school referral of SHCS and DSPS since sub-categories of the school referral require a separate mention for these two schools. This breakup for SNSPS is not available.

Table 1

Categories Number table			
	SNSPS	SHCS	DSPS
General Calls	130	459	0
Self Referral	17	274	30
Parental referral	0	78	28
School referral	109	78	97
Came to accompany a friend	0	2	0
Total students counseled	256	891	155

Table 2

Categories Percentage table			
	SNSPS	SHCS	DSPS
Total	100%	100%	100%
General Calls	50.78%	51.52%	0%
Self Referral	6.64%	30.75%	19.36%
Parental referral	0%	8.75%	18.06%
School referral	42.58%	8.75%	62.58%
Came to accompany a friend	0%	0.23%	0%

Table 3

School Referral table of SHCS		
	Numbers	%
Total	78	100%
Teacher as parent referral	16	20.51%
Teacher referral	38	48.72%
Peer referral	10	12.82%
Principal referral	8	10.26%
Non teaching staff referral	6	7.69%

Table 4

School Referral table of DSPS		
	Numbers	%
Total	97	100%
Teacher as parent referral	9	9.28%
Teacher referral	72	74.23%
Non teaching staff referral	1	1.03%
Principal referred board classes students	12	12.37%
Caught counsellor's notice during class	3	3.09%

Analysis is done for a total of 1302 students over a period of 5 years approximately. The data obtained is shown in tabular form. Table 1 shows the number of students in each category for all three schools. Table 2 shows percentages for the same. Table 3 shows number and percentage of students in sub-categories of school referral for SHCS. Table 4 does the same for DSPS.

1. It is seen that maximum no. of pupils, both for SNSPS (130, 50.78%) and SHCS (459, 51.52%) fall under '**General Calls**' category. This category has nil frequency in DSPS since entire class would come to counseling room weekly. The infrastructure of other two schools didn't allow entire class to be accommodated in the counselor's room, hence it was not possible. So, purpose of general calls done in first two schools got served automatically in DSPS.
2. Next come **self-referred** students, SNSPS (17, 6.64%), SHCS (274, 30.75%) and DSPS (30, 19.36%). The number is lesser in SNSPS and DSPS since the service duration in these two schools is also less.
3. **Parental referral** – SNSPS (0), SHCS (78, 8.75%) and DSPS (28, 18.06%). Parents usually get a chance to meet the counselor during Parent-Teacher Meetings. Eager for consultation, they would throng the office on these days.
4. **School referral** – SNSPS (109, 42.58%), SHCS (78, 8.75%) and DSPS (97, 62.58%). School referral includes many things like teacher referral, peer referral, non-teaching staff and principal referral etc. Details are presented in table 3 and 4 for SHCS and DSPS respectively.

OBSERVATIONS

Unless the students are categorized according to their first meeting with the counselor, the utility of school counseling can't be analyzed and relied upon. Following were the observations, found to be quite variegated, and presented in accordance with results' numbering.

1. As such, a pro-active role of counselor requires the general calls. Sitting in the office and waiting for students to show up can be a waste of time.
2. Service in SHCS spanned over at least 5 years, during which time students came to know and trust the counselor, hence, they would approach me more often. That is why the higher percentage of self-referred students in this school.
3. Initially, parental referrals were mostly for younger classes, but, as word spread, every kind of parent would seek guidance, and even on regular working days.
4. **School referral** – In both SHCS and DSPS school referral tables (Tables 3 and 4), maximum percentages are found in teacher referral. This is so because teachers eagerly seek assistance for improving students. Many teachers also opted not to insist with referral when the students declined to go for the fear of stigma. The latter ignore their teachers' advice to go to counselor.

5. Under School Referral table itself, it can be seen that 'Teacher as parent referral' is also at a higher end (SHCS 16, 20.51%; DSPS 9, 9.28%).
6. DSPS principal told me to give additional group and individual sessions to students going to appear for board exams. I endorse this. Most of the pupils shared that they wanted to confide about their concerns and apprehensions in someone. Calls to my office were a relief to them. Some group sessions for common problems are also highly beneficial.

DISCUSSION

A total of 1302 students give us enough scope to ponder over various aspects of school counseling as to its a. utility, b. scope of improvement, and c. essentiality.

Referring to point 1 of observations, even when students are made aware of the counselor's availability by seminars, announcements and counselor's class-to-class visits, they hesitate in approaching the counselor individually. Hence, calling them on a 'general pretext' is not an additional dimension but a necessity. In a span of merely 10 years, the school counseling profession has reinvented itself. Since the late-1990s, school counseling has progressed from the tradition of a responsive services focus to a proactive and programmatic system that is inextricably integrated with the mission of schools (Dahir, Carol). The general calls undertaken (SNSPS and SHCS) brought forth multiple benefits –

- It served as a preventive measure instead of curative.
- Students referred by teachers/parents didn't feel 'pointed out' since everyone in the class was being called for 'counseling' sooner or later.
- Students willing to talk to the counselor, but hesitating for various reasons, got a chance.
- Students shared more freely, and opened up quickly when told that I just wanted to have a general word with them, and not exactly counsel.

Referring to point no. 2 of observations, it follows that school counselors should be permanent on long term basis and with good emoluments. The self-referred students usually (and naturally) came from senior classes; younger students don't yet have well-developed analysis capability, so they are usually unable to realize if and when they require counseling. The self-referred category reaps maximum benefit out of counseling. It is a common belief in the parlays of psychology that a client can be effectively counseled only as much as s/he is ready to be counseled. The pupils who came on their own presented a wide range of issues. Here is a list of them:

- Career counseling
- Exam stress

- Inability to concentrate
- Anger management
- Lack of confidence
- Managing emotions
- Scary dreams (younger students)
- Negative thinking
- Grief
- Relational problems
- Lack of interest in studies
- Stress management
- Rumors (About students themselves)
- Family problems
- Complaints about teachers/students
- Peer referral for some other student
- Willingness for general conversation
- Physical complaint with psychological reason
- Abuse - despite counselor's repeated and sustained efforts, results on this front are always doubtful because of poor compliance and secrecy involved.

One student had a new scientific idea, had shared it in class and wanted to know how he could copyright it. This query can be treated as career counseling, yet demands a special mention since it highlights something very important – At times students may come to counselor for some purpose other than counseling – because they feel counselor is the only person, apart from academic staff, whom they can relate with. Here, counselor gets another role to help students. The school counselor is seen as a role model and highly respected by students. The counselors by their training are expected to be friends with the school child, listen to the child's complains, short comings and proffer guidance to the child in a quest of molding the child in the right part to take in their life pursuit (Nkechi et al).

Referring to point no. 3 of observations, as far as parental referral goes, DSPS had a plus point - Repeated messages were dropped on parents' mobiles to inform about counseling services in school, if required, for their ward. So, parents came even on days other than PTM.

Referring to point no. 4 of observations, in many such cases, teachers themselves also undertook students' proxy counseling, especially upon noting the reluctance to go to counselor's office. Those who did refer students again, did so as a last resort. These were mostly for discipline issues. However, with time, as teachers were made aware of other possible benefits of counseling (apart from class discipline), they referred other

type of cases, too. To fully utilize the service, the teachers should have higher index of suspicion for psychological problems of students. This was managed in all 3 schools via talks and seminars for the staff.

Referring to point no. 5 of observations, about **teacher-as-parent referral**, it was found that teachers are usually very eager to seek help for their wards (often studying in the same school). They see the counselor as easy-to-approach and highly utilize-able source of guidance, hence, this category is significant in school referral table. This can form the foundation for the success of the whole program since teachers, once they feel satisfied and encouraged with the counseling of their wards, will like to enthusiastically motivate other students also, to seek the counseling services.

More than 30 years ago, Inbody identified six basic premises that were critical to the future of school counseling:

1. What the school counseling profession does today will have an impact on the quality of the field of school counseling and educational environments in which school counselors and students must live.
2. Scientific methods of researching school counseling can be used for anticipating the various futures school counselors could create unknowingly.
3. There is no longer just one future that awaits the school counseling profession, but many different possible futures, depending on what school counselors and the profession chooses today.
4. School counselors assume a moral urgency in their responsibility to future generations of students and school counselors.
5. Technology continues to serve as a powerful tool for school counselors; however, school counselors are responsible for technology integration and use in the future in a way that may have been inconceivable twenty years ago.
6. Prior to unleashing the power of an idea on the school counseling profession and students, an extensive study of the future impact of that idea must be mounted. (Inbody)

So overall, some suggestions can be made on the basis of Inbody's words, and results and observations:

1. Talks and seminars are required in schools, by the counselor, to better mend things.
2. Pro-active steps like announcements in assembly, SMSes and email communication – both for parents and teachers, class-to-class visits etc are a must for awareness as well as effective implementation of counseling program.
3. If entire class can come to counselor or some periods be given to the counselor, all the much better.
4. Counseling room should have a good ambience, motivational charts and proper light and ventilation. It should provide students with privacy, so that they open up.
5. Monitors, house captains and other students in leadership roles should be given separate group and individual sessions.
6. Lengthy sessions should be avoided.

7. Compliance, follow-up and congenial atmosphere must be worked upon to fully utilize school counseling.

LIMITATIONS

Categorization is done only according to how 1st meeting happened between myself and the student. However, this is not an exhaustive criterion as sometimes a student who was called for general conversation, would later get referred also – by parent/peer/teacher. Further, sometimes presenting problem can be only a miniscule of the entire range of problems faced by a particular student.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is to be emphasized that categorization can also be done according to chief complaint. It can highlight most common student life problems and effective line of treatment for them. Although, it may be a tough job as most of the students have multiple interlinked problems, but it will certainly enhance the development of school counseling. Theobald suggested that we need to envision the society we really want and to “create methods by which we can move from the present future into the conditional future that we choose” (Maples).

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