

Malaysian School Counsellors' Challenges in Job Description, Job Satisfaction and Competency

Desafíos de los consejeros escolares de Malasia en la descripción del trabajo, la satisfacción laboral y la competencia

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ABSTRACT

School counselors play an important role in providing professional counseling services. In Malaysia, the role of school counselors correlates in filling the needs of developed countries by 2020 to develop a human capital with a strong identity and are noble, knowledgeable, and highly skilled. To perform these roles, school counselors need to constantly improve their knowledge, skills, and competencies to meet the demands and needs related to the wellbeing of students holistically. These include the students' emotional, mental, and behavioral health, which in turn contribute to academic excellence. This study aimed to explore the challenges of Malaysian school counselors in their job descriptions, job satisfaction, and competency. This was a qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews conducted with five school counselors. The results provided valuable information about the practice of counseling in a school setting in Malaysia. Results showed that conflict existed within the job scope and role of school counselors, job satisfaction, and competency of school counselors. This study supported the notion that the counseling service in primary schools should be given attention by the responsible authorities in order to enhance the quality of the profession. The implication of the study was to improve the practice of counseling in primary school settings in Malaysia.

Keywords: School Counselor, Challenges of Job Description, Job Satisfaction, Competency.

RESUMEN

Los consejeros escolares juegan un papel importante en la prestación de servicios de asesoramiento profesional. En Malasia, el papel de los consejeros escolares se correlaciona para satisfacer las necesidades de los países desarrollados en 2020 para desarrollar un capital humano con una fuerte identidad y que sean nobles, conocedores y altamente calificados. Para desempeñar estos roles, los consejeros escolares deben mejorar constantemente sus conocimientos, habilidades y competencias para satisfacer las demandas y necesidades relacionadas con el bienestar integral de los estudiantes. Estos incluyen la salud emocional, mental y conductual de los estudiantes, que a su vez contribuyen a la excelencia académica. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo explorar los desafíos de los consejeros escolares de Malasia en sus descripciones de trabajo, satisfacción laboral y competencia. Este fue un estudio cualitativo que utilizó entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas con cinco consejeros escolares. Los resultados proporcionaron información valiosa sobre la práctica del asesoramiento en un entorno escolar en Malasia. Los resultados mostraron que existía un conflicto dentro del alcance del trabajo y el papel de los consejeros escolares, la satisfacción laboral y la competencia de los consejeros escolares. Este estudio apoyó la idea de que las autoridades responsables deberían prestar atención al servicio de asesoramiento en las escuelas primarias para mejorar la calidad de la profesión. La implicación del estudio fue mejorar la práctica del asesoramiento en entornos de escuelas primarias en Malasia.

Palabras clave: consejero escolar, desafíos de la descripción del trabajo, satisfacción laboral, competencia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling services in schools are essential requirements in Malaysia's educational system. The four main concerns that need to be implemented by the school counselors emphasize on the student's personality development and progress, student's discipline enhancement, student's career education, and student's psychosocial and mental wellbeing (Ministry of Education, 2012). Guidance and counseling services are services that can help to emotionally, mentally, and behaviorally shape, mature and balance the students as indicated in Malaysia's educational goals. Counselors are professionals in the school setting who play essential roles in helping the country to pursue its goal in developing its citizens' wellbeing holistically.

Individual development should be supported in early childhood so as to produce excellent and well-rounded individuals (Cates, Schaeffe, Smaby, Maddux & LeBeauf, 2007). School counselors also help in the development of every individual's personality, starting from their early stage of schooling which contributes to the country's advancement and is not limited to the aspects of knowledge and higher education (Alias, Nik Mohd Rahimi & Ruhizan, 2011). However, the roles and responsibilities of school counselors have become increasingly challenging. This is due to the existence of various factors and negative influences prevalent in society today.

Job Description

A primary school in Malaysia has been required by the Ministry of Education to have at least one school counselor full-time, starting in 2000 (See & Ng, 2010) within the ratio of one school counselor to students at 1: 500 (Abdul Rahman, Mohd Isa & Atan, 2013). For primary schools with the enrollment of less than 350 students and have no provision for the position of a full-time school counselor, the school is required to appoint an internal level of school counselor that teaches subjects at the same time.

The job scope of school counselors in Malaysia is based on the Ministry of Education KPM Handout No 12, 2012, which provides four main focuses for the school counselors in the counseling and guidance services to help their client's mental, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. The four main emphases are the students' personality development and expansion, students' discipline enhancement, students' career education, and students' psychosocial and mental wellbeing. Effective counseling services in schools can help identify and resolve problems experienced by students in the early stages of their development.

According to the Directory Book of Implementation of Counseling and Guidance Services at Primary and Secondary School 2014 Edition, school counselors in Malaysia are required to provide individual counseling sessions for at least one session per day or five sessions per week or 150 sessions in a year. For group counseling sessions, school counselors need to undertake at least one session per week or 40 sessions in a year. This requirement is considerably minimal, as school counselors have to spend most of their time providing counseling services to students (American School Counselor Association, 2012). The most important task is to help clients to discover and understand their own behavior, interest, talents, and abilities in order to flourish, understand, and realize their many opportunities. This helps achieve self-perfection by finding their self-balance, in line with religious and societal demands (ASCA, 2012).

Job Satisfaction

According to the Directory Book, the lists of 20 jobs require the school counselors to plan, implement, and regulate activities and programs involving the guidance and counseling unit (Abdul Rahman et al., 2013). Made Wahyu, Mohamed Yusoff, Ashairi suliman et.al (2018), define teacher job satisfaction as an attitude, which results from balancing and summation of many specific experiences in connection to the job. However, the job satisfaction factor among school counselors is low due to being tasked with administrative responsibilities outside their job-scope (Cervoni & Annemarie, 2011). According to Sidek, Nordin, Mohd Yusoff, Shamsudin and Halimatun Halaliah (2005), despite being responsible for guidance and counseling services, most school counselors are burdened with administrative and teaching tasks which undermine their ability to perform their job as full-time counselors (Abdul Rahman et al., 2013).

According to Boon, Wan Marzuki Wan Jaafar and Maznah Baba (2015), having the opportunity to focus on their job scope is the key for job satisfaction among school counselors in Malaysia. Focusing on counseling leads to professional mastery and increases the self-efficacy level of a counselor such as performing tasks more effectively and enhancing assistance rendered to students. The role played by counselors at the school level is essential to help children gain emotional, mental, and behavioral wellbeing (Philips & Smith, 2011; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012). Therefore, high competency level is needed by providing oneself with knowledge, skills and competency to achieve the counseling goal. Counseling is a professional field, whereby counselors are bound to ethical policies for a healthy and confidential client-counselor relationship. The effectiveness of counseling services is affected by counselor competency in helping clients with various issues and problems.

Competency

Competency is a professional responsibility and closely related with the counselors' personality and reflects on the counselors' training, ethics, and professional identity. Roles to be played as a counselor must be based on precise knowledge regarding guidance and counseling to be able to handle school problems and this highlights the important role of counseling at school. Counselor professionalism can be enhanced through training, courses, and workshops.

As a conclusion, this study aimed to identify the counselors' job description, satisfaction, and competency in primary schools which comprised of the factors affecting the effectiveness of counseling services in schools.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This was a qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews to collect data from five randomly selected primary school counselors (Creswell, 2008). The researcher formulated few research questions that guiding during the interview process while also having the freedom to ask in depth regarding the primary school counselors' challenges in their job description, satisfaction, and competency.

Participants

The study participants comprised five qualified school counselors. Initial contact was made with several counselors who practicing counseling at school setting. Eight counselors were identified considering the study requirement. However, only five counselors agreed to participate in the study and all data from them were qualified to be used in this study. The sample size of five is considered sufficient in providing complex and accurate information. Table 1 displays the demographic data for the five school counselors which included age, gender, years of experience and academic qualification. The age of the school counselors ranged from 26 to 35 years old. All were females. All school counselors had adequate working experience which five to ten years of experience as primary school counselors. One school counselors had Master's Degree and four school counselors had Bachelor's Degree stated in Guidance and 3.

Respondent	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Age	47	35	29	37	34
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Years of Experience	10	8	5	9	7
Academic Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree

Table 1 School Counselors' Demographic Information

Procedure

The main data source for this research was the focus group interviews with the school counselors. Two focus group sessions were conducted in face to face format (Krueger 1994). The focus group method was facilitated open discussion using group interactions and collected rich data on the experiences of the school counselors. Interviews were conducted in small group (2 and 3 school counselors) and ranged from two to three hours. All sessions were conducted in a closed room and were audio-recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Malay. Then, the process of back-to-back translation was conducted on the interview's transcript from the original Malay language to English language in order to ensure the accuracy and validity of the meaning of the original language. Data analysis used the thematic approach of the coding process to identify themes and subthemes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data presenting three themes from this study were related to job description, job satisfaction, and competency as a counselor in Malaysian primary school settings. The first theme that related to job description had three subthemes, second theme that related to job satisfaction had three subthemes and third theme that related to competency also had three subthemes. Table 2 summarizes the themes and subthemes found in this study.

Themes	Subthemes	Description of Summary
Job Description	Main Job Scope and Feasibility	Conducting individual sessions and group counseling, replacement classes and guidance activities
	Parents Consultation	Consultation sessions with parents of counseled students conducted in two ways including meeting the parents at school and visiting the student's house
	Jobs Unrelated to Counseling	Planning school programs, academic programs, and ensuring that these programs coincide with the school administrator's requirements and take most of their time.
Job Satisfaction	Clients' Positive Changes	Helping students to succeed and secure greater self-balance is central to job satisfaction. Counselors feel proud when seeing their clients prosper.
	Counseling Room Facilities	Comfortable and conducive counseling facilities were seen as important for job satisfaction.
	Cooperation and Support From Administrator and School Teachers	Getting cooperation and support from the administrator and teachers is one of the factors that contributed to job satisfaction as a school counselor.

Competency	The Approach of Counseling Session	The school counselors used direct or indirect approaches while conducting the counseling session. The use of conventional counseling approach towards child clients was seen as ineffective.
	Applications of Theories in Session	It showed the need of school counselors to improve their skills and advancement in dealing with child clients.
	Efforts to Increase Competency	The school counselors' competencies in applying the theories were ineffective. The school counselors increased their competency and enhanced their knowledge and skills by reading, furthering their studies at a graduate level and attending training courses related to counseling.

Table 2. Summary of the Study Findings among Primary School Counselor.

Counselor's Job Description

According to the findings, there were three sub-themes related to the counselor's job description in primary schools which were the main job scope and feasibility, parent's consultation and jobs unrelated to counseling.

Main job scope and feasibility. According to the interviews, a counselor had four main tasks and responsibilities in the school which were conducting individual and group counseling sessions, replacement classes, and guidance activities. All five interviewed counselors had the same understanding related to the provided main job scope which was the need to conduct at least one session with a client for an individual session every day and at least one group counseling session per week. The replacement classes were optional depending on the school's administrator. However, the school counselors cannot accept more than nine replacement classes in a week, whereas a fixed number of guidance activities had not been provided and depended on the school's program. Apart from that, school counselors needed to write reports and keep counseling records that were bound to ethical policy. This rule was written in the Guidance and Counseling Services Circulars at schools by the Malaysia Ministry of Education. An example of the statement is "...regarding the job scope, I need to conduct individual and group counseling sessions, guidance sessions. Actually, every school counselor needs to do individual session for at least one client in one day and for group counseling, there must be one group session in a week. Whereas for relief, must not be more than nine periods in a week" (R4)

This study revealed that all interviewed counselors were unable to achieve and manage their targets, either in individual counseling sessions or group sessions as provided in the guidance and counseling services guideline by the Malaysian Ministry of Education due to time constraints. An example of the statement is "I don't have a fixed job schedule. Sometimes, the new principal is likely to ask me to give more attention on handling academic programs, sometimes, in a week, I can only do two to three sessions a day. Then, the next days, I don't even have a session. For group counseling, I manage to conduct a group session in a week" (R1)

Parent's consultation. According to the findings, school counselors also needed to conduct consultation sessions with parents of the counseled students. Consultations with parents are conducted in two ways; first, by meeting the parents in school and second, by visiting the student's house. Consultations with parents that occur in school are conducted to acquire information and support related to the issues of the referred student and discussing the student's development in helping them in the counseling process. External tasks such as visiting students' houses to meet with their parents aim to observe their home settings and offer support to the family.

Three respondents said that consulting with parents is part of the job scope of a counselor at primary schools, either by doing it at school or by visiting their homes. These statements were supported by two other respondents stating that consultation with parents is important so that the parents know about the issues and problems their children 9km, are experiencing in school and their overall development. An example of the statement is "...parents' consultation needs to be conducted because it is important for the parents to be involved in the process of helping their children" (R2)

Jobs unrelated to counseling. Other jobs besides counseling, as stated by the respondents, were taking most of their time. Some examples of it were planning school programs, academic programs, and ensuring that these programs coincided with the school administrator's requirements. The counselors needed to ensure that every process in the program was implemented smoothly. There were also programs that needed to be conducted by the counselors due to orders from the Department of State Education (JPN). Programs that involved year 6 students were handed to the counselors for planning and implementing. This led to excessive workload and distracted them from their primary job and responsibilities as a counselor. Besides that, the school counselors also needed to conduct administrative and management activities, such as making the program book and arranging academic timetable. Four respondents mentioned about they were doing jobs unrelated to counseling. An example of the statement is "...most of the programs come from the administrative. In the meeting, the head minister said that year 6 programs will be under the counseling unit, and I will be the one responsible for them. I am fully doing academic programs, preparing schedule for year 6 students' classes, planning for program implementation... everything focused on academic. There's plenty of administrative programs and I really don't have time to do a counseling session... at school, my focuses are more into academic achievement, so for in the counseling unit, we just add this as the guidance only. For program implementation, it is fully academic. I feel limited and dissatisfied because the school wants it to be like that. haa... other than that, I have to replace other teachers in classes to teach subjects... all about answering techniques, even P&P itself we need to prepare the planner... because the administrator wants it to be like that..." (R3)

Job Satisfaction among School Counselors

The respondents identified job satisfaction as comprising of their clients' positive changes, counseling room facilities, and receiving cooperation and support from administrators and school teachers.

Clients' positive changes. Helping students succeed and secure greater self-balance are central to job satisfaction. Three respondents as counselor feel proud when seeing their clients prosper. An example of the statement is *"I'm satisfied when I can help clients toward their personal formation. If I can manage to help them change toward a better direction, that is a satisfaction for me. I felt satisfied because the students trust me"* (R3)

Counseling room facilities. According to interviews, two respondents said that comfortable and conducive counseling facilities such as having the right room size for conducting individual and group counseling session are important for job satisfaction. An example of the statement is *"...like at my school, there is no problem about the counseling room because it's already there. The room is big for individual and group counseling. Then there's another room for my office, for me to do work, it's big and comfy. Without having proper rooms for counseling process, there is no use of the service, actually..."* (R1)

Cooperation from administrators and teachers. Another factor that contributed to job satisfaction as a school counselor at Malaysian primary schools was to get cooperation and support from the administrators and teachers. Three respondents mentioned about this element. An example of the statement is *"I feel satisfied and grateful because I get good cooperation from teachers at my school. Most of the programs related to academic were handled by the Year 6 academic committees. I was told by my school principal to focus on the student's personal growth and related programs to counseling."* (R4)

Competency

The findings showed that there were three sub-themes related to the school counselor's competency, which were the approach of the counseling session, applications of theories in session and efforts to increase competency.

Counseling approach toward primary school students. According to the findings, school counselors used either direct or indirect approaches while conducting the counseling session. School counselors also applied counseling basic skills such as building rapport, listening, exploring and confronting while dealing with the clients' issues. Most of them were using the conventional counseling approach which can work appropriately for adult clients. Thus, the school counselors felt that the conventional approach did not effectively help their child clients. The lack of skills dealing with child clients contributed to their level of competency while conducting the counseling session. Four respondents said that the counseling approach that they were using contributed on their competency. An example of the statement is *"I always use the directive approach, like I did to adult clients. So, the student who came for counseling sessions won't feel happy about it. Every time they were being told to see the counselor, they will avoid it or be reluctant...so I think that my approach is not really suitable..."* (R2)

Application of counseling theories in session. All school counselors as the respondents in this study stated that they applied and explored the use of counseling theories while conducting counseling sessions. However, they also claimed that their competencies in applying the theories were ineffective. School counselors also realized that they needed to improve and enhance the knowledge and skills of counseling theories. An example of the statement is *"During my counseling sessions, I tried to apply theories. Sometimes, I referred to the theory's book to learn how to apply certain theories and how to apply a theory based on a case. However, when I tried to apply this, it was not effective and I felt incompetent..."* (R1)

Efforts to increase competency. The findings also revealed the needs for counselors to increase their competency by furthering their study at a graduate level. Four respondents increased their knowledge and competency through reading. Reading can help the school counselors to gain knowledge and skills. Besides that, attending training courses related to counseling was also seen as an effort to increase the level of competency of school counselors so that they can enhance their knowledge and skills. An example of the statement is *"...for me, I want to further my study...do master's...it will enhance my knowledge and skills in counseling... I also read books related to the counseling field. I also bought more counseling books. Whenever I have time, I read them, especially in order to increase my competency in the counseling practice"* (R1)

4. CONCLUSION

This study discussed the challenges faced by school counselors in primary schools in Malaysia in terms of job scopes, job satisfaction, and their competency. Counseling is a professional field of subject in the Counselor Act 1998 (Act 580). As stated by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2012), the four main jobs that need to be implemented by the school counselor emphasize the student's personality development and progress, student's discipline enhancement, student's career education, and student's psychosocial and mental wellbeing (Abdul Rahman & et al., 2013). Counseling services can also provide various specializations in school such as career counseling, child and family, addiction and organization in line with the four main jobs. Thus, the job scope of a counselor should focus on providing counseling services which consist of conducting individual counseling, group counseling, guidance programs, and administrative and managing client files.

However, school counselors are given additional jobs that are often not related to counseling (Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000; Herr, 2001), making it hard to balance between jobs (Bryant & Constantine, 2006) and causing them to be depressed with their work environment (Kolodinsky, Draves, Schroder, Lindsey, & Zlatev, 2009; Lambie & Williamson, 2004) and reduce the time available for a counselor to provide counseling services to the students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). The school counselors were aware of their main job but were unable to fulfill it because of the tasks unrelated to counseling such as program management, administrative tasks and teaching academic subject during class reliefs. Other school counselor's job scopes involve outside tasks for school activities (Abdul Rahman & et al., 2013). As a result, school counselors have very limited time to conduct individual, group, and guidance counseling. This finding was supported

by Johari Talib (2009), who state that administrator who do not understand counselor's job scope affects the counselor to be in a state of dilemma, conflict and misunderstanding. Similarly, Zulmahari Merawi, (2003) also state that among the issues related to school counselor professionalism is the failure of administrators to coordinate the counselor's job scope effectively due to a lack of understanding about the actual counseling services. Counselors are told to do other jobs unrelated to counseling. According to Johari (2009), the administrator's failure to understand counseling services has created job conflicts among school counselors. The tasks given by administrators should be in line with the directory and policy of the counseling practice. The minimum hours of doing counseling services should be increased in order to help the administrators understand the priorities that the school counselor should give attention to, instead of spending most of their times consumed by other activities. This effort will solve many student issues and help them excel academically.

Parents' consultation is essential for the school counselor to play the role as an agent to inform the parents of students regarding their children's development and progress. Besides that, counseling services at school need to involve parents to help deal with the students on their stress levels and problems. Consultation with parents is important because they are the vital support system in their child's life. They can help school counselors acquire important information such as development background, problematic behavior patterns, surrounding interaction, and problem solving style for the children (Kottman, 2011). Such information assist counselors in helping the students to solve their issues (Kottman, 2011). According to Murphy and McKenzie (2016), family and school play very important roles to guide students to achieve self-wellbeing and excel academically. At the same time, counselors can identify whether the parents are also having difficulties and obstacles requiring support from counseling services.

Research findings supported by Pattison et al. (2007) which evaluated counseling services at schools found that school counselors are not satisfied with the jobs and tasks done due to obstacles such as lack of cooperation from administrators and teachers, lack of counseling training, and doubting the counselor's competency. Researcher like Rorlinda (2009) have also discovered job satisfaction is very significant among counseling teachers to sustain their responsible, spirit and confidence in order to develop moral efficiency. Without job satisfaction, counseling teachers will tend to make excuses not to conduct counseling activities (Rorlinda & Noriah, 2016). Other than that, Brott (2006) showed that the school counselors' lack of time, lack in support, and heavy work load are factors affecting the counseling practitioners' competency. However, a counselor will have higher satisfaction if they are trusted by the client, succeed in helping the client achieve session goals and help produce positive change among clients. Achieving client wellbeing is a key motivator for job satisfaction, followed by counseling facilities that are comfortable, safe, and private.

Students' positive changes, counseling room facilities and receiving cooperation and support from administrators and teachers were important factors that encouraged job satisfaction of school counselors in this study. These findings coincided with the findings of Boon, Wan Marzuki Wan Jaafar and Maznah Baba (2015) where one of the factors that contribute to the school counselors' satisfaction in Malaysia is professional mastery, as having the opportunity to focus on the job scope leads to a sense of fulfilment, especially when students prosper. This enhances the self-efficacy of a counselor, by being able to undertake tasks to effectively help students. According to Martin (2014), positive experience will strengthen satisfaction while negative experience will not. According to Pattison, Rowland, Cromarty, Richards, Jenkins, Cooper and Couchman (2007), school counselors will not be satisfied with their job because of obstacles such as lack of cooperation from administrators and teachers, lack of counseling training, and doubting the counselor's competency.

Counselor competency is an important factor that influences the effectiveness of counseling services conducted at school. Competency level will affect the practice of counselors when applying their knowledge and skills in helping clients. According to Mohamad Bokhari et al. (2012), the main factors of success in helping counselors offer effective counseling services are related to competency, efficiency, and ethics of confidentiality policy practiced by the counselor. These findings clarify that simply possessing counseling theory does not mean that the counselors properly comprehend their meaning and effective means of their application. This issue arises when a counselor memorizes the theory without understanding it. Zakaria (2010) found no significant relationship between knowledge and theory understanding among counselors. These characteristics are concurrent with Salleh Amat et.al (2013), reported that awareness, knowledge and skills are three main domains in multicultural counseling competencies for Malaysian school counselors. According to Landreth (2012), children have limitation in terms of verbal and cognitive maturity, which influenced their ability to deliver and express feelings, thoughts and emotions. This makes the problems reported related to children at primary schools more challenging. Guidance activities are generally not enough and are ineffective in helping students gain mental, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. This situation will become more serious if schools focus solely on academic achievement for the sake of exams. This is because emphasizing on academics will not be effective if the student is limited by psychological and emotional vulnerabilities. As such, the role of school counselors should not be underestimated and the quality of counseling needs to be enhanced as an effort to produce students who excel holistically.

Counselor professionalism can be enhanced through the preparation of specific training, courses, and workshops specifically in counseling services. School counselor competency can be enhanced by understanding counseling approaches, theory applications, furthering their studies, reading, and attending training courses. In other words, when a counselor has an intention and high degree of confidence, they can provide good service as a professional counselor (Rorlinda Yusof, Noriah, & Amla Salleh, 2018). By way of conclusion, the more developed the country, the higher the pressure and challenges faced by the society. Counselors are professionally trained to provide psychological support for healthier mental, emotional, and behavioral states. Counseling has become better developed with counselors that are given key roles in certain settings, including in schools. The school setting is important to build a human capital. The importance of counselor placement at primary schools should not be underestimated. Counselor ratio per student should be smaller and reconsidered.

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