PERCEPTIONS OF SINGAPORE ADOLESCENTS ON THE ROLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

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Abstract: School counselling has been implemented in all Singapore public schools for more than a decade. This study sought the perceptions of Singapore adolescents on the roles and characteristics of school counsellors. A survey was administered to 135 students from Nanyang Polytechnic. This research was largely descriptive in nature with one open-ended question. The results showed that adolescents had some misconceptions on the roles of school counsellors. An unanticipated finding revealed that adolescents who had not experienced the counselling process had better perceptions of the characteristics of a school counsellor. These results imply that school counsellors need to take on a more proactive role in reaching out to students, in terms of information sharing and creating awareness. Recommendations have been made for enhancing the school counselling landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents in this era encounter many more opportunities and challenges as compared to their previous generations. The 21st century has seen rapid changes in globalization, political volatility, population growth, climate change and technological advancements (Larson, 2002). In addition, the recent Coronavirus pandemic has significantly changed the lives of adolescents with the potential of threatening their mental health (Fegert et al., 2020). Given the complexities of a rapidly changing world, adolescents will benefit from additional support in their psychological and emotional wellbeing (Gutgesell & Payne, 2004; Choi, 2018).

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Notably it is also at the adolescent stage that many mental disorders set in (Patel et al., 2007). Patel et al., (2007) also postulated that one in five adolescents worldwide suffer from a mental health problem. In the local context, the Singapore Mental Health study found that less than a third with mental health problems seek help (Subramaniam et al., 2014). Ho (2019) also found that 25% of Singaporeans felt it was a stigma to have a mental health condition, thus suffering in silence and not seeking help. The Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) has witnessed more teens aged 10 to 19 seeking emotional support. In 2018, 530 teens emailed the SOS suicide prevention centre, almost 53% increase from 347 cases the year before (SOS, 2020).

It is ever more important to provide a genuine listening ear to adolescents living in today's complex world. A possible source of emotional support could come from school counsellors.

School Counselling in Singapore
The roots of schooling counselling date back to the 1960s led by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) (Yeo et al., 2012). The primary aim then was to provide financial support for students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families and students with emotional and social difficulties who were referred to external social welfare agencies to receive counselling (Yeo et al., 2012). Further efforts to refine school counselling took place in 1987 when MOE established the Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) Branch to cater to the psychological and social needs of the students studying in the local education system (Kok, 2013). This served as a stepping stone for school counselling to gain importance and relevance in the Singapore education system.

By 2008, the Ministry of Education (2004) also introduced the position of a full-time school counsellor in all local primary and secondary schools, with the aim of helping students cope with their psychosocial and behavioral difficulties (Kok, 2013). School counsellors in Singapore, as stipulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2021) work in various capacities with the top most providing support to student's mental well-being and social-emotional development (MOE, 2021). In addition, school counsellors are also expected to create a conducive support system for their students, working with both school personnel and the families;

parents and guardians (MOE, 2021). School counsellors also provide both responsive and preventive services to students in order to safeguard their emotional wellbeing (MOE, 2021).

With the introduction of school counsellors in all public schools, students have had the opportunity to consult their school counsellor when faced with any mental health distress. However, the usage of such services could be underutilized when students do not have a clear understanding of what school counselling entails and view the school counsellor as being part of the school authoritative personnel (Lee, 2006).

Research shows that therapy can produce successful outcomes when youth actively participate in the process and experience the counselling relationship positively (Duncan et al., 2007). When placed in a counselling setting, adolescents indicate a strong inclination for a therapist who will respect their autonomy (Binder et al., 2011; Church, 1994). This strong need for independence impacts the way adolescents communicate with their counsellors which subsequently affects the therapeutic alliance (Bennett et al., 2017). The meanings attached to a therapeutic counselling relationship thus appears unique to the client's life stage. Given the increasing numbers of mental health concerns in adolescents, it is pertinent to study how they perceive school counsellors and the counselling process.

Adolescent's Perceptions of School Counsellors' Roles and Duties
Adolescents come across many authoritative figures in their school. A school counsellor's role can be often confused with these authoritative figures. A research conducted by Fox and Butler (2007) sought to find out young people's views on school counselling in the UK. Though 80% of the students indicted that they were aware of counselling services in their schools, a vast majority of the students had limited knowledge of the roles of a counsellor and they indicated interest in wanting to know what the counsellor did (Fox & Butler, 2007). Yet another study conducted on African American male adolescents showed misconceptions surrounding the role of school counsellors; wherein more than 50% of the respondents believed that the counsellor scheduled classes and assisted in academic work (Bryan & Gallant, 2012). The researchers highlighted the need for school counsellors to proactively reach out to students to increase their awareness of counselling and to reduce the stigma related in seeing a counsellor (Bryan & Gallant, 2012).

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In the Singapore context, school counsellors saw themselves as having multiple roles such as a teacher or a trainer (Kok, 2013). School counsellors also felt that there was a negative perception amongst teachers and misunderstanding regarding their role (Kok, 2013). Kuhn (2004) found that high-school students viewed school counsellors as assisting in disciplinary interventions and administering achievement tests. This yet again shows the lack of awareness on the role of school counsellors.

There continues to be a lack of clarity in the role of a school counsellor. Often the school counsellor's role is defined by the school principal or other stakeholders and their professional identity is surpassed (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). Active measures are being taken in U.S and Israel to establish a distinct definition of school counselling (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014) and to address the ambiguity on the roles and functions of a school counsellor. On a much more personal level, Lee (2006) reiterates the need for school counsellors to explain their roles to students in order to establish a positive therapeutic relationship.

Adolescent's Perceptions of Characteristics of School Counsellors
Ohrt et al's., (2016) study revealed that adolescents found their school counsellors to be trustworthy, caring, motivating and were able to create a personal connection. They also stated that school counsellors empowered them and acted as an advocate when needed (Ohrt et al., 2016). Similar studies also rendered support to adolescents perceiving their school counsellors to being trustworthy, helpful and knowledgeable (Solmonson et al., 2014; Sackett et al., 2018).

Whilst there are encouraging studies supporting adolescent's positive perceptions of counsellor characteristics, there are also negative perceptions surrounding the characteristics of school counsellors (Church, 1994; Lindsey & Kalafat, 1998). Lindsey and Kalafat, (1998) found that adolescents perceived school counsellors as being "psychologically inaccessible," and acting superior and lacking concern towards the students. Adolescents also preferred counsellors who were willing to give them an opportunity to have a larger say in the counselling process as compared to counsellors who took a more authoritative and know-all approach (Church, 1994).

Data on alliance has shown optimistic counselling outcomes when adolescents experience a positive relationship (Duncan et al., 2007). Wampold's (2015) contextual model puts forth that in addition to a strong alliance, therapist effects are extremely vital for charting counselling progress and success. What the therapist is (trust, understanding and level of expertise) paves the way to a stronger alliance.

Factors outlined in the contextual model (Wampold, 2015) serve as an important guide for counsellors and therapists (regardless of their chosen theoretical orientation) who desire positive outcomes for their clients (Sullivan et al., 2009). The contextual model also helps counsellors view clients as having the ability to control the process of counselling and outcomes as opposed to a medical model where the counsellor is seen as an "expert" healer (Kehle & Bray, 2003).

This research took reference from Wampold's (2015) contextual model and drew on the factors of therapist effects; Trust, Understanding and Expertise. Extending his ideas, the researcher also explored if there were other characteristics that adolescents valued in a counsellor.

Purpose of Study
This study contributes to the lack of current literature on the perceptions of local adolescents on school counsellors. Whilst many studies have been conducted in the Western context and a few studies have studied the local teachers and administrators' perceptions of school counselling (Kok, 2013; Low, 2014 & 2015), exploring students' perceptions is critical too, as they are on the receiving end of the service.

Having an awareness of student perceptions serves as an impetus in the following areas: (a) providing feedback to school counsellors and administrators, (b) improving current counselling program by incorporating adolescent concerns, and (c) addressing and educating students on what school counselling entails and the roles and duties of a school counsellor.

Research Questions
The main objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of Singapore adolescents on school counsellors and counselling. The three research questions reflecting the objectives were:

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- What do adolescents perceive the roles and duties of school counsellors are?
- What counsellor characteristics do adolescents value and perceive as being important?
- Do adolescents who had experienced school counselling and those who hadn't have differing perceptions about school counsellors?

METHODOLOGY
Participants
One hundred and thirty-five Singaporean students from the Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) took part in this study. Nanyang Polytechnic is an institution of higher learning established in Singapore in 1992, offering diploma-level courses (NYP, n.d.). Students who have completed their GCE-O Levels can opt to take up the Diploma courses, given they meet the grade requirements for the respective courses. All the participants had studied in the Singapore Education system in the years 2006 – 2018 and would have had access to a school counsellor. The students typical ages ranged from 17 to 20.

Procedure
Permission to conduct the survey at Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) was obtained from the Psychological Studies (NIE) Institutional Review Board and the NYP Institutional Review Board. Year 1 – Year 3 students from the Social Work courses were approached to take part in this study. A paper and pen survey format was administered in English language. The survey lasted twenty minutes and was conducted at Nanyang Polytechnic. Prior to administering the survey, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and sought participants' consent. The participants were also informed that their responses would be kept confidential. Following this, participants signed the consent form and answered the survey questions. The researcher was available on-site to answer any queries from participants. All consent and survey forms were collected immediately after the session.

Measures
The survey was divided into two parts. The first section sought information on the past history of whether adolescent had experienced counselling and if so, where. The second section was an adapted version of the survey titled

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'Perceptions of School Counselling' (Bryan & Gallant, 2011). For the current study, three questions (24 items) related to the perceptions of school counselling were of interest. The scales measured three primary areas; beliefs regarding school counsellors, roles regarding school counsellors and individuals who had been influential in encouraging adolescents to attend counselling. In addition, the researcher put together two more questions related to therapist effects and adolescent receptiveness for seeking counselling in future. All items on the questionnaire required a categorial response and varied by items (disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree; yes or no). Three of the items in roles regrading school counsellors contained negative language and required reversing the scale. However, the inclusion of these three reversed items caused the reliability score to be significantly lower as compared to analyzing only the regular items. Suárez-Alvarez et al., (2018) found that the results of a psychometric test was reduced substantially when reversed and regular items were included in the same test. Though there has been much support for including reversed items for preventing response bias, there is also a high possibility that this could have caused confusion in the respondents (Sonderen et al., 2013). After much consideration, the researcher removed the three negatively worded questions as it was observed to cause a lower reliability score.

The internal consistency reliability measured by Cronbach's alpha (α) for the subscale on beliefs regarding school counsellors was ($\alpha = .77$, n=135, 5 items). The Cronbach's alpha (α) for the subscale on roles of school counsellors was ($\alpha = .66$, n=135, 9 items). Generally, the reliability is acceptable according Ursachi, Horodnic and Zait (2015).

Data and Statistical Analysis
This research was descriptive in nature but had one open-ended question where respondents could list counsellor characteristics which they viewed as being important. For the major part of the research which was quantitative, data analysis was done in the SPSS software to compute the frequencies and percentages for Research Questions 1 and 2. A cross-tabulation analysis was conducted on Research Question 3 to examine any differing perceptions of adolescents with and without school counselling experience.

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For the one open-ended question, the data were sorted and those with similar ideas were placed together. These groupings were then labelled with themes based on key terms found in the respondents' comments. A total of seven themes were identified.

RESULTS
Descriptive Statistics
More than 40% of the respondents had consulted a school counsellor during their schooling days, with 50% of them consulting a school counsellor in secondary school.

Almost 40% of the respondents indicated 'teachers, friends and self' as individuals who had been encouraged them to seek school counselling services. About 15% of the respondents indicted parents and 5% indicted principals as encouraging them to seek counselling.

More than half the respondents indicated that they were open to seeking counselling services in the future. About 10% of respondents were certain that they would not seek counselling services, whilst 33% were uncertain about their future openness in seeking counselling.

Main Analysis
Adolescents' Perceptions on the Roles and Duties of School Counsellors
Table 1 captures the frequencies and percentages of adolescents' level of agreement on their perceptions of school counsellors' roles and duties. Almost 90% of adolescents somewhat agreed and agreed that school counsellors were involved in interventions for students, assisted students with emotional issues, kept secrets unless the adolescent or someone else was in danger and met with teachers and parents.

Nearly half of the adolescents somewhat agreed and agreed that the role of a school counsellor was to assist students with academic problems, schedule classes and conduct testing.

Table 1: Frequencies (Percentages) of Adolescents' Responses on the Roles and Duties of School Counsellor

Roles & Duties of School Counsellors	n	Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Somewhat Agree		Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Assist students with academic problems	135	8	5.9	37	27.4	66	48.9	24	17.8
Are involved in testing for students.	135	14	10.4	44	32.6	65	48.1	12	8.9
Are involved in interventions for students.	135	1	0.7	0	0.0	52	38.5	82	60.7
Meet with teachers, if necessary.	135	0	0	7	5.2	55	40.7	73	54.1
Meet with parents, if necessary.	135	3	2.2	12	8.9	46	34.1	74	54.8
Assist students with career choices.	135	1	0.7	22	16.3	76	56.3	36	26.7
Assist students with scheduling classes.	135	21	15.6	50	37.0	57	42.2	7	5.2
Assist students with emotional issues	135	0	0.0	1	0.7	21	15.6	113	83.7
Keep secrets unless you or someone else is in danger	135	2	1.5	7	5.2	20	14.8	106	78.5

Adolescents' Perceptions of School Counsellors Characteristics
Table 2 captures the frequencies and percentages of adolescents' level of agreement on their perceptions of school counsellor characteristics. None of the adolescents disagreed that school counsellors were friendly and knowledgeable.

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In addition to studying adolescent's perceptions of school counsellor characteristics, they were also asked to choose factors which were most important to them in the counselling process. More than 90% of adolescents responded that a trustworthy and understanding counsellor and a supportive counselling relationship was important to them. In comparison, only 65.9% of adolescents responded that the skills and techniques employed by the counsellor was important. Adolescents also listed counsellor characteristics in an open-ended question which they felt were important in a school counsellor. Seven themes were identified from the adolescents' responses (highest to lowest ranking); being empathetic, building a relationship, being non-judgemental, being skilful, being genuine, being a good listener and maintaining confidentiality.

Table 2: Frequencies (Percentages) of Adolescents' Responses to Perceptions of School Counsellor Characteristics

Characteristics	N	Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Somewhat Agree		Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Trustworthy	135	7	5.2	11	8.1	67	49.6	50	37.0
Friendly	135	0	0	3	2.2	51	37.8	81	60.0
Knowledgeable	135	0	0	7	5.2	60	44.4	68	50.4
Accessible	135	2	1.5	19	14.1	63	46.7	51	37.8
Helpful	135	5	3.7	18	13.3	50	45.9	62	45.9

Differing Perceptions of Adolescents with and without School Counselling Experience
A cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to study the differing perceptions of adolescents' who had experienced school counselling and those who had not. About 21.5% adolescents who had consulted a school counsellor disagreed and somewhat disagreed that school counsellors were trustworthy, accessible and helpful. More than half the respondents who believed that school counsellors were trustworthy, friendly, knowledgeable, accessible and helpful had not sought school counselling services.

DISCUSSION

Individuals who Encouraged Adolescents to seek School Counselling Services

This research set out to seek adolescents' perceptions of school counsellors' and school counselling services. Almost half of the adolescents were self-motivated or encouraged by their teachers and friends to seek school counselling services, whilst only 15% of adolescents said that their parents had encouraged them. This difference could be due to teachers, friends and adolescents themselves, having more awareness of school counselling services. Adolescents were also found to be more aware of mental health conditions and the importance of emotional well-being (Ho, 2019). This could explain why adolescents themselves were open about seeking school counselling services. Parents might have been less encouraging due to a stigma attached to seeking help for mental health (Ho, 2019) or perhaps they did not have much awareness of school counselling services.

It is also encouraging that more than half of the adolescents are open to seeing a counsellor in the future. This yet again shows adolescents' receptiveness to seeking help when faced with emotional distress.

Adolescents' Perceptions on the Roles and Duties of School Counsellors

Adolescents had some misconceptions regarding the roles of a school counsellor. Almost half of the adolescents felt that the role of a school counsellor was to assist students with academic problems and schedule classes. Kok (2013) found that in the Singapore context, school counsellors took on multiple roles such as a teacher or a trainer. Adolescents could have a general misconception that school counsellors are part of the academic team. There appears to be a lack of clarity in the role of a school counsellor on both ends – counsellor and counselee.

Almost half of the adolescents disagreed that school counsellors were involved in testing students. It is unclear if the participants understood that testing involved psychological testing and not academic testing. Testing and screening students for any potential mental distress is yet another specific job role of a school counsellor and adolescents may not be aware of this job role.

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Despite having some misconceptions, majority of the adolescents agreed that school counsellors assisted students with emotional issues, kept secrets unless the adolescent or someone else was in danger and met with teachers and parents. Ohrt et al. (2016) study also found that adolescents believed that their school counsellors could support them in their emotional issues and acted as an advocate for adolescents by meeting with their parents and teachers. Adolescents do seem to have an awareness of the fundamental roles of a counsellor. There is however a need to raise the awareness of a school counsellor's roles and duties to help adolescents understand how a counsellor differs from the staff in an academic team. This awareness could also help adolescents have a different take on a school counsellor's characteristics such that they will not see them as coming in as an authoritative figure.

Viewing Adolescent's Perceptions of School Counsellor's Characteristics via Wampold's Contextual Model
All of the adolescents agreed that school counsellors were friendly and knowledgeable. A vast majority of the adolescents also felt that a trustworthy and understanding counsellor and a supportive counselling relationship was important to them in the counselling process. In comparison, only 60% of adolescents felt that the skills and techniques employed by the counsellor was important to them in the counselling process.

Wampold's (2015) contextual model places trust, understanding and expertise at the forefront in working towards therapeutic goals. Though Wampold (2015) did not specify which of the 3 factors (Trust, Understanding, Expertise) took precedence over one another in his contextual model, the results of this research show that adolescents place great importance on a trustworthy, understanding counsellor as compared to the skills and techniques employed by the school counsellor. A counsellor could have mastery in his theoretical orientation but what the adolescents' value is the relationship and characteristics of the counsellor. Fife et al., (2014) meta-model also supported this finding wherein the therapeutic alliance and therapists' characteristics were given more importance than the skills and techniques employed by the therapists.

These are indeed vital information for school counsellors as they could spend more time establishing and building a therapeutic relationship with

their clients instead of setting counselling goals and planning counselling interventions at the very onset of the counselling sessions.

Differing Perceptions of Adolescents with and without School Counselling Experience

A surprising finding in this research was more than half of the adolescents who believed that school counsellors were trustworthy, friendly, knowledgeable, accessible and helpful had not previously sought school counselling services. It appears that adolescents who had sought school counselling services may not have had a good impression on their school counsellors. There could be several reasons for this. Low (2014) found that former school teachers and school principals who had made a job switch to school counsellor tended to use a directive and authoritative approach. Adolescents who participated in this survey might have encountered counselling experiences with counsellors who may have had made a job switch from the academic field. In such a case, they might have felt uncomfortable and felt they were interacting with an authoritative figure, which could have distorted their perceptions of the characteristics of a school counsellor. It is also unclear if the adolescents in this research could have been mandated to attend counselling, which yet again may not left a good impression if they had engaged in the counselling process unwillingly. Another possible factor which might have led to an unpleasant experience is the lack of clarity surrounding confidentiality. School counsellors who work within the school setting play an integrated role within the educational organisation (Bond, 1992). School counsellors may have to work within the confines of the educational organisations' goals and view their student clients as consumers who are seeking a service within the organisation (Bond, 1992). This may then lead the school counsellors to reveal information about their student clients when requested by the educational organisation.

Low (2015) also found that teachers felt that counsellors could share more information about the students they worked with. This clearly then shows the struggles a school counsellor may face when it comes to his / her commitment to confidentiality. When a student client finds out that sensitive information shared within the confined setting of counselling has been shared, they may naturally feel disappointed and may have not have a good impression of their counsellors.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

There is much research to be conducted in the arena of school counselling to understand how school counsellors could better cater to the student population. The following recommendations are small steps in moving towards a deeper conversation for working with the student population.

1. School counsellors could take a more proactive role in informing students about their duties and roles. This could be done in the form of assembly talks, classroom sharing and perhaps even dedicate a day in the school year to have a fair on school counselling. Reaching out to students in innovative ways could help them understand the work of a school counsellor and how they could partner them.
2. School counsellors could hold parent workshops to provide more information on what school counselling entails. There might also be a need to address the stigma attached to mental health conditions and concerns of parents.
3. School counsellors could garner help from students who are keen to be ambassadors of mental health and partner them to spread positive messages on counselling.
4. School counsellors could work with the school team to define the boundaries of information shared about their counselee. This could reduce the school counsellor's predicament for sharing information and also gain the trust of the counselee.
5. School counsellors should actively upgrade their skills and seek supervision to maintain a high level of professional service. School counsellors should also practice self-care to ensure they remain healthy and motivated to give their best to their clients.

School counsellors have an important role to play in supporting the mental / emotional health of students. Having an awareness of the perceptions of students and working to bridge these gaps can create a better landscape of school counselling environment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

There were several limitations in this study. Firstly, only a small survey sample of 135 adolescents were recruited from the same polytechnic course, thus not representing the views of a larger pool of adolescents.

Future studies should encompass a larger sample size capturing the views of adolescents from diverse settings.

Secondly, the survey question on the roles and duties of a school counsellor gave a lower reliability score when negatively worded questions were included in the analysis. Due to the short timeframe of this research, the researcher did not exclude the negatively worded questions in the survey questionnaire but instead eliminated the items from the data analysis. Future studies could eliminate these questions and relook into designing a clearer representation of school counsellor's duties which are more culturally apt in Singapore context.

There was also a lack of local literature on school counselling in Singapore and the researcher took reference for this study from research conducted overseas. Having more information on the local school counselling arena could have framed this study differently.

CONCLUSION

This was a small-scale but important study which looked at adolescents' perceptions of school counsellor characteristics and their roles and duties. This study revealed that there were some misconceptions on the roles and duties of a school counsellor and more could be done to educate and clarify the roles and duties of a school counsellor. This would help adolescents to better understand and differentiate the roles of a school counsellor from the roles of the academic team. A surprising finding in this study also revealed that adolescents who had not sought school counselling services had better perceptions of school counsellor characteristics. There is an urgent need for school counsellors to play a more pro-active role in wanting to know the adolescents in their schools better, which would also allow the students to have a better perception of their school counsellor. Despite knowing that there are several gaps to address in the school counselling arena, it was heartening to learn that majority of adolescents are willing to seek counselling services in the future. Working with adolescents to help them address their emotional distress at an earlier stage (schooling days) could perhaps ease their life journey and prepare them better for adulthood.

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