

## **An Insight Into The Role Of The School Counselors In Malaysia: Perceptions Of Administrators, Counselors, And Teachers**

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### **ABSTRAK**

*Kertas ini mengemukakan persepsi pentadbir-pentadbir, kaunselor-kaunselor dan guru-guru sekolah menengah di Semenanjung Malaysia tentang peranan kaunselor dan kepentingan peranannya dalam memenuhi keperluan pelajar-pelajar.*

*Penyelidik telah merangka satu inventori Penilaian Peranan Kaunselor (Counselor Role Assessment Survey) yang mengandungi 56 item yang dibahagikan kepada enam sub-skala. Empat negeri telah dipilih secara rawak iaitu Johor, Selangor, Terengganu dan Pulau Pinang. Sejumlah 98 buah sekolah menengah dengan sampel 183 orang pentadbir, 190 orang kaunselor dan 276 orang guru telah terlibat dalam kajian ini.*

*Kajian ini (1) menerangkan persepsi pentadbir, kaunselor dan guru tentang peranan kaunselor dan kepentingan peranannya dalam memenuhi keperluan pelajar; (2) menentukan perbezaan persepsi dalam kumpulan pentadbir, kumpulan kaunselor dan kumpulan guru tentang peranan dan kepentingan peranannya; (3) mengenalpasti bagaimana negeri dan lokasi, jantina dan tahun pengalaman mengajar, serta jantina dan umur mempengaruhi perbezaan dalam persepsi tentang peranan dan kepentingan peranannya.*

### **Introduction**

Secondary school counselors in Malaysia face many barriers that inhibit their performance. These barriers include the lack of a clear definition of the role of the counselors; lack of professional identity and status; inadequate professional training; inadequate budget and facilities; lack of administrative support from principals; teacher bias against counselors; and the student misconception that they must be dysfunctional if they must seek out the counselor. Additionally, teachers who hold a dual role as teacher-counselor must deal with the stresses of heavy workload and possible conflict of duties (Nahrawi, 1983). The issue of ambiguity concerning the role of the secondary school counselor influences most of these obstacles. Role ambiguity contributes to role confusion and a lack of clarity about the field of school counseling (Williams, 1993). It also contributes to communication difficulties between the counselor and the school personnel which leads to inadequate administrative support from principals, inadequate recognition and cooperation from teachers, stress (Falvey, 1987; Holt, 1982), and institutional disharmony (Wittmer & Loesch, 1975).

It is generally agreed that when administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and others incorrectly define the school counselor's professional role, the results for counselors are role ambiguity, lack of organizational commitment, a decline in job satisfaction (Harris, 1986; Moracco, Butcke, & McEwen, 1984), and ineffective performance (Podemski & Childers, 1980).

Therefore, a clear perception and proper definition of the school counselor's professional role is essential in order to maintain a sound counseling profession (Hutchinson, Barrick & Groves, 1986), adequate and effective counselor's performance (Terrill, 1990; Remley & Albright, 1988; Podemski & Childers, 1982), and the counselor's professional identity and professional stability (Lewis, 1978). Accountability issues can be dealt with when there is clarification of the counselor's role (Hutchinson, Barrick & Groves, 1986; Hutchinson & Bottorff, 1986; Ibrahim, Helms & Thompson, 1983).

From an organizational point of view, forces such as the administrators, teachers, and counselors themselves work together to determine the counselor's role. Carson (1971) indicated that the counselor's role was largely determined by his/her publics', and the counselor's perceptions of his/her publics' expectations. Therefore, administrators, counselors, and teachers need to communicate adequately regarding how the counselor can make a contribution to the school. The reason for the present study is to explore the perceptions of these three groups of personnel in the school setting concerning how often the counselor performed the role and the importance of the role in meeting the needs of the students.

## **The Study**

In Malaysia, guidance programs have been in the secondary schools since 1963, and a more comprehensive and systematic guidance and counseling program has gained momentum since the 1980s. Although the Ministry of Education has proposed the services that school counselors should provide in the schools (Panduan Pelaksanaan: Khidmat bimbingan dan kaunseling di sekolah, 1993; 1984), the role of the counselor has yet to be described. For this study, the role of the school counselor is defined as the sum total of the functions/duties performed by the counselor. The term, actual role, refers to how often the counselor performed the role. The need for this study emerged from the belief that if the school counselor's professional role is accurately perceived by school administrators, teachers and counselors themselves, the counselors' positions in the schools are secured.

The purpose of this study was to (1) describe the administrators', counselors', and teachers' perceptions of the actual role and the importance of the role of the secondary school counselor in meeting students' needs; (2) determine what differences exist among the administrators', counselors', and teachers' perceptions between the actual role and

importance of the role of the secondary school counselor; (3) determine what differences exist between the administrators', counselors', and teachers' perceptions of the actual role and the importance of the role of the secondary school counselor; and (4) identify how state and location, gender and years of teaching experience, and gender and age are associated with the differences that exist among the administrators, counselors, and teachers in their perceptions of the actual role and importance of the role of the secondary school counselor.

**Method**

**Research Setting**

The study was conducted only in Peninsular Malaysia. Four states in the Peninsular Malaysia were randomly selected: Johor, Selangor, Terengganu, and Penang.

**Participants**

A total of 98 secondary schools with a sample size of 183 administrators, 190 counselors, and 276 teachers were included in the study (Table 1).

Table 1

Number of Schools and Sample Size by State and Location

State	No. of School		Sample Size					
	Urban	Rural	Urban			Rural		
			Adm	Cr	Tr	Adm	Cr	Tr
Johor	11	13	22	22	32	20	25	38
Selangor	13	13	26	25	35	24	23	36
Terengganu	13	12	23	25	36	22	24	34
Penang	11	12	22	22	31	24	24	34
Total	48	50	93	94	134	90	96	142

## **Procedure**

A multi-stage cluster stratified random sampling design was used (Scheaffer et al., 1986). Peninsular Malaysia was divided into four parts (north, east, south, and west) and a state was randomly selected from each part. A stratification of schools based on the location (urban and rural) of the schools in each state was drawn. Then a random selection of the schools and subjects (two administrators, two counselors, and three teachers) in the schools was carried out.

## **Research Design**

Quantitative descriptive design was used in this study. Descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, one-way ANOVAs, and factorial ANOVAs were used.

## **Instrument**

The data were collected using a Counselor Role Assessment Survey (CRAS), developed by the researcher. The questionnaire had 56 statements grouped into six role subscales. Role subscales were (1) individual and group counseling, (2) developmental, educational, and career guidance, (3) assessment and appraisal, (4) consulting, (5) coordination and management of a developmental and comprehensive program, and (6) professional ethics, personal growth, and development. The statements used in the questionnaire were created from the role descriptions of the counselor adapted from the review of recent literature on guidance and counseling services (Snyder & Daly, 1993; Myrick, 1993; Wittmer, 1993; Baker, 1992; Borders & Drury, 1992; Glossoff & Koprowicz, 1990; Gerstein & Lichtman, 1989; Cole, 1988; Gysbers & Henderson, 1994), role statement of American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 1990), professional development guidelines for secondary school counselors (ASCA, 1986), and questionnaires from previous studies (Giorgis, 1992; Stalling, 1991; Woodward, 1989; Saeedpour, 1986).

The instrument used a five-point Likert scale on both sides. The left side collected responses on how often the school counselor performed the stated functions. Subjects were asked to respond with Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never, or Don't Know. The right side collected responses on the importance of the stated counselor functions in meeting the students' needs. The scale ranged from 1 (unimportant) to 5 (crucially important).

Face validity and content validity were established. A pilot test was conducted to determine the internal consistency reliability of the instrument (Mueller, 1986; Cronbach, Gleser, Nanda & Rajaratnam, 1972). The alpha coefficient for the six actual role subscales ranged from 0.92 to 0.95, and the six importance subscales ranged from 0.83 to 0.88.

The instrument was then translated into Bahasa Malaysia. It was edited for the language and reviewed for its face and content validity again. The internal consistency reliability (Alpha coefficient) for all six role subscales was 0.94, and the six importance subscales ranged from 0.94 to 0.95.

## **Results**

**Perceptions of Actual Role of School Counselor:** The frequencies were counted on a five-point scale from never performing the role (1) to always performing the role (5). The rating system used to interpret the mean scores was: 1.49 or less for Never, 1.50 to 2.49 for Rarely, 2.50 to 3.49 for Sometimes, 3.50 to 4.49 for Often, and 4.50 or over for Always. Generally, the administrators perceived that the school counselor sometimes performed the five role subscales, but rarely performed the assessment and appraisal subscale (mean = 1.94). The counselors perceived that they often performed the professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale (mean = 3.75), sometimes performed the individual and group counseling subscale (mean = 3.19); coordination and management subscale (mean = 2.95); consulting subscale (mean = 2.74); and developmental, educational, and career guidance subscale (mean = 2.73), and rarely performed the assessment and appraisal subscale (mean = 2.24). The teachers perceived that the counselor sometimes performed the professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale (mean = 2.88); and individual and group counseling subscale (mean = 2.70), and rarely performed the developmental, educational, and career guidance subscale (mean = 2.23); coordination and management subscale (mean = 2.19); consulting subscale (mean = 2.07); and assessment and appraisal subscale (mean = 1.54).

**Perceptions of Importance of the Role of School Counselor:** The same rating system was used to interpret the mean scores with 1.49 or less for unimportant, 1.50 to 2.49 for slightly important, 2.50 to 3.49 for important, 3.50 to 4.49 for very important, and 4.50 or over for crucially important. All the three groups agreed that the professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale; individual and group counseling subscale; and consulting subscale were very important. They also agreed that the assessment and appraisal subscale was important. While the administrators (mean = 3.52) viewed the developmental, educational, and career guidance subscale to be very important, the counselors (mean = 3.46) and teachers (mean = 3.41) viewed this subscale to be important. While the administrators (mean = 3.74) and counselors (mean = 3.60) viewed the coordination and management subscale to be very important, the teachers (mean = 3.48) viewed this subscale to be important.

**Differences Between Perceptions of Actual Role and Importance of Role:** The eighteen six-paired t-tests of the administrators, counselors, and teachers revealed that their perceptions on the actual role of the counselor differed significantly from their perceptions on the importance of the role for all six subscales. The mean scores for the importance subscales are higher than the mean scores for the actual role subscales.

**Differences Between Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers:** The one-way ANOVAs indicated that the administrators, counselors, and teachers differed significantly in their perceptions on the six actual role subscales. The Scheffe post hoc analysis was used to investigate the differences between groups at .05 level of significance. Specifically, the administrators and counselors held quite similar views regarding how often the counselor performed the individual and group counseling subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 23.36, p < .001$ ); developmental, educational, and career guidance subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 22.62, p < .001$ ); consulting subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 31.78, p < .001$ ); and coordination and management subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 42.49, p < .001$ ). The teachers differed significantly from the administrators and counselors on the above stated subscales. The three groups differed significantly on their views of how often the counselor performed the assessment and appraisal subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 29.50, p < .001$ ); and professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 58.90, p < .001$ ).

Although there were statistical differences, for practical interpretation, the three groups held similar views on two subscales, that is (a) the school counselor sometimes performed the individual and group counseling subscale; and (b) the school counselor rarely performed the assessment and appraisal subscale. For the professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale, although the statistics showed that the three groups differed, in practical terms, the administrators and teachers perceived that the counselor sometimes performed this subscale but the counselors perceived they often performed this subscale.

There were no significant differences between the three groups' perceptions on the importance of the four subscales but they differed significantly on the importance of the coordination and management role subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 7.25, p < .001$ ); and on the importance of the professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale ( $F_{2,646} = 4.26, p < .015$ ). The administrators and counselors perceived the coordination and management role subscale to be very important but the teachers perceived it to be important. The counselors and the teachers differed significantly in their views on the importance of professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale; in practical interpretation, the three groups viewed this subscale to be very important.

**Differences Among Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers by State and Location, Gender and Years of Teaching Experience, and Gender and Age:** The counselors did not differ in their perceptions according to subscales on the actual role of the school counselor and on the importance of the role by state and location, gender and years of teaching experience, and gender and age. The administrators differed in their views on the importance of professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale by years of teaching experience ( $F_{2,177} = 3.89, p = .022$ ).

Many differences of perceptions were found among the teachers. The teachers differed amongst themselves on the actual developmental, educational, and career guidance subscale by state ( $F_{3,268} = 3.02, p = .030$ ), by location ( $F_{1,268} = 8.97, p = .003$ ), and by gender ( $F_{1,270} = 9.66, p = .002$ ); and actual assessment and appraisal subscale by gender ( $F_{1,270} = 19.01, p = .001$ ). They differed in many of the importance role subscales such as developmental, educational, and career guidance subscale by state ( $F_{3,268} = 3.92, p = .009$ ) and by age ( $F_{2,270} = 5.70, p = .004$ ); assessment and appraisal subscale by gender ( $F_{1,270} = 5.07, p = .025$ ) and by age ( $F_{2,270} = 3.98, p = .020$ ); consulting subscale by gender ( $F_{1,270} = 5.19, p = .024$ ) and by age ( $F_{2,270} = 6.69, p = .002$ ); and coordination and management subscale by gender ( $F_{1,270} = 4.26, p = .040$ ), by years of teaching experience ( $F_{2,270} = 3.22, p = .042$ ), and by age ( $F_{2,270} = 7.46, p = .001$ ).

## **Conclusions**

This study indicated that the role subscales of the secondary school counselor are recognized to be important to very important, but the actual performance of these role subscales is considered lacking. The three groups held quite similar views on the importance of the six subscale roles. This implies that there is awareness among the three groups about the importance of the six role subscales of the school counselor in meeting the needs of the students but there is a perception that the school counselors are not performing these role subscales well enough to meet the needs. This could be due to the fact that the school counselor(s) do not have the time nor the energy to perform their responsibilities because of the dual role they have to play. Furthermore, the counselors lack professional training and do not have the skills to perform these role functions (41%).

The counselors did not differ in their perceptions on all the role subscales and importance subscales. The administrators differed only by years of teaching experience in their perceptions on the importance of professional ethics, personal growth, and development subscale. This indicates that the administrators are aware of the functions of the counselor. On the other hand, the teachers differed among themselves in their views on many role subscales and importance subscales by state and location, gender and years of teaching experience, and gender and age. It is clear that the teachers are not as well-informed of the school counselor's role as are administrators and counselors.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Based on these findings, there is support for the six role subscales and the 56 functions of the secondary school counselors in Malaysia. Thus the role of the school counselors can be defined along this framework.

The study revealed that the school counselors are not performing the role functions as much as would be required to meet the needs of the students. Some suggestions to motivate the counselor to be more active and effective in their performance are:

- (1) School counselors must have the basic professional training and certification to enable them to be proficient in their work. Schools that do not have qualified counselors should register their counselor for in-service training from the on set.
- (2) Schools should have a full-time school counselor.
- (3) Define the role of school counselors so that there is accountability of their duties.

There is certainly a need for professional training among the secondary school counselors. The following suggestions are proposed to ensure that school counselors are informed of their roles and trained in their skills:

- (1) The Ministry of Education should provide national guidelines to the counselor educators in the universities and in the teachers training colleges to assist them in planning and implementing the curriculum for school counselor training.
- (2) The counselor educators or trainers should include in their counselor training curriculum an aspect on assessment instruments and assessment skills, so that the school counselors will have the skills to perform this function.
- (3) In the short term, weekend workshops and seminars should be conducted by the District Education Department to guide school counselors through the process of setting up and running an effective and efficient program.
- (4) In the long term, teachers training colleges and universities should offer training and certification for school counselors

This study in effect echoes what has already been established by other studies in the United States that the counselors and principals did not differ significantly on their perceptions of the counselor's role but that the teachers are more distant in their perceptions (Saeedpour, 1986). Thus steps must be taken to bring awareness of the role of the school counselor to the teachers. Some suggestions include:

- (1) A topic on the role of the secondary school counselor should be included in the guidance and counseling course which is compulsory for all teacher trainees in Malaysia.

(2) A day call "Guidance and Counseling Day" can be set to display exhibits, show reading materials, and provide information on the services of the guidance and counseling program in the school.

(3) Administrators in the school should include in the staff meeting agenda a time for the school counselor to present and discuss guidance and counseling services/issues.

The school guidance and counseling movement in the United States has a strong influence on the growth and development of a comprehensive developmental counseling program in the schools in Malaysia. The success of this program depends on the performance of the school counselors, which presents the need for a professional status with specific role to meet the needs of the students. The movement in Malaysia has reach a stage where the focus is on the professional training and growth of the school counselors, and their pursuit for professional identity.

The success of the school guidance and counseling programs in Malaysia depends on the performance of the school counselors, which presents the need for a professional status with specific role to meet the needs of the students. The movement in Malaysia has reach a stage where the focus is on the professional training, growth and accreditation of the school counselors, and their pursuit for professional identity.

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