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Teachers' Perceptions toward School Counselors in Selected Private Schools in Lebanon

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to investigate teachers' perceptions toward school counselors in Lebanon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 100 teachers from 13 private schools in Lebanon. The interview questions were adapted from Amatea and Clark (2004), and Beesley (2005), who interviewed teachers concerning their perceptions toward counselors in their schools. The interviews were analyzed mainly using descriptive qualitative grounded theory in order to identify how teachers perceive counselors and the various rationales behind their perceptions. The sampled teachers held varied perceptions, some negative and some positive, depending on their personal experiences with counseling.

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1. Introduction

The function of school counselors has hugely changed since 1960. Before the 20th century, school counselors didn't exist. It was the teachers' responsibility to use a few minutes from their period to help students (Bawers & Hatch, 2002).

Beginning with the industrial revolution in the 1900's, Schmidt (1999) stated that schools depended on teachers as being responsible to tackle the private, social, and vocational support to students. In the 1940's & 1950's a new form of school guidance was produced by E.G Williamson, which emphasized teaching skills (Kuhn, 2004). After the 1960's, professionals began identifying the role of the school counselor. Today, a school counselor identifies objectives and purposes, evaluates students' desires, and guides services within the schools curriculum (Quast,

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2003). In addition, school counselors serve as leaders and are an indispensable part of the student's learning curriculum. They can help individual students or students in groups (ASCA, 1999). They assist students resolve or adapt with any developmental modifications.

Usually, elementary students' developmental problems would include trying to understand themselves, their peers, family and school. They will be trying to identify what they value. Therefore, the counselors' job would be to resolve, direct and aid students regarding their self image, value, self-assurance and peer's family interactions (Kuhn, 2004). Students during intermediate school would be trying to recognize their individual personality and would obey the rules of their friends rather than their family. Therefore, the counselor edifies students' skills that are desired and aids students to balance between the secondary levels; the students would assess their skills and power and start scheduling for their future. Therefore, the counselor strives to improve their decision making process regarding their future. He/She provides guidance, support and professional assistance. The definition of the role of the school counselor and the tasks they actually engage in on the ground, however, are continuously modified through the perceptions and expectations of parents, teachers, and administrators (Stone & Dahir, 2006). This may be especially true in Lebanon, as school counseling is still considered a relatively new profession and has not been formally included in the education process; thus characterizing it with more flexibility but also more ambiguity. In fact, gaining an understanding of the perceptions and expectations of those involved in shaping and upholding the counselors' roles are key in understanding what counselors can offer, what can be expected of their work in the school, and how improvements can be made. This information may also be instrumental in assessing some of the main elements that need to be included in Lebanese school counselors' training.

1.1. Significance of the Study

It can be seen that this study is important because it sheds light on how teachers view school counseling. It will contribute to the entire school body, since it will give schools new missions and visions specifically for education in the 21st century. It will also motivate schools and teachers to take on a more positive attitude. Moreover, it will open new prospects for additional research that will carry on along the same line and try to reaffirm the results achieved in this research by conducting parallel research in the different parts of the country.

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, school counselors have become an increasingly valued addition to school systems worldwide. In fact, a number of countries have passed laws that require their schools to be staffed with counselors (Amatea & Clark, 2004). The ASCA (2005) generally defines school counselors as specialized trained educators who work in K-12 schools to provide educational, job, college willingness, and individual/social competencies to students. Their main tasks usually involve advising students and addressing their academic readiness, as well as conducting individual and group counseling. School counselors interact and collaborate consistently with teachers and this relationship plays an important role in the dynamics and the success of the counselors' work, especially since teachers are in the best position to assess a number of student outcomes and to refer them to and evaluate counseling. According to Beesley (2005), teachers are the first and most effective assessors of counselors. Counselors also work with parents and administrators in order to assist in the improvement of the students' educational environment at large.

The definition of the role of the school counselor and the tasks they actually engage in on the ground however are continuously modified through the perceptions and expectations of parents, teachers, and administrators (Stone & Dahir, 2006). This may be especially true in Lebanon as school counseling is still considered a relatively new profession and has not been formally included in the education process, thus characterizing it with more flexibility but also more ambiguity. In fact, As such, gaining an understanding of the perceptions and expectations of those involved in shaping and upholding the counselors' role are key in understanding what counselors can offer and what can be expected of their work in the school, and how improvements can be made. This information may also be instrumental in assessing some of the main elements that need to be included in Lebanese school counselors' training.

Although school counseling seems to be gradually gaining more acceptance in Lebanon, especially since the July 2006 war and the role that counseling services played in its aftermath, advancements have been slow despite repeated calls for the development of such services over the decades (Ayyash-Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, in press). Consequently, existing empirical research that can inform the important and needed process of developing school counseling services that fit the needs of students and the society in Lebanon is very limited. As such, the study of the perceptions of schoolteachers towards counselors in their schools is timely and necessary. For the purpose of this study, “teachers’ perceptions” is used to refer to how teachers conceive of the role and tasks of the counselor, in the absolute and in relation to their own role and tasks, and to the expectations they have of the counselor. Because private schools in Lebanon offer the most developed services and house the majority of Lebanese students, the focus of the current study and following discussions will be on school counseling within the private sector.

A substantial number of researchers have studied teachers’ perceptions toward school counselors, most of which took place within Western samples with a few emanating from Lebanon or other Arab nations. As teachers’ perceptions vary widely across schools and different regions, a broad review of the literature is necessary. Some studies showed positive perceptions of teachers while others revealed negative perceptions.

Much of the research on the topic emanating from the West has reported positive attitudes towards school counselors on the part of teachers. For example, Cusky (1996) examined the perceptions of 152 teachers in public elementary schools and found that they viewed counselors to be most effective in consultation and support for teachers and individual counseling for students. Amatea and Clark (2004) studied the perceptions of 23 teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools, concerning the importance of school counseling services. The results showed that teachers emphasized the need for the counselors’ support for classroom instructions, and their importance in directing students with special needs to appropriate resources. In her survey of 188 teachers across the American Southwest, Beesley (2005) found that her participants were satisfied with the counseling services in their schools. Similarly, Gibson (1990) and Oyaziwo & Imonikhe (2002) examined how teachers envision the job of school counselor at the secondary level and found positive perceptions all around.

On the other hand, a few studies revealed negative perceptions towards school counselors. For example Stelzer (2003) surveyed 100 elementary teachers and found that only a few of them understood the job of the counselor and what counseling actually is. Moreover, Valine, Higgins, and Hatcher (1980) found that teachers in their sample viewed counselors as ineffective.

2.1 Perceptions towards School Counseling in Lebanon and the Arab Region

The Arab world spreads from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Central African and the Indian Ocean in the south. The Arab world consists of 23 countries including Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen, Comoros Islands, Djibouti, and Western Sahara. For these Arab nations, existing research on school counseling indicates differing attitudes towards school counseling across these countries. Generally speaking, research concerning attitudes towards school counselors in Arab countries is rather modest, but general research on the topic mainly indicates a positive general attitude, whereby school counseling is viewed as influential and necessary (Al-Amir & Brinson, 2006; Saleh, 1987; Al-Sarraf, 1997; Samaneh, 2000). A survey conducted by Saleh (1987) showed that most teachers in Kuwait were satisfied by the counseling services even though few schools had counselors. In Kuwait, Al Sarraf (1997) found that teachers believe counseling to be very essential to the quality of their schools. Similarly, Al-Amir and Brinson (2006) found that students and teachers consider counseling as essential in the United Arab Emirates. These findings indicate that counseling as a profession is still young in the Arab region, but seems to be growing and gaining some interest; although it remains to be further understood and accepted by teachers and parents. Resistance to counseling is still present however, for example El Sherbeiny and Ayab (1995) found that most Kuwaiti’s prefer to seek traditional healers to deal with psychological problems than to seek a counselor’s

services. Soliman (1994) stated that only five out of the 23 Arab countries provide either a diploma or a Master of Art in counseling. The universities of Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Riyadh, and Ain Shams offer degree programs in counseling (Wehrly, 1995).

In Lebanon, it seems that resistance to school counseling and the stigma associated with it has been decreasing during recent years. This new acceptance for school counselors may be due to the obvious effects of war, conflict, and ensuing political and social instability on children who are faced with difficulties in their everyday lives. Lebanon has faced several wars since the 1980s to the present time. Children had to hide in shelters, watch close family members and friends get injured or die, go to school under dangerous conditions and be surrounded by talk of war and politics. Families were often separated or taken apart due to the pressure and difficulties of these wars, or due to changes in living conditions. These issues permeated in the school environment leading to sectarian fighting between children and tense school climates.

Consequent academic difficulties lead the government to introduce law 1030 in 1997, which requires every public school to have a guidance counselor to help students adapt to their social surroundings. This was also instigated by the projected challenges that had arisen from the introduction of a new national curriculum. However, only 70 out of the 1500 public schools have a guidance counselor (Hamzeh, 2008). With the help of UNICEF, a number of school practitioners were selected and signed up in a preparation program that shaped what they called “guidance counselors” (Hamzeh, 2008). In 2002, 120 teachers who had a minimum BA in psychology, sociology, or philosophy, were trained to use “preventive developmental approach to school counseling.” Nonetheless, school counseling in Lebanon today still needs a lot of work. Counselors work under very difficult conditions, with very little support and room for advancement (Ayyash-Abdo, Alamuddin & Mukallid, 2010). Additionally, Hamzeh (2008) found that teachers and students in Lebanon hold very different perceptions and expectations of their school counselors. For example, she found out that parents and students agreed on the same perception concerning the roles of the counselor, such as consultation. As for teachers, they had different views when it came to implementing the role of the counselor in the Lebanese schools. As such, assessing the perceptions of teachers towards school counselors consists of a first step towards gathering empirical data that can help promote the role and job of counselors in meaningful ways.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose of the Study

Teachers’ perceptions of school counseling have been researched excessively, but not efficiently in the Arab World, especially in Lebanon. The purpose of this research is to assess teachers’ perception of school counseling in Lebanon. The research questions consisted of 9 questions adapted from: Amatea and Clark (2004), and Beesley (2005). Questions 3 and 4 are adapted from Amatea and Clark (2004) and questions 5, 6, 7, and 8 adapted from Beesley (2005) in order for the data to be organized in themes based on Grounded Theory analysis.

3.2 Hypothesis

It is expected that the sampled Lebanese teachers will hold both negative and positive perceptions toward school counselors. Negative views may be engendered by the low level of exposure to counseling and to the existing stigma towards counseling and mental health services at large. Based on my personal experience as a teacher, schools in Lebanon are not well prepared to have counselors on staff. Teachers or psychologists are often the ones engaging in the work of the school counselor, which might add further confusion. In fact Hamzeh (2008) found that Lebanese teachers had misconceptions concerning the role of the school counselor. On the other hand, positive perceptions are likely to arise in light of the recent relative openness to counseling and mental health services in the country. Therefore, school teachers in private Lebanese schools will be interviewed and surveyed concerning their perceptions towards counselors in their schools in order to clearly understand their stance.

3.3 Method of Sample and Data Collection

The participants will consist of 100 elementary, intermediate, secondary, and high school teachers from 13 different private schools. The schools were chosen randomly based on previous phone calls to check if they would approve a meeting. Participating teachers will be selected randomly and interviewed based on availability. The principals and administration of each school will be contacted beforehand in order to schedule an appointment for the teacher interviews, which will take place at the school itself. No incentives will be offered for participation in the study.

3.4 Instrument

Conducting interviews is one way of collecting data in a qualitative study. Interviews allow the researcher to explore the interviewee's mind and obtain information related to the interviewee's values, attitudes, and abstract thinking. The interview questions were semi-structured in order to gain answers for defined questions. The items included both open-ended and close-ended questions. Because the instrument is designed and tailored for this study, there are no measures of validity or reliability provided yet.

3.5 Data Collection

The teachers were contacted in order to get their approval and consent to carry out this study. The interviews were conducted during the spring semester of 2008-2009. The researcher interviewed the teachers after informing them of the purpose and the reason for the study.

3.6 Data Analysis

The answers of the interview questions were transcribed in order to be analyzed. For each of the ten questions, the ratio of the possible answers was obtained.

4. Results

The interview results were analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1976). Through this qualitative method, the interview results are analyzed a number of times until overarching categories of meanings generated by interviewees are identified. The analysis revealed the following four key themes which are further discussed below: solving problems, collaboration and support, referral, disadvantages of school counseling, and improvement of counseling.

5. Discussion

Teachers who were consulted symbolize a population that varies in knowledge, background, and the level of the school at which they teach. They expressed several worries about their needs and feelings toward counselors. The themes extracted from the results reveal teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward school counselors. A number of important themes were found. Most teachers know some of the roles of the counselor even if they do not have a licensed school counselor in their school or even if they did not have a counselor at all. They identified the job of the counselor based on what the counselor does in their schools. If the counselor was only helping students deal with psychological problems, that is what they mentioned as most important job. Since teachers did not have enough workshops to know the exact job of the counselor, they were general and unspecific. Most teachers interviewed are aware of the fact that a student's academic achievement might be blocked if he/she is facing any kind of nonacademic problem, however, not all of them would refer to the counselor but instead deal with it on their own. That could be the case due to our culture and religion that makes the family comes first. Moreover, they know that the counselor cannot work alone, he/she needs the teacher who usually refers the case to him. Most teachers who

accepted the help of the counselor knew the difference between their job and his/her job. They understood that they detect or identify the problem in the classroom while teaching and the counselor then deals with it outside the classroom. Teachers with the longest teaching experience had different and negative perceptions of school counselors and this may be due to their having been tried at a time where school counseling was not yet present and such services were looked down upon or misunderstood. One teacher who has been teaching for 25 years social studies believed that he/ she needs to write the assessment exams since she had never contacted or talked to the counselor in her school that might be the reason why she thought that his/her job is to write the midterm exam.

Teachers knew that the counselor is of benefit to the school and he/ she is not there to take over their job, which is very important. They are also very well aware of the disadvantages of the counselor and each teacher based the disadvantage on what is going on in her/ his school. For example, one teacher explained that students can leave the class to go see the counselor whenever he/she wants, which was confirmed by the counselor at that school. Therefore, that teacher felt that if a student hates math for example, they would use the counselor as an excuse to leave class. Other teachers mentioned that counselors are not well trained or lack enough counseling courses since their counselors are either fresh graduate with a general counseling degree or have a psychology degree.

None of the Lebanese teachers in the sample are satisfied with the counseling services in Lebanon, which contradicts other studies done in the UK and the United States; and reaffirms findings from the Arab World. For example, Huntwork (2005) concluded that the majority of the teachers are satisfied with the counseling services by their schools. Al-Sarraf (1997) on the other hand found that Kuwaiti teachers are not satisfied with the counseling services in their country, although they believe it is essential. Day (1983) also noted that most people in Arab countries are not satisfied with school counseling. In Lebanon, most teachers explained the need for more counselors that is due to the fact that School Counseling is a new Masters program that did not exist before. Therefore, most counselors working in schools are either foreigners or with different major. One teacher is totally dissatisfied not because her school does not offer counseling but because the parents need to pay the fees after each session which is totally unacceptable.

6. Limitations

The results of this study are limited by the fact that it included 100 teachers from private urban schools only. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the results. Furthermore, the researcher interviewed the teachers, which could have altered the teachers' responses since they knew why they are being interviewed.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, there is still a need for school counselors to further cooperate with teachers concerning the counselor's role and responsibilities in order to improve counseling in schools. Furthermore, counselors need to plan more workshops and seminars to guide teachers and educate parents. In addition, the Ministry of Education should begin a strategy in order to incorporate school counseling into all schools. The Ministry of Education needs to state the objectives and procedures concerning the rules, applications and authorization of the school counselor. As for higher education institutions, they are the ones responsible for improving school counseling by adding more courses and seminars for those majoring in counseling. In addition, the counseling program should become a major and not only an emphasis as is the case at present. Finally, counseling should be a free service offered by schools, which will encourage parents to seek the counselor's help when their child faces a problem.

A recommendation for further study would be to replicate this study using a larger sample. Moreover, the teacher should also be interviewed after two or three years to check how their understanding of school counseling has changed over the years. This would allow for a more thorough assessment of the teachers' perceptions.

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