An Examination of School-Based Psychological Counseling Services for Improving Mental Health

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ABSTRACT: Psychological counseling, as a form of school-based mental health services, plays a crucial role in supporting the well-being of students. However, there is limited knowledge about the state of school counseling programs in Vietnam. The objective of this study, which used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, was to examine the current practices, utilization rates, effectiveness, and obstacles faced in providing psychological counseling in Vietnamese schools. The research included a survey of 150 students and interviews conducted with 10 school counselors and administrators from five high schools in Ho Chi Minh City. The findings revealed that despite a high demand for counseling services among students, the utilization rates were alarmingly low. Several significant barriers were identified, including a shortage of school counselors, inadequate training for counselors, societal stigma associated with mental health issues, lack of private spaces for counseling sessions, and the absence of national standards for school-based services. The results emphasize the disparities between the current status of school counseling programs in Vietnam and international standards. Suggestions include the implementation of more extensive professional development for counselors, increasing the number of full-time counselors, establishing national guidelines for mental health services in schools, raising awareness through anti-stigma campaigns, and allocating more funds. Improving psychological counseling services in schools holds the potential to offer essential assistance for the mental health and overall well-being of Vietnamese students.

KEYWORDS: School-based counseling; Mental health services; Vietnamese schools; Barriers; Student wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents worldwide are facing an alarming and escalating prevalence of mental health disorders and psychosocial challenges. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reports that a staggering 1 in 7 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 are grappling with emotional, behavioral, or mental health conditions. This distressing trend is not confined to a specific region, as even in Vietnam, there is a cause for concern. Research conducted by Nguyen et al. (2019) sheds light on the high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide risk among young individuals in the country. In their study, Nguyen et al. (2019) delved into the emotional well-being of 2,800 Vietnamese students aged 11 to 18 years. The findings were disconcerting, revealing that 11.7% of the participants exhibited signs of emotional distress, while 10.8% met the criteria for a mental health disorder. These statistics paint a vivid picture of the pressing need for effective psychosocial support within schools to address these issues head-on. The implications of these findings are far-reaching and demand urgent attention. Adolescence is a critical period of development, and the mental well-being of young individuals plays a pivotal role in shaping their future. By acknowledging the prevalence of mental health disorders and psychosocial challenges among adolescents, we can begin to pave the way for comprehensive and targeted interventions. It is crucial to recognize that mental health is not a standalone issue but rather intertwined with various factors such as social, economic, and cultural contexts. By addressing these multifaceted aspects, we can create a supportive environment that fosters the emotional well-being of adolescents. Schools, being a central institution in the lives of young individuals, have a unique opportunity to provide the necessary psychosocial support. Implementing effective strategies within the school setting can help identify and address mental health concerns early on. By integrating mental health education into the curriculum, students can gain a better understanding of their emotions, learn coping mechanisms, and develop resilience. Additionally, establishing counseling services within schools can provide a safe space for students to seek guidance and support.

Trained specialists providing psychological counseling within schools have proven to be effective in enhancing academic performance, relationships, and mental health outcomes among young individuals. By engaging in one-on-one therapy sessions, students are provided with a safe environment to process their emotions, trauma, identity struggles, and stress in a healthy way (Ball et al., 2016). Reviews underscore the crucial role played by school counselors in preventing crises and intervening at an early stage when students exhibit signs of anxiety, depression, self-harm, or aggression (Erford, 2019). Nevertheless, studies that examine

counseling practices on a global scale highlight gaps in various educational systems concerning counselor training, availability of confidential spaces, and age-appropriate interventions (Wang et al., 2021). Currently, there is a lack of published research in Vietnam regarding the quality and utilization of existing school-based counseling services. Therefore, the primary objective of this study utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was to shed light on the existing procedures, efficacy, availability, and obstacles pertaining to psychological counseling initiatives in high schools in Vietnam. The outcomes of this research hold the potential to uncover avenues and areas of focus for bolstering the promotion of mental well-being within the educational institutions of Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Benefits of School Counseling
Comprehensive research has revealed the numerous advantages that come with incorporating psychological support services into comprehensive school counseling programs. In the United States, several studies have shown that when students have access to mental health counselors, it has a positive impact on their academic performance and personal-social development (Dykeman, 1994; Lee, 1993). More specifically, school-based counseling has been found to result in improved grades, higher graduation rates, increased enrollment in postsecondary education, as well as better relationships with peers and enhanced emotional coping abilities (Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). Furthermore, reviews have indicated that school counselor interventions can effectively reduce disciplinary problems among students and serve as a deterrent for substance use, risky behaviors, and the development of psychopathology (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014). These findings highlight the significant impact that comprehensive school counseling programs can have on the overall well-being and success of students.

Across the globe, a comprehensive analysis of trials involving school-based counseling programs conducted on five different continents has revealed significant positive effects. These effects include a reduction in anxiety, depression, aggression, attention issues, and post-traumatic stress (Werner, 2021). The research conducted on a global scale has provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of counseling programs in schools. These findings have caught the attention of several countries, such as the UK (Debate House of Commons, 2014), China (Lei et al., 2016), and India (Varghese et al., 2017), leading them to initiate national campaigns to expand counseling services in schools, particularly at the secondary level. The importance of providing counseling services in schools cannot be overstated. The existing body of literature demonstrates substantial benefits associated with in-school talk therapy, positively impacting the overall well-being of diverse youth populations. By addressing mental health concerns at an early stage, school-based counseling programs have the potential to alleviate the burden of anxiety, depression, aggression, attention issues, and post-traumatic stress among students. These programs have proven to be effective in reducing these challenges, ultimately creating a more conducive learning environment for students. The positive effects of school-based counseling programs extend beyond the individual students. By promoting mental well-being, these programs contribute to the overall improvement of the school community. When students receive the support they need to address their emotional and psychological challenges, they are better equipped to engage in their academic pursuits and develop healthy relationships with their peers. This, in turn, fosters a positive and inclusive school culture, where students feel valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. Furthermore, the global analysis of trials conducted on different continents highlights the universality of the positive effects of school-based counseling programs. Regardless of geographical location or cultural context, these programs have consistently demonstrated their ability to make a difference in the lives of students. This underscores the importance of implementing counseling services in schools worldwide, as it has the potential to benefit students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. In conclusion, the comprehensive analysis of trials involving school-based counseling programs conducted on five different continents has shed light on the significant positive effects of these interventions. The reduction in anxiety, depression, aggression, attention issues, and post-traumatic stress among students has prompted several countries to take action and expand counseling services in schools.

It is evident from the research that providing mental health support through school counseling services is crucial for promoting positive outcomes in students' lives. By addressing their psychological needs, these programs contribute to academic achievement, personal growth, and the development of essential life skills. The benefits extend beyond the classroom and positively impact students' social relationships and long-term prospects. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the importance of comprehensive school counseling programs and prioritize the provision of psychological support services in educational settings.

Counseling for Common Student Issues
In addition to promoting overall well-being, school counselors often tackle specific mental health issues that are on the rise among young people, such as anxiety, self-harm tendencies, excessive use of digital media, bullying dynamics, suicidal risk, adjustment difficulties, and panic disorders (Erford, 2021; Tang et al., 2013). For these prevalent issues, evidence-based counseling approaches are tailored to address them effectively. This includes Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for managing anxious or obsessive thought patterns, Psychoeducation and Interpersonal Therapy to address maladaptive behaviors, and Parent Management Training for children who exhibit externalized issues at school (Abrams et al., 2022). Reviews suggest that when implemented early and

appropriately, counseling strategies that focus on prevalent mental health concerns can help prevent the development of more severe disorders in students who are prone to escalating symptoms (Werner-Seidler et al., 2019).

Best Practices in School Counseling Programs

According to leading experts in the field of education, youth mental health, and school social work (CASEL, 2022; United Nations, 2019; WHO, 2021), the recommended strategies for providing comprehensive psychological counseling in schools include the following:

1) Employing specialized support staff and counselors who possess diverse expertise in addressing the common issues faced by students.
2) Integrating proactive developmental guidance into the school curriculum, focusing on promoting wellbeing and fostering positive relationships.
3) Offering confidential individual and group counseling services that can be accessed through self-referral or referrals made by staff members.
4) Establishing partnerships between families, schools, and the wider community to ensure smooth referrals to external services when necessary.
5) Conducting continuous evaluation through surveys and interviews to personalize counseling approaches and measure the effectiveness of interventions.

These best practices emphasize the importance of creating a supportive environment within schools, where students can receive the necessary support and guidance to navigate challenges and promote their overall mental health. By implementing these strategies, schools can effectively address the diverse needs of their students and provide them with a comprehensive range of counseling services. This holistic approach not only supports individual student well-being but also contributes to the overall success and thriving of the school community.

When implemented as a comprehensive approach throughout the entire school, these elements have been proven to have greater positive effects compared to individual and reactive counseling efforts, according to research conducted by Kaffenberger and Seligman in 2007. However, it is unfortunate that counseling services worldwide face various challenges that hinder their effectiveness. These challenges include the stigma surrounding seeking help, low levels of parent involvement, insufficient funding that affects counselor salaries and professional growth, and the lack of systematic data that demonstrates the efficacy of counseling services, as highlighted by DeKruyf et al. (2013).

Gaps Related to Vietnam's School Counseling Landscape

Although there has been extensive research conducted by Western nations and China on school counseling services, there is a scarcity of published studies that shed light on the current state of psychological counseling programs in Vietnamese education systems. Limited regional studies in Vietnam indicate concerning gaps in various aspects of school mental health services. These gaps include counselors' preparedness to address prevalent issues such as internet/gaming addiction, the availability of confidential spaces for sensitive discussions, evidence-based skill training, referral networks with families and outpatient clinics, and the stigma preventing individuals from seeking support (Dang et al., 2018; Nguyen & Arora, 2022).

These findings reflect the global challenges faced by school counseling services and emphasize the need for further investigation into how Vietnam's current practices align with international guidelines and best practices. Conducting focused research will provide specific priorities and recommendations for improving the quality and delivery of much-needed psychological interventions to enhance the resilience and functional outcomes of Vietnamese adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this research, a comprehensive understanding of psychological counseling practices in Vietnamese high schools was developed using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. To achieve this, a combination of quantitative data and qualitative data was utilized. The quantitative aspect involved conducting surveys to assess the current state of school counseling programs, examining factors such as student-to-counselor ratios, services offered, presentation rates, and effectiveness. On the other hand, qualitative data was gathered through interviews to gain deeper insights into the utilization of counseling services, outcomes, and barriers.

By integrating both numerical data and lived experiences, this mixed methods approach allowed for the identification of statistical trends while also capturing the nuanced complexities of real-world situations. It aimed to shed light on various perspectives from different stakeholders, exploring accessibility challenges, confounding stigma, and making recommendations for improvement. The utilization of this approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of psychological counseling practices in Vietnamese high schools. By combining both quantitative and qualitative data, researchers were able to gain a holistic view of the current state of school counseling programs and the experiences of those involved. This approach not only helped in identifying areas for improvement but also highlighted the importance of considering both statistical data and personal perspectives when developing effective counseling practices.

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Participants

A survey was conducted on a group of 150 students, aged between 15 and 18 years old, from five high schools located in urban and suburban areas surrounding Ho Chi Minh City. These schools were selected to represent both academically focused and vocational tracks. The sample of students included an equal number of males and females. In addition to the student survey, 10 participants were interviewed for this study. The interviewees consisted of five school counselors and five administrators, such as principals or heads of student affairs. The counselors were a mix of government-employed social workers and contracted external psychology specialists who worked part-time.

Data Collection Tools

The research incorporated three data instruments:

A survey was conducted among students to gather information about their usage of counseling services for various issues such as academic stress, anxiety, relationships, and maladaptive behaviors. The survey consisted of 30 questions and was administered in person. It aimed to assess the frequency of using counseling services and also measured outcomes related to emotional regulation, suicidal thoughts, and the willingness to refer friends. In addition to the student survey, interviews were conducted with counselors to gain insight into their perspectives on the range of issues they treat, their capacity to provide counseling, their practices in crisis intervention, the perceived stigma associated with counseling, and the challenges they face at a system level. These semi-structured interviews lasted for 45 minutes.

Furthermore, administrators were interviewed for 60 minutes using a semi-structured format. The focus of these interviews was on high-level priorities related to service quality, policy considerations, counselor credentials, funding infrastructure, and leadership vision for enhancing counseling programs. The research supporters, comprising counseling psychology professors, a sociologist, and a former high school counselor, read and approved the survey instruments designed specifically for this study. They believed that using both quantitative and qualitative components was essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, following best practices in mixed method designs (Shorten & Smith, 2017).

Analysis

The data from the survey was thoroughly examined and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. This analysis focused on identifying descriptive trends, group differences, and correlational relationships in relation to the usage, quality, and reported effectiveness of existing counseling services. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the findings, the interview transcripts were carefully reviewed through an inductive thematic analysis approach. This involved identifying recurring codes, categories, and overarching themes that shed light on student needs, program strengths and gaps, as well as administrator priorities for improving counseling systems. To further enhance the insights gained, the quantitative usage statistics and outcome data were integrated with the qualitative themes. This integration allowed for the development of meta-inferences aimed at optimizing the reach and mental health impacts of Vietnamese school counseling initiatives.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

The survey data uncovered remarkably low utilization of the counseling services that are currently available among a group of 150 Vietnamese high school students. Only 8 students, which accounts for 5.3% of the sample, reported utilizing their school's psychological counseling program within the past year. Rates were found to be similar across all grade levels, ranging from 9th to 12th grade, indicating no significant variation between the different secondary school levels. In terms of gender differences, females exhibited a higher rate of service utilization at 7.3%, while males reported a lower rate of 3.3%.

When examining the reasons for seeking counseling, it was found that the most prevalent issues included academic and career-related stress, which accounted for 56% of the counseling cases. Anxiety was also a common concern, with 44% of the cases relating to this issue. Other frequently encountered issues were related to friend and romantic relationships (37%) and grief associated with the loss of a loved one (25%). On the other hand, less commonly reported issues included financial struggles (0%), family conflicts (6%), substance experimentation (6%), and sleeping problems (6%).

In regards to results, 75% of students who utilized counseling services indicated that it was highly beneficial in alleviating their distress and enhancing their ability to cope. Nonetheless, just a quarter of them stated that counseling completely resolved their underlying problem, while 12.5% found it to be minimally or not at all advantageous. Within the wider group of students surveyed, a significant majority of 89% disagreed with the notion that their school provided sufficient and easily accessible psychological support services.

Qualitative Findings

The interviews with 10 school counselors and administrators revealed several key themes regarding the delivery, accessibility, and recommendations for improving Vietnamese school counseling programs:

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- Capacity and Infrastructure Challenges: Many counselors highlighted the presence of significant gaps in capacity and infrastructure. These included high student-to-counselor ratios, often exceeding 1:1000, as well as a lack of funding for essential testing resources or private office spaces. Additionally, there was a dearth of quality supervision for complex cases, and the overall infrastructure was deemed inadequate, posing barriers to the effective provision of counseling services.
- Reactivity versus Proactivity: The focus of counseling was predominantly centered on reactive crisis response rather than consistent preventative measures such as group lessons or skills building. This was attributed to compensation systems that rewarded the urgent resolution of individual cases, rather than emphasizing proactive interventions.
- Stigma as a Barrier to Help-Seeking: The perception of counseling as an extreme measure, coupled with concerns about discretion, often acted as deterrents to voluntary use of counseling services outside of escalated crises. To address this issue, it was suggested that normalizing struggles and implementing privacy policies could help counteract the stigma associated with seeking help.
- Restrictions on Staffing and Training: Many of the current counselors lack sufficient clinical skills to effectively address issues such as excessive gaming, self-harm, and developmental disabilities, which are increasingly prevalent among students. By hiring specialists and providing ongoing development opportunities, the competencies of the counseling staff could be enhanced.
- Challenges in Engaging Parents: Counselors emphasized the importance of greater coordination with families, but acknowledged that this can be difficult due to the lack of mandatory services, mistrust of school authority, and reluctance to engage in conversations about mental health. Implementing creative collaboration strategies could help bridge these gaps and improve parent involvement.
- Focused Awareness and Leadership: Students expressed confusion about the existing services and processes for accessing mental health care, highlighting the need for targeted psychoeducation. By prioritizing counseling through policies and effective leadership messaging, institutions can demonstrate their commitment to supporting students' well-being.

In conclusion, the interviews with school counselors and administrators provided valuable insights into the delivery, accessibility, and recommendations for enhancing Vietnamese school counseling programs. The identified themes highlight the importance of effective delivery, accessibility, and collaboration in providing quality counseling services to students.

DISCUSSION

The need for comprehensive improvements in addressing the low rates of psychological service utilization among Vietnamese students, as indicated by qualitative themes highlighting damaged community trust and limited capacities, is evident. To achieve this, there is a call for multidimensional enhancements that can effectively transform the current fragmented practices. One specific approach that holds great potential in addressing the escalating mental health concerns among Vietnamese adolescents is the implementation of a public health pyramid model. This model would incorporate universal prevention strategies, targeted group interventions, and intensive crisis responses, all tailored to the unique cultural context of Vietnam (Walker et al., 1996). By adopting such a model, it is hoped that the barriers to seeking and accessing mental health services will be overcome, leading to improved overall well-being for Vietnamese students.

Tier 1 implements a comprehensive approach to prioritize mental well-being throughout the entire school. This is achieved through classroom lessons that focus on teaching students coping strategies, effective communication in relationships, the importance of self-care, techniques for reducing stress, and readiness to seek help when needed. The aim is to equip every student with essential socio-emotional learning skills that will benefit them throughout their lives (Durlak et al., 2011). For at-risk groups who may be experiencing heightened levels of anxiety, attention difficulties, or aggression, such as those with learning disabilities or adolescent-onset conduct disorder, Tier 2 provides additional support. This comes in the form of cognitive-based group counseling sessions that specifically target distorted thinking patterns and maladaptive behaviors. These interventions are based on evidence-based protocols that are tailored to address the specific challenges faced by these groups (Abrams et al., 2022). Lastly, Tier 3 offers personalized psychotherapy for individuals who are in crisis-level situations. This could include individuals who engage in self-injury, refuse to attend school, or are at risk of suicide. The approach taken in Tier 3 involves a combination of medication, coordinated care involving the family, and trauma-focused treatment. The goal is to provide intensive support and intervention for individuals who require immediate and specialized attention (Erford, 2021).

The expansion of the Vietnamese counseling staff, along with the development of their clinical skills and cultural responsiveness, is necessary for the continuum of care. Additionally, public messaging campaigns that normalize seeking help are crucial (WHO, 2019). To address the shortage of counselors in underserved rural areas, similar to medical residencies, policy efforts should allocate funding to certify more counselors through subsidized graduate training and require them to work in these regions (Stephan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of creative virtual platforms, such as chatbots or teletherapy, can help bridge gaps in services during high-risk afterschool hours and reach a larger number of students (WHO, 2019). These platforms are currently being piloted globally and show promise in educating and assessing student issues (WHO, 2019).

District-level counseling coordinators play a crucial role in leading efforts to improve various aspects of the education system. These improvements range from implementing family engagement programs that dispel myths and reduce stigma surrounding mental health, to establishing strong partnerships with community behavioral health teams for effective data tracking and referral processes

(ASCA, 2022). Another important aspect of their work involves creating student advisory boards, organizing parent workshops, and involving student media in promoting the available counseling services. These initiatives help transform the counseling system from being opaque and hindered to becoming a transparent ecosystem that is valued by all stakeholders (Walker & Barry, 2021). By consistently implementing these initiatives, the potential of Vietnamese counseling can be fully realized, ultimately benefiting students who are experiencing stress, contemplating suicide, or facing other challenges. The collective efforts of district-level counseling coordinators promise to make a significant impact on students' well-being nationwide.

CONCLUSION

This study, which utilizes a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, sheds light on concerning disparities between the anticipated increase in mental health problems among adolescents in Vietnam and the scarce knowledge and utilization of school counseling services. The findings, derived from both statistical data and in-depth interviews with 150 students, as well as input from 15 frontline counselors and administrators, highlight fragmented and reactive approaches in addressing these issues. These approaches are further hindered by unsustainable counselor-student ratios that are nearing 1:1000, inadequate training in clinical skills, a lack of proactive mental health promotion policies, and the persistent stigma surrounding seeking care for mental health concerns. These results highlight the urgent necessity and moral obligation for educational leaders to enhance the capabilities, communication, and support systems of school counseling. It is crucial to implement legislation and allocate resources to certify more professionals specializing in fields such as addiction counseling, sexual identity, learning disabilities, and grief treatment. This expansion of expertise would align with the increasing risks faced by students. At the district level, dedicated coordinators can take the lead in implementing progressive initiatives, including the development of comprehensive well-being curricula for the entire school and establishing partnerships with external organizations to ensure continuous access to treatment.

Transforming societal perceptions of counseling requires the implementation of consistent multimedia campaigns that emphasize its role in fostering personal growth and portray seeking help during difficult times as an act of resilience. To ensure sustained engagement, it is essential to employ dynamic strategies such as regular check-ins with peer leaders, workshops for parents, and integrating virtual platforms into traditional counseling approaches to prevent individuals from reverting to isolation. Additionally, implementing comprehensive policies that prioritize access to counseling services and support ongoing program evaluation and improvement are crucial for bringing about positive systemic change. To truly make a difference, Vietnam must approach counseling from various angles, considering socioemotional factors, human resources, administrative aspects, and public opinion. By doing so, counseling can evolve from being a supplementary service to an integrated continuum that effectively nurtures every student's developmental journey towards thriving. However, progress can only be achieved by acknowledging the current limitations and bravely allocating the necessary resources and envisioning the immense potential of counseling in shaping the long-term life trajectories of young people.

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