

Perspectives of Counselors on the Mental Health Needs of Intermediate Level Public School Children: Implications for a Preventive Mental Health Program

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Abstract

This paper explored the mental health concerns of intermediate level public school children (Grades 4-6) from the perspectives of the school guidance counselors. The objective of this research was to know and understand the issues of the students in the public schools, as it will have an impact on the development of a preventive mental health program for this target group. The perspectives of the guidance counselors were deemed as very important because they are the ones who directly deal and help with the non-academic concerns of students in the school setting. In the conduct of this study, the following were utilized: focused group discussion with counselors/guidance teachers; data from two school divisions in Metro Manila on the concerns of Grades 4-6 students for school year 2013-2014; and a devised needs assessment questionnaire for guidance counselors that quantitatively measured their perception of the frequency and severity of the students' mental health concerns. Findings showed that from the perspectives of the guidance counselors, bullying was the most frequent mental health concern reported by Grades 4-6 students. On the other hand, absenteeism and family problems had deeper and more negative effects on the students. In order to have a more holistic and grounded mental health program for intermediate level students, it was recommended

to also conduct a needs assessment for Grades 4-6 students and their parents because these two groups are important stakeholders in the development of the mental health program. Interventions that will be provided must also involve not only the children but the parents, guidance counselors, and teachers as well.

Keywords: Children's mental health, guidance counselors, mental health, preventive mental health program

Introduction

Childhood health does not only constitute physical health, but even more importantly, the aspect of mental health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as not just the absence of disease, but a state of well-being wherein one realizes his/her own strengths and potentials, is able to cope with the normal stresses of life, and can contribute to his/ her community ("WHO | Mental health: a state of well-being," 2014). In the area of children's mental health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) basically adheres to WHO's definition as it describes mentally healthy children as those who are able to reach developmental and emotional milestones, can learn healthy social skills and coping with problems, have positive quality of life, and can function well at home, in

school, and in their communities (Perou, Bitsko, Blumberg, Pastor, Ghandour, Gfroerer, ... Huang, L. N. 2013). New evidence shows that childhood mental health problems have much larger impacts than do childhood physical health problems on four critical areas of socioeconomic status as an adult: education, weeks worked per year, individual earnings, and family income (Delaney & Smith, 2012). Therefore, poor childhood health is a factor that may lead to a below average socioeconomic status when the child reaches adulthood. In order to reduce levels of mental health problems in children, interventions need to begin early, prior to the development of significant symptomatology and efforts must be geared towards reaching children that do not have ready access to treatment (Greenberg, Domitriovich, & Bumbarger, 2000). Studies show that a number of mental health issues have affected children and youth in the recent past. These include depression, attention disturbances, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Puolakka, Haapasalo-Pesu, Klikkala, Astedt-Kurki, & Paavilainen, 2013). A Philippine Mental Health Association (PMHA) study on the mental health of the Filipino youth revealed that adolescent respondents were mostly sad and had a negative outlook of the future (2009).

By far, the most rampant mental health concern of children and adolescents especially in schools where they spend most of their daytime is that of bullying. This issue further leads to the development of other mental health concerns. Bullyingstatistics.org (2013), citing makebeatsnotbeatdown.org and olweus.org found that throughout the United States, 282,000 students monthly are physically attacked in secondary schools, 56% have seen bullying in various forms, 71% have identified bullying as an on-going problem, 90% of 4th through 8th graders disclose being victims of bullying, 160,000 children stay home from school daily due to fear of bullying, 15% of all school absenteeism is due to fear of being

bullied, and 1 of every 10 students drop out of school because of recurrent bullying. Given the magnitude of the problems of children in school, it is crucial that these are appropriately addressed right where the problems are manifested. In the Philippines, particularly in the public elementary school system, the guidance counselors (or "guidance teachers" in the absence of licensed guidance counselors in a school) are the primary providers of mental health services to the students and perform various services such as interviewing, counseling, referral, parent consultation, and other duties and responsibilities pertinent to address the mental health concerns of children in the public schools. It is in this light that this research is being conducted.

Objectives

The aim of this research is to gather data from the guidance counselors regarding the issues and concerns of intermediate level public school children, in order to have a basis for the development of a preventive mental health program for this group. As the front-liners in responding to the different mental health concerns of children in schools, guidance counselors are in the best position to provide data as to the most common problems that affect these children. Their status in the school set up inherently capacitates them to be able to deliver interventions that can help address these problems.

Methods

Participants

Participants of this study are guidance counselors or "guidance teachers" (academic teachers that have been assigned to perform guidance counselor duties in a particular school) who handle Intermediate Level public school children (Grades 4-6 students). For purposes of uniformity, participants of this study will be called

guidance counselors. Guidance counselors from two school divisions in Metro Manila were targeted as respondents. There are 108 public elementary schools under these two school divisions and there is at least one guidance counselor in each school to handle the concerns of the students. Average ratio of guidance counselor to students is 1:2,500. Formal meetings were conducted and communications were sent to the appropriate authorities prior to the conduct of the study.

Instruments

The following were utilized in the conduct of this study:

(1) Summarized data from the two school divisions that showed the concerns of the Grades 4-6 students as reported to their guidance counselors for the academic year 2013-2014;

(2) Focused Group Discussion (FGD) sessions with selected guidance counselors from the two school divisions. A total of 14 guidance counselors were purposively selected, seven from each school division, with the criterion that they must have at least three years of experience as guidance counselors handling grades 4-6 students.

(3) A self-devised Needs Assessment Questionnaire (NAQ) – items of which were constructed from the results of the data from the school divisions and the FGD with the guidance counselors. The NAQ was judged and content validated in terms of clarity of instructions and soundness of the items by a total of five professionals – three guidance counselors and two clinical psychologists. Pilot testing was also conducted to five guidance counselors to ensure that the NAQ was understandable and clear. Distribution of the NAQ was done separately for the two school divisions. The administration and retrieval of the NAQ for one division were done during their general assembly, while electronic mail was used in the distribution and retrieval of the questionnaires in the other division. For the

NAQ, guidance counselor respondents should have at least one year of experience in their position. Otherwise, their questionnaire was discarded. From a total of 108 guidance counselors who handle Grades 4-6 public school children, 58 respondents qualified to be part of the NAQ survey. The fourteen guidance counselors who participated in the FGD and the other five with whom pilot testing was conducted were excluded in the administration of the NAQ. Demographic profile of the participants is discussed in the results section of this research.

Data Analysis

Data from the two school divisions regarding the most common problems/issues of Grades 4-6 students that were brought to the guidance counselors' attention were tallied, summarized and discussed in the results section of this paper. The summarized data became the basis for the questions that were used in the FGD sessions.

The following FGD questions were formulated: (1) What are the most common issues and concerns of your intermediate level (Grades 4-6) students? (2) What are the effects, if any, of these concerns on the students' mental health? (3) What are the strategies that you (guidance counselors) use in addressing these concerns? and, (4) What possible help do you need to be able to address the mental health concerns of your students? Responses to the FGD questions were recorded, encoded and analyzed for themes by two assistants and further analyzed by this researcher for common themes that emerged. The NAQ listed the most common mental health issues that beset the intermediate level public school students. The list was based on the summarized data from the two school divisions, FGD results, and from related literature. The list of concerns were clustered into the following: (1) Bullying; (2) Vices; (3) Family concerns; (4) Sexual-related concerns; (5) Truancy; (6) Petty

crimes; (7) Others. These concerns were rated by the guidance counselors using a 5-point scale in terms of (1) frequency (how often did they encounter the identified concerns of the students) and (2) severity (how serious was the effect of the identified concerns on the student). Frequency scale ranged from 1 -Never Occurring to 5 - Always Occurring. Severity scale ranged from No Effect (1) to Very Serious Effect (5).

Mean and standard deviation were computed for each item of the NAQ to determine the (a) frequency and (b) severity of the concerns of the students, from the point of view of their guidance counselors.

Results

Demographic Data

The 14 participants of the FGD sessions were all females, had at least three years of experience as guidance counselors, and were between the 29-50 years age range. All of them also had teaching experience prior to being assigned as guidance teachers of their respective schools.

Out of the 58 respondents of the NAQ, 47

were females, three were males, while eight did not indicate their gender. Thirty-nine were married, ten were single, and nine did not specify their civil status. Age of participants ranged from 27-63 years old: six respondents were within the 26-35 years, fifteen respondents were within 36-45 years, nineteen respondents belong to the 46-55 years range, and eight were 56 years or older. Ten did not indicate their age. Mean age was 47 years. As for the number of years of experience as a guidance counselor, 25 respondents are within their first to fifth year, 14 are within their sixth to tenth year of service, 7 are on their eleventh to fifteenth year, and 6 are more than sixteen years of service as guidance counselors. Six of the respondents did not indicate their years of experience.

Needs Assessment Questionnaire Results:

Table 1 shows the mean average ratings (and corresponding standard deviations) of the respondents for the items of the NAQ that received a rating of 2.60 or higher in the aspects of frequency or severity (or both).

Table 1: Mean Average Ratings and Standard Deviations for the NAQ Items

Items	Mean (Standard Deviation)	
	Frequency	Severity
<i>Bullying:</i>		
Verbal Bullying	3.37 (1.01)	2.85 (0.99)
Physical Bullying	2.97 (0.77)	2.69 (0.93)
<i>Family problems:</i>		
Lack of parental supervision	3.53 (1.03)	3.39 (1.17)
Parental separation	3.41 (0.87)	3.22 (1.21)
Living conditions (lack of space)	3.46 (0.87)	3.31 (1.12)
Family problems	3.72 (0.85)	3.61 (1.08)
<i>Truancy:</i>		
Absenteeism	3.83 (0.90)	3.71 (1.03)
Tardiness	3.17 (0.86)	2.96 (1.01)

Discussion

The following section discusses in detail the data obtained from the three tools that were used in the conduct of this study.

Summarized Data on the Reported Concerns of Intermediate Level Public School Children:

Data gathered from the two school divisions participating in this study showed that bullying was the most rampant mental health concern among children in the elementary level, particularly in the fourth to sixth grades. Among the three types of bullying (verbal, physical and cyberbullying) identified, verbal bullying was the most frequently reported. It also ranked highest in terms of the number of involved victims and offenders. Physical bullying ranked second, while cyberbullying reports were much fewer in number as compared to the other two types. Other student concerns that came out include involvement in vices (e.g., gambling, alcohol), crimes (i.e., theft, harassment and extortion from younger children), involvement in gangs, and truancy (i.e., cutting classes). There were very few reports of child abuse (physical), rape (incest), and bringing of pornographic materials in the classroom.

Focused Group Discussion with Guidance Counselors:

Responses of the guidance counselors to the FGD questions are discussed below, per item:

1) What are the most common issues of your intermediate level (Grades 4-6) students?

The consistent and overwhelming response of the guidance counselors in the FGD is “bullying” - both verbal and physical in nature. To a lesser extent, FGD participants also mentioned that some of their students engage in vices (e.g., gambling, smoking, use of marijuana). These seem to be related to the concern of truancy, usually committed by students who are chronologically

older than their regular classmates. Petty theft, extortion from children from the lower grades, involvement in fraternities or gangs, as well as sexual-related concerns such as masturbation and bringing of pornographic materials inside school premises also surfaced. The respondents connected the behavioral problems of the children to the lack of parental supervision and family problems that the students could not cope with, thereby acting out in school. This was likewise seen in the results of the NAQ.

2) What are the effects, if any, of these concerns on the students' mental health?

The participants responded in reference to bullying - the most frequently reported concern of students according to the guidance counselors in this FGD session. They replied that the children develop feelings of fear in going to school, to the point that some drop out to avoid being bullied again. This substantiates the findings of the study from Yale University revealing that about 160,000 children in the United States stay home instead of going to school for fear of being bullied. At the other extreme, FGD participants claim that there are also children who become bullies after being victims of bullying. They start joining gangs probably to have some sense of “security” that their gang members will be able to protect them. The guidance counselors also observed that some of the bullied victims who continue going to school manifest poor concentration, i.e., they tend to lose focus on their studies resulting to low academic standing. Furthermore, FGD participants reported that loss of appetite, lack of sleep, “change in behavior” (e.g., becoming quiet in school), and apparent low self-esteem were observed among student-victims of bullying.

3) What are the strategies that you (guidance counselors) use in addressing these concerns?

Responses of the guidance counselors can

basically be classified into three: (1) conducting seminars on bullying (for children and for parents); (2) conducting counseling sessions with the students (individual or group); and (3) empowering teachers, non-teaching staff, as well as administrators on their role in handling the non-academic concerns of the students. Admittedly though, these were being done sporadically. Many guidance counselors in the public schools also have teaching loads that take time away from their counseling duties. Given the average ratio of counselors to students of 1:2,500, and the other tasks assigned to them aside from their role as guidance counselors, it can be surmised that their responses to this FGD question may be more of the ideal scenario rather than what is actually happening in their respective schools. In fact, one guidance counselor requested that they be relieved from their teaching loads in order to focus on their duties as a guidance counselor.

In spite of time limitations and their other responsibilities in school, some of the guidance counselors mentioned using “positive techniques” such as greeting the students by telling them what is good in them at the start of the day and providing alternative tasks as proactive measures to prevent students from committing misconduct. The guidance counselors also admitted that they lack adequate information insofar as handling the specific concerns of the students.

4) What possible help do you need to be able to address the mental health concerns of your students?

The FGD participants consistently responded that there was a need to conduct seminars for teachers, parents, and even the counselors to help them learn more effective means of addressing student concerns. Group sessions with students in grades 4-6 were suggested too in order to strengthen their coping skills to face adversities in

their young life. More importantly, the guidance counselors also mentioned that they need more time to perform and focus on their counseling responsibilities.

From the perspectives of the guidance counselors who responded to the NAQ, the most pressing concerns of Grades 4-6 students in terms of prevalence and seriousness of the concern are: absenteeism, family problems, living conditions (e.g., lack of space at home), lack of parental supervision, and parental separation. This reveals that for the counselors who handle the concerns of the students, it is the issues in the family that deeply affect intermediate level students which further lead to other problems. Some FGD participants substantiated this by saying that children who have family problems at home tend to act out in school for lack of appropriate coping mechanisms to handle their concerns. Verbal and physical bullying, as well as tardiness were also highly rated by the respondents in terms of frequency, suggesting the high incidence of these concerns among Grades 4-6 students. While bullying may be prevalent based on the NAQ results, it appears that the guidance counselors do not see this concern to be as serious as compared to family problems in deeply affecting the mental health of students at these grade levels. Such finding may be interpreted in several ways: first, the commonness of bullying complaints from the students may have led the counselors to downplay its effect, unless there is concrete evidence of harm done to the bullied victim; second, the Anti-Bullying Law of the Philippines which is aimed at adopting and implementing policies to diminish, if not eradicate this concern in schools have likely helped the guidance counselors in mitigating its effect on the students. Absenteeism and tardiness had been found to be serious concerns among intermediate level students, apparently because these are a concrete manifestation of all the other major problems

previously discussed, i.e., family problems and bullying concerns may result in a child refusing to go to school (or to have a low motivation to go to school) thus affecting his/her academic performance as well as social relationships.

Conclusions

This study explored the mental health concerns of intermediate public school children from the perspectives of their guidance counselors. Results of the FGD with selected guidance counselors and reports of cases from the two school divisions in Metro Manila who participated in this study showed that bullying was a consistent mental health issue among students. There were likewise few but emerging concerns such as engaging in vices, petty crimes, and sexual-related issues (e.g., masturbation in the classroom) that need to be proactively addressed. While the Needs Assessment Questionnaire also showed bullying to be one of the major concerns of intermediate level students, the items on family problems and absenteeism yielded higher mean ratings in terms of frequency and severity of their effects on the students. These issues and concerns appear to be interconnected and therefore must be dealt with from a more holistic perspective, e.g., absenteeism may not be a problem in itself but may be an effect of bullying or family problems. Discussion with the guidance counselors showed that they have basic knowledge on how to address the issues of the students. Nevertheless, they expressed the need for more information, skills development and training so that they can be better equipped in addressing the mental health needs of the students. Guidance counselors also expressed the need to be relieved from their academic teaching loads to be able to focus more on their work as guidance counselors.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are

provided in light of the previous discussion and findings:

1) The prevalence and severity of the concerns of the students as revealed in this research, the huge counselor to student ratio in the public schools, and the other responsibilities that guidance counselors have in the school setting warrant the development of a preventive mental health program in schools that will help to collectively address student concerns before these worsen or intensify.

2) Results of the NAQ show that guidance counselors see the children's family problems as major contributors that affect the children's mental health. In light of this finding, a mental health program for intermediate level public school children must not only involve the children themselves, but must actively involve the parents as stakeholders. This can be done through seminars on positive parenting that will help in teaching parents (or guardians of the children) alternative approaches to parenting. In this regard, needs of the parents and the children within this level must be assessed in order to have a more grounded basis for a preventive mental health program in schools.

3) As children are the primary target recipients of the preventive mental health program in schools, it is recommended that activities be designed and implemented not only in separate sessions but more importantly, must be incorporated in their academic subjects. These activities must be geared towards building positive self-esteem, resilience, and learning of life skills that will help them cope with life's challenges.

4) Guidance counselors can be provided with regular skills building training and seminars that will teach them to handle specific areas of concern, particularly those that are related to the findings of this research.

5) Classroom teachers, on the other hand, may also be provided with orientation and

seminars on identifying students in their classrooms who may be showing early signs of stress, and consequently being able to refer them so that their issues may be appropriately addressed.

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