
Title	Pupil counselling in Singapore schools
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Source	3 rd International Conference in Counselling, 29-31 December 1992, Singapore

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Citation: Khoo, A., & Soong, C. (1992, December). *Pupil counselling in Singapore schools*. Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference in Counselling, Singapore.

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PUPIL COUNSELLING IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

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**Paper presented at the
Third International Conference in Counselling
held in Singapore from December 29-31, 1992**

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Pupil Counselling in Singapore Schools

by

Angeline Khoo and Cecilia Soong

Counselling before the Introduction of Pastoral Care

Concern for pupils' welfare has always been recognised as part and parcel of teaching. Before the introduction of Pastoral Care in the schools, teachers played an active part in what was known as "Pupil Welfare". This was often interpreted as providing for the basic needs of pupils, like the payment of school fees and textbooks, and coping with schoolwork. Teachers felt comfortable in these roles. However, the task of counselling was often left to teachers given the overall charge of "Pupil Welfare" rather than an integral aspect of every teacher's role. Pupils who were counselled were often those who had problems with their schoolwork or those who had been repeatedly misbehaving. Counselling then tended to play a secondary role to remedial work and discipline. Often, this was done only when the form teacher, the Pupil Welfare teacher and the discipline master had exhausted all means of handling misbehaving pupils.

Most teachers, who were not trained in basic counselling skills, tended to interpret counselling as the dispensation of advice -- often advice on study skills and time management. Counselling then was mainly *reactive* and conducted by form teachers and teachers in charge of discipline and Pupil Welfare, and when these failed, the vice-principal and the principal.

Referral

In some cases, pupils are sent for referral. Principals need parental consent before the child could be referred. They often face the difficult task of having to convince parents that professional help is needed for their child. Often, teachers are not in contact with the referral agency and there is no cooperation between the two. When the pupil is referred to the agency by the school, there is no motivation for the pupil to remain in counselling and the rate of non-attendance is high.

Government referral agencies are the Institute of Health, Child Psychiatric Clinic, and the Ministry of Education Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Unit. Some non-government organizations include Counselling and Care Centre, Singapore Children's Society and Students' Care Service.

Pastoral Care and the Training of Teachers

Pastoral Care was introduced in schools in 1988. In response to the demand for training of in-service teachers, the National Institute of Education, (then Institute of Education) developed two levels comprising eight modules of coursework -- level one (modules one to four) which covers basic counselling skills, group and career guidance, and level two (modules five to eight) which covers the development, implementation and management of a pastoral programme, more advanced counselling skills, psychological testing and research. Teachers who successfully completed these courses are awarded a Specialist Diploma in Guidance and Counselling. Response to these courses, especially level one modules, has been tremendously encouraging.

Pupil Counselling after the Introduction of Pastoral Care

The introduction of Pastoral Care and Career Guidance in the schools shifted the responsibility of counselling to the form teacher or the pastoral care tutor. One of the key aims of the pastoral care programme is to enhance the teacher-pupil relationship such that teachers are able to get to know each pupil better and consequently, help them maximise their potential. In other words, counselling began to adopt a more *proactive* and developmental approach. This one-to-one contact with pupils meant that teachers now have to see themselves playing a new role -- not merely as disseminators of knowledge but more of a guidance worker, mentor, confidant or surrogate parent.

Research Questions

Our exploratory study aims to gain an insight as to how these teachers react to these new demands and how they see their roles as counsellors and guidance workers. The following questions are addressed:

1. How do teachers rank the different roles of counselling (e.g. personal counselling, giving remedial help in studies) in terms of actual amount of time spent?
2. How are these roles of counselling ranked in terms of the ideal functions of a teacher-counsellor/guidance worker?
3. What advantages do teachers see in having the teacher perform the role of a counsellor as opposed to having a full-time school counsellor?
4. What are some of the difficulties teachers face as teacher-counsellors?

The Sample

We sampled teachers who attended our in-service courses in Pastoral Care. Fifty teachers from both levels of training, and who attended the modules on counselling were given the questionnaire. About 50 teachers have since completed all the eight modules. Table 1 gives the details of our sample.

The Questionnaire

There are two parts to our questionnaire. First, teachers were asked to rank from 1 to 10, in order of amount of actual time spent in different counselling roles, and in order of the ideal amount of time they would like to spend in these different counselling roles. Rankings above 7 were grouped as 'Low', rankings between 4 and 6 as 'Moderate' and rankings 3 and below as 'High'.

Next, teachers were asked to describe what they think are the advantages of having a teacher perform the role of a counsellor, and the difficulties of a teacher-counsellor in the school.

Table 1: Sex, Age, Educational level, Years of Teaching, Type of School and Level of Inservice Training

		NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
SEX	Male	7	14
	Female	43	86
	Total	50	100
AGE	Below 30	11	22
	Above 30	39	78
	Total	50	100
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	Non-graduates	29	58
	Graduates	21	42
	Total	50	100
YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	less than 10	16	32
	more than 10	34	68
	Total	50	100
TYPE OF SCHOOL	Primary	17	34
	Secondary	33	66
	Total	50	100
LEVEL OF NIE IN-SERVICE COURSE	Level 1: Modules 1-4	24	48
	Level 2: Modules 5-8	26	26
	Total	50	100

Findings

Ranking in Terms of Actual Amount of Time Spent

Personal counselling and giving remedial help were ranked highest in terms of actual amount of time spent. These were followed by giving academic guidance, staff consultation and parent contact. The percentages are given in Table 2.

Ranking in Terms of Ideal Time to be Spent

When asked to rank what they feel they should be spending more time on (i.e. ideal ranking) in their role as teacher-counsellors, the teachers ranked giving academic help (such as time management and learning skills), personal counselling, career counselling, group counselling and giving remedial help higher than the other roles of staff consultation, parent contact, referrals, conducting needs assessment and organizing guidance programmes. These percentages are given in Table 3.

Table 2: Ranking in terms of actual time spent in counselling

ROLES OF COUNSELLING (actual time spent)	Number ranked High	Percentage ranked High
1. Personal Counselling	20	66.7
2. Group Counselling	5	16.7
3. Parent Contact	10	30.0
4. Staff Consultation	12	40.0
5. Referrals	3	10.0
6. Conducting Needs Assessment	2	6.6
7. Organising Guidance Programmes	5	16.7
8. Career Counselling	2	6.6
9. Giving Remedial Help	20	66.7
10. Giving Academic Guidance	13	43.3

Table 3: Ranking in terms of ideal time spent in counselling

ROLES OF COUNSELLING (ideal time spent)	Number ranked High	Percentage ranked High
1. Personal Counselling	12	40.0
2. Group Counselling	11	36.7
3. Parent Contact	7	23.3
4. Staff Consultation	1	3.3
5. Referrals	5	16.7
6. Conducting Needs Assessment	6	20.1
7. Organising Guidance Programmes	3	10.0
8. Career Counselling	12	40.0
9. Giving Remedial Help	10	33.3
10. Giving Academic Guidance	16	53.3

Difference between the Actual and the Ideal

Is there a discrepancy between the actual and the ideal?

Although in terms of the ideal amount of time spent, a lower percentage (40% compared with 66.7%, a percentage drop of 26.7%) of teachers ranked personal counselling as high, teachers still felt that personal counselling is an important aspect of their role. However, ideally, it appears that they would like to spend less time on it. With regard to staff consultation and giving of remedial help, teachers indicated that they would like to spend much less time on these (percentage drop of 36.7% and 33.4% respectively). Instead, they seem to want more career counselling (a percentage increase of 33.4%). With regard to group counselling, teachers reported that they would like to have more of this, (there is a percentage difference of 20%) but this difference is not significant. The difference in mean rankings between the actual and the ideal amounts of time spent and the levels of significant differences is tabulated in Table 4.

Table 4. Difference in Ranking between the Actual and the Ideal Amount of Time Spent in Counselling

ROLES OF COUNSELLING	Mean Actual ⁺	Mean Ideal ⁺	Difference	PR > T
1. Personal Counselling	2.17	3.57	-1.40	0.020*
4. Staff Consultation	3.17	6.20	-3.03	0.0001**
8. Career Counselling	6.87	4.40	+2.47	0.004**
9. Giving Remedial Help	3.30	4.23	-1.80	0.016*

+ A smaller mean is indicative of higher ranking.

Possible Explanations

It can be expected that teachers would prefer to see a lesser need for personal counselling and the need to give remedial help as this would mean fewer personal as well as academic problems. However, they still see these roles as important, hence the high ideal ratings. Regarding staff consultation, less time spent on this could mean less ambiguity in the nature of problems presented, hence ideally, teachers did not rank this role high. The greater need for career counselling can be expected as schools become increasingly aware of the need for career guidance, especially after the introduction of the Pastoral Care and Career Guidance.

Differences in Ranking of Actual Amount of Time Spent between Educational level, Type of School and Level of In-service Course Attended.

The rankings were also analyzed for differences regarding educational level of the teachers (graduates and nongraduates), the level of in-service training attained (levels 1 and 2), type of school (primary and secondary) and years of teaching experience (more and less than 10 years). Other variables of age and sex were not considered because of the small size of the sample.

The educational level of teachers seemed to make a difference with regard to the amount of time spent on needs assessment -- graduate teachers seemed to spend less time on this than

nongraduate teachers. Primary school teachers spent less time on career counselling compared to secondary school teachers. Teachers who have had level one in-service training in Pastoral Care seemed to spend less time in giving of academic guidance. The results of this analysis is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Differences in Educational Level of Teachers, Type of School and Level of In-service Course attended for Ranking of Actual amount of time spent in Counselling.

Roles of Counselling (Actual Amount of Time Spent)			Mean	Difference	PR > F
Needs Assessment	Educational level	Graduate	7.18	1.61	0.038*
		Nongraduate	5.57		
Career Counselling	School	Primary	8.44	2.25	0.022*
		Secondary	6.19		
Giving Academic Guidance	Course	Level 1	4.63	2.86	0.009**
		Level 2	1.77		

Possible Explanations

Graduate teachers teach in secondary schools and it is in these school that there is a greater emphasis on academic work, compared to that in the primary schools. This could account for the fact that these teachers do not see the need to spend time conducting needs assessments in order to ascertain what the pupils' other needs are. Also, in the secondary school setup, needs assessments are usually conducted by the heads of levels or Pastoral Care coordinators. In the primary school, behaviours tend to be more easily observable, and pupils are more ready to talk about their problems to their teachers.

Primary school teachers spend less time in career counselling. This can be expected as many teachers feel that pupils have many years of education to go before deciding on a career. However, careers education is being introduced even at the primary level.

Teachers who have undergone Level 2 in-service training spend more time on giving academic guidance than teachers who have undergone Level 1 in-service training. The giving of academic guidance involves the teaching of study skills, time management and decision-making skills, and these teachers are seen as more competent. The moderate and high ranking is again indicative of the emphasis placed on academic achievement.

Differences in Ranking of Ideal Amount of Time to be Spent between Educational level, Type of School and Level of Inservice Course Attended.

With regard to how teachers feel about the ideal time they should be spending in these different roles of counselling, graduate teachers placed a lower emphasis on parent contact. Teachers who have had Level 2 in-service training ranked group counselling lower than teachers with Level 1 training. These teachers also placed less importance to staff consultation. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6.

Possible Explanations

Nongraduate teachers are in the primary schools and can therefore be expected to see more parents than teachers in the secondary schools. Hence, they indicated that they would like to have more contact with parents. Teachers who have undergone Level 2 seem to prefer less group counselling. One possible explanation could be that they are more aware of the difficulties involved and the level of skills needed for this. They also preferred less staff consultation. This could be because they are more confident of themselves and also more aware of the issue of confidentiality.

Table 6: Differences in Educational Level of Teachers, Type of School and Level of In-service Course attended for Ranking of Ideal amount of time spent in Counselling.

Roles of Counselling (Ideal Amount of Time Spent)			Mean	Difference	PR > F
Parent Contact	Educational Level	Graduate	4.93	1.57	0.04*
		Nongraduate	3.36		
Group Counselling	Course	Level 2	5.24	2.68	0.0007**
		Level 1	2.56		
Staff Consultation	Course	Level 2	6.93	1.37	0.04*
		Level 1	5.56		

Advantages of the Teacher as a Counsellor

Teachers report that from the constant contact with students, they are in an advantageous position to build good rapport with them. With trust and confidence in the teacher the student respects, he/she would feel more at ease during the less formal counselling contacts between them than would be the case with a school counsellor. Moreover, with the regular contact, the teacher-counsellor is able to obtain first hand knowledge of how the student is behaving. The teacher-counsellor is then able to observe the student's behaviour more accurately in different situations. This enables the teacher-counsellor to identify students with problems. Besides, with direct feedback from these daily class interactions, it is easier for the teacher-counsellor to monitor the student's performance too. Information of how the student is relating to others can be gathered from direct observations.

In summary, teacher-counsellors have background knowledge of their students, their family background, self-concept, strengths and weaknesses and academic achievement within easy reach, and this augurs well with their work as counsellors.

As part of the school setup, the teacher-counsellor is there all the time which speaks well of his/her availability, especially to give immediate help if the student's problem requires prompt action. In addition, if the teacher-counsellor needs to gather data from other sources like other students, or he/she needs to consult other teachers, they are readily available. One teacher-counsellor comments

that 'the teacher is a constant source of reminder and an inspiration to students', that there is someone there who is available to help them through their difficult times.

Being so much part of the school, the teacher- counsellor would know the climate of the school better than a school counsellor. Together with the support of the school and its provision of resources, teacher-counsellors can thrive in a conducive environment providing counselling services to the students. As opposed to a formal counselling set-up, teachers doing counselling need not subscribe to fixed times; in fact, counselling can be incorporated into the pastoral care programme or integrated into class lessons.

With regard to parental expectations, some teacher-counsellors highlight a positive relationship as parents trust teachers and would entrust their children's situations and problems into the hands of a caring and skilled teacher-counsellor who knows their children well.

Difficulties Faced by the Teacher-Counsellor

From the perspective of their students, teacher-counsellors think that students may not open up to them because they are part of the school system. A related difficulty cited is that students may perceive the teacher-counsellor role as conflicting - being understanding and empathic on the one hand and a disciplinarian on the other. There is also the fear that teacher- counsellors will expose their weaknesses in class. When students do go to teachers for counselling, they may become over-friendly and over-familiar when good rapport has been established with the teacher-counsellor, and this may be detrimental to the counselling process. Teacher-counsellors also fear that students may revert to their old ways after counselling, thus injecting a sense of guilt and disappointment in the teacher-counsellors.

With regard to time constraints, teacher-counsellors feel that some students may not turn up, or that it is difficult to arrange a time for counselling as students have a myriad of activities to attend to after school. These may range from ECAs to remedial/tuition classes. Students may also perceive a stigma attached to going to a teacher for counselling, that they are 'problem cases' if they see a teacher-counsellor.

Recognising that their first role is that of teaching, teacher-counsellors find that beyond their teaching demands and other responsibilities, counselling is indeed time-consuming. Teacher-counsellors express that they have to do a lot of background work, especially if the student is not in their class. Follow-up work also entails a lot of the teacher-counsellor's time. Stress levels would mount even greater when the teacher-counsellor encounters 'difficult' cases. Thus, coupled with too much administrative work, one teacher-counsellor laments that she is 'too bogged down with work and not people'. Having to wear two or more hats, some teacher-counsellors feel that there is no total dedication and commitment in performing the counsellor's role. Besides a lack of time, teacher-counsellors also express a lack of training and preparation and experience in dealing with certain problems.

When involved in counselling, teacher-counsellors also find that it is difficult to switch mode as they feel that the relationship between teachers and students is largely a directive one. With pre-conceived ideas gathered from their previous interactions with students, one teacher-counsellor's concern is that he/she may be subjective and prejudiced in the counselling relationship. Another issue cited is that the teacher-counsellor may become emotionally involved with the student which may retard the growth of the counselling relationship. Teacher-counsellors are also aware that other students may perceive that they are showing favouritism to the students being counselled as they are spending more time with those students.

As to the role of parents in counselling, teacher-counsellors state their indifference and non-support as a source of difficulty they have to encounter in their counselling efforts with their students. At the school level, the large enrolment is identified as one of the difficulties teacher-counsellors face. In addition, the impersonal nature of large schools hinder the development of a 'counselling environment' conducive to caring and sharing. Besides the lack of proper facilities, especially a counselling room to ensure privacy, teacher-counsellors also note that there is also a lack of support from the administration to take on counselling work with the students. This is sometimes seen in the way that counselling is being superseded by the principal's disciplinary intervention. Moreover, some principals have the myopic view that counselling is only for students who present disciplinary problems. The administration's lack of support can also be surmised by the lack of recognition given to the teacher-counsellor's status. Besides the lack of recognition, there is also no time slot allocated to counselling. As the amount of time spent in counselling is great, teacher-counsellors vouch for off-loading by way of using the time devoted for ECAs for counselling.

Teacher-counsellors also encounter the difficulty of colleagues who find the concept of teacher-counsellor too new an idea to accept, and thus have passed unfavourable remarks about the role of the teacher-counsellor. Teacher-counsellors also face the difficult situation where they conflict with colleagues as to what is the best method to handle students. When colleagues have to be consulted, teacher-counsellors have to grapple with the problem of lack of confidentiality among their colleagues. Other colleagues also tend to take advantage of the existence of teacher-counsellors and refer their students to them unhesitatingly without first trying to handle their students' problems themselves. One teacher-counsellor summed up the difficulties faced by the teacher-counsellor so aptly, ' I feel awful - like a harassed teacher trying to do good and feeling horribly stretched'.

Conclusion

Counselling in the schools is no easy option, but teacher-counsellors are not unwilling to take on this role. However, a lot can be done to help them to become more effective and less stressed. Administration should give recognition to the importance of their role. This can be translated into such actions as giving them less administrative work and providing them with more opportunities for training