

Counselling services for gifted students in Malaysia: A qualitative exploration

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Abstract

This research is conducted to study in detail issues regarding the perception and experience of local gifted and talented students towards guidance and counselling service in their school environment. Research sample includes 30 students from the first and second cohort in a 'lab' school that provides a special-need education programme for the gifted and talented students. This qualitative study combines focus group and in-depth interview as data collection method, and the data is analysed in detail using NVivo version 10.0. Findings show that the issues affecting the local gifted and talented students are related to their career and academic pathway as well as psychosocial being. Their uncertainties have encouraged them to seek for guidance and counselling services. Findings also indicate that the students' perception and experience on the guidance and counselling service in general are made of both positive and negative reactions. The overall findings are discussed in the context of suggestions for best practices and differentiated school counselling services that cater towards local gifted and talented student's population.

Keywords: Counselling, Gifted Students, Malaysian Education, Qualitative Study

1. Introduction

Generally, students' diversity is reflected through their differences in many individual aspects including personality, learning style and need, knowledge and cognitive ability influenced by many social factors and family background such as gender, ethnic and culture, socioeconomic status and learning ability [1, 2, 3]. Students' diversity is also explained as a population of students that can be categorised into groups differentiated by learning abilities, which cover those with one or more learning disabilities, normal or average, including students regarded as gifted and talented [4]. In the context of educational pedagogy, Smith, Ewing and Le Cornu [5] stated that the aspect of students' diversity need to be addressed in the planning process of effective teaching and learning, especially for those with low aptitude including the special need group such as the gifted students.

However, the question that should be raised is how far the counselling service provided in the national education system is able to cater to the needs of students with diverse needs. The diversity that exists among students (from those with learning problems to those who are gifted) requires a counsellor who is able to accommodate to the different needs of students. Those with learning problems is considered as a low academic performance group with high percentage of failure in the school system [6]. Thus, the counselling service provision for this group of students should be focused on motivating and encouraging them to continue their effort in their study other than equipping them with effective study skills.

The population of gifted students, on the other hand, is a group in the diverse students' entity that possesses not only their own unique personality but also require their own study needs which

are different from special needs or normal students. Various research in gifted education field [7, 8, 9, 10, 11] found that this special group of students require a different counselling approach including career counselling at a younger age compared to the normal students. They also face unique psychological issues such as asynchronous emotional development with their age, perfectionism, and anti-social behaviour issues [6, 12]. Even though counselling service is acknowledged as a vital support system for any particular gifted education programme [13, 14], the fact is, academic studies that emphasise on the implementation of such programme are limited and seldom conducted [15, 16, 17, 18]. As a consequence, the population of gifted students require a differentiated and specialized form of counselling service due to their unique personality and issues associated to them [19, 20, 21, 22].

In the local context, since the gifted education has not really been recognised as a mainstream group in the national education system, studies on the implementation of counselling service on this students' population in school are limited. However, the basic data on the existence of such counselling service to fulfil the needs of this group of students in the school environment are relevant [6, 23, 24, 25, 26]. Realising the fact that the counselling service available in the local education environment only focuses on the general students' population without taking into consideration the diversity aspect, this research was planned to study the best practices in the counselling service catered towards the gifted and talented students' population in Malaysia. It was initiated with the understanding that gifted education, even if it was not a new phenomenon, is now regarded as a new paradigm in the country's education system. Thus, the support structure (such as counselling) to this new education dimension should also be developed so that it would be ready when it is needed. Three main objectives underlining this exploratory qualitative research were to:

- (a) study the pattern of issues faced by gifted students in a school environment.
- (b) examine the gifted students' overall experience towards the counselling services provided in school.
- (c) analyse gifted students' perception on the counselling services provided in school.

2. Methodology

This study was an exploratory case study phase – in a research project using mixed-method approach – conducted to study in-depth the phenomenon of counselling services implementation in school, based on the perspective of gifted students. Specific design used was exploratory multiple case study-single site to enable the researcher to understand the complex problem or issue in a larger context in detail manner [27, 28, 29].

Data was collected through focus group interviews and in-depth interviews using a structured interview protocol as research instrument. The study sample was made of 30 gifted students of the first and second cohort in PERMATApintar™ Education Programme, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Out of the 30 students, 24 of them had been randomly selected in a systematic way to be in the focus group respondents (three groups with eight students in a group), while six of them would participate in the in-depth interview session (every focused group background would be represented by two respondents). The data collected was obtained from the interview sessions and analysed using NVivo version 10.0 to generate the themes used to answer the research questions developed based on the three main research objectives.

3. Findings and discussion

The first objective of this research was to ascertain the variety of issues faced by the gifted students and what topics were normally discussed with their counsellor in school. In general, respondents in this study displayed inclination towards selective sharing of issues with the school counsellor. Data from the interviews with the focus group and in-depth interviews revealed respondents' comfort in issues related to main domains namely career path and academic matters. The scenario was clearly seen in the excerpts from the two interviews conducted as transcribed here:

- (a) "I can share with counsellor matters regarding academic, career and school environment, but not personal issues, I guess ..."
- (b) "the thing I always discuss with the counsellor was about career path since you need to think about the future ... the counsellor has a test that will help us determine what course to take in university later ... second issue I feel comfortable to discuss with my counsellor is study matters ... usually, the teaching method ... there was once I got a 'C' in my subject, I went straight to the counsellor ..."
- (c) "I'm ready to discuss with the counsellor my career path because he seems to have the experience and knowledge ... at the same time, I can also share about my academic and school matters ..."
- (d) "I prefer to talk about professional matters ... career, academic ... study skills, personal ... family matters not really, especially with male counsellor, should be fine with female counsellor ..."

Even though respondents tend to discuss more on both career development and academic, issues on social and psycho-emotional were also raised by some as seen in the following comments:

- (a) "I talked about problems concerning my friends, misunderstanding that happened, poor cooperation from them, things like that ..."
- (b) "the first subject I talked to my counsellor was issues with my friends ... as usual, feelings hurt, especially close friends, have to get help from third party ..."
- (c) "I told the counsellor problems about my self-confidence and also about missing my family..."

- (d) "I've been given counselling for my weak study performance, stress on study ... being counselled, adding more stress ..."

In conclusion, the common issues and comfortable topics shared by the gifted and talented students (in this study) with their school counsellors can be categorised into primary and secondary issues, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The second study objective was developed to discover the respondents' overall experience in the implementation of counselling services in their school. Collectively, the feedback received from both interviews reflected respondents' variety of experience towards the school counselling service and counsellors who deal with them. Specifically, the multiple experiences can be detailed in the following aspects:

- (a) limited involvement
- (b) criticism towards the service
- (c) tendency of not choosing a counsellor
- (d) mixed feelings dealing with counsellors (positive and negative)

In the experience of limited involvement in school counselling service, respondents among others mentioned, "I have no issue and seldom involve in any form of problem in school, thus there is no need to meet the counsellor ...", "as long as I can remember for the three-year duration in lower secondary school, I only met the counsellor twice ... once on a disciplinary issue, and the other one I could not remember ...", and "I don't really involve in counselling in my school ... I wasn't interested with the programmes organised by the guidance and counselling unit in school ... there was a programme, after PMR that I considered best". In addition, there were comments criticising the counselling service uttered through opinions such as, "I think majority of the counselling programme especially seminar or talk is boring ... you listen if you want to, you can sleep as well", "counselling programmes are almost alike, routine topics repeated, self-esteem, self-esteem, leadership, leadership, so boring ... most students busy themselves with their own things, I'm not too sure the objective of school counselling really", and "the service is almost non-existence ... counsellor help organise for school trips, performances, competitions ... I went to see the counsellor regarding my scholarship".

In the context of inclination towards sharing problems with other people, respondents gave comments such as, "I don't like to talk about my problems with other people, I prefer to keep it to myself ... but if I'm asked to share, I would choose a close friend ...", "I seldom share my problems with others ... if I did, it would only be with my friends ...", and "I don't share with anyone, I will be my own judge and try to solve the problem on my own, if it cannot be solved ... let it be ... if I still need help I will go to my friends, close ones ... no parents' involvement as I don't want to trouble them, counsellor is not in my list ..." and it showed respondents never made counsellor as the main choice. This scenario could be triggered by their experience in dealing with their school counsellors as detailed in Figure 2.

The third study objective was to explore the overall respondents' perception of the implementation of counselling services in their school. The qualitative response received showed an indication of varied overall perceptions by respondents, almost similar to the overall experience of the counselling service that they had gone through. In detail, the variety of perceptions mentioned covered the following aspects:

- (a) perception of ineffective service
- (b) improvement on the service
- (c) criticism towards counsellor
- (d) conceptions on idealistic and not idealistic counsellor

In the aspect of the perception on less efficient and need-to-improve school counselling service, respondents' perception on this matter included comments such as, "as far as I know, counselling is for those who face disciplinary problems, problematic students ... a place to express your feelings ... sometimes cannot even solve the problem ...", "don't feel right to go for counsel-

ling ... normally only problematic students would go for counselling ... counselling in school is not that active, counsellor is bias ...”, “many people said that counselling should help you, but I still feel that meeting my school counsellor would put me into the group of problematic students ... so, I did not go for counselling, I feel that I don’t need any help ...”, “counselling programmes should be varied ... the core is the same, but the events should be diverse to avoid boredom and attract students’ participation ...”, and “the cliché program should not be repeated, use a different approach or new idea”.

Besides that, respondents’ perception towards the counsellors can also be understood from their critical comments such as, “I think a

school counsellor’s job is very easy, I can see a counsellor organising an event, I think anybody can be a counsellor in school ...”, “I think a school counsellor cannot even solve a single problem ... not at all, I think I can solve all problems by myself ...”, “if I have a problem, I prefer to talk to teachers close to me ... if I see a counsellor, he could only listen ...”, and “I think that a counsellor does not really involve in the school system, for instance, he organises the mentor-mentee program, but he is not a mentor himself”. In relation to that, they also form a very clear perception on the idealistic and non-idealistic characteristics that a counsellor should possess when rendering his service to the population of gifted and talented students, as shown in Table 1.

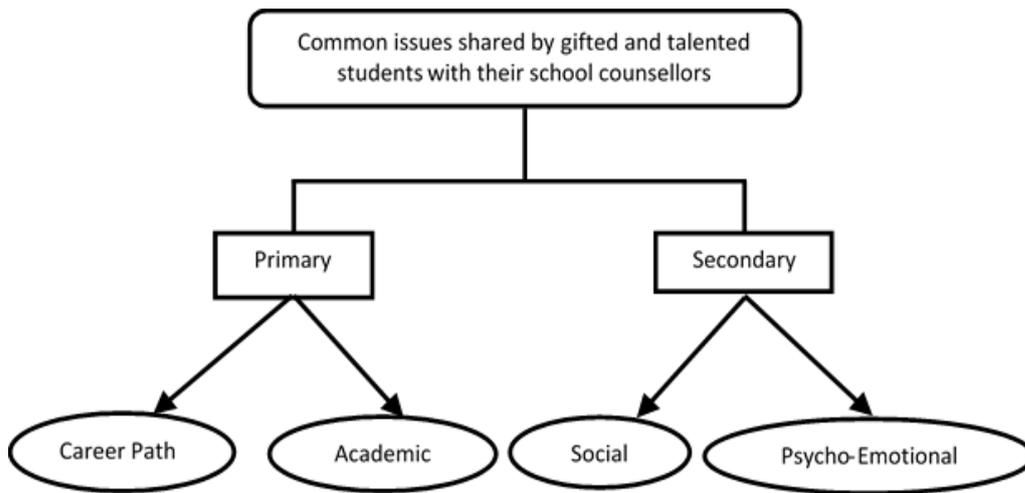


Fig. 1: Types of issues usually shared by gifted students with their school counsellors

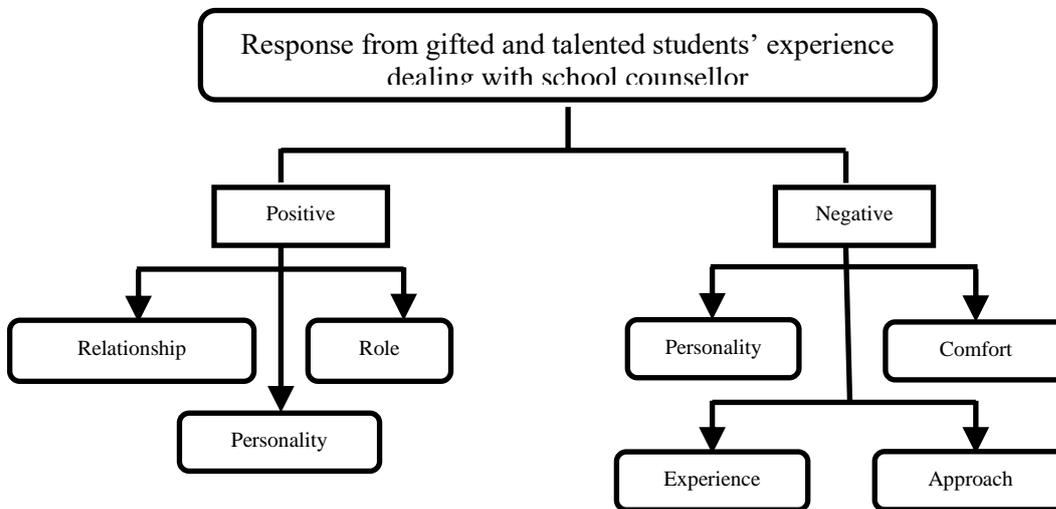


Fig. 2: Response from gifted students’ experience dealing with school counsellors

Table 1. Characteristics of Counsellor Based on Respondents’ Perception

Ideal Characteristics	Non-Ideal Characteristics
Friendly, sporting, and understand students	Cynical, judgmental, tend to label people
Knowledgeable and up-to-date	Cannot keep secret
Good communication and interaction skill	Bias and discriminative
Having sense of humour	Lack self-confidence
Caring, humble, modest	Too serious and strict, fierce, and emotional
Easily contacted, not limited to office hour	Tend to procrastinate and be ignorant

4. Conclusion

Findings in this study showed that polar of issues facing the gifted students in academic environment can be categorised into four main domains: (1) career, (2) academic, (3) social, and (4) psycho-emotion. Generally, classification of issues stated here are consistent with other findings that have been discovered in a similar context [14, 15, 17, 30, 31]. Since career and academic issue were highlighted as the two main domains, thus counselling service catering towards the students' population should be focused on career development and academic guidance. Other than that, any other form of counselling programme to meet the needs of this population of students has to take into consideration other aspects such as their experience and perception as discovered in this study. As a result, this finding would open up a path for future research that could explore various issues related to the school guidance and counselling of gifted students in Malaysia.

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