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## THE VIABILITY OF PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELLING PROGRAMS FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

Abu Yazid Abu Bakar<sup>1\*</sup>, Ahmed Hamdi Aissa<sup>2</sup>, Salleh Amat<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

 [yazid3338@ukm.edu.my](mailto:yazid3338@ukm.edu.my)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5811-7514>

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

 [ahmedhamdiaissa@gmail.com](mailto:ahmedhamdiaissa@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0000-0000>

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

 [sallehba@ukm.edu.my](mailto:sallehba@ukm.edu.my)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5687-3041>

\*Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to explore the viability of psychoeducational school counseling programs for refugee students' population in Malaysia. It is done by generally synthesizing the information gathered from literatures on the refugee phenomenon in Malaysia, the nature of psychoeducational programs provision in school settings, and the evolution of school counseling programs in Malaysia. The viability of psychoeducational school counseling programs for refugee students' population in Malaysia was evaluated and discussed by integrating all the information gathered from this literature review analyses. The literatures' syntheses provided baseline data to understand the possibility to establish appropriate psychoeducational and counseling programs for refugee school students in Malaysia.

### Keywords:

Counselling, Psychoeducation, School, Refugee, Malaysia



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## Introduction

Refugees' experiences in Malaysia are complex and divergent. By the end of February 2020, there was around 178,990 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia, including around 46,520 children below the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2020). Since Malaysian government schools do not offer admission to refugee children, most of them go to UNHCR partially funded learning centres and schools or its' implementing partners. These schools provide basic education through subjects like Mathematics, English, Science and Computer skills. They are usually run by either NGOs or community organizations who charge minimal fees and rely a lot on donations besides UNHCR funds (Koizumi & Hoffstaedter, 2015).

A number of studies have reported the positive impact of the school counselling activities, given they are facilitated by competent and professional school counsellors. School counselling activities have remarkably reduced mental illness symptoms among school students (Hassan, 2015). They also helped students suffering from family problems, adjust and improve (Rose & Rose, 1992). School counselling programs do not only cater to the mental health and emotional issues of students; besides, they make sure students achieve their objectives behind going to schools which is to perform academically and intellectually well. In fact, academic issues have been the main concern of the modern trends in school counselling where counsellors make sure, they are the ultimate goal of any activity they plan. That is why we find elementary students' academic achievement was positively influenced by the provision of such services (Sink & Stroh, 2003). School counsellors do not merely provide remedial services, they besides play an important role in preventing the occurrence of behavioural, personal as well as social problems through direct and indirect intervention. Direct interventions are the ones provided to the students, whereas indirect interventions are the ones aimed at people around the students like management staff, teachers, and community at large, as providing them support will result in positive impact on students.

The outcome of such efforts was the prevention of many problems, such as students drop out from school (Kaufman, Klein & Frase, 1999). Just like personal, social, and academic concerns are important to school counsellor, we find that career related matters form a critical part of school counselling programs where links between student's academics and future career are established and strengthened. Many studies were carried out in this regard and found that effective career counselling helped high school students with their college choices. In general, school counselling programs are of substantial assistance to the school leadership in managing school issues and achieving school's educational goals, as it was reported that schools which implement full guidance and counselling programs have a range of privileges over other schools, their students earn higher grades, and they have more positive climate that helped students feel safe in the school and reduce classroom disruption (Lapan, Gysbers & Sun, 1997).

## Literature Review

To evaluate the viability of psychoeducational school programs for refugee students in Malaysia, it is essential to understand two important phenomena from literatures, namely the: (1) refugee education in Malaysia; and (2) school counselling evolution in Malaysia.

### *Refugee Education in Malaysia*

Education plays an important role in equipping refugees with skills of peace building and conflict resolution that would definitely improve their life conditions as well as their families'

ones and achieve some economic and social development (Sinclair, 2002). Similarly, Demirdjian (2012) argued that child refugees are entitled to the right of education just like any other children in their country of origin. Hence, education that is provided in such a situation is considered of high importance, it protects children well-being, creates learning opportunities, and nurtures overall child's development (Sinclair, 2002). While education is seen as a psychosocial support for children that protects them against violence and any other threats, it is difficult to guarantee education to child refugees due to lack of means and resources: building, administration, teaching materials, teachers, and funds.

In Malaysia, since refugees are denied access to public education, the UNHCR had to take care of 46,610 refugee children's education through partnering with volunteering organizations and learning centres. Yet, only 50 percent of primary aged children and 19 percent of secondary aged children are enrolled in those centres (Bailey & İnanç, 2019). While Malaysian government schools don't offer admission to refugees, the international and private school are expensive and most of them require proper documents that refugees and asylum seeker don't process. Alternatively, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia go to UNHCR partially funded learning centres and schools or its implementing partners. These schools provide basic education through subjects like mathematics, English, science and computer skills. They are usually run by either NGOs or community organizations who charge minimal fees, and thus they rely a lot on donations besides UNHCR funds (Koizumi & Hoffstaedter, 2015).

### *School Counselling Evolution in Malaysia*

School counselling movement in Malaysia took off in the 1960s following the similar movement in the United States of America and others such as Canada and Great Britain. Prior to that movement, and according to the Malaysian traditional practices; guidance and counselling existed even before the global movement, as classroom teachers, housemasters, and hostel masters used to provide those services to students (Othman & Bakar, 1993). It is worth mentioning here that those practices could be tracked back to a report issued by the ministry of education in 1938 where the need to guidance services was expressed.

In 1963, a structured guidance services in Malaysian schools were introduced to the Ministry of Education, and that led to the establishment of guidance units in the Ministry of Education and in all the education departments of each state (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1970). Acting on that, assistant supervisors from each state's education Department have to go for 6 months course on guidance, that is to allow them to train teachers in their respective states, as the ministry ruled that there should be a guidance teacher in each school, who provide guidance and counselling services besides their teaching responsibilities (Mey & Kok-Mun, 2010).

After the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) was allocated a guidance section, it started promoting career guidance in primary and secondary school (Awang, 1969). Although all the aforementioned developments led to acceptance of guidance in schools as it helped individuals make correct choices and decisions, work on guidance faded out due to financial reasons as well manpower challenges. Soon in 1980s there were guidance and counselling units established by the Ministry of Education in schools, and the school counsellors' practices were governed by a book published first in 1984 and then in 1993, titled: "Guidelines for the implementation of Guidance and Counselling Services in Schools). School counsellors this time were full time officers who spend all their time providing counselling services to students.

## **Discussion**

### ***The School Counselling***

With the growing human needs and the increasing complexity of life, counselling has become an important part of school system. School counselling has emerged over 100 years ago as a humanitarian response to the students affected by institutional changes, social and school reform, and economic circumstances such as poverty. The school counselling nowadays contributes with a great role to aspiring students and preparing the appropriate environment for them to have a successful academic achievement (Dahir & Stone, 2015). Since school counselling has been evolved as a measure to help students adapt with their surrounding circumstances, it is considered today as a necessary part of schools as it helps students adjust with their ever varying and changing lives, and thus it is an agent that facilitates growth and development of today's children.

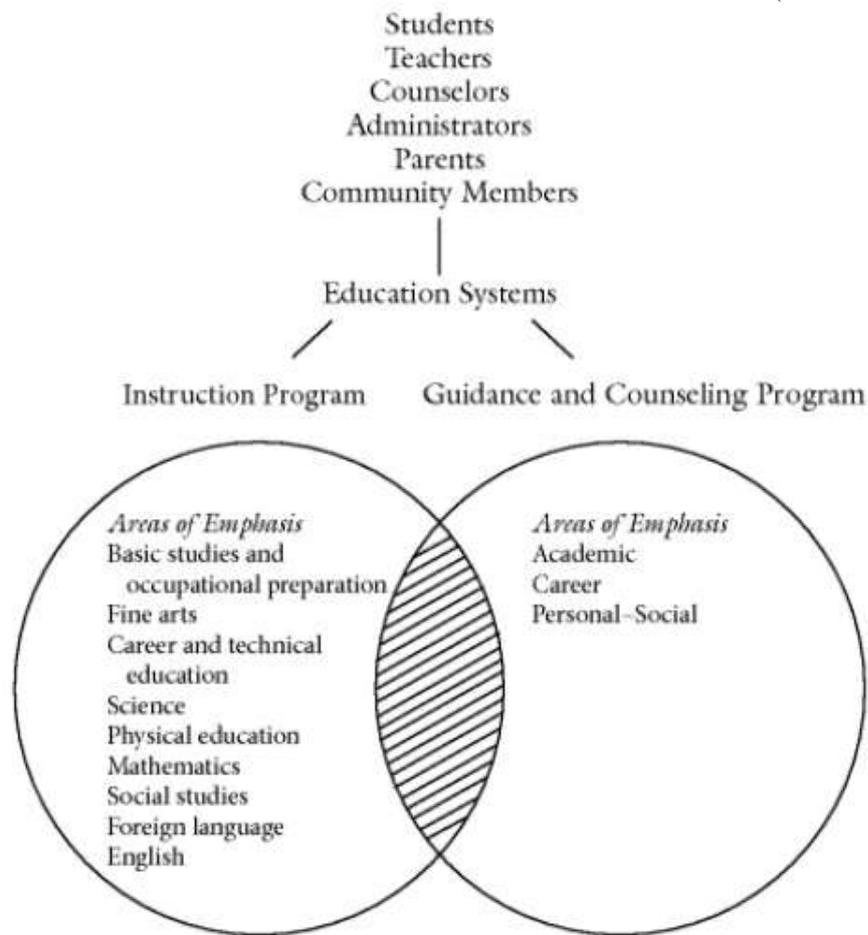
A body of research on professional school counselling role and effectiveness has carried out that school counselling activities have a positive effect on students (Erford, 2019). School counsellor is now assuming an even greater role besides the previous ones, he is now an agent of change not only in the school but in the society as well through achieving social justice in schools and closing the gap between diverse populations of students. Thus, school counsellor has two important roles: school counsellors are both mental health specialists and educational specialists in a school setting who focuses on the student as a learner, with school counselling services designed, delivered, and documented in an accountable manner that either directly and indirectly advances academic achievement, enhances student development and well-being, and informs important others. Figure 1 displays the American School Counselling Association (ASCA) school counselling model that summarizes school counsellor's roles and the relationship among them.



**Figure 1: The ASCA's School Counselling Model**

Source: (Kolbert et al., 2017)

Many efforts were made to position counsellors in schools in a way that their contributions become significant until the 1970s when those efforts were crowned with acknowledgement by different bodies like the US department of education, University of Missouri and ASCA, where the role was redefined to pay attention to all students rather than some of them, and have a program rather than position (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014). Nowadays, school counselling represents a system that has to be in line with the school educational system, and only when they function together then students may be able to achieve their goals. Therefore, Figure 2 below demonstrates the relationship between school counselling and the school educational system.



**Figure 2: Relationship between School Counselling and School Educational System**

Source: (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014)

A comprehensive counselling program is based on four essential areas: foundation, management, delivery, and accountability (ASCA, 2016). A comprehensive school counselling program has to have a foundation that contains the following essential elements: program focus, students' standards, and school counsellor competencies. The program focus comprises of belief statement, vision statement, mission statement, and goals. It is important that counselling program focus is in line with the school's belief, vision, and mission statements, as well as school goals. Students' standards are the desired outcome behind the implementation of the school counselling program, that is: knowledge and skills that excerpt change in the students' life in all of its three aspects: academic, career, and social/personal. And in order for

the school counselling program focuses to guide and provide direction, and for the students' standards to be achieved, the school counsellor has to have the essential professional competencies that are either in a form of knowledge, skills, or attitudes, without them such a program can't be properly developed, implemented, and managed (ASCA, 2016; Davis, 2014). After curriculum foundation is laid based on the school's philosophy, then needs of students are assessed after that in all the three domains that govern students' life: academic, personal/social, and career development (Dahir & Stone, 2015). Management of the school counseling program is crucial to achieve the desired goals (Thompson, 2013), it is to ensure that all parties take place in the delivery of the program, as well as to ensure that all the program

processes are monitored and evaluated for a better outcome. Management of the program also implies that there are tools that need to be used and observed throughout the progress of the program, so it is run efficiently, these tools are annual agreements, school data profile, advisory council, use of data, action plans, calendars, program result data, lesson plans, and curriculum (ASCA, 2016).

Although the delivery of school counselling services are meant solely for the students, other significant parties around the students like teachers, school staff, parents, and communities are important in the delivery of quality counselling services. Stone and Dahir (2015), Gysbers and Henderson (2014), and Davis (2014) support ASCA's (2014) claim that a comprehensive school counselling program is comprised of direct and indirect services to students. While the direct services are provided to students by the counsellor himself, the indirect services are provided by teachers, staff, other professionals, and parents. Direct services include individual counselling, group counselling, crisis intervention, and classroom guidance. Indirect services could appear in a form of collaboration between counselor and parents, and counselor and other professionals. Consequently, it is also found that there is a positive correlation between counsellor's implementation of comprehensive school counselling program and their job satisfaction (Pyne, 2011).

### ***Psychoeducational Programs at School***

Psychoeducation is a strategy that counsellors and psychologists often used in their different areas, settings, and populations in order to address cognitive deficiency of the clients. Cognitive deficiency is the state of mind where there is no proper understanding of issues and processes which may result in inappropriate handling of them that leads to complications in life. Thus, psychoeducational programs can be used by the school counsellor for a variety of purposes, one of them could be the information given to the students and their parents about the counsellor's interventions, their purposes and implementation.

Psychoeducational programs are not only remedial; they can be used as a prevention tool. There is a range of school issues that psychoeducation can be used to enlighten both parents and their students and thus avoid a lot of unnecessary problems. In other words, psychoeducational strategies can be used to teach students life skills which are ignored by many school curriculums. Life skills are very important besides the academic knowledge that students get from school. Life skills such as self-control, communication, and critical thinking are essential ingredients for students' success in school and life. Psychoeducational strategies are also useful to help students in their transitions and equip them with necessary skills and knowledge to have a successful post-secondary life.

Part of using psychoeducation as a preventive method is school counsellor's simplified explanations about mental and psychological problems natures and paths in order for the parents and students to avoid them. Psychoeducational programs can be helpful in avoiding common school students' problem such as:

- a. anxiety and its related disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, selective mutism, separation anxiety, specific phobia, social anxiety, somatic symptom disorder, and panic disorder
- b. traumatic and stress-related disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and adjustment disorder

- c. bipolar and related disorders like cyclothymic disorder
- d. depressive disorders such as major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and disruptive mood dysregulation disorder
- e. eating disorders; for instances, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa
- f. behavioural related disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), excoriation (skin-picking) disorder, trichotillomania (hairpulling) disorder, and hoarding disorder.
- g. personality disorders; for examples, schizoid personality disorder and schizotypal personality disorder

Therefore, psychoeducational programs applied by counsellors in the school setting may be helpful to manage psychosocial issues of the students, other than teaching and learning related issues.

### ***Psychoeducational School Counselling Programs for Refugee Students in Malaysia***

Common issues faced by refugee students all over the world, including Malaysia evolve around the environmental setting of their schools. Some of these issues include academic and social learning adjustment, language and culture integration, systemic adaptation, and communication struggle. Since it was not possible for the refugees residing Malaysia to join neither government schools nor private school which are expensive and require proper documentations recognized by the government, they had to come up with their own schools that are small learning centres under the supervision of the United Nations Higher Commission of Refugees UNHCR-Malaysia, and that is usually done with the help of Malaysian NGOs and some active Malaysian individuals who volunteered to serve refugees. Given that situation, the vast majority of the refugees' schools are not well equipped, managed, and enriched with programs like the Malaysian government and private schools due to the fact that funds are not consistently given to them, and they are not enough for providing all the school services in the first place, including the school counselling service.

As a matter of fact, psychoeducational school counselling programs around the world have been substantially helpful to school students of refugee status in overcoming their personal, social, academic, and career problems in their new environments through various counselling and therapeutic means like group counselling, psychoeducational sessions, and individual counselling sessions. Such programs helped them go through healthy and smooth acculturation process, in the meantime a lot of studies reported that untreated acculturation problems with refugees can lead at the end to mental disorders like depression, and that counselling programs using different counselling techniques like expressive group counselling are found very effective in dealing with acculturation problems among refugee students (Oliva, 2015; Chung, 2018).

Nonetheless, based on the common issues faced by refugee students at school, if a counselling provision is to be set for this student population, it should not be much different from the services provided in government schools. In 1996, when the positions of full-time counsellors were officially established in Malaysian schools, three focussed areas of these school professionals were set towards academic performance and study skills, career development and guidance, and psychological and mental health concerns. These three focussed areas generated a list of 24 new tasks for school counsellors to perform including:

- a. preparation of a year plan for the guidance and counselling activities
- b. identification of the needs of the students
- c. planning and management of the records and reports of the students
- d. gathering, preparation and publicity of counselling information
- e. discharging of group guidance and counselling, and instructional base activities to motivate maximum development
- f. planning and discharge of individual counselling
- g. planning, performance and management of study skills programs
- h. planning, performance and management of programs to help students select subjects for the Government examinations
- i. planning, performance and management of educational programs against drug, alcohol, and smoking abuse
- j. assistance to students to continue with higher education
- k. planning, performance, management and evaluation of consultation and referral services related to career and drugs
- l. planning, performance, management and evaluation of conferences with parents, teachers, support staff and Government agencies, related to the process of education and development of students
- m. preparation of modules, instruments and approaches to promote professionalism in the guidance and counselling services
- n. planning, coordination and evaluation of guidance and counselling resources
- o. setting up committees to coordinate the guidance and counselling services
- p. advocating for and provision of in-house training to share understanding of the guidance and counselling services
- q. provision of crisis counselling to students, teachers, staff and anyone else who needs the service
- r. assumption of role as mediator between the school and outside agencies
- s. assumption of a position on the Curriculum committee
- t. assumption of a position on the School Planning committee
- u. role as facilitator in the mentor-mentee program
- v. position as facilitator in the development programs such as motivation camp, civic education, etc.
- w. carrying out programs related to Drug Prevention Education
- x. carrying out programs related to HIV/AIDS prevention programs (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 3/1996).

With the replication of this national school counselling system at refugee schools, it is believed that those refugee students' issues related to mental health, social skills, behavioural difficulties, acculturation, career guidance, resilience, and study skills. This assumption is aligned with findings of previous research works which found that students who participate in

comprehensive school counseling program get high scores in their exams, have better disciplinary records, and are also ready for the transition to workforce (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014; Carey et al., 2012; Burkard, et al., 2012;).

## Conclusion

All in all, school counselling is one of the services being overlooked in the refugees' school as most of them are still struggling with their basic needs. That is why the vast majority of the refugees' schools are not able to hire counsellors. Although some volunteering individuals may occasionally help with the provision of some counselling-like programs, they are not able to go deep in holistically helping this population for long term duration. Therefore, refugee students residing in Malaysia require a proper provision of educational support system, in terms of school counselling service.

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