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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AT REFUGEE SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA: A FEASIBILITY STUDY

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Abstract:

This concept paper proposes research to examine the effectiveness of psychoeducational programs provided at refugee schools in Malaysia as counselling intervention. The current provision of such programs is commonly dealing with the pupils' emotional well-being, behavior, social skills, acculturation, resilience, study skills, and career awareness; however, there is no validation study to examine the correlations between the variables just yet. The proposed research is going to engage the Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) as the main underpinning theory, with the ultimate aim to develop and introduce a psychoeducational module as intervention to help the students' growth. The module is going to be constructed using mixed method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative feedback from all involved stakeholders, the pupils, teachers, parents, and school administrators.

Keywords:

Counselling, Psychoeducation, Refugee School, Malaysia

Introduction

Counseling plays an important role on individuals in different aspects and stages of their lives. Counseling in schools has helped students achieve their academic goals besides their emotional, social and career ones. School counseling has undergone series of changes in order for it to

ultimately come up with the great help that is being provided to students today. It started in the 1900s as a vocational guidance, mental hygiene and progressive reform, and then towards the end of 1990s, more interesting topics evolved in the field and shaped it the way it is today, among those topics were the developmental theories, academic guidance, group counseling, and progress guidance. School counseling started in a form of directive counseling and ended up in the recent years as an individualized counseling, paying much attention to psychotherapeutic theories and multicultural issues (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Savickas, 2009; Gladding, 2009). As a result of those developments in the field of school counseling, its programs have proven to be effective in providing the needed support to students. They provide intervention to students in the three major critical areas of students' life; academic, personal/social, and career.

Refugees are people who are believed to be forced to flee their own countries by any means due to their political, religious beliefs or sexual orientation are being compromised (UNHCR, 2019). Refugees in Malaysia are not distinguished from undocumented migrants and are at risk of deportation or detention. They lack access to legal employment and formal education. Refugees are able to access public and private health care, but this access is often hindered by the cost of the treatment and language barriers. And because refugees have no access to legal employment, they tend to work difficult or dangerous jobs that the rest of the population does not wish to take.

Although there are a number of educational centers in Malaysia that attend to young refugees' educational needs, yet there are very limited resources in those centers that should attend to refugee children's emotional and social needs. It is found in the recent counseling studies that attending solely to educational needs of school children has not given back many gains on the level of individuals and societies, in the other hand studies have concluded that shortness in resources and services of refugees' educational centers have contributed to their mental health suffering (Low et al., 2018). Furthermore, personal growth as a result of attendance to students' personal and social concerns can have a significant positive impact on students' academic achievement (Thompson, 2015).

Moreover, even though refugee students in Malaysia are getting support from active local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), counseling and mental health support is yet to be granted to them fully compared to refugees in other places of the world. Furthermore, refugee students in Malaysia have reported experiencing trauma caused by torturing experiences in their home countries, having deteriorated well-being, and suffering from multiple mental health issues like PTSD and MDD (Gosnell, 2017). The situation of refugee students residing Malaysia requires serious psychotherapeutic and counseling attention, which is the essence of this research. The study in hand will provide refugee students residing Malaysia the needed support through the development of a psychoeducational program that looks at all students' life aspects: personal/social, academic, and career, and measure the effectiveness of such intervention as well as the inter-correlations among program variables.

Literature Review

The refugee phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers from various disciplines; social, political, economic, law, etc. that is an indication of the importance and the seriousness of this phenomenon. Refugees don't flee their own countries unless there is an apparent risk that threatens their lives. Many seek refuge when they lose hope in country's regime and

policies (Maley, 2017). Though the strict definition of refugee and the limited criteria in being recognized as a refugee; many people continue to seek refuge in other countries, in many instances are not their country of destination, and thus bear bitter consequences in handling their difficult lives in other countries where they hope that their voices are heard and process their application of resettlement to a third country where they are going to be resettled to.

So far, it is obvious that there are two types of people who flee their countries, those real refugees who couldn't stay in their countries by any means, and those who just wanted better lives as they are not satisfied with their governments' management (UNHCR, 2000). In either case these people are found in a real need to counseling in different stages of their crucial journeys. Hence, we find counseling and psychotherapy studies related to refugees have occupied a big space in the literature. In Malaysia, counseling in general and school counseling in particular have undergone a series of developments just like other places in the world, following the guidance and counseling movement in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom in the 1900s. Although the official inception of counseling and school counseling in Malaysia was in the 1960s; teachers and headmasters in schools used to practice a traditional form of counseling after the need to it was expressed by the ministry of education in 1938 (Federation of Malaya Annual Report on Education, 1955). School counseling in Malaysia became more structured in 1963 where guidance teachers are sent for training to provide guidance and counseling to students, and soon in 1980 the ministry of education established guidance and counseling units in schools (Ching & Kok-Mun, 2010).

Studies conducted on refugee students' personal growth in Malaysia have found a number of issues that have not been attended to, which haven't only affected students' academic performance but also all aspects of their lives. Untreated problems related to emotional well-being, behavior, social skills, acculturation, career awareness, study skills, and resilience have been found among refugee children in learning centers in Malaysia, where everybody struggles as a result of those problems; thus, it is imperative on counselors and mental health practitioners to work on such issues. Emotional well-being and social skills are the most important factors that are found to be affecting refugee student's personal growth and education. An essential source of nurturing refugee children's wellbeing and social skills are parents and family in general, followed by individuals and groups outside home like friends and school environment whose impact is responsible of making the children feel a sense of self-worth, belonging, and social adjustment (Brewer & McCabe, 2014).

Refugee students' positive behavior is strongly connected to their emotional well-being and social skills, and it is determined by their school environment, parental perceptions and involvement, and available social supports (Brewer & McCabe, 2014). Acculturation is usually a huge impediment in the refugee students' way to adjustment and growth in their new culture as they feel obliged to forget about their native languages and cultures and embrace the culture of their new country which can have a bad effect on them and their academics, however if school management and teachers make it easy for refugee students to express their biculturalism then they would have a smooth acculturation process accompanied with health emotional, social, and behavioral growth (Schwartz & Ungerr, 2017). Equipping refugee students with career awareness and development tools doesn't only make them certain about their future but more importantly motivate them for a better academic achievement and behavior in their present stage. Moreover, educational excellence together with the right vocational guidance is a determinant of successful integration in the mainstream society (Athanasou & Perera, 2020).

Resilience is an essential component of children's life; it is even more essential for refugee children due to their vulnerability and exposedness to various hardships. Even though school policies and programs are key to enhancing refugee students' resilience; taking their cultures into account and integrating them with school resources responsible for enhancing students' resilience (Fernando & Ferrari, 2013). Students of refugee background, due to their past lifestyle and present challenges need a strong academic support in the educational institutions of their host countries such as study skills workshops besides organization skills, guidance counseling, and homework and tuition clubs. Such a support results in both good academic performance and increased emotional and social well-being (Sengupta & Blessinger, 2019).

Research Background

A number of studies have reported the positive impact of the school counseling activities, given they are facilitated by competent and professional school counselors. School counseling 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 counseling 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 counseling where counselors 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 counselors do not merely provide remedial services, they besides play an important role in preventing the occurrence of behavioral, 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 they 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 counselor, we find that career related matters form a critical part of school counseling 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 counseling helped high school students with their college choices. In general, school counseling 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 counseling 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).

Malaysia has not been an exception of the global refugee phenomenon. There are considerable number of refugees residing Malaysia, which is increasing due to various factors. Both adult refugees and their children suffer social, mental, and financial problems due to the country's policy in regards to refugees. Refugee resettlement process in Malaysia is a very long and complicated one, which means if refugees are not properly assisted, they may suffer bitter consequences that will not ultimately help them achieve their main goal of becoming refugees. A number of studies have shed light on the problems that refugees have in Malaysia, however

no study has come up with an intervention, though it's believed that numerous NGOs in the country are working hard to assist refugees in all the aspects of their life.

This study has evolved as a scientific and professional action to help young refugees adjust and resolve their social, emotional, and educational problems. Just as youth are the focus of any society, young refugees should be the focus among refugee communities around the world. Thus, this study is believed to be important since it is dealing with an important and vulnerable category of these communities. Helping this young category means a lot not only to them, their families, and their surrounding people from the refugee population, but also to the society they are living in. Refugee children are just like any other children, they have their ambitions and strengths which if they are not taken care of well, then they would lead to a regression on the level of the individual which will have inevitable effects on the society; like juvenile delinquency and drug abuse. Thus, this interventional study is not only important for refugees' life in Malaysia, but also for their future life in the country of resettlement.

Discussion

Psychoeducational intervention is a strategy that counselors and psychologists use 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.

In this study, a psychoeducational program will be designed based on the students' needs stated in the literature which are; emotional, social, behavioral, acculturation, study skills, career awareness, and resilience. This program will be delivered in a form of modules that will work to impart skills and right attitudes in students that will help them with their emotional, social, behavioral, acculturation, study skills, career awareness, and resilience related problems. The rationale behind this study was to verify the effectiveness of a psychoeducational program in issues related to refugee students' emotional well-being, social skills, study skills, resilience, career awareness, acculturation, and behavior. As illustrated in Figure 1, there are three main phases that this research is going to go through;

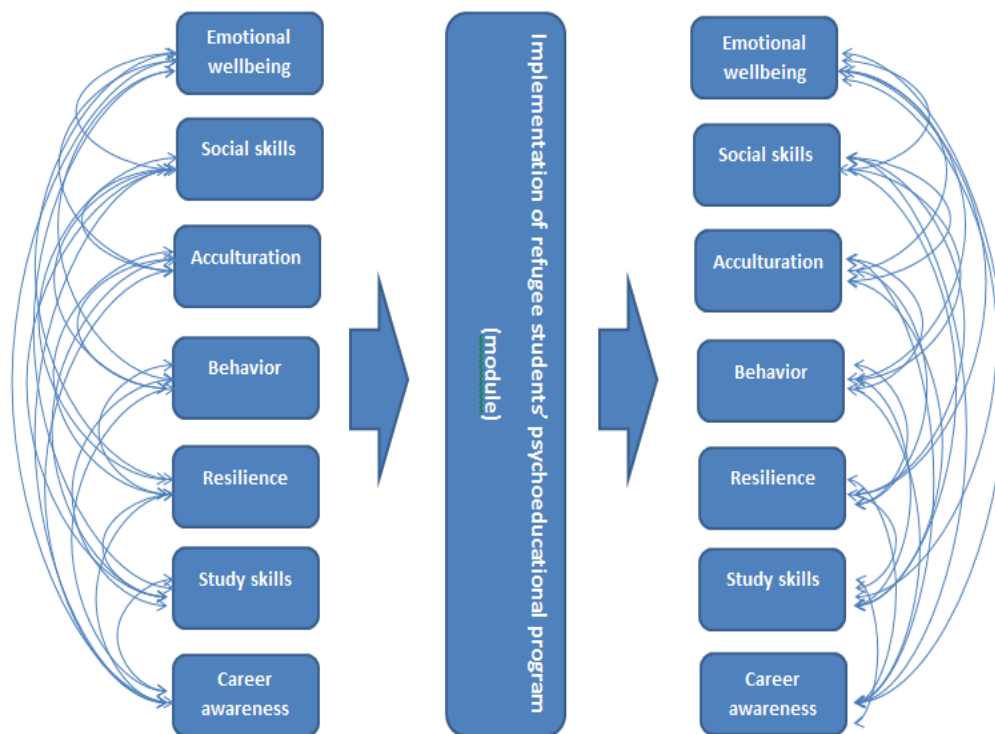


Figure 1: Research Conceptual Framework

First, a pre-treatment assessment where the researcher gets to know the current respondents' status in terms of their emotional well-being, behavior, social skills, acculturation, resilience, study skills, and career awareness. The researcher will employ specific measurement tools to find out about each of the fore mentioned variables. Part of this phase is to look at the correlations among the study variables: emotional well-being, behavior, social skills, acculturation, study skills, career awareness, and resilience.

In the second phase, a psychoeducational program is going to be designed and then implemented on a sample of refugee students in one of their schools in Malaysia, which is MSRI School. Finally, in the third phase, a post treatment assessment will be conducted where the effectiveness of the program will be examined. Researchers will adopt the above-mentioned framework for this study taking into account the following underpinning facts and concepts pertaining to each phase of this study:

- a. There is a proven effectiveness of counseling and psychoeducational programs provided to students in different parts of the world in treating their problems and thus help them achieve their goal of going to school which is academic achievement (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001). Many studies have reported that refugee students outside the Malaysian context have benefited a lot from such programs (Quinlan et al., 2016, Neuner et al., 2004). In order for school counseling programs to promote students' personal and academic developments, they have to be comprehensive, preventive, and developmental. The components of the comprehensive, preventive, and developmental counseling programs are outlined by the ASCA Model, which stresses on the program's vision that is essential in bringing everybody together for the sake of achieving unified goals, which are improving students' performance and supporting their development. And in order for a school counseling program to run correctly it has to go in line with the school's vision

and plans (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014). A good counseling program according to ASCA's standards is the one that is educational, standards-based, and systematic in delivering the content, data driven, and professionally implemented. A good counseling program is also built around four areas that are: foundation, management, delivery, and accountability.

- b. A considerable number of studies carried out those refugee students in the Malaysian context have a range of unattended problems. One of the studies carried out that refugee students in Malaysia have reported experiencing trauma caused by torturing experiences in their home countries, having deteriorated well-being, and suffering from multiple mental health issues like PTSD and MDD (Gosnell, 2017). Another study states that stress, anxiety and depression are suffered by adolescent refugees in Malaysia in deferent levels (Low et al., 2018).
- c. The utilization of the quasi-experimental design is imperative for the achievement of these study goals as this design belongs to the experimental method that is part of the quantitative approach in the scientific research. It is known that the quantitative approach produces empirical data that allows outcomes to be measured, and thus more appropriate for the current research as it enables precise judgments to be made about students' emotional well-being, social skills, study skills, acculturation, resilience, career awareness, and behavior, and the relationships among them as well as the differences in terms of students' genders, study levels, and nationalities. Like many sciences, researchers in the social sciences perform analysis of evidence that is produced by empirical data in order to come up with conclusions about the questions of interest. In this study, with the use of empirical data, evidence of change in the experimental group will be analyzed comparing with the control group. In other words, a quasi-experimental design allows the researcher to look at the causal relationship of the treatment on the experimental group in comparison with the control group (Agresti & Finlay, 2009).
- d. The psychoeducational program in hand using the quasi-experimental design has a content that relies heavily on the cognitive-behavioral theory of psychotherapy. This theory consists of two important components of human behavior, cognition and behavior. This theory is based on the notion that human being are in control of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. With that, this theory is regarded as a revolution in the area of counseling and psychotherapy, as according to older theories like Freudians psychoanalysis and psychodynamic, it was believed that people are victims of their experiences, and thus seen as passive and mere receptacles. While with the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy people are empowered to own consequences of their actions which empower them to think and improve their conditions. Another notion on which this theory is based on is that cognition, emotion, and behavior are interrelated, therefore any change in one of them can automatically cause change in the others, and this is illustrated in Figure 2. While rational positive beliefs lead to healthy positive feelings and thoughts which result in positive behavior, irrational negative thoughts lead to unhealthy negative feelings and thoughts which result in negative undesired behavior. The success of this theory has led to the emerging of more developments in the psychotherapy like: the appearance of Rationale Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), the Rationale Behavior Therapy (RBT), and stress inoculation Therapy (SIT) (Colette & Matthew, 2019).

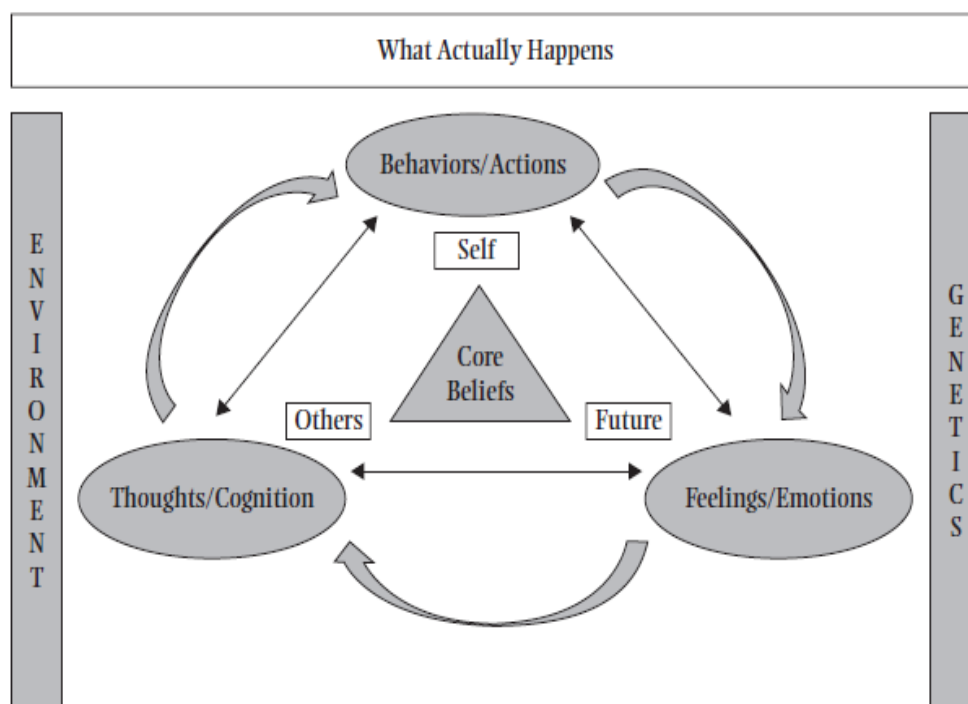


Figure 2: Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT)

- e. The counseling program in hand comprises of seven core components which were derived from the literature and were proven effective in treating refugee students' problems related to: emotional well-being, acculturation, social skills, study skills, resilience, career awareness, and behavior (Oliva, 2015; Quinlan et al., 2015; Kymberly, 2016; Elliott, 2017; Abkhezzr, 2018).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the study in hand has evolved as a response to the absence of interventions needed by students of refugee status who are residing Malaysia. The main goal of this study is to test the effectiveness of a psychoeducational program that is going to work on refugee students' emotional well-being, behavior, social skills, acculturation, career awareness, study skills, and resilience. Besides there are sub-goals that look at the correlations among the study variables, as well as differences in terms of gender, study level, and nationality. After terms were defined, a conceptual framework was established in which study will undergo three phases; the pre-treatment, the development of the counseling program (module), and finally the post-treatment that can be better done with the help of looking at the correlations among study variables, as well as looking at the differences between the two groups and the socioeconomic variables.

This study is believed to be of high significance as it works to assist and empower young refugees who are the future of their families, and that means not only helping them but everyone surrounding them including the host country, because ignoring this vulnerable category could lead to bad consequences that everybody will be affected by. Moreover, this study is an initiative for more attention regarding helping refugees and equipping them with life skills that may save their lives not only in their transition country but also in their country of resettlement. However, the study in hand has some limitations, some of them are related to the experimental design, others related to the nature of the study sample.

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