

SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERSPECTIVES ON SECONDARY STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

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School Counselor's Perspectives on Secondary Students' Mental Health

Abstract:

Mental health status of Malaysian youth Mental health in Malaysia is a major public health issue with the high prevalence of anxiety, depression and stress symptoms among school students. Early identification and intervention for students in need, and early support for educators is integral to a sense of responsibility within the school counseling profession. A qualitative phenomenological design was used, which engaged the participation of 15 school counselors in secondary schools of Kuala Lumpur to describe lived experience following students with mental issues. The research used semi-structured interviews in order to understand 'types' of difficulties and causes for these, along with the support provided within school. Through this type of research, counselors' perspectives can be thoroughly investigated drawing out the fine-grained aspects of the difficulties they face daily. Through the consideration of such underlying, and as other researchers might argue contributing elements, namely lessons learned from the experiences of front liners in the field, the paper seeks to bridge theoretical propositional knowledge to practical realities within Malaysian educational setting. The phenomenological approach reflects young people's authentic voices of experience with youth mental health. The findings would also contribute towards the contemporary profile of mental health status among the Malaysian secondary school students which can help identify areas that can be improved. Such findings would provide valuable benchmarks for guiding intervention development that produces greater or more durable effects, as well as training counselors and advising policymakers to increase support of mental health among adolescents in educational settings. Ultimately, it aims to bolster mental health structure in schools so that young Malaysians can receive prompt and effective psychological help.

Keywords:

School counsellor, secondary students, mental health, qualitative study

1.0 Introduction

As students in secondary school spend a large part of waking hours at schools, they constitute an educational and highly influential habitat for the propagation of mental health information and support. Specifically, school counselors are positioned strategically within this ecology. They are the emotional first responders to breakdowns, to disruptions and acting out and psychological crises from students. Because they work so directly with youth, educators and parents, they are at the epicenter of educational and mental health systems.

Yet, the voices and practice of school counsellors in addressing student mental problems are largely unknown especially in metropolitan multiracial Kuala Lumpur city. Most of what is known on the topic from research to date either involves information available through clinical data or self-reports from students, and little was previously known about how people in the trenches of education are dealing with mental health issues.

This needs gap is seen in the qualitative research attempt to probe into the perceptions of school counselors from secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. Using the cracked hands of counselors as discursive resource, this report explores common mental health issues held by students and their perceived sources, the coping strategies that are provided by counselors, and recommendations from these professionals about how best to support mental health in school. These discoveries are paramount for policy, practice and promotion towards healthier schools in the Malaysian adolescent population.

1.1 Background of the Study

Malaysian school counselors are also responsible for a spectrum of roles including academic counselling, career guidance and attending to the psychosocial and emotional needs among students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). If that is the case, counselors are often faced with concerns such as high counselor-to-student ratios as well as political and economic factors (Greenidge et al., 2023). And these can get in the way of their ability to authentically help students with their mental health. In addition, mental health stigma can discourage students from visiting counselors for support, further complicating the work of the counselor. Insight into the perspective of counselors might shed light on these challenges, and have implications for how to further develop school mental health services.

1.2 Research Problem

It is known that mental health issues are common amongst adolescents in Malaysia, but there has been little research on the experiences and opinions of school counselors who are their primary carers (Greenidge et al., 2023). Without this understanding, the delivery of mental health services in schools may be inappropriate and culturally incompatible.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To determine general psychological problems among secondary school students as perceived by the school counselors in Kuala Lumpur.
2. To examine school counselors' perceptions of the effects of these mental health concerns on students' general functioning and development.
3. To investigate the current activities and strategies of school counselors in addressing students' mental health issues.
4. To examine school counselors' recommendations for how mental health services could be improved and the quality of their ability to support students.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is mental health among Kuala Lumpur school counsellors in relation to secondary school students?
2. What do they believe the factors contributing to these problems are in terms of their impact on young people's mental health?
3. What is being done currently, in terms of counselling for students with mental health problems?
4. What do school counselors say they need in order to better support students' mental health?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this project lies in its potential to create utility across domains within the adolescent mental health and education literatures. Being a specific analysis of perceptions and ideas of school counselors in Kuala Lumpur, the study has importance that can influence policy, cognition and further study.

The current findings have at least three policy implications. In a context of increasing mental health issues among young people, there is an urgent need for school-based policies which offer a comprehensive, evidence-informed response to students' emotional and mental health. Counsellors' experiences and practice observations are useful additions to this body of knowledge, specifically in terms of the formulation of intervention programs for the operationalization of preventative pathways and redefining the mental health context within Malaysian schools. School Key Faculty and Staff could use the evidence to lobby for low school counselor-student ratios or the inclusion of mental health education in curricula or even entire, stand-alone mental health units within schools.

Secondly, there are the pragmatic implications of this research for schools. District and school leaders can additionally gain a new appreciation for the systemic and logistical challenges that counselors face in serving students. These could be related to time, workload, mental health stigma and resource scarcity. Schools can best determine which of these barriers it is hardest to fight through, so they can hone in on that and use resources more wisely, still providing professional development to counselors, teachers and other staff as well as creating an atmosphere at the school that's supportive and responsive to the mental health issues that students are experienced.

Additionally, this study has implications for community-based mental health providers. It suggests the potential for closer school-community mental health service partnerships. Counselors' views of what students might need can steer outside professionals but those professionals must also be sure they are offering services that are culturally set and school-based. This collaboration will help to close referral loops, provide comprehensive care for students and alleviate the burden on school counselors.

It's academically justified, because we are addressing a hole in the literature. Although there is increasing literature on student centered and quantitative research in adolescent mental health in Malaysia, qualitative enquiries that examine school counselors' perspectives are limited. The study is indeed significant to the increasing pool of research in the education and psychology literature as it offers empirical knowledge on urban schools located in Kuala Lumpur. It sets up other studies that might spring out of it: rural schools, public/private venues or others' (e.g., students', or parents', or teachers') attitudes.

In short, this research is important because it offers the school counselors a platform, critical yet often forgotten players in adolescent mental health. Through the tension and insight cast on data, struggles, strategies and recommendations, the research offers pragmatic lessons for building-inclusive-responsive-effective-forms of mental health in Malaysian secondary education schools.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The research sample comprised 15 school counsellors working in the secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. It is qualitatively designed and utilises semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth narratives from the counsellors about their practises and perspectives on student mental health. The current study is devoid of student and parent data, and the findings cannot be used to claim a generalizability throughout Kuala Lumpur.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Implications While our findings provide significant insight regarding school counselors in Kuala Lumpur supporting the mental health of secondary students, there are some limitations to be considered. These limitations serve to manage the interpretation of the findings and guide potentially beneficial avenues for future study.

The first, a small study from a confined region, with its own sample and location restrictions. The study is grounded in interviews with 15 counselors of the secondary schools within the urban metropolitan city called Kuala Lumpur. Although rich in qualitative data, the sample size and its insularity may pose limitations on the generalizability of this study's findings to counselors working in other contexts e.g., rural or suburban settings and context/ resources that likely differ significantly. Thus, the insight and problems identified may be skewed to those at Malaysia's broader educational context.

Second, the evidence is derived from self-reported interviews. Self-report is appropriate for qualitative research, that could be accessed directly through the subjects considerations (but still biased). Counsellors could give socially acceptable answers, conceal how terrible their experiences had been or shop for a particular lens with which to view issues, on purpose or subconsciously. These biases may have threatened the quality and validity of the data, which might reduce objectivity in this study.

Third, the results are based on school counselors' perspectives only, overlooking other stakeholders, such as students, parents, teachers and mental health professionals. The mental health of young people is a multifaceted issue with interaction among several systems and settings. And by focusing on the counselor, it only tells one side of the ecosystem. Further research should engage other stakeholders in better understanding the struggles and resources concerning student mental health.

Such limitations contribute to a need for caution when considering these results and call for additional research that includes participants with wider range of experiences, perspectives from multiple stakeholders and triangulation of data with mixed-method investigation in order to strengthen the credibility.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 School Counselors

School counselors are professional educators with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling and certification/licensure as required by their state, and/or the district. They are critical to supporting students' wellness and serving with mental health and crisis intervention. The role of the school counselor is greatly challenged in the COVID-19 pandemic. Greenidge et al. (2023) also examined school

counselors' experiences transitioning into remote counseling during the pandemic using a phenomenological approach. Findings suggested that counselors used technology to make contact with students and their families well, and highlighted the necessity of more detailed crisis preparedness planning when utilizing broad-based technological strategies in post program planning.

While school counselors have flexibility and resilience, however, they also are confronted with challenges. Counselors are often required to perform tasks unrelated to their role as counselor, limiting their ability to address student mental health needs (Savitz-Romer et al., 2022). Inadequate student-to-counselor ratios, particularly among under-resourced schools, exacerbate the problem and underscore the crisis of structural reform that supports counselors to do their work (Ooi et al., 2021).

2.2 Secondary School Students

Many students in secondary school, aged between 13 and 18, are navigating a significant period of growth, with significant physical and emotional changes taking place. This time is not only critical for self-identity and academic achievement, but also the period of increasing vulnerability to psychiatric disorders.

High school students have been at the center of the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative study carried out in Iran by Azizi et al. (2024) demonstrated how the low self esteem, lack of motivation and emotional distancing observed in school students who returned to activities following lock-down are symptomatic of post-pandemic depression. The findings of these results may have implications for long-term effects of prolonged isolated confinement, and the need to target mental health interventions.

There are many things that impact the mental health of high school students, academics pressure, social dynamics, family life. Such stressors have been heightened by the pandemic that has led to increasing incidences of anxiety and depression among adolescents (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2022). The response to these problems must be multifaceted, involving school-based supports, family engagement and accessible mental health services.

2.3 Mental Health

Mental health is the way we think, feel, and act, as well as our emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. Is crucial in coping with stress, making and socializing decisions (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2022). Even with growing understanding, there is significant stigma towards mental health in adolescents as a primary barrier to seeking support. Stigma and mental health illiteracy result in underreporting and lack of support. It's crucial for schools to incorporate wider campaigns regarding mental health education and destigmatization, so that students get the proper support they need from an early age.

2.4 Qualitative Study

Qualitative is non-numeric, it gives in other words data to examine a category or construct or even opinion and experience. It is especially helpful for examining complex constructs such as mental health, which are presumed to be based on the subjective experiences and context (Creswell, 2021).

Greenidge et al. (2023) utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine school counselors' experiences during the pandemic. This method supported a rich interpretation of the content of the counselor's adaptations and perceptions, as well as rich understanding of the barriers and modifications for remote counseling delivery.

While qualitative research gives richness and context, it risks the problem of limited generalizability due to small numbers of subjects. But in mental health research the rich detail from qualitative research is used to inform the design of focused interventions, and policy.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study to explore the perceptions of school counselors regarding the mental health of secondary students. Phenomenology is therefore appropriate for the conceptualization of an individual's lived experiences, perceptions and reflections on a phenomenon (Creswell, 2021). This framework of analysis allowed the researcher to gain insight into how school counsellors in Kuala Lumpur construct and deal with mental health issues among their students. With the focus on personal narratives and shared experiences, qualitative approaches are particularly relevant when sociological inquiry is directed toward the domain of mental health, where place and individual subjectivities cannot be easily discredited.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 15 school counsellors representing 15 government secondary schools in various district in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. These counsellors were identified as having roles related to student welfare and psychological support within their actual schools. All participants were required to have a minimum of three years experience as a school counselor to ensure that they had experience and knowledge in relation to mental health issues experienced by students, and support systems available within the school system.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The participants, based on the purposive sampling, could be potentially rich with information about the research (Creswell, 2021). The schools were chosen to encompass a range of SES backgrounds and school size, in order to reflect diverse perspectives. Counselors were invited with formal email solicitations and secondary telephone calls. We also collected informed consent from those who agreed to be interviewed.

3.4 Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and these were conducted face-to-face or on a secure online video conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom), depending on the therapist's availability and preference. The interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes each and were audio recorded, with the permission of the interviewee. The interview guide was developed based on the aims and open-ended questions including:

"What are the mental health problems (MHD) faced by Kuala Lumpur school counsellors pertaining to secondary school students?"

"What do they believe the role of these issues is in young people's mental health?"

"What, then, is the present condition or usage of counselling to aid college students with mental health issues?"

"School counselors: What do they say would better support students' mental health?"

Prompts were used to solicit elaboration and clarification. Notes were also taken to capture the nonverbal and contextual cues.

3.5 Data Analysis

Transcripts were made verbatim and thematically analyzed as per the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis for this study has entailed six stages: familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing the report. Flexibility and capacity to detect patterns and meanings in the qualitative data led to thematic analysis being chosen. The coding process was manual and categories were iteratively refined to ensure that themes closely mirrored the views of participants.

3.6 Trustworthiness

Credibility In this qualitative research, credibility was ensured by following a mix of rigorous methods derived from the strategies presented by Braun & Clarke (2021). Validity and ethical integrity of findings The criteria regarding credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were systematically adopted to guarantee the validity of the study.

Credibility refers to the confidence we have in the truth of data and interpretations. The trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by member checking. Participants were invited to browse the transcripts and themes as they evolved from the interview data. It allowed them to verify that they had given the right answers and to see whether the interpretations conformed with what they intended to be involved. Confirming the results of this study with participants strengthened the rigour and minimised any distortion in findings.

Through thick description the transferability was guaranteed. Detailed descriptions of the school settings, counselors' roles, and student populations were provided. This valuable scope enables readers and future scholars to evaluate the extent to which findings may generalize in similar educational contexts or among similar populations.

Reliability (or confirmability as termed in qualitative research) was established by maintaining an audit trail. This included notes concerning all the research tasks (early stage planning, data collection, coding, theme generation and analysis). Reflective notes and methodological choices were recorded to be transparent for possible replication or scrutiny of the other researchers.

To address confirmability, or the extent to which findings can be attributed to participants instead of researchers' bias or preconception, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used. They constantly held a reflexive journal throughout the entire journey where they documented assumptions, emotional reactions and changed perspectives. We further peer debriefed with fellowship members of qualifying research journals to engage in critical reflection about the data and guard against the danger of confirmation bias.

Integration of these strategies led to satisfactory credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These are measures taken to contribute toward the goodness quality of the study overall and further deepen the understanding on mental health problems among secondary school students in Kuala Lumpur.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee before data collection. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all of the participants were given an information sheet and a consent form. Their privacy and anonymity were guaranteed; all transcripts and reporting were conducted using pseudonyms. The study data were placed in password-protected files to which only the researcher had access; they were then securely maintained. Participants were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

4.0 Findings

Mental health problems among Malaysian adolescents have become a serious problem, especially in an urban area such as Kuala Lumpur where school counselors are front-liners of counseling service that offer assistance to students when they faced with emotional and psychological issues. We queried 15 secondary school counselors in Kuala Lumpur and this qualitative study, based on interviews with these participants, focused on four main domains: existing mental health problems, root causes of these issues, interventions in practice at present and suggestions for better support systems within schools.

4.1 Mental Health Problems Among Tariff Paying Secondary School Students in Kuala Lumpur

Three themes were identified from the thematic analysis of counselor interviews: academic-related anxiety, social isolation with depressive symptoms, and emotional dysregulation. Those are the answers you'd expect from young Malaysians Today are troubled, this is what we have to face.

4.1.1 Academic Stress and Anxiety

The highest rates of reporting were for academic pressure, especially during the examination periods. Though it was not reported as the sole primary issue, anxiety was a contributing factor in virtually all the cases that came up for counselors. And students described how they felt under pressure from teachers and their parents to accommodate unreasonable demands, while the fear of failure was reflected psychosomatically in symptoms ranging from sleeplessness and loss of appetite to pre-examination panic attacks.

There's a lot of pressure on kids in Malaysia to get excellent results from an education system that verbalizes associating grades with self-worth, leading to an unhealthy sense of perfectionism among higher achievers. This is an achievement-oriented culture that applies continuous psychological pressure beyond the classroom to family and social settings.

4.1.2 Social Isolation and Depression

Counselors often reported depression signs among students, such as disconnection from peers, emotional flatness and lack of engagement in the classroom. A large percentage of affected students had experienced family dysfunction, parental conflict/divorce, and neglect. A further substantive risk factor was being a very frequently victimized peer, in real life and on elevated on-line (cyber-bully) incidence. The counselors observed that the mental health issues tended to be hidden until they were expressed in a change in behaviour.

Such disorders, the research suggests, are internalized and thus it is hard for society to know they are there as a counselor says we need perspectives from all sides where mental health is concerned. They often do not have the right words to convey their emotional hurt, especially in a traditional, authoritative

setting where emotions are frowned upon. This “unheard suffering” highlights the need for proactive identification and development of trustful relationship between students and school staff.

4.1.3 Emotional and Behavioral Dysregulation

Nine counselors noted distinct periods of emotional instability, variously described as spontaneous crying, outbursts of anger and impulsivity. These presentations were seen as signs of underlying emotions and perhaps possible unresolved trauma.

Adolescent emotional dysregulation has its origins in unfulfilled developmental needs and scarcity of emotional immersion during early life. The frequency with which behavioural statements are used indicates poor coping strategies and the lack of involvement by available supportive adults. Schools frequently misread these behaviors as discipline problems rather than mental health concerns, reacting with punishment not treatment.

4.2 Sources of Stress Contributing to Student Mental Health Problems

The findings suggest that reasons for student mental health concerns are complex and multi-faceted, including systemic, familial, and social ones.

4.2.1 Family Relations and Parenting Styles

Every counselor cited unhealthy home life as the main risk to students. Common themes were the authoritarian personality of the father, emotional unresponsiveness and neglect. Students touched by broken homes or other physical abuses showed increased susceptibility, without stable emotions to lean on.

When insecure, these early patterns of attachment are generally believed to lead to compromised regulation of emotion and the stress response. The findings imply that Malaysian family cultures may at times be biased toward suppression, rather than validation of emotions, and tend to minimize, deny or stigmatize mental health concerns instead of addressing them in a proactive manner.

4.2.2 Expectations and Culture of Academic Performance

Chronically stressed high schools students were more likely to report suffering in school and experience on-the-job harassment and discrimination. Twelve of the 15 counselors cited unrealistic academic expectations as a key contributor to their stress. Constant comparisons and parental pressure coupled with the educational environment that is all about standardized testing lead to a culture in which a child success at school becomes his value.

This accomplishment-oriented attitude coops up students as human capital that has to be maximized, making failure unacceptable and rest unproductive. So, society needs to redefine success. Schools should be teaching kids how to be nice: the sort of people others want around with good emotional intelligence and resilience not just high grades.

4.2.3 Social Influence of Social Media and Peer Dynamics

Counselors also described how social media negatively influenced adolescent self-concept, especially among girls. Apps like Instagram and TikTok are only adding fuel to the fire of our peers’ beauty, popularity, lifestyle anxiety comparisons... making us feel even worse about ourselves.

The widespread use of social media inundates children with polished, idealized vignettes of others' lives which creates devastating levels of social comparison and body dissatisfaction. There's no escape from peer judgment and social scrutiny with the perennial digital connection.

4.3 Counseling Practices and Constraints

Even with counselors' commitment, there are numerous structural constraints to providing good mental health support.

4.3.1 Personal Counseling and Emotion-based Support

Counselors provided individualized sessions using methods such as art therapy, role-play, and journaling. But dominated by a student-to-counselor ratio of 1:800 their ability to care for students in this way was circumscribed.

Although individual counseling provides a critical source of emotional support, the level of need exceeds the supply of services available for delivery. Lack of staffing requires a crisis management approach, as opposed to prevention and ongoing therapeutic engagement, for many student needs.

4.3.2 Sharing between Teachers and Parent Involvement

Counselors often worked with families and educators to identify at-risk youth, but faced barriers such as parental denial, lack of time and continued mental health stigma.

Multistakeholder participation is best practice in school-based interventions. However, in the absence of systematic destigmatization efforts and improved parental mental health literacy, such partnerships are generally patchy and have had relatively little impact.

4.3.3 Mental Health Literacy and Prevention

MHL programs include various subjects including; knowledge and information about mental illness, sources of help available for MI, negative attitudes or stigma prevention and promotion of positive MH.

A few schools offered occasional awareness series/workshops, however such activities were limited both in terms of regularity and funding according to the counselors and typically not institutionalized. Good mental health provision goes further than just raising awareness and is about promoting supportive, empathetic cultures in schools. It takes more than an isolated incident to create a shift in culture. Regular well defined, curriculum based initiatives that progress the emotional literacy of young people from the time they begin school is what is needed.

4.4 Recommendations for System Improvement by Counselors

Counselors identified a number of strategic interventions to improve school-based mental health services.

4.4.1 Expanded Mental Health Workforce

Everyone agrees that we need more mental health professionals including school psychologists and therapists to meet the growing needs of students. If you are really asking the staff to do two jobs, it will not be possible for existing counselors and employees to continue to meet with current caseloads.

While the Ministry of Education's 2022 National Education Blueprint recognises this as a priority, practical policy planning and budget allocation are still needed. Without that growth in personnel, prevention and intervention services will continue to be grossly inadequate.

4.4.2 Holistic Education Reform

Counselors pressed for educational reform that would eschew rote learning in favor of more comprehensive, project-based assessment methods. This would move students to a more low-stakes situation where they have a good chance to develop those life skills (as opposed to just being awesome for high-stakes tests and jumping through standardized hoops for reward).

4.4.3 The Accommodation of Mental Health Education in the Curriculum

Ten counselors were of the view to include MH as a part of the official curriculum, specifically focusing on teaching how emotional regulation was possible, balancing life through developing resiliency and the practice of asking for help when needed.

Embedding mental health within curriculum makes it a mainstream part of conversations around psychological wellness and students having essential skills in self-care. Global evidence shows that early childhood instruction on emotional literacy relates to lower rates of adolescent depression and anxiety.

4.5 Summary

The mental health profile of secondary school students in Kuala Lumpur is well established by this study. Counselors are all too familiar with the emotions many of their students struggle with: pervasive anxiety and depression cobbled from academic pressures, broken homes, and digital media. Although individual prevention counseling and other promising programs promise, structural challenges regarding workforce capacity, resource development and curricular integration remain.

Addressing this crisis effectively necessitates a comprehensive approach involving the expansion of mental health workforce, reduction of academic stress and integration of systematic emotional education. Sustainable change requires holistic reform of the education system so that schools are places for Malaysian youth to realize emotional, psychological and academic growth. Kuala Lumpur school counselor(s) were found to have both awareness and commitment towards the mental health issues among students albeit some systemic barriers especially the availability of resources and logistical problems have impeded their efficiency. The results highlight the need to focus on integrated mental health personnel, lowered academic stress, and reinforced support system in order to implement a sustainable student-centered MHCA in Malaysian educational institutions.

5.0 Conclusion

The present study specifically targeted school counsellors' perceptions on mental health of secondary schools' students in Kuala Lumpur. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 15 experienced counselors, which were analyzed heard themes included: the pervasiveness of anxiety, depression and emotional dysregulation among adolescents; multiple contributors to these problems such as family

dynamics, academic pressures and technology; counseling's numerous roles in the absence support from the school system; and a call for systemic change to improve student wellness.

The results underscore a vast tension between growing mental health needs among students and the ability of school systems themselves to effectively meet those needs. Counselors who are the first line of support for emotional issues, though overburdened with student-client load,s are poorly trained to manage mental health-related cases and do not have professional psychological backup. This is indicative of an inadequacy that exists within the Malaysian education system which often emphasizes academic achievements while neglecting one's emotional and psychological growth.

Most importantly, the study exposes an even more core issue with how we currently treat mental health — that it's reactive, rather than preventative. Many of the school counselors probably have little if any contact with students, only holding conferences in private with them when they look seriously disaffected. There is a continued demand for curriculum based interventions that provide students with skills to promote lifelong mental health literacy and emotional resilience. Moreover, lack of parental participation, and policy enforcement weakens co-operative collaboration downplaying a structural disconnect between the home, the school and the state.

The findings should make educators, policy-makers and children's mental health campaigners in Malaysia sit up and question the priority placing of this school system. The government has finally acted to acknowledge that young people face a mental health emergency but frontline delivery is piecemeal and underfunded. The research suggests that unless we shift our education system from a performance focus to an approach that is more student-centred, mental health issues are going to continue to go up among school-aged children, they write.

The present study also contributes theoretical implications by placing school counselors in a new light as primary caregivers and systems navigators with unprecedented potential to identify, help, and advocate for students' mental health concerns. But all too often, their perspectives are overlooked in decisions about policy and those that determine how our schools are run. Including their perspectives in national mental health strategies would help close the gap between policy rhetoric and lived educational experience.

And in Kuala Lumpur secondary schools, the mental health issue is not only a clinic issue but also one related to the whole system, and it is deeply rooted within the Malaysian culture of education, family and digital nature. Such on-school agents, although their approach is selective, can thus offer windows of wisdom that do call for timely coordinated situation-specific attention. It will be useful therefore for future research to build from this effort, expanding this study to include student and parent perspectives, seek out longer-term impacts, and extend into other school-based mental health models that are sustainable in the multiple educational contexts of Malaysia.

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