



An Investigation into Counseling in Turkey: Spotting the Perceptions of School Counselors

Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This paper involves a qualitative survey conducted among secondary school counselors in Adana, Turkey. The main objective was to determine the perception of school counselors regarding the current state of school counseling programs in Adana and whether any improvements are necessary or not. The areas of counseling examined included: the roles of school counselors in promoting the mental well-being of secondary school students in Adana, the difference in approaches used in counseling in secondary schools compared with other levels of education such as the elementary level, the challenges encountered by school counselors in their effort to provide counseling services to learners, and the training necessary to improve the competence of school counselors. Phenomenological research design, which is among the qualitative research designs, has been used in this study. The data collection procedure involved a qualitative survey among 20 counselors selected from different schools within the Adana region in Turkey. Personal account and opinions were recorded in relation to the research questions, and an analysis of the results was discussed by comparing them with the literary publications. From the findings, it was evident that school counselors in Turkey did not have significant supportive infrastructure from the government which could be used to facilitate the objective of providing counseling services to students. However, there was a general agreement that counseling contributes to an improvement of the mental state of learners and increases their willingness to undertake learning activities with positive attitudes. It was also established that counseling provides a supportive environment for students to make the right decisions when joining tertiary institutions. This led to the conclusion that counselors are important contributors to the learning needs of students in secondary institutions in a similar manner as other categories of teachers.

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Keywords:

School counselors, perceptions, mental health, secondary education, students, Turkey

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Introduction

Turkey is a country located on the boundary between Asia and Europe with a population of more than 80 million people. It controls the Black Sea and a section of the Mediterranean Sea. The country experiences a range of problems such as increased urbanization and challenges associated with industrialization. Significant progress has been achieved in the educational developments in Turkey through the setting up of ambitious goals in training learners of all levels (Cosan, 2015). The national objective of training is to provide programs which lead to the acquisition of competence among learners and enable them to become 'empowered citizens.' While counseling in schools started in the United States, it has been practiced in Turkish schools for over fifty years with the teachers diversifying their roles to act as counselors in addition to providing teaching services. According to Williams, Greenleaf, Albert & Barnes (2014), counseling is considered as an important requirement in the development of human capital. In the period between 1950 and 1956, counseling in Turkey was done by American educators who were specifically trained as professionals. The important developments that took place during this period included the setting up of the Test and Research Bureau that determined the standardized IQ outcomes on which students were evaluated, and the US counselors were contracted to provide training to professional counselors in Turkey (Ekin & Oksal, 2012).

The appointment of counselors to provide counseling services in Turkey started in 1996 when the Ministry of National Education assigned counselors to elementary and secondary schools. The role of the counselors in the provision of counseling services was sponsored by the Higher Education Council, the World Bank, and other interested stakeholders (Aliyev et al., 2012). The government of Turkey played a role in formulating educational policies which required counseling lessons to be obligatory among learners between the 1st to 5th grades.

While the government of Turkey has emphasized the importance of educational attainment as a major requirement for the development of productive population, counseling has not been given adequate attention as an important requirement for a child's educational success (Hanimoglu, 2018). There is still lack of adequate knowledge among school stakeholders regarding the relevance of counseling in enabling the achievement of learning objectives of students in secondary institutions. According to Torunoğlu & Gençtanırım (2015), the youths in the Turkish secondary schools presently face numerous psychological challenges ranging from the problems they encounter at home to the academic obligations which they are required to achieve under difficult situations. The implication is that many students may experience mental disturbances that require them to be counseled and guided on how to cope with the challenges. Stockton & Güneri (2011) observed the Turkish National Education Ministry has identified counselors as relevant in providing services to students in schools, but the number of studies is few in this field involving a survey among counselors to seek their views in relation to their role in achieving the mental well-being of learners.

Current State of Counseling in Schools in Turkey

The development of counseling in Turkey has occurred in the same manner as educational programs. Each country has undergone its unique changes in the social, political, and economic developments to the present date (Stockton & Güneri, 2011). The counseling programs for a particular society or country may not be applicable in another country due to differing environments. The nature of counseling provided in Turkish schools is that it aims at correcting undesirable characteristics and promoting the orientation of students to the values, norms, and cultures of the country. Counseling is also perceived to be a means through which students are disciplined and provided with special education by their teachers (Williams, Greenleaf, Albert & Barnes, 2014). However, the strategy used in counseling in Turkey has been influenced by the counseling developments in the United States. Globalization has created the opportunity for counselors in Turkey to acquire knowledge of counseling strategies from America.

There is a gain in popularity of counseling in the Turkish schools due to the role it plays in addressing the needs of students who are experiencing mental challenges. However, there is still regional disparity in the availability of counseling programs by the students in less developed regions not having the opportunity to undergo counseling compared with those in urban areas due to unequal distribution of counselors. The existing training programs for counselors are still undergoing developments and require the participation of different stakeholders such as the government and the educational officials.

The aim of this study is to examine the roles of counselors in secondary schools in Adana, Turkey, as a means of getting insight into the national perception of school counseling. The results were used to get insight regarding the significance of counseling in promoting the development of children, the challenges encountered by school counselors in Turkey, and why the participants believe that counseling is important in secondary schools.

Methods

Phenomenological research design, which is among the qualitative research designs, has been used in this study. Phenomenological research design focuses on cases that we are aware of but do not have in-depth and detailed understanding of (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005).

Participants

Description of the participants. Convenience sampling was used in this study. Convenience sampling is “defined as a sample in which research participants are selected based on their ease of availability” (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 124). The participants were secondary school counselors working in Adana, Turkey. A total of 25 counselors were contacted and informed about the objective of the researcher to collect data which would reveal the understanding of the role of counselors in schools. Among the school counselors contacted, 20 counselors accepted to participate in the study. The average age of the respondents was 38.4 (SD=1.45) while their average number of years of experience as counselors was 6.42 (SD=3.17). The respondents were recruited through referrals by the colleagues of the researcher and their friends. All those who were invited agreed to participate in the survey. Forty percent (n=8) of the participants worked as guidance and counselors as their only role in the institutions, but the remaining 60 per cent (n=12) worked as counselors as well as teachers of other subjects. Most counselors expressed the feeling of satisfaction and the relevance of their roles in the achievement of the learning goals of students. The researcher found that parents also relied on the role of counselors in the provision of motivation to their children to perform better in the final examination in order to qualify for college education.

Demographic characteristics. In terms of gender, male participants made up 40% (n=8) of the participants while female participants made up 60% (n=12). Those aged between 30-35 were 25% (n=5), 36-40 30% (n=6), 41-45 were 35% (n=7), and those who were above 45 years made up 10% (n=2). Among the selected counselors, 10% (n=2) of them were doing PhD in counseling, those who had Master’s Degree in Counseling were 30% (n=6) while those who had Bachelor’s degree in Counseling were 60% (n=12). All the school counselors had experience level of more than 5 years in counseling and had also taught the subject in their respective schools.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument used was a questionnaire which was divided into three parts. The first part was the consent section where the respondents were required to sign their agreement to take part in the research; the second part was composed of the section where the demographic information of the respondents was recorded while the third part was composed of the qualitative survey questions which the respondents were expected to answer. The third section was composed of five open-ended questions as illustrated below:

- I. According to your opinion, what is the role of counselors in schools? (Explain your response).
- II. Is there a difference in the technique of counseling in secondary schools compared with other levels of learning? (Explain).
- III. Are there any challenges you encounter when counseling in your profession? (Give detailed description).
- IV. What is the relevance of additional training programs for counselors to perform better in their roles? (Explain briefly).
- V. Are guidance and counseling important in secondary institutions? (Briefly explain the benefits associated with counseling).

Interviews

Before the actual interview, a pilot study was conducted that focused on introducing the respondents to the researcher and the interview questions so that they could think about the right answers and provide the most suitable feedbacks during the interview. The interview was in the form of self-reported personal survey. A personal interview requires the respondent to provide a qualitative response in the form of observation, opinions, perspectives, and thoughts depending on his or her understanding of the question asked by the researcher (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The types of questions asked were open-ended questions. These are questions which give the respondent the opportunity to provide information in the best way he or she understands without victimization. The type of data collected was qualitative data which is in a descriptive form such as observations, experiences, and knowledge of respondents (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Qualitative data was important in this study because it provided the opportunity for respondents to express their views depending on their experiences. The views of the respondents in relation to the research questions were recorded by note taking. After all the researcher had conducted the research, the responses were compiled and analyzed as illustrated in the following section.

Data Analysis Approach

Data analysis was done by conducting thematic qualitative analysis of the emerging themes from the descriptive data collected. Thematic analysis enables the extraction of major concepts which act as a basis of discussion of a research topic (Buetow, 2010). The researcher recorded the responses in computer applications which enabled them to highlight the main themes and discourses in relation to the research questions. The themes were used as the background for getting insights regarding the current state of counseling in schools in Turkey within the perspective of secondary school counselors.

Assessment of Reliability and Validity of the Sources

Reliability of data refers to the extent to which similar outcomes can be obtained when the same research is repeated by a different researcher (McCrae et al., 2010). In this case, reliability analysis was achieved by conducting a test-retest process. Validity of a study refers to the extent to which the outcomes are in accordance with the current knowledge of the researcher, the general knowledge, and the views of scholars and experts in the field of study. Internal validity analysis was done by establishing the level of standardization of the survey instruments such as whether all the respondents were asked similar questions. Validity analysis also involved the examination of whether the respondents provided relevant answers to the research questions. External validity of the responses was assured by comparing the responses with the knowledge in experts' reports and the researcher's experience on the research topic.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted by following the ethical procedures of research such as: promoting the informed consent of participation of the respondents and excluding those who were reluctant to participate in the research, ensuring anonymity of respondents when reporting the findings, ensuring confidentiality of the data collected and not disclosing them to the members of the public who are not stakeholders in the research, and truthful reporting of the outcomes of the research without omission or commission (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013).

Results

The findings of the respondents were presented in the context of five emerging themes, namely: the roles of school counselors in schools, the difference in counseling approach in secondary schools in comparison to other levels of learning, the challenges encountered by counselors in secondary schools, the relevance of additional training on school counselors, and the importance of guidance and counseling in secondary institutions.

From the discussion of the respondents on the first theme, it was identified that they perceived school counselors as professionals who provide guidance to students to acquire competence of coping with challenging school environment. The respondents also expressed their agreement that the counselor provides guidance to students in a wide range of areas such as; relationship with other students, teachers, and how they actualize themselves at school. According to the observation of one of the respondents, *“A school counselor provides the opportunity for students to adapt to school programs and facilitates the sustenance of programs.”*

There were agreements among a certain number of respondents that school counselors play the role of providing information to teachers, parents, and students regarding the preventive counseling practices relevant to address the mental and psychological support they require. Most school counselors who took part in the survey expressed the observation that parents and teachers greatly appreciated the information provided to them in guiding students at school and home. The sub-theme of ‘Acting as Equipoise’ was identified as one of the roles of school counselors among a number the respondents. They agreed that the school counselor reinforces of the ideals and perspectives of parents regarding the manner in which children should be trained to acquire best characteristics that contribute to the improvement of their performance and behavioral characteristics. One of the respondents’ observed that *“School counselors promote collaborative approach of supporting children to achieve their learning goals.”* From this subtheme, it is evident that the school counselor not only provides guidance and counseling but also undertakes them in a collaborative manner that incorporates the values and expectations of parents and teachers when they are not available to guide students.

The investigation of the theme of differences in counseling in secondary schools compared with other levels of learning resulted into the view that counselors used different content when counseling secondary school students while they are using a completely different approach when counseling elementary school students. They observed that the differences in levels of mental development and variations in challenges at school was the reason for using different content in counseling. A number of the participants explained that there was a difference in counseling methods for secondary school students in comparison to other levels of learning due to behavioral and developmental differences among them. The view of one respondent was: *“There are variations in emotional capabilities of children and counseling must be provided to provide them with the ability to manage emotions.”* The insight from this view is that counseling must be designed with the objective of addressing the developmental needs of a student at various stages of development.

Several respondents stated that the difference in counseling approach among secondary school students is different from those in elementary school levels or pre-school level because of the variations in the extent of collaboration with parents and teachers. Most respondents observed that students in secondary schools do not

require significant attention from parents or teachers and also require less guidance compared with those in elementary levels or pre-school levels.

The respondents discussed the challenges they encountered in the provision of guidance services to students in secondary schools by identifying demand from parents and teachers as one of those challenges. They expressed their concerns that the state of counseling in most schools was such that the counselors must address the psychological needs of students who had problematic characteristics. One of the responses was: *"We encounter difficulty in implementing psychological guidance framework due to the demand for a change in approach from teachers and parents."* Another respondent observed that they are faced with the task of searching for the best methods of counseling because of the demand placed on them by the institutions and the fear that they may be perceived to be incompetent in their roles.

A few respondents stated that lack of facilities and equipment of counseling is a major challenge encountered by school counselors. Those who held this view stated that counseling is a profession that requires a number of inputs rather than the experience and skills of the counselor. An example of such a view was: *"We are not provided with an office which we can use to organize the counseling process."* According to the observation of one of the respondents, lack of facilities has been a threat to their effort to remain in their respective institutions since they are not able to provide high quality counseling without the facilities. It was also observed that inaccessibility of training and educational opportunities was one of the challenges faced by school counselors in Adana, Turkey. Those who held this view stated that lack of advanced education and training reduces their abilities to provide improved counseling services to students.

The respondents' views and opinions were generally supportive of the view that additional training programs provide the opportunities for counselors to perform better in their positions. There were responses which supported the view that guidance and counseling training programs contribute to improvement of the skills of the school counselors. The argument supporting this view was that when counselors undergo training, they acquire knowledge of the best practices which lead to better student outcomes. On the other hand, a section of respondents were of the view that additional training contributes to exposure. In these exposure programs, they were able to know people they can refer to when in need of a strategy to use while providing counseling services. One of the respondents stated: *"We are able to learn from counseling experts."* The act of being connected to experts and scholars was a motivating factor to counselors because it enabled them to get guidance whenever they were faced with uncertain situation among the students. There was the observation that school counselors had higher confidence when they underwent training. The act of undergoing training increases the understanding of the patients' problem and formulation of the most suitable approach in counseling.

The answers provided by the respondents supported the theme that guidance and counseling is beneficial to students in secondary institutions. There was the view that the availability of guidance and counseling services to students in secondary schools contributes to improvements in their academic performances. One respondent's response was: *"When students are counseled, they acquire new attitude towards learning and perform well in examination."*

This view was supported by the observation that most students in secondary schools encounter challenges in planning their tasks or cope with the pressure of studying before examination. However, guidance provides them with the opportunities to overcome these challenges. The second category of respondents was of the view that counseling contributes to the improvement in behavioral characteristics of the students. The purpose of providing this response was the recommended observation that students are able to learn values of the institution and codes of conduct when they undergo counseling. There was also agreement among most respondents that counseling has a beneficial impact on promoting psychological health of the students. They expressed their approval that counselors were important members of their institutions in managing emotional challenges ranging from stress and depression to anxiety.

Discussion, Limitations and Implications

Discussion

The findings of the first research question showed that school counselors performed the role of guidance to the students. According to Elwyn, Frosch & Rollnick (2009), guidance is an important role of a school counselor because it ensures that students are empowered with skills of coping with the challenges in the day-to-day activities in the institutions where they learn. Guidance should be provided in school to mitigate negative trends of student behaviors which are not in accordance with the school policies, traditions, and values. The implication of this finding is that schools need to promote the availability of guidance services to students by employing a school counselor. Many participants supported the view that the role of school counselors is to act as a source of information for the teachers and parents. The view is that school counselors have the training and skills of alternative approaches which can be used to create a supportive environment for a child to overcome the difficulties in their learning and living environments. Miller (2012) noted that school counselors have professional trainings, skills, and educational exposure which increase their ability to get the right information that can be applied by teachers and parents in caring for children and guiding them to their roles. School administrators are dependent on the roles of counselors in the provision of special information that can be used as a framework for creating school policies such as codes of conduct that must be observed by students. The implication of this finding is that teachers and parents must seek the support of school counselors when they need to effectively manage their children to overcome undesired behaviors. A number of respondents agreed that school counselors act as equivoise in creating a connection between teachers and parents in their care for the children. According to Mau, Li & Hoetmer (2016), high school students may have the perception that they are only required to behave in a certain way when they are in school or comply with particular rules when they are in the presence of the teacher or parents. The school counselor has the duty to counsel and guide the students in such a way that their behaviors mirror the interests of both the parents and teachers whether they are at school or at home.

The analysis of the views of respondents in relation to the second research question resulted into the finding that a major difference between counseling in secondary school and other levels of learning is that the content of counseling varies depending on the level of education of the student. Onyango, Aloka & Raburu (2018) observed that students in secondary schools have acquired mental development which empowers them to learn about their environment and rely less on the involvement of the counselor in providing guidance and counseling. On the contrary, younger children require greater attention in orientation towards new school environment, socialization skills and behavior development. Thus, counselors have to devise content of counseling that meets the demands of younger learners in a different way compared with that for older students. Stockton & Güneri (2011) noted that the content of counseling secondary students focus on guiding them on how to make effective use of their abilities and develop talents that can lead them to focus on particular career paths while counseling children in lower levels of learning emphasize on guiding them to develop acceptable behavioral characteristics such as obedience to parents, cleanliness, being presentable, and being respectful. The respondents also stated that the counseling approach for secondary students is different from students in lower levels of learning because they are in different level of behavioral development. A secondary student is more mature in terms of behavior, and the school counselor is less tasked with the role of providing behavioral guidance compared with a student in elementary school or a pre-school institution. Owen & Güneri (2015) observed that counselors have to undergo training in counseling which enables them to either counsel students in secondary schools or those in elementary schools. When counselors get training to counsel students in secondary schools, their areas of specialization include: improving the student's decision making skills, teaching the student how to cope with the difficulties in the labor market, guiding the student to maximize career opportunities, and making use of their knowledge and skills (Onyango, Aloka &

Raburu, 2018). The levels of collaboration was also identified to vary depending in the category of students being counseled with the students in secondary schools requiring little collaboration compared with those in lower levels such as elementary stage and pre-school institutions.

The third research question resulted into the findings that demand from teachers and parents is one of the challenges encountered by school counselors in secondary schools while performing their professional roles. The implication of this finding is that counselors are usually held accountable for failure to provide the expected outcomes in guidance when students encounter challenges in learning or coping with psychological challenges. Aydin (2012) noted that school counselors are expected to provide solutions to children with behavioral problems or those who encounter challenges in coping with learning stress, and depression. The act of demanding better outcomes from school counselors is frustrating and decreases their ability to perform their roles with confidence and dedication, resulting into disagreements and lack of cooperation with other stakeholders in an institution. Hanimoglu (2018) observed that some school counselors have been accused of lack of competence if they fail to successfully counsel a child to achieve the required mental or behavioral characteristics. According to Mapfumo & Nkoma (2013), stakeholders in learning institutions should be asked to allow the counselors to perform their roles without castigating them for the challenges encountered by their children. It was also found that counselors experience the challenge of lack of facilities such as offices and research equipment that they can use to prepare for counseling programs. The effectiveness of counseling is prevented by inaccessibility of the necessary infrastructure such as reference materials, presentation materials, and meeting rooms where counselors can plan their activities. According to Glessner, Rockinson-Szapkiw & Lopez (2017), counseling is a professional activity which is performed with the help of research facilities and other resources that simplify the counselor's roles. This finding shows that when there is unavailability of equipment and facilities, the counselors are less likely to perform counseling roles according to their capabilities due to lack of motivation. Lack of access to training and educational opportunities is another challenge identified to be impacting school counselors in the Turkish secondary schools. Mapfumo & Nkoma (2013) found that school counselors who are not provided with opportunities for advancement of their knowledge have low motivation and sometimes develop the need to change their careers. The implication is that stakeholders in educational institutions must increase the accessibility of educational and training opportunities for counselors in order to motivate them to contribute to their professional obligations in schools.

In the fourth research question, it was found that one of the benefits of training and development to school counselors is the improvement of counseling skills. The acquisition of advanced levels of training skills empowers school counselors with the knowledge of managing complex situations faced by learners (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). The insight from this finding is that institutions and stakeholders in education must create opportunities for school counselors to undergo further training which empowers them with skills of guiding and counseling students. A counselor who possesses better counseling skills is motivated to impart the required advice to students so that they can overcome issues such as: depression, stress in the school environment, and poor relationship with teachers or parents. According to Duman (2016) school counselors who have been trained effectively are able to provide guidance that improves students' coping skills and better academic performances. Another finding was that additional training contributes to the exposure of teachers to the new strategies that have been used by expert counselors to provide counseling services to students. Owen & Güneri (2015) observed that school counselors with advanced training get the exposure of approaches which empowers them to apply the most strategic and effective counseling approaches which result into improved child development outcomes. There is the need to improve the level of exposure of counselors to resources and other stakeholders who are able to provide them with empowerment and act as example regarding the strategies recommended when counseling secondary school students (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017). Better confidence was identified as a major advantage of undergoing additional training in

school counseling profession (Sarı, 2010). According to Kozlowski & Huss (2013) a school counselor who has undergone effective training is able to develop the confidence of being able to resolve the challenges and difficulties associated with the profession such as providing guidance to students with extreme levels of physiological problems.

The fifth research question resulted into the finding that academic improvement is one of the impacts of counseling in Turkish secondary schools. The act of counseling students empowers them with the skills of being able to approach academic challenges in a different perspective which increases their ability to perform better in academic work (Khansa, 2015). Every parent would like his or her child to excel in academics irrespective of their competence. The availability of a counselor in an institution increases the ability of a student to achieve this outcome. Some students are unable to get inspiration to cope with difficulties in assignments in different subjects during learning or how to develop plans for undertaking their assignments. Failure to get psychological counseling support has significant mental and psychological implications. Stone-Johnson (2015) found out that students who underwent regular counseling performed consistently better compared with those who were counseled occasionally. The second finding was that counseling ensures the behaviors of students are improved. The counselor has the experience and knowledge of identifying deviant characteristics in adolescents and advises them to develop behavioral characteristics which are in accordance with the school rules and regulations. Some students have bad behaviors such as lack of respect for teachers or failure to follow school regulations because they are not provided with guidance in a correct manner (Sarı & Ozkan, 2016). The availability of a counselor enables them to develop a change in behavior and mode of conduct. The last finding was that counseling contributes to the improvement of student's mental and psychological well-being. Holland (2015) noted that students suffer from conditions such as depression, stress, and anxiety which can be difficult to manage, but the presence of a counselor ensures that they are able to overcome these challenges.

Limitations

The limitation of the current study is the fact that it focuses on a survey in Adana in Turkey, which means that the findings may not be used to understand the state of counseling in all secondary schools in Turkey. The use of primary survey approach is subject to bias in responses which cannot be proven when presenting the findings, thus impacting the validity of the research. This study was conducted among secondary school counselors without the inclusion of those from other categories of learning such as elementary schools or pre-schools; therefore, the findings are only useful in understanding the current state of counseling in secondary schools.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the current study imply that counseling is an important requirement in the achievement of learning needs of students in Turkish secondary schools. Teachers and parents get the opportunity to address the mental and developmental needs of their children through the participation of counselors who provide guidance services in accordance with their professional training. In spite of the relevance of counseling in most schools, there are many challenges encountered by counselors which must be addressed such as: demand to perform their roles effectively, inadequate facilities, and lack of training opportunities. An implication for practice is that stakeholders in secondary institutions must put in place measures to ensure that the counselors are provided with adequate facilities and supportive environment which enables them to perform their professional functions. There is also the need to increase the availability of training and career development opportunities for counselors in Turkey. The collaboration between educational stakeholders and the government of Turkey can lead to the achievement of the recommendations of this paper.

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