

# THE PROBLEMS FACED IN CAREER COUNSELING IN SAUDI ARABIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN PRIVATE GIRLS' SCHOOLS

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**ABSTRACT: Background:** *There is an enormous concern in today's world regarding career selection and satisfaction that can be traced since the high school education period when students are required to make choices for their career. Hence the recognition of the problem related to career choice and career decision making self-efficacy. The education ministry in Saudi Arabia has been giving due importance to career guidance and counseling. But still the services related to career counseling lag behind to match the major needs of enrolled students.*

**Objective:** *The present study explores the nature and extent of the problems witnessed by Saudi career counselors, and identifies potential difficulties facing the establishment of such service in private schools. Another aim is to investigate perceived career counseling self-efficacy and counseling competence among career counselors.*

**Method:** *Mixed method approach was adopted. Phase I consisted of two focus group discussions with a group of 15 participants each. Phase II consisted of survey method that involved a self-report questionnaire distributed to 55 female counselors from private schools in Jeddah to address the problems and efficacy of the counselors addressing their skills and confidence in providing counseling services.*

**Results:** *The study findings indicated that school career counselors were facing skill based problems, lack of trust or belief in counseling by learners, unsuitable institutional setting for counseling, acknowledgment for the role of school counselors, and school counselors face cultural issues. Quantitative findings reported that 56.4% school counselors had a high competence whereas 43.6% had a low competence.*

**Conclusion:** *Career decision making self-efficacy can be developed in the students only via professional career counseling.*

**Keywords:** Counselor, Self-efficacy, Competence, Career.

## INTRODUCTION

A universal consensus is emerging viz-viz the counseling of students to be taken up as mandatory service in educational institutes specifically at school level. The educationists and school psychologists are of the view that in order to trim down the unfavorable and hazardous impact of psychological and social problems on psychological well-being and academic performance, counseling should be provided to the students at school level. Although every teacher in his capacity carries out some sort of counseling but still professional school counselors are vital to the system since they are properly trained in providing counseling services.

Literature review reveals that counseling services at school level is limited. There is research evidence [1,2] signifying that school counseling is a necessity for the betterment of the students. A widely held support is found among the pedagogical and administrative staff for the counseling services. It is viewed to be a channel of assurance for a systematic and organized school, where the responsibility of the counselor is to flatten the emotional, behavioral or academic problems [2,3]. Additively students have another facet of problems as well that is required to be dealt by the school counselors. The students are required to determine their future careers which they base on the information made available to them by parents, guardians, peers, teachers, media and through various social interactions. Career choices are often made without much emphasis made on the skills and aptitude of the students which ultimately leads to frustration and anxiety or wrong career decision making [4]. School counselors focus on educational, vocational, social, emotional, and personal development. They are required to provide data and information on counseling status and

outcomes to school authorities and parents of students undergoing counseling and to smooth the progress of planning and policy making. Students carry, barrages of psychosocial issues and difficulties, to school for instance family break up, physical and psychological abuse and loss of parents and significant others that necessitates school counseling to reduce the intensity of trauma that hinders the learning process and psychological well-being. Regardless of the school being the only promising premises from where students can seek psychosocial help without financial burden, students appear to have numerous opinions regarding school-based counseling [5]. (Like they have concerns that school counselors would not preserve confidentiality of their reported problems, this is a critical feature that lingers in many minds regarding counseling [1]. Career school counselors in Saudi Arabia deal with many obstacles that confront their work outcome. There is a leading problem that there is no comprehensible illustration of the role of career counseling at Saudi schools for administrators, students, teachers and parents and not even the counselors. There has been an argument over the role definition and problems faced by the school counselors [6] have discussed the actual and ideal roles of female school counselors in Saudi Arabia.

Recent reports from universities around the world continue to express concern about the number of students who are currently coming to campus with Career choice problems. Recognizing the urgent need to address such Career choice problems, ministry of education in Saudi Arabia established a school counseling service to orient the growing numbers of students towards new specializations and occupations in society and to address their vocational needs. Despite this effort, the career counseling service does not fulfill its

purpose in satisfying the needs of the vast majority of students. This study will try to identify the nature and extents of the problems witnessed by Saudi career counselors, and identify potential difficulties facing the establishment of such service in private schools. The above issues will be investigated through the perceptions of counselors and teachers working in private schools in Saudi Arabia. The problems faced by the counselors are also required to be focused as they may have a bad impact on their perceived career counseling self-efficacy and counseling competence.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study is an evaluation and assessment of the counseling services provided at schools by counselors and identifies what difficulties are faced by them.

### Research Design

This study was based on a mixed method approach. This was done with the concentration on ensuring 'rich' data generation. The opinions of the counselors, as the providers of the counseling services, were given prominence. The mixed method approach is a combination of quantitative (Survey) and Qualitative (Focused Group Discussions). It consisted of two phases for data collection. *Phase I* consisted of Survey method that consisted of using a self-report questionnaire to address the problems and efficacy of the counselors that was regarding their skills and confidence in providing counseling services. *Phase II* consisted of focused group discussion with two groups in two separate sessions with a group size of 15. The data was later analyzed to unearth the basic themes and subthemes for problem identification of the difficulties faced by counselors that were skill based, institution based and student based. It explored three main perspectives providing various majors problems (themes) and sub-problems (sub-themes).

### Sample

For Phase I: To obtain richer understanding, two focused groups of 15 participants each were taken. The participants were female school counselors and teachers working in the schools of Jeddah city. This phase focused on identification of problems faced by the school career counselors.

For Phase II: The researcher distributed 55 questionnaires to a sample of female counselors who were drawn from 30 private schools in Jeddah city. The age range of the school counselor was 25-40 years. In this phase the data were collected concerning the career counseling self-efficacy or perceived counseling competence.

### Instruments

#### Demographic Data Sheet:

A demographic data sheet consisting of variables like age, school, marital status and family system was used.

#### Career Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale

Developed by [7] the scale consists of 25 items. The scale is used to assess counselors' level of confidence in providing vocational interventions to people who struggle with career concerns. The reliability of the scale is .90 with the sample of psychologists and .93 with a sample of graduates.

**Semi Structure Focused Group Discussion Protocol.** A semi-structured interview protocol was developed for the focused group discussion to screen out the nature and extent of the problems witnessed by Saudi career counselors, and

identifies potential difficulties facing the establishment of such service in private schools.

## RESULTS

In [8,9] authors asserted that quantitative and qualitative methods are allied in the logic that their outcomes can be harmonizing, with each method supporting the other. Consequently, it is believed that having a combination of both the methods can develop deeper understanding of any phenomenon and gain reliable results. The fundamental principle of mixed methods research is that multiple type of data should be collected which reflect complementary strengths and non-intersecting weaknesses, that allow mixed method research design to provide insights that cannot be merely gained when only qualitative or quantitative data/ are gathered [10].

### Findings of Phase I

Phase I of the research consisted of focused group discussion with two groups in two separate sessions with a group of 15 participants. The data was then analyzed to find the basic themes and subthemes for problem identification of the difficulties faced by counselors that were related to skills, institution or students.

Following are the findings of the Focused group discussion:

#### Skill Based Problems Faced By The Counselor:

The counselors reported they do not feel proficient in the use of some specified psychological test. Therefore, a need for *training on adequate and skillful administration and interpretation of the psychological tests* is required. But unfortunately not effective measures are being taken for enhancing the skillfulness. International exposure was also emphasized. Counselors reported that they find difficulties dealing with the legal issues like sexual abuse and rights of children to decide their choice of subject in which they are competent. Therefore, some sort of *training on legal issues* is also required. This adds to the counseling responsibilities to protect the students psychologically. They also lack *on-line counseling* services and appropriate training is required for it also.

#### Lack of Trust or Belief in Counseling by Learners

Teacher counselors revealed that although they had some skills but at times students *do not trust them or disclose their problems* to them that may be personal or academic related. The school counselors also reported that students had *previous experiences of fear or betrayal or distrust* in a school setting (administration, School head or teachers).

#### Unsuitable Institutional Setting for counseling

In terms of institutional settings school counselors across the sample reported similar challenges faced by them, which are as follows:

Schools *do not have enough space* earmarked for counseling services, *lacking furniture* for appropriate settings and lack of furniture for group counseling and also inadequacy of settings that may *violate confidentiality or comfort* of the students in counseling as by passers may eavesdrop whatever they share. Due to *role overload* (high number of students) the counselors find it difficult to carry out their counseling services along with administrative tasks that are assigned to them.

**Table 1:** Demographic Details of the School Counselors (N=55).

Age	f	%
25	9	16.4
26	10	18.2
27	13	23.6
28	2	3.6
29	2	3.6
30	1	1.8
31	6	10.9
32	4	7.3
33	3	5.5
37	3	5.5
39	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0
Marital Status	f	%
Married	42	76.4
Single	13	23.6
Total	55	100.0
Family System	f	%
Joint	45	81.8
Nuclear	10	18.2
Total	55	100.0

**Acknowledgment for the Role of School Counselors**

School counselors reported that they were *regarded as unimportant* by the teaching faculty of the school. They also reported that they are *not given full and free hand to operate* the provisions of counseling services.

**School Counselors Face Cultural Issues**

Another problem faced by the counselors is to tackle culturally-related issues. School counselors reported a *lack of support from parents* for the concept of counseling who just feel *stigmatized* that their child requires counseling. They also reported that at times some cultural rituals or constraints may also bound the school counselors to provide career counseling where females may not be encouraged by family or male members to join careers. Ignoring such things in learners’ life does not support the counseling process for career building. Therefore, parents should be oriented with the concepts related to healthy outcomes of counseling. There were parents who tell their children not to discuss private and domestic issues or parental pressures and *family values* with outsiders (including student counselors). This occurs regardless of the fact that traditional families seldom provide opportunities to their children to express their problems.

Another important issue that came to the limelight was *unavailability of indigenous and culturally oriented psychological tests*.

**Findings of Phase II**

Phase II consisted of quantitative part of the research. It involved use of survey questionnaire that was filled by 55 female school counselors from private schools of Jeddah. The Overall mean age of the sample was 28.76.

Table 2 shows that Cronbach’s Alpha for Career Counseling Self-efficacy is .69 which shows that the items have a suitable internal consistency.

Table 3 reflects high and low counseling competence based on the scores obtained on career counseling self-efficacy. The scores were divided in two major ranges of high competence and low competence and the findings report that 56.4% school counselors reported a high competence whereas 43.6% reported a low competence.

**DISCUSSION**

Over the last one decade or so, the significance of career guidance and counseling programs has been gaining sufficient grounds in educational sector of Saudi Arabia. Educators in Saudi Arabia are conscious and favorable for the guidance and counseling of students specifically for career support and efficacy. They also support the implementation of career counseling services by professionally trained school counselors [11]. It is one of the major goals of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to develop counseling services throughout the country, particularly career counseling in the schools [12]. Despite the need of counseling, short-period training programs and permission of implementation of career counseling via non-professional personnel, some problems were observed and career counseling was considered to be non-effective. The main reason behind the non-effectiveness of the counseling arena was deficiency of professional counselors and not providing training courses for skilled personnel providing career counseling [13].

The present study focused on the identification of problems faced by the school counselors and their career counseling self-efficacy. So that the provision of counseling services can attain full professional status exclusively career counseling in schools of Saudi Arabia. The findings of the present study revealed that non-provision of training and lack of interpretation of the psychological tests plus unadept in handling of legal issues are the primary causes in the non-effectiveness of the counseling process. The findings are supported by other researches [14,15,5].

Moreover the present research also highlighted that the school counselors face a number of cultural and ethnic issues while dealing with school children and some of the problems are due to lack of support from parents who just stigmatized that their child requires counseling. Some parental pressures and family values also serve as obstacle in career counseling as in some families there is gender discrimination with respect to employment and career building. Similar results were found by [16,17] in their exploration of problems faced the counselors in provision of counseling services. The studies further supported that when parents and guardians are involved and support is provided by them in counseling process the outcomes for children are more successful than those without parental participation [17,18].

An additional problem identified in the present study was that students do not trust counselors being an outsider or stranger to them or disclose their problems to them that may be personal or academic in nature. The school counselors also reported that some students had previous experiences of fear or betrayal or distrust in a school setting due to administration, School head or teachers that makes them reluctant to share their goals and expectations. They trust more on their parents who often select what career is best for

**Table 2: Reliability Analysis of Career Counseling Self-efficacy (N=55).**

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Career Counseli	25	0.69

**Table 3: High and Low competence in career counseling among the school counselors (N=55).**

Counseling Competence	f	%
High Competence	31	56.4
Low Competence	24	43.6
Total	55	100.0

them. Such findings are similar to the ones found in a study by [5].

In addition to lacking skills the counselors reported that there exists unsuitable institutional setting for counseling that is the area which needs more attention by the powers be. There exists lack of suitable space, settings; lacking furniture for appropriate settings and lack of furniture for group counseling such inadequacies lead to violation of ethics to protect the welfare of client in terms of any social injury caused to them for instance during the sessions the others passing by may hear what is being shared and may discomfort the student in counseling session. There is also limited time to carry out counseling related tasks as they are often assigned with administrative tasks as well. Literature in Saudi Arabian context also reveals that there exists fewer counselors and due to which a number of students are assigned to one counselor [19,20]. The school counselors also reported that they are not appropriately acknowledged for the Role of School Counselors. They are considered to be irrelevant and insignificant by the teaching faculty of the school. They also reported that they are not given full and free hand to operate for the provisions of counseling services. Similar findings were found in Nigerian Study [21].

By and large the problems identified in the study and outlined above could have a negative impact on the development of career guidance and counseling services in Saudi Arabian schools. Therefore, the career counseling self-efficacy was explored among the school counselors. The findings reported high career counseling self-efficacy that is high competence reported by 56.4% and low career counseling self-efficacy or low competence was reported by 43.6%. Though the majority of the sample reported high competence but it could be subject to the experience and age of the school counselor as well social desirability effect might have played its role in the responses of the school counselors. As the problems identified by them clearly speak of the lack of skills, lack of equipment and lack of support from parents and staff at school. On the other hand even if we consider them to be highly competent, even then 43.6% reported low competence which cannot be ignored and it calls for strict, adept and strategic measures to be taken to deal with the problems and thus enhancing the career counseling services and programs.

Majority of the secondary school graduates do not have sufficient information and awareness about career options available, specifically related to their aptitude and interests. They go into the universities to study courses that are not

suitable to their aptitude and abilities or interests. The problems faced by the counselors are also required to be focused as they may have a bad impact on their perceived career counseling self-efficacy and counseling competence. This may in turn influence the treatment and counseling process. Career decision making self-efficacy can be developed in the students only via professional career counseling.

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