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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ASSESSING THE CURRENT STATUS OF COUNSELING PROFESSION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN WOLAITA ZONE, SOUTH ETHIOPIA

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#### ABSTRACT

School counseling service in the secondary school has fall in with numerous challenges due to attitudinal problems of stakeholders in the contemporary schools throughout the globe. The purpose of this study was to identify the present status of counseling in secondary and preparatory schools in Ethiopian context. In line with the purpose, a qualitative – explanatory research design has been used to evaluate the presence status of counseling service in the secondary schools. Generally, twenty-one school counselors and three zonal education officers have been partied in the study by using selective purposive sampling techniques. Counselors have some professional defects in the area of knowledge, skill and practicing of professional counseling services in secondary schools. Professional marginalization and discrimination is a common practice in the secondary schools that in other way hinders the professional growth and advancement of profession. Moreover, attitude towards counseling service, weak promotional ladder in education environment, lack of supervision and coaching, were the genuinely reported problems in the secondary schools. Scientific systems and structure has to be establishing to empower counselors to downgrade the upgrading status of psychological and social pathologies in the contemporary secondary schools. Procedurally and contently structured counseling guideline and counseling text books has be developed to expand counselors knowledge and skills in the secondary schools. On the other hand, universities should revisit their curriculum in how to delivering the courses in psychology and in the way how to rendering community service to raise community mobilization and participation.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Professional secondary school counselors often find themselves with no clearly defined role in school environments because the school administration lacks education regarding the duties of a school counselor (Cervoni and DeLucia-Waack, 2011). Traditionally, the professional secondary school counselor's role has included making academic recommendations, record keeping, report writing, vocational planning, test administration and scoring, scheduling, and other assigned administrative duties (Tang and Erford, 2004). Despite the growing popularity in schools, there lacks clear understanding of the school counselor role. School counselors are increasingly called upon to serve as school leaders with the ultimate goal of ensuring social and academic success for all students. By providing proactive leadership for students and staff, school counselors can work to eliminate the achievement gap and serve integral roles in the school reform movement (House and Hayes, 2002).

School counselors have the skills needed to overcome the challenge be successful in the area of counseling by focusing on leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and innovation (Galassi and Akos, 2012). Specifically, school counselor are reminded of their leadership capacity, offered strategies to overcome barriers to leadership, and given examples of how to make leadership to be successful. Moreover, school counselors can collaborate with school staff to create a coordinated, comprehensive school counseling program through the integration of a common language and set of behavioral expectations. On the other hand, school counselor in advance facilitates staff knowledge of the link between social/emotional skills and academic success through their use of universal suggested counseling reality (e.g., Ockerman, Mason, and Hollenbeck, 2012; Ryan, Kaffenberger, and Gleason Carroll, 2011). Contemporary issues related to mental health affect school counselors personally and professionally. Historically, school counselors have been trained as mental health care

providers rather than as school leaders, advocates, and researchers. Under (McGannon et al., 2005; Tang and Erford, 2004). Counselors often suffer personal psychological stress as well as professional stress as they seek to provide for the mental health needs of students. Ringeisen, Henderson, and Hoagwood (2003) declared that schools are a key factor in the delivery of mental health services to students. School counselors are at the forefront of working with students suffering from mental health issues (Bain, 2010). Walker, Shenker, and Hoover-Dempsey (2010) maintained that school counselors cannot bring about student success by themselves. They must build upon a network of resources which of necessity involves families and communities. Building a network support for students is a delicate and deliberate aspect of the school counselor's role. Becoming familiar with the resources both in and out of school can often help build the bridge that will interconnect these various groups (Bain, 2010). White and Kelly (2010) asseverated the role of the school counselor in the six key intervention strategies for student success: social support, monitoring and mentoring, personal and social skill development, parent involvement, academic instruction, and academic support (Bain, 2010).

Seeing the school counselor as a leader is somewhat different than seeing the school counselor in terms of leadership. Mason (2010) found that school counseling programs could be more effectively implemented if the school counselor manifested certain leadership skills (Bain, 2010). School counselors who have leadership experience have been found to be prime leaders in terms of mentorship and consultation. According to the American Counseling Association (2004), the roles of public school counselors remain unclear in many school districts. School counselor's tasks, expectations, and demands vary from state to state, district to district, and school to school. Typically, school counselors are merely told what to do by administrators (House and Hayes, 2002). Paisley and Mahon (2001) argued that the ongoing debate over the definition of the role of public school counselors is probably the most significant challenge facing public school counselors. McMahon and Patton (2001) highlighted the lack of suitable supervision for school counselors in Australia. According to their study, practice supervision was able to be accessed two times or less in a year by almost half of the respondents in their study. School counselors may have access to informal support networks providing peer supervision and support, but the need for adequate formalized supervision largely remains unmet. Bunce and Willower (2001) also revealed the sporadic nature of professional contacts and the lack Counseling (2009) of supervision for school counselors in their study undertaken in America (as cited in Camelford .K. and Ebrahim H.C , 2017). The study revealed that the teacher counselors were facing many challenges including unavailability of appropriate space and time to counsel learners, and lack of skills to effectively address learners' psychosocial needs (Mushaandja and Collagues, 2013). The lack of acknowledgement of the role of teacher counselor was exacerbated by teachers and school management who undermined the work being done by the teacher counselors. A teacher counselor from a secondary school in Kunene concluded that: "... We are not acknowledged as a body that can make any contributions. You may know about a particular learner's circumstance. The next thing you hear is that the learner has been expelled. They [school management] do not consult us" (Low, 2009). Despite the availability of a reference guide for domestic violence and sexual abuse, teacher counselors did not know how to handle

cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, and incest. Rape and sexual abuse were particularly problematic issues when teacher counselors lived in the same community as learners. Many of the teacher counselors also had problems dealing with cultural issues (for example, early marriages jeopardizing learners' access to education; distribution of orphans in families; difficulties of monitoring how OVC lived in host families; parental preference of corporal punishment as opposed to the counseling approaches, etc.) (Low, 2009). Because of lack of proper counseling skills coupled with the culture of not opening up to outsiders, teacher counselors found it difficult to counsel learners. Learners did not trust them and therefore did not open up. Moreover, lack of trust was a result of prior experiences of betrayed trust. Learners were suspicious that teacher counselors would reveal their problems to others outside the trust relationship. They also thought that they would be punished if they opened up (Paisley and Mahon, 2001).

Thus, empowering school counselors through various means will be valuable to bring change in the students' behavior, leadership competency, teachers' attitude and change in working environment. Yet there is great gap of knowledge, skills and practice in counseling and other psychological variables are observed among the counselors to overcome individual student based problems, and ordering academic leadership as effective. Keeping this in mind this project is designed with the objective of assessing the current status counseling to overcome the contemporary issues bearing in the secondary schools.

### Objective of the study

**General objective:** To investigate the status and challenges of guidance and counseling service in secondary and preparatory schools.

### Specific objectives

- To describe the experience of guidance and counseling in secondary and preparatory schools.
- To assess the knowledge of secondary school counselors
- To describe the perceived attitude of school principals towards school guidance and counseling.
- to explain the challenges to provide school guidance and counseling service

### Significance of the study

- Research finding will provide recent information for the concerning bodies in the school environment.
- It will advance the knowledge and awareness on the role of guidance and counseling in the process of building students personality.
- It will create a good understanding for the stakeholders like government and nongovernmental organizations in the area of school guidance and counseling.
- It provides some insight for future study in this particular area and related issues.

**Delimitation of the study:** This paper delimited to address the status and challenges of guidance and counseling in secondary schools in Wolaita zone, which is located 329 km far from Addis Ababa.

### Limitation of the study

The researchers expected to face the following challenges.

- Inconvenience and shortage of time.
- Financial problems.
- And limited materials displayed in the library.

### Operational definition of terms

All terms defined according to the context of this research are the following.

**Guidance:** - the role of school counselors in which they show direction about their students to extract their potentials and talents.

**Counseling:** - caring and providing supporting systems for the students.

**Counselors:** professional psychologists or trained other professionals who are providing assistant for students in the school environment.

**Study design:** In this study, descriptive research design was used. Purely qualitative research approach was used to explore the status and challenges in the area of school guidance and counseling service. Study area. This study was conducted in Wolaita zone, which is located 329 km far from Addis Ababa. This study is delimited to all secondary and preparatory schools in Wolaita zone.

**Populations:** The target population of the study was school counselors in secondary and preparatory schools in Wolaita zone.

**Sampling and Sampling technique:** 21 school counselors and three education officers were selected randomly from all secondary and preparatory schools in the zone. This is in order to increase the quality and the validity of the information from the participants. In the sampling process, clearly non-probability sampling technique was used. It was important to dig out the firm research participants. Participants for in-depth interview and FGD were selected by using purposive and convenience sampling technique while questionnaires administered on the randomly selected participants.

### Sampling size

**Instrument development:** Open ended questionnaires and semi structured interview instruments were used for data collection. Before data collection, questionnaires, FGD and interview guidelines; and observation check list were developed by the researchers.

**Data collection procedure:** During the data collection, self-administrative questionnaires, notebooks and tape records were used for only voluntary participants.

**Methods of Data Analysis:** Using percentage, thematic-summarization and narration data analysis mechanisms were used during the time of data analysis. Because, it appropriately enables to address the objects of the study as much as possible.

## RESULTS

### Counselors' Knowledge and Skills to Practice Counseling:

It is only what we got in the university when we are students rather nothing has done to update our knowledge, skill and practices in the area of school counseling profession although counseling is dynamic in its nature" one informant stated his lived experience. The central issues in the contemporary globe such as technology and globalization are accelerating the extent of problems in the school environment. Young school counselors need continuous and steadily training in the area of counseling and psycho therapy in order to halt the new expanding mental health disorders in the school environment because of the students' heavily dependency on drugs is increasing from the time to time. " I have 10 years school guidance and counseling service experience in public school but I have not seen as such expansion of the psychosocial and mental health problems in today's school." said by one of school counselor.

As participants in panel discussion seriously raised that no space was given for counseling profession in the school by the school principals and education officers though the problem is serious. Education officers and school leaders have distorted and wrong orientation on the role of school counselors. " Human resource development offices have weak commitment to recruit school counselors in all education levels even they want to shift budget to the subject teachers due to their weak orientation and understanding." stated by one of zonal education officer. Similarly other education department head delegate stated his experience as 'I' were education department leader in one of district in Wolaita zone for the last three years but I have never want to employ school counselors rather make budget transfer for the other activities" Psychology curriculum in universities itself is not based on the practical demonstration rather only loaded by West-oriented theories and literatures. Professionals and school leaders are claiming that counselors have great skill gap in what and how to carryout counseling services in school and other environment. A frontline Calmar remarked that even no simple cases will allow to practice in the classroom when we are in the universities. Look at "you have never buy knowledge and skill from the market if there is nothing in the market. University stay is only dominated in theory other than practice and demonstration. Universities have to check and cross check their ways of course delivering and instruction systems" an informant in the discussion forwarded his observation. West oriented theoretical aspect domination in the class course weakened students' intention to advance skills in counseling and psychotherapy.

### Challenges for the professional growth and development of counseling in schools:

Wrong attitude and perception by education officers and school community towards counseling is common in all levels. People are not well awarded about school guidance and counseling service. Rather school community considered counselors as jobless employees. Participants forwarded that counselors are assigned as a clerk and documentation officers in different schools. "I am not a linguistic expert to be assigned in documentation room but they did it and I am working there only for bread" school counselor forwarded his experience in the discussion. It is not only school principal or officers even counselors themselves are not well informed about what they will do. "Counselor themselves ask to deliver courses in school rather to straggling

**Totally, 23 male children and 7 female children were taken to participate in the study.**

No.	Types of data collection	No participants	Target group
1	Questionnaires (interview)	24	counselors
2	Focused group discussion	9	counselors
3	Semi -structured interview	10	Education officers and counselors

to promote and deliver their professional services in schools” zonal education officer said. Attitude problem is common in both angles.

**Inconvenience physical setting:** As counselors we know how to organize physical setting for counseling service, but school counselors are incapable to do that because no one cares about counseling service in the school compound. When you ask about office, may be everyone will be laugh on you. Let me share my experience when I am dealing about office with my boss “I never allow office to you to recreate and entertain rather we have no office even for the subject teachers” said by of the counselor in the discussion. One office may be assigned for three or four teachers including school counselors although counseling needs private classroom for discussion, you are forcedly assigned in collection which is absolutely unethical in counseling profession.

**Professional marginalization and discrimination in school:** Teachers other than counselor get opportunities of academic and status promotion in every year or every couple of years. We are not encouraged to get promotion and system itself alienate school counselors not be promoted as other school teachers. School counselor cannot be compete for school leadership position or education officers or unit leader positions even though you have bulky of experience and ability to be competent in all aspects. School leadership position criteria and procedures itself legally excludes school counselors from the competition. We are entertaining a legal and structured professional discrimination in Ethiopia. “I doubt who I am even and I am emotionally and professionally deteriorating from time to time after watching and experiencing excluding and alienating system” said by a school counselor in the discussion. Similarly other counselor in the discussion issued that “sometimes I try to ask myself...who I am? I get some professional identity crisis, what is the important of learning psychology though I know how much psychology is important for young students in the school” school counselor forwarded his terrible experience in the school.

Injustice and unfairness is a day to day job in the school. School counselors are not equally treated as subject teachers in the school. A good indicator will be any career development in school environment always excludes school counselors. National or regional examination invigilation excludes school guidance and counseling officers. Even any incentive package for teachers excludes school guidance and counseling officers. Counseling is not a job for teachers and school officers. Look “ Subject teachers with the same experience with us are able to invigilate regional and national examinations but counselors are not get any room to invigilate” said by a counselors in interview session. School officers always visit our school, but they never want visit to school counselors and their respective offices. No system to empower counselors to advance their skill and knowledge. Beside supervision problem, still today there is no clear job description or manual prepared for school counselors.

Naturally, we prepare checklist during school visiting session however issues relate to school counseling is not included in the checklist” presented by zonal education officer in the discussion. There is no system and structure to check what school counselors doing in their stay in the schools.

**Training and empowerment system:** I have 8 years work experience as school guidance and counselor. I have got null training that capacitates me to scaling up my profession and deliver neat counseling professional service for the young students and school community “ a informant explained his feeling in the discussion session. Things are getting worst from time to time in school environment because internal and external conditions paramount exposing young students to the extremely dangerous zone. That directly or indirectly is devastating the living condition of youths. Intervention system should be scratched to handover the problem. For that, empowering training for professionals, such as counselors’ should be prioritized. Subject teachers get training in different time but nobody wants to give training for behavior scientists in the school. In the FGD discussion session, panels said that mental health issues are getting worst from time to time among youths. Therefore, special training on drug abuse, media use and mental health are essential for the school counselors. School counselor should be considered as mental health extension workers in their school, and surrounding community beside their one-to-one counseling services.” one of the counselor in discussion forwarded her idea. Training and support system is weak for counselors because of the distorted attitude and knowledge towards psychology, guidance and counseling services. Unfortunately, universities are failed to organize seminars, dialogues and conferences on the current practice of counseling in Ethiopia. “I believe that university is a bridge to link professionals with employers and political leaders yet I haven’t seen that kind of action from any of Ethiopia universities in the area of psychology” said by a counselor in the discussion.

**Planning, monitoring and evaluating system of the effectiveness of counseling in the school:** Counselors are not alerted to support their clients and students as much as the expected level. School Counselors in our locality have weak experience to develop daily, weekly, monthly and annual plan to adhere their professional services for clients and students in the school. Even counselors have gap in the area of planning, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of counseling services. “As a counselor I have plan but there is no ways to monitor and follow up system” forwarded by school counselor. Counselors have perception to expect the external supervisor and evaluation rather to expand their system of follow up to upgrade the effectiveness of the service. Majority of school counselors in the school have no counseling background. In school, counselors are not wanted to stay for long time because of low salary and promotion system. Therefore, young counselors have no base to get good experience from the old counselors. “Counselors are attending other degree programs in the distance base to change their profession” school counselor said. You have never found any

experienced school counselors from whom you will get experience.

## DISCUSSION

Despite the growing popularity in schools, there lacks clear understanding of the school counselor role to enrich students' performance and development (House and Hayes, 2002). Similarly, the current study stated that starting from the education office to teachers have blurred perception towards school guidance and counseling services. What wondering is that the case is similar in other country as the cross-cultural study reported by Tang and Erford, (2004), raveled that traditionally, the professional secondary school counselor's role such as making academic recommendations, record keeping, report writing, vocational planning, test administration and scoring, scheduling, and other assigned administrative duties. Paramount school counselor in our locality are forced to carryout routine activities which has none relationship with professional counseling activities. Despite the availability of a reference guide for domestic violence and sexual abuse, teacher counselors did not know how to handle cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, and incest. Rape and sexual abuse were particularly problematic issues when teacher counselors lived in the same community as learners (Camelford and Ebrahim (2017). The present claim is also similar with the old studies. Building a network and supporting system for students is a delicate and deliberate aspect of the school counselor's role (Bain, 2010). The current study similarly indicates that networking has limitless role to advance students academic and interpersonal development. As similarly the old study by Mushaandja and Collagues, (2013), present study revealed that the teacher counselors were facing many challenges including unavailability of appropriate space and time to counsel learners, and lack of skills to effectively address learners' psychosocial needs due to lack of continuous training and supervision by employers and institutions. Bunce and Willower (2001) also revealed the sporadic nature of professional contacts and the lack of supervision for school counselors in USA is a big challenge to adhere counseling service for students and school community. Ringeisen, Henderson, and Hoagwood (2003) declared that schools are a key factor in the delivery of mental health services to students. Results raveled that students in secondary schools are facing mental health problems; however, school counselors were not trained in similar manner to treat and prevent mental health issues in the school.

## Conclusion

Although continuous training and empowerment is a ladder for professional growth and development, a little attention was given for school guidance and counselors in the contemporary school environment. The originally and structurally dwarfed professional growth system for counseling in secondary schools is rooted due to the wrong perception and attitude, little attention and weak knowledge to the counseling profession by professionals themselves, school principals, teachers and education officers at all levels. In the school compound there is clear, legally and structurally supported professional marginalization and discrimination observed in contemporary schools in Ethiopia. The problem in planning, and evaluation also hinders the effectiveness of school guidance and counseling services in the secondary schools.

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