

Novice School Counselors' Stress during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Received March 12, 2023;
Revised June 2, 2023;
Accepted June,12 2023;
Published Online July,1, 2023

Conflict of Interest Disclosures:

The authors declare that they have no significant competing financial, professional or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.



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Abstract: This study was conducted to explore the causes and effects of stress among novice school counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employs a qualitative approach with combination data collection techniques of observation, interview and document analysis. The respondents involved six counselors who have just started their careers for less than one year in high school settings. The six respondents were sampled using the purposive sampling methodology. The main result of the study found that all respondents agreed that their feelings before taking up the position of a teacher and after becoming a teacher had many changes. It is also found that all respondents have a good understanding of the pressures and challenges they go through. Undoubtedly, it's critical for teachers to keep in mind that having personal experience may help them cope with stress.

Keywords: Counselor, COVID-19, School, Stress, Qualitative

Abstrak. Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk mengeksplorasi penyebab dan dampak stres di kalangan konselor sekolah pemula selama pandemi COVID-19. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan kombinasi teknik pengumpulan data observasi, wawancara dan analisis dokumen. Responden melibatkan enam konselor yang baru memulai karir mereka kurang dari satu tahun di lingkungan sekolah menengah. Keenam responden diambil sampelnya dengan menggunakan metodologi purposive sampling. Hasil utama dari penelitian ini menemukan bahwa semua responden setuju bahwa perasaan mereka sebelum mengambil posisi guru dan setelah menjadi guru mengalami banyak perubahan. Juga ditemukan bahwa semua responden memiliki pemahaman yang baik tentang tekanan dan tantangan yang mereka lalui. Tidak diragukan lagi, penting bagi guru untuk diingat bahwa memiliki pengalaman pribadi dapat membantu mereka mengatasi stres.

Kata Kunci: Konselor, Covid-19, sekolah, stress, qualitative

How to Cite: Rahum, S.N.H., Abu Bakar, A.Y., Amat, S., & Suranata, K..2023. Novice School Counselors' Stress during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry. JBKI, 8(2): pp. 112-120, https://doi.org/10.23887/jurnal_bk.v8i2

Introduction

The teaching profession is a field that provides unique services and is indispensable to society. Its uniqueness will be felt and known to those who are engaged in this profession. Only individuals involved in this profession can provide educational services to the community and have a significant impact on the personal, mental, and physical development of each person. The hiring of full-time school counselors was first implemented in Malaysia in 1996, whereby this counselors' post was allocated as an "over and above" school-based allocation. Teachers appointed as full-time student counselors have qualifications of either a Degree in Guidance and Counseling, a Diploma in Psychology (Counseling), or a Professional Certificate in Counseling.

The majority of teachers and community members view this full-time counselor position as the easiest and most enjoyable one because it only requires the counselor to listen to the students' emotional expressions and offer them guidance. In addition, the counselor is not required to teach, review textbooks, or mark exam papers. But, a school counselor cannot escape a myriad of issues during the course of a school day since he or she must deal with children of various personalities. School counselors deal with a range of worries, tensions, and emotional strains as they work to satisfy the needs, desires, and concerns of their pupils. The counselor also has to deal with problems and challenges that arise from time to time. Therefore, there is no question that there is an issue with school counselors' self-conflict like the issue of stress, which should be taken seriously. If the cause can be identified early, strategies can be developed to help the school counselors to deal with stress issue, so that they do not fall within the group of uninspired, unmotivated, frustrated, or unhappy personnel.

During the time of COVID-19 pandemic, school counselors are also hit by extreme stress due to the demand for education. They need to prepare various materials according to the syllabus online. Excessive or prolonged stress will affect the psychological, physiological, and behavioral aspects of a teacher (Dunham, 1992). From the psychological point of view, the symptoms affected them including sense of irritability, emotional distraction, self-offensive feeling, and enthusiasm or self-motivation loss. From the physiological point of view, on the other hand, school counselors who face constant stress without finding a suitable discharge mechanism are prone to chronic diseases including heart-related problems, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

Research Background

According to Robert (1987), school counselors have five great responsibilities, namely: (1) responsibility to students; (2) responsibility to parents; (3) responsibility to colleagues and other professional partners; (4) responsibility to the school and society; and (5) responsibility to oneself.

In 2018, the ministry conducted a study on teacher stress with 48,258 respondents. The results showed that 4.4% of teachers experienced moderate to high levels of stress. The results of this study also showed that stress in this group was caused by various factors such as family problems, finances, management and workload, lack of recognition, lack of skills in performing tasks, and lack of training to manage stress. While the effects of resilience on teachers have been investigated during the

pandemic, fewer studies have focused on school counselors, who must be strong and resilient to support students' mental health. Litam, Ausloos and Harrichand (2021) found that resilience predicts low professional quality of life as measured by fatigue and compassion satisfaction caused by stress helping traumatized people.

Concerns about online confidentiality, ethical responsibility, and personal experience of COVID-19 can challenge the resilience and well-being of school counselors which in turn impacts the quality of their services (Cullen, Gulati & Kelly 2020). Košir et al. (2022) conducted a study of work stress among primary and upper secondary school teachers and school counselors during the early period of online education in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 964 school professionals (90.7% of teachers; 9.3% of school counselors) took part and the results showed that school professionals who reported higher ICT self-efficacy, have a more positive attitude towards distance education, and feel a higher level of supervisor support are experiencing less stress. In addition, participants who reported taking care of their preschool or younger school children during school closures reported higher levels of stress. A study conducted in 1997 on the attitudes of teachers and students towards the implementation of full-time counselor services in schools has found that counselors face only low or moderate stress. This shows that there is a poor relationship between teacher and student attitudes with stress levels among full-time student counselors.

The study will focus on the experiences faced by new teachers of coaching and counseling as a premier element while the impact is faced as a secondary element. It consists of two domains which are stress and challenge. Therefore, it is crucial to carry out this study because, according to Matteson and Ivancevich (1999), workplace stress results in physiological issues like headaches, an elevated heart rate, and blood pressure as well as attendance issues, higher health insurance costs, and reductions in the quality and quantity of production. This study aims to explore the causes of stress, the effects of stress, and the experience of adapting to stress among novice school counselors.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is important so that the research conducted has the most appropriate and effective method in answering the problems of the study and achieving the objectives of the study. According to Mohamed (2001), a methodology is an approach used in research to collect data. Therefore, the study uses qualitative methods with data collection techniques through field studies (observations), interviews as well as document studies.

Qualitative research has its form of data that is different from quantitative research. Qualitative data is in the form of interviews, observations, and document analysis. Field notes and research diaries are the main supporters in confirming the fieldwork carried out in qualitative studies (Jasmi, 2012) This article tries to delve deeply into the form of data, strengths, and weaknesses of the methodology for each data collected, as well as the process of collecting data in qualitative research. The respondents involved were first-year guidance and counseling teachers. There were six of them who were purposively sampled and all of them went through in-depth interview sessions.

Results and Discussion

Stress on work experienced by novice school counselors

All the respondents were novice school counselors who were in their first year. When sharing their experiences, all six respondents agreed that their feelings before taking up a teacher and having become a teacher had many changes.

"After becoming a teacher, the feeling of excitement has changed. Other teachers put their hopes on me because I'm a fresh graduate, but I'm still in the process of learning, there's still a lot I have to learn." (R1)

"...before I got the job, every day I wanted to work but when I got the job to be a teacher, I just understood what the weight of a teacher's responsibilities. If asked about this feeling, it's 100% different." (R3)

"...the feeling now is different because what I learned was not the same as in my current job. I used to be in a regular school day but when I got into MRSM it was different because the system was different. So becoming MRSM school counselor taught me a lot of new things that I never knew." (R4)

Three other respondents also said that they are now able to adapt to being a teacher despite the increasing sense of responsibility.

"...feelings are very different because I feel more responsibility than ever. It's a lie if I say there's no change at all, but when I start working, I think what I used to want is very different from what I'm going through now." (R6)

"I honestly say that feelings are different because there's a transition in me. I used to be a student who wanted to work so the morale was quite high but when I'm in the current situation, I have to deal with the transition that's happening to me." (R2)

"...being a teacher is my ambition, but when I get this goal, it feels different. It's nice that what I've learned and understood is very different because the new counselors at this school are always given side tasks that aren't our job. But this isn't an obstacle near me because I want to push it can't so I practice the concept of asking a lot. After all, I don't know everything. I do and ask a lot of questions so people know that I'm trying and trying to be the best." (R5)

Causes of stress among novice school counselors

The causes of stress experienced by all respondents during the MCO are quite different from each other. Four out of six respondents shared that the cause of the stress they experienced was their current environment.

"...one of the causes of my stress is when I need to fill in lot of relief classes. I need to take care of two school sessions. When I change classes in the morning, in the evening usually I have to run a session. I did an appointment with the students but I was forced to change classes, so I refused it. But the teacher still forced me so much that we fought. It wasn't my intention to turn it down but I arranged a schedule. I was depressed and stressed because of the many COVID cases and at the same time, I was continuing my master's. When I was forced, I explained it nicely but the teacher still didn't understand and finished posting in the school WhatsApp group. I'm still with my stance and rejecting the teacher." (R2)

"...like I said before, I used to study for a regular school, but the current system is different from what I learned. Now deal with BPM (the management division of MARA) who like to do surprise assignments. But what I'm most stressed about is the use of technology. Now, everyone wants to go online. MARA counselor teacher is a little special because we have to take care of the students' finances as well. It's like doing an audit yourself. This is what makes me stress." (R4)

"...my cause is stress because the internet line is not satisfactory when it comes to programs and dealing with students. I didn't even get support from a senior counselor even though I had a lot of ideas. I'm stressed because when I want to share ideas but the teacher doesn't want to because students don't commit. Other senior teachers have high expectations of me but senior counselors don't. I was labeled egotistical and resolute for being impatient. It's this thing that makes me stressed; it's hard to satisfy everyone." (R5)

"...stress due to the burden of being a real teacher during PDPR. I was working from home, but I was often harassed outside of work hours. If they want anything, they like to ask for a last minute job and need it as soon as possible. I don't have time to produce quality work. If there's any program, other teachers don't want to cooperate. Student demographics also become a barrier when it comes to online programs or classes. It's also stressful when the principal gives me high hopes because the male teachers are lacking in the school." (R6)

One respondent was stressed because there were no jobs to be done during the PDPR period. The respondent feels that he does not exist in school. The respondent stated:

"... I'm stressed not because of a lot of work but I'm stressed because there's no work at all for me to do. When the work is less, the material to fill and on the record is also less. I was stressed when I saw other friends doing their jobs but I didn't. When it's like this, I'm stressed because I don't think my senior counselor seems to believe I can do the job too. All that work they did without me in the frame. Maybe it's a cross-cultural reason and we still don't understand each other. My senior counselor is Chinese so maybe the way of working is different. But that's what makes me stressed plus the SOP of this COVID season." (R3)

The last respondent, on the other hand, had no stress on him but thought that this was an issue that could still be controlled.

"... I don't have any stress about what's going on. It's just that right now I have to learn a lot more because senior teachers consider new teachers are versatile. The reality is not. When you get to school, there's a lot of new knowledge. So, I would say that the stress can still be controlled." (R1)

These findings are in line with De Rozario and Taat (2015) research work which stated that the structure and climate of the school, the environment, as well as the relationship with the community, together with the internal factors of employment are among the contributing factors to the individual's physical and mental health problems. In addition, several studies stated that one of the main causes for teachers experiencing work stress is due to insufficient workload and time (Ambotang, Pilus & Abdullah, 2014).

Effects of stress among novice school counselors

The most significant effect of stress among new teachers of coaching and counseling was emotional changes and disruption of their daily activities. Three out of six respondents agreed that the effects of stress had disrupted their emotions and made it difficult for them to perform tasks as usual.

"...the most significant effect of this stress is that I'm an unproductive human being. I'm too lazy to do my job and keep getting rest. When I saw that I was inactive, the other teachers said as if the counselor was useless. I got worried because I kept thinking about this and my bedtime became erratic." (R3)

"...for me, I'd rather take a leave-alone approach. Although I feel bad, I strengthen my heart. This thing has happened before. So, I'm going to take a moment to calm down before I do something. This stress bothers my emotions because I need to be stronger to deal with all this. When the environment doesn't help, I have to take time to calm down to do something to be more rational." (R5)

"...to be honest, this thing is causing my emotions to be disturbed. I'm getting emotional fast. I also don't like teachers who have fought with me before. This issue caused me discouragement and I did not speak to any other teachers in my school if it was not necessary. I keep my limits when dealing with them. I don't want the same issues to happen again because I'm not able to control my emotions well." (R2)

While three of the respondents felt they were suffering of burnout and did not want to communicate with other teachers after hours.

"...when it gets like this, I get irritable and emotionally disturbed. Due to this MCO, I feel tired and burnout. I don't think I want to take a call from anyone. With a different system, I feel very disturbed. When someone else tries to make a joke, I feel squeamish and don't respond. This is because the relationship with other teachers is poor." (R4)

"I used to feel like okay there was no stress. But it's been a lot of time for a long time. When other people expect more but I'm still learning, I feel a headache when I think of this. The work that's been given is increasing until I feel burnout. I'm going to have to do this. I keep thinking about getting a headache." (R1)

"...okay if this is WFH (work from home) a lot of people understand the time is uncertain, but if they only find me during midnight, how am I going to produce a productive job. The effect is delaying of the program because I don't have enough time. During MCO, I got high expectations from the superiors. I can't control the stress because of the pressure from the people around me. My daily hours are interrupted when the day is to be always ready but do nothing. If this doesn't change that makes me getting a burnout." (R6)

Shimazu et al. (2003) studied the effects of stress management, social support, and how to cope with stress on 24 teachers in Hiroshima and found that social support is important to help teachers overcome stress. In Japan, 0.24 percent of teachers had to postpone work as teachers due to mental disorders in the year of 2000. Among the problems faced by such teachers are the school environment, the diversity of student behavior, interpersonal relationships, time pressures, relationships with parents of students, and overwork. The conclusion of the effects of stress faced by respondents has disrupted their daily activities and made them less productive. This has resulted in less motivation in continuing their work.

Novice school counselors' experience in adapting to stress

Stress can affect daily life if there is no way to cope with it. All respondents shared how they adapted to the stress. Each of the respondents had his way of adapting to their stress.

"...the way I adapt to this stress is through discussions with the people around me. Sometimes they don't understand the workload I'm having because I've never shared. Besides, I also mute all the groups after work hours so that I don't get distracted by thinking about things outside my field. Finally, I limit association with colleagues and let them continue to be just colleagues and nothing more." (R2)

Two out of six respondents adapted to stress themselves by accepting the stress. At the same time, they were trying to improve themselves.

"I tried to keep myself busy by asking about work to my senior counselor. I also shared it with friends who asked about tasks. For the other part of the teacher, I shared my job area with other teachers so that they did not assume that I was a slacker who did not work. I'll also make sure they're aware of my existence at school." (R3)

"I, on the other hand, differentiate tasks by importance so that I don't burn out as a result of the overflow of work. I also try to talk to other counselors while doing an assignment. I try not to follow my heart and feelings in making things. Finally, I try to accept stress in myself so that I can reduce stress." (R1)

Two respondents, in contrast, used changing their thinking styles as a strategy for coping with stress. They believe they must alter their thought processes to be more productive.

"...the way I adapt to stress is very special, because I will play games and enjoy myself. At boarding school, I had a very different environment from day school. I will always be grateful for that. Also, I have to change my thinking style. I am now working for the next generation and not for myself." (R4)

"If it were, I would be better prepared, especially at 5 p.m., because I already know the rhythm in my school. Above all, I have to adjust to being the new teacher and the only male teacher in the administration. I also have to overcome boundaries and fit in with the clique of teachers. I am grateful that my principal has always helped me improve my weaknesses. I am always told to learn from my mistakes so I know what I need to improve." (R6)

In addition, three respondents discussed their session-attending experiences. They perceive that there are several options available to them when they experience the same pressures as other members in this way.

"When I attended this session, I found that output that out that other teachers had similar problems and issues, and the way they handled and managed adapted their stress was unique. Maybe I can use it when I need it in the future." (R2)

"I got the information, the environment, and what the other teacher experiences are but it's quite different from me. Through this session, I was able to apply techniques shared by other teachers." (R4)

"...in the process of this, I have found that output that out that other teachers also have more problems than I do myself. If you follow my stress, it is normal compared to other teachers. I could also learn how to deal with different problems. You might be able possible to apply that if you have the same problem in the future." (R3)

If school counselors get stressed out by several issues, he will calm down and take some time to reflect. This strategy fits with the Islamic viewpoint on stress reduction that emphasizes reflection and in-depth thought, which is achieved through meditation (Zakaria, 2004). All respondents were able to control the stress they experienced and try to make more positive changes.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the responsibilities and duties placed on teachers are enormous, and each teacher plays a critical part in determining the attitudes and personalities of the following generation. The duties of a teacher are not limited to teaching, educating and mentoring, but teachers must show great determination and commitment to teach students, provide the best service and maintain the dignity of their profession while continuing to strive to improve their quality, standards and image. Therefore, the image of the teaching profession should be preserved so that it is not affected by

negative factors (Shalaby, Ibrahim & Zain 2004). The pressure in the education sector will always remain. However, it can encourage teachers to experiment with new counseling techniques, try new approaches to boosting student morale, and think about reflecting the programs they implement. Only when they overdo it will we see the negative consequences of the stress. Overall, the new norm has brought a lot of stress and a challenge for everyone, not only in Malaysia, but the whole world is facing the same problem.

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Article Information (Supplementary)

Conflict of Interest Disclosures:

The authors declare that they have no significant competing financial, professional or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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First Publication Right: JBKI Undiksha

https://doi.org/10.23887/jurnal_bk.v8i2

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Word Count: 4419

