

The Role of School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services for Sustaining the Mental Health of G.C.E Advanced Level Students in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Counselling plays a crucial role in promoting students' mental health, particularly among G.C.E. Advanced Level (A/L) students who face significant academic and psychosocial pressures. This study examined the role of school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental health of A/L students in 1AB schools of the Manmunai North Educational Zone, Batticaloa Educational Division, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka. The objectives were to identify counselling activities available to A/L students and propose strategies to improve their effectiveness. A mixed-methods research design was employed. Eight 1AB schools were selected for the study. Participants included school principals, deputy principals, guidance and counselling teachers, educational and psychosocial officers, psychiatrists, and a counselling nurse. From a population of 2,588 A/L students, 346 students were selected using Slovin's formula with a margin of error of 0.05. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and documentary evidence. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 22, while qualitative data were interpreted thematically. Descriptive statistics, including percentages and mean scores, were calculated and used for data analysis. Findings revealed that 62.6% of A/L students experienced mental stress, with students in the Biology and Physical Science streams reporting higher levels of psychological difficulties. Although mental health concerns were common, the level of counselling activities conducted in schools was inadequate (Mean = 1.93). Key challenges included a shortage of trained guidance counsellors, insufficient professional training, and limited access to regular psychological counselling services. The study recommends strengthening school counselling programs, appointing qualified guidance and counselling teachers, promoting co-curricular activities that support mental well-being (Mean = 4.55), and ensuring the effective implementation of existing school counselling guidelines.

Keywords: Counselling, Guidance and Counselling Services, G.C.E. Advanced Level Students, Mental Health, Psychological Counselling.

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the National Education Commission Report of 1992 and the recommendations of the National Education Commission in 2003, guidance and counselling officers have been appointed in many schools today. They have been provided with training, and dedicated centers have been opened, thereby expanding this service. The preamble to the New Education Act of Sri Lanka for Public Education in 2009 emphasizes that "all teachers should be trained as counselors" (Disharaja, 2024).

Basic psychological counselling helps foster a close relationship between two individuals. Continuous mental abilities, skills, and relational states are central to this method. Furthermore, it creates a safe environment to express and soothe repressed emotions. This process promotes psychological awareness, inner strength, and personal growth. It also encourages the use of books on mental hygiene. In this way, the provision of guidance and counselling services alongside school education is extremely important for students in the current situation (Kamalanathan, 2009).

This service is seen as instrumental in guiding and counselling students on physical, mental, and social problems and challenges, aiming to transform them into well-educated individuals. According to the ideas presented by Chris Hehal in 1962, the activities of every school and the welfare of the students studying there should be prioritized. Only then can the goals of schools and curricula be successful. It is not appropriate to focus solely on intellectual development without giving importance to the welfare and personal development of students. This is because education is significantly influenced by psychological development, and only through the implementation of psychological approaches by counselors can educational achievements be fulfilled, according to Hehal (Mahesan, 2010).

Most situations in students' lives present challenges. Psychological counselling services are viewed as a way to empower students by providing strength and courage to face such problematic situations. This guidance and counselling service is highly important in schools. However, because regular guidance and counselling are not consistently provided to students in schools, their mental well-being is currently affected in many ways. Based on this context, this study has been conducted to research the mental state of students, the problems and causes affecting their mental well-being, the challenges faced, and the importance of school guidance and counselling in promoting mental well-being.

Research Background

Counselling service involves the counsellor meeting the counsellee face-to-face to understand and discuss their problems, thereby providing assistance for them to solve their problems through self-awareness. Today, guidance and counselling services are essential for all humans globally. They also provide the foundations for psychological well-being (Kamalanathan, 2009).

Krantz et al. (2023), in their American study titled "A Guide for Schools on Student-Directed Suicide Prevention Programs Eligible for Implementation under the STANDUP Act - a Rapid Review and Evidence Synthesis," stated that in 2021, 22% of young Americans had contemplated suicide in the past 12 months, and 10% had attempted suicide.

This represents an increase of more than 25% in attempts recorded since 2011. They also stated that the reason for such a daily increase in suicides is the lack of awareness about suicide prevention programs and insufficient guidance. Based on this, the research topic was chosen, and the research was conducted in the identified area.

Kisokanth, Najeem, and Karunakaran (2014) stated in their study conducted in Batticaloa, "The Influence of Common Risk Factors for the Patient with Attempted Suicide Hospitalized at the Teaching Hospital, Batticaloa," that 37% of individuals aged 11-20 attempted suicide due to mental stress. This study was also conducted with this background in mind.

Today in Sri Lanka, students constitute a significant number of those involved in suicide attempts, a concept put forward by researchers. Although students commit suicide for various reasons, there are also situations where they do so due to examination results.

When examining the internal and external factors for these incidents, the rate is increasing due to disappointment and unfulfilled expectations during school, failed relationships, mental distress resulting from taunts by family members, outsiders, and friends, and subsequent suicide attempts. Therefore, this study has also been conducted based on the background that guidance counselling for students is essential in the current period.

In Batticaloa District, more children have been admitted to Remand Homes (RH) / Places of Safety / Safe Houses (SH) in the Manmunai North Divisional Secretariat Division compared to other Divisional Secretariat Divisions (as shown in Table 1). This study was also conducted based on this background.

Table 1: Details of those admitted to Remand Home/Safety House in Divisional Secretariat Divisions under the Batticaloa Probation Divisions in the last year

Divisional Secretariat Division	Type	Gender and Age Group														
		Under 7 years			(7 - 10)			(11 - 16)			Over 16 years			Total		
		M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Koralaipattu North	SH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	1
Koralaipattu	SH	-	3	3	-	1	1	5	15	20	-	1	1	5	20	25
Eravur	SH	1	2	3	-	8	8	8	22	30	5	7	12	14	39	53
Manmunai North	SH	2	-	2	7	3	10	22	20	42	1	2	3	32	25	57
	RH	1	3	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3	4
Eravur Pattu	RH	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Manmunai South & Eruvil Pattu	SH	-	1	1	-	2	2	9	5	14	19	5	24	28	13	41
Koralaipattu South	RH	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total	SH	3	6	9	7	14	21	44	63	107	25	15	40	79	98	177
	SRH	3	3	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	3	6

(Source: Eastern Provincial Planning Office Statistics, 2023)

The Empowered School Development Program (EPSI) recommends that guidance and counselling services should be provided by schools to students, parents, and the community. Therefore, not only teachers, but also school principals, management committee members, educational officers, and those in this field, should have obtained the necessary qualifications. However, during discussions with the guidance counselling officer of the Batticaloa Education Division, it was learned that many individuals in the research area have not obtained such qualifications. Furthermore, appointed guidance counsellors in 1AB schools are performing their duties on a voluntary basis, and in some 1AB schools, unappointed teachers are serving as guidance and counselling teachers. This study was also conducted based on this background.

The Weekly Epidemiological Report, published in 2022 by the Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of Health, Nutrition, and Indigenous Medicine, states that globally, 6% of adolescents aged 10-20 are affected by suicide or self-harm. It also notes that globally, 3.6% of children aged 10-14 and 4.6% of children aged 15-19 are affected by anxiety. Furthermore, it is noted that 1% of children aged 10-14 and 2.2% of children aged 15-19 have been identified as being affected by depression.

In the 1AB schools selected for the study, activities such as psychological awareness programs, yoga practice, subject selection guidance for Advanced Level, and career guidance after Advanced Level are conducted every Friday to promote the mental well-being of students. Despite the presence of activities aimed at promoting students' mental health, this study was conducted with the aim of identifying the reasons why school-level guidance and counselling services are lagging in their efforts to address the increasing psychological problems among Advanced Level students in 1AB schools

Research Problem

Adolescence is a critical stage marked by significant physical, psychological, and social changes that can affect students' mental health and well-being. Increased academic demands, emotional challenges, peer influence, and the desire for independence often expose adolescents to stress and behavioral problems. In the Batticaloa District, concerns such as psychological distress, suicide attempts, substance abuse, early marriage, and other risky behaviors have been reported among school students. Although school-level guidance and counselling services are intended to support students' mental health, their effectiveness is often constrained by limited resources, inadequate counselling activities, and a shortage of trained counsellors. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the role of school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental health of adolescent students and to identify ways to strengthen these services.

Jenusha, Santhi, and Anjelo (2016) conducted "A Descriptive Study on Perceived Psychological Stress among Middle Adolescents in Batticaloa Educational Zone" with 616 students as a sample. They found that 45.6% were affected by psychological stress, with the majority being male students. They stated that the reasons for this include parental personal behavior, economic status, and standard of living. Since this situation is also observed among students in the researcher's study area schools, it is related to the research problem.

Today, adolescents in schools face many problems. The full responsibility to protect them from these problems lies with the teachers. The task of creating students with good mental health and knowledge in the future also lies with the teachers. To be free from these, society and the environment must be especially conducive to these students. For this, guidance and counselling at the school level are indispensable. However, due to various problems such as a lack of proper guidance counselling, a lack of professional qualifications, and a lack of attention in school-level guidance counselling, the question of whether proper guidance counselling takes place arises. Therefore, this study is seen as having been conducted based on the aforementioned problems.

Statement of the research problem

Despite the frequent occurrence of mental health-related problems among Advanced Level students in 1AB schools in the Manmunai North Educational Zone of the Batticaloa Educational Division, school-level guidance and counselling services are lagging in their efforts to address them.

Research Objective

General Objective

To identify the services provided by school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students and to propose effective strategies for their enhancement.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the mental health problems and their etiological factors among G.C.E. Advanced Level students.
2. To assess the contributions of school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students.
3. To analyze the challenges encountered by school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students.

4. To develop guidelines for enhancing school-based activities aimed at promoting the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students through guidance and counselling services.

Research Questions

1. What are the mental health problems and their causes among students studying in G.C.E. Advanced Level?
2. What is the contribution of school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students?
3. What are the challenges faced by school-level guidance and counselling services in sustaining the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students?
4. What methods can improve the activities carried out in schools through the school-level guidance and counselling service to foster the mental well-being of G.C.E. Advanced Level students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School-level Guidance and Counselling

Guidance

Guidance is the assistance one person provides to another in making correct choices, finding relevance, and solving problems. It is understood as a psychological approach to help individuals interact with their environment in all life situations and at all stages, to develop self-ability, and to make informed decisions (Kamalanathan, 2009).

Counselling

Counselling is defined as a process where the counselee meets the counsellor face-to-face to find solutions to their problems. Through understanding and discussion, the counselee determines the approaches to solve those problems independently. The objectives of counselling include individual development, preventing problems before they arise, solving problems once they have arisen, and assisting in finding adaptation (Vimala, 2012).

School-level Guidance and Counselling Services

The government is making significant investments in education to empower Sri Lankan children and help them contribute to the global community. To successfully achieve this anticipated benefit, various intellectual and extensive curricula, along with vocational programs that aid practical life skills, have been implemented in schools. Human resources are crucial in development activities, and planning for future human resources is essential for the nation's progress. During this process, attention must be paid to the physical, mental, and social well-being of school students. In this regard, guidance and counselling services have been implemented at the school level as supportive services (Ministry of Education Circular No. 6/2013).

Mental Health

Mental health is related to psychological well-being. The WHO undertakes activities such as promoting the mental well-being of individuals and society, providing assistance for mental health disorders, protecting human rights, and ensuring protection for those affected by mental health disorders (World Health Organization, 2022).

Mental Health of School Students

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic affecting Sri Lanka since 2020, the internal political instability, and the current economic crisis in the country, students face several problems: a significant proportion of both male and female students are "affected by dangerous obsessions and illicit substances." They show more interest in mobile phones

than in their studies. The majority of students are sluggish. There is a decline in obedience towards parents and teachers. Situations of early marriage and pregnancy, and suicidal tendencies are observed. Guiding this student community presents great difficulties for principals, teachers, and parents, who express much concern and distress.

Child Protection

Every child needs a place to live, food, health, education, play, and physical, mental, and social protection. The deprivation of these indicates child abuse. Today, child abuse is rampant and widespread. The reasons for this include a lack of sufficient awareness about it, an inability to understand its potential consequences, and a continuous lack of proactive awareness measures (UNICEF, 2020).

Challenges Faced by School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services

Monicah and Boitt (2016) conducted a study in Kenya titled "Evaluation of the Challenges in the Implementation of the Guidance and Counselling Programme in Baringo Country Secondary Schools, Kenya," with a sample of 23 guidance and counselling teachers. The study revealed several challenges in implementing guidance and counselling in schools, such as insufficient time, lack of student cooperation, lack of parental support, shortage of qualified personnel, heavy workload, lack of support from school administration, inadequate facilities, and lack of funds. Therefore, the government and school administration should provide training, facilities, and funding to guidance counsellors. Furthermore, as insufficient time is allocated for guidance and counselling, the other duties of guidance counsellors should be reduced, and they should be appointed as full-time counsellors.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development, Identity vs. Role Confusion, typically occurs during adolescence (13-19 years). The primary task for individuals during this period is to achieve a clear sense of identity. Children gain knowledge and clarity about their strengths, weaknesses, goals, occupation, and gender. To explain this, Erikson specifically uses the term "identity crisis." During this period, due to significant physical changes and emotional consequences, adolescents face many crises and confusions. Therefore, it is essential to find immediate solutions to these problems. Otherwise, the child's self-identity may dissolve, leading them to become aimless (Anita E. Woolfolk & Ellen L. Usher, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach. Given that quantitative research is commonly used in educational studies to examine problems, this design was initially adopted. Additionally, qualitative data will be analyzed to fully achieve the research objective, thereby incorporating a comprehensive mixed-methodology.

Research Area

The research area for this study comprises eight 1AB schools within the Manmunai North educational division. This division is one of the three educational divisions in the Batticaloa educational zone, which is part of the five educational zones in the Batticaloa district. This specific area was selected due to its high student population, comparatively high efficiency, and notable qualitative characteristics.

Population and Research Sample

Out of the 40 schools in the Manmunai North educational division of the Batticaloa educational zone, eight 1AB schools were purposively selected to form the sample for this study. From these selected schools, a total of 2588 students preparing for the G.C.E. Advanced Level examinations in 2024 and 2025 were identified and enumerated. Utilizing Slovin's sampling method, with an allowable margin of error set at 0.05, 346 students were chosen to participate in the quantitative phase of the research

$(N = \frac{2588}{1+2588(0.05)^2} = \frac{2588}{1+2588*0.0025} = \frac{2588}{1+6.47} = \frac{2588}{7.47} = 346.45 = 346)$. Additionally, for the qualitative data collection, a diverse group of key stakeholders was included: 13 Guidance and Counselling Teachers, 8 Principals, 23 Deputy Principals from the selected 1AB schools, a Guidance and Counselling Teacher Advisor, a Psycho-Social Officer, a Child Protection Officer, two Psychiatrists, a Probation Officer, and a Counselling Nurse of the Batticaloa Child Protection Unit.

Data Collection Tools and Data Analysis Method

Data and information were collected from the selected samples within the research area. All gathered information underwent systematic analysis according to predefined indicators. Quantitative data, derived from Likert scale questionnaires administered to Students, Guidance and Counselling Teachers, Principals, and Deputy Principals, was converted into numerical form. This numerical data was then analyzed using SPSS (Version 22), with intervals calculated as appropriate. Microsoft Office Excel was utilized for the generation of tables and charts, and quantitative findings were presented based on percentages. Concurrently, information obtained through interviews with Guidance and Counselling Teacher Advisor, the Psycho-Social Officer, the Child Protection Officer, Psychiatrists, the Probation Officer, and the Counselling Nurse was collected and subjected to qualitative explanation to provide contextual insights.

Reliability and Validity of Research Instruments

The reliability and validity of research instruments are crucial for ensuring accurate and truthful research findings. In this study, questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data on the role of school guidance and counselling services to students' mental health. The questionnaire was premeditated using a designed Likert scale and close-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide clear and reliable answers. This helped improve the reliability and validity of the data collected. Interviews were also conducted to gather detailed information directly from relevant stakeholders. Since the questions were asked face-to-face, respondents could provide accurate and genuine responses, further strengthening the credibility of the study. To ensure content validity, interview schedules were prepared based on the study objectives and reviewed by experts, including guidance and counselling teachers, educational officers, mental health professionals, and child protection officers. Their response was integrated to improve the quality of the research instruments. Therefore, the questionnaires and interview schedules used in this study were considered reliable and valid for accomplishing the research objectives.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Although psychological problems are frequently observed among G.C.E. Advanced Level students in schools, the school-level guidance and counselling services were found to be deficient in their capacity to effectively address these issues. This deficit was precisely identified as the central research problem. Consequently, data were collected from the selected research samples using appropriate tools, guided by several specific objectives. The results derived from the subsequent analysis of these data are presented as follows.

Identification of Mental Health Problems and Their Causes among G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

In line with the first specific objective, statements concerning the mental health problems prevalent among G.C.E. Advanced Level students were posed to students, guidance and counselling teachers, principals, and deputy principals using a Likert scale. Their aggregated responses are presented as follows

Table 2: Mental Health Problems among G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

Mental Health Problem	Students (Mean)	Guidance & Counselling Teachers (Mean)	Principals (Mean)	Deputy Principals (Mean)
Suicidal thoughts	3.16	3.92	4.00	4.04
Self-harm activities	3.78	4.46	4.38	4.43

Conflicts	4.15	4.31	4.50	4.52
Stress	4.55	4.31	4.13	4.13
Substance use	3.44	4.92	4.63	4.65

Table 3 presents the mean ratings of mental health problems among adolescent students. Stress received the highest mean score from students ($M = 4.55$), while guidance and counselling teachers, principals, and deputy principals rated substance use as the most prominent issue ($M = 4.92, 4.63,$ and 4.65 respectively). Suicidal thoughts received the lowest mean ratings across all respondent groups.

In line with the first specific objective, statements regarding the causes of mental health problems prevalent among G.C.E. Advanced Level students were posed to students, guidance and counselling teachers, principals, and deputy principals using a Likert scale. Their aggregated responses are presented as follows.

Table 3: Causes of Mental Health Problems among G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

Causes of Mental Health Problems	Students	Guidance & Counselling Teachers	Principals	Deputy Principals
Family	2.88	4.15	4.63	4.65
School	2.25	3.67	4.00	3.00
Teachers	2.88	3.85	4.25	4.26
Peer Group	4.10	4.31	4.63	4.65
Physiological Factors	4.00	4.46	4.63	4.60
Adolescence	1.25	4.54	4.50	4.65
Financial Situation	2.45	3.85	4.00	4.04
Subjects	3.85	4.54	4.57	4.65
Phone and Social Media	3.12	5.00	5.00	5.00
Abuse	2.78	4.00	4.13	4.13

In identifying the mental health problems and their causes among G.C.E. Advanced Level students, the students' response, based on the Likert scale, was $X=3.7780$, which falls within the range of $3.40 \leq \bar{X} \leq 4.19$. This indicates that students acknowledge the presence of mental health problems and that various factors influence them. The guidance counselors' response was $X=4.1572$, which falls within the range of $3.40 \leq \bar{X} \leq 4.19$. This indicates that most teachers accept it. The principals' response was $X=4.2227$, which falls within the range of $4.20 \leq \bar{X} \leq 5.00$. This indicates that most principals strongly agree with it. The deputy principals' response was $X=4.3182$, which falls within the range of $4.20 \leq \bar{X} \leq 5.00$. This indicates that most deputy principals strongly agree with it. Accordingly, it has been identified that mental health problems are present among G.C.E. Advanced Level students, and various factors contribute to them.

The results indicate clear differences in how stakeholders perceive the causes of mental health problems among students. Students rated peer group influence (4.10), physiological factors (4.00), and subjects (3.85) as the most significant causes, while they rated adolescence (1.25) and school-related factors (2.25) relatively low. In contrast, Guidance and Counselling Teachers, Principals, and Deputy Principals consistently rated most factors as highly influential, particularly phone and social media (5.00 across all administrative groups), physiological factors, adolescence, and peer group issues. Overall, school staff perceive a wider and more intense range of

contributing factors than students, suggesting a possible awareness gap between students' lived experiences and educators' professional understanding of mental health challenges.

Identifying the Contributions of School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services in Sustaining the Mental Health of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

In line with the second specific objective, statements regarding the role of school-level guidance and Counselling services in promoting the mental health of G.C.E. Advanced Level students were asked to students and guidance counselors through Likert scale questionnaires. Their responses were as follows.

Table 4: Role of School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services in Promoting the Mental Health of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

Contribution of Guidance and Counselling Services	Students (%)	Guidance & Counselling Teachers (%)
Counselling is provided for subject selection, examination stress, and career guidance	85	78.4
Mindfulness activities are regularly conducted for G.C.E. A/L students	69.4	73.4
Awareness programs on drugs, suicide, and related issues are conducted	77.5	61.6
Assistance is sought from relevant government and non-government organizations when needed	69.4	100.0
Home visits and follow-up checks are conducted regarding students' mental health	100	69.3

Accordingly, the students' response was $X=1.9299$, which falls within the range of $1.80 \leq \bar{X} \leq 2.59$. This indicates that most students do not accept that activities of school-level guidance and counselling services are taking place to promote their mental health. The Guidance and Counselling's Teachers response was $X=3.8957$, which falls within the range of $3.40 \leq \bar{X} \leq 4.19$. This indicates that most teachers accept that activities are taking place. Here, there is a contradictory opinion between the students' responses and the Guidance and Counselling's Teachers responses. Through this, it was learned that activities to promote students' mental health are scarce.

Analyzing the Challenges Faced by School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services in Promoting the Mental Health of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

In line with the third specific objective, information was obtained from students, Guidance and Counselling's Teachers, principals, and deputy principals through Likert scale questionnaires, and through interviews with the Guidance and Counselling Teacher advisor, psycho-social officer, child protection officer, Psychiatrists, probation officer, and Counselling Nurse, regarding the problems faced by school-level guidance and Counselling services in promoting the mental health of G.C.E. Advanced Level students. Their responses were as follows.

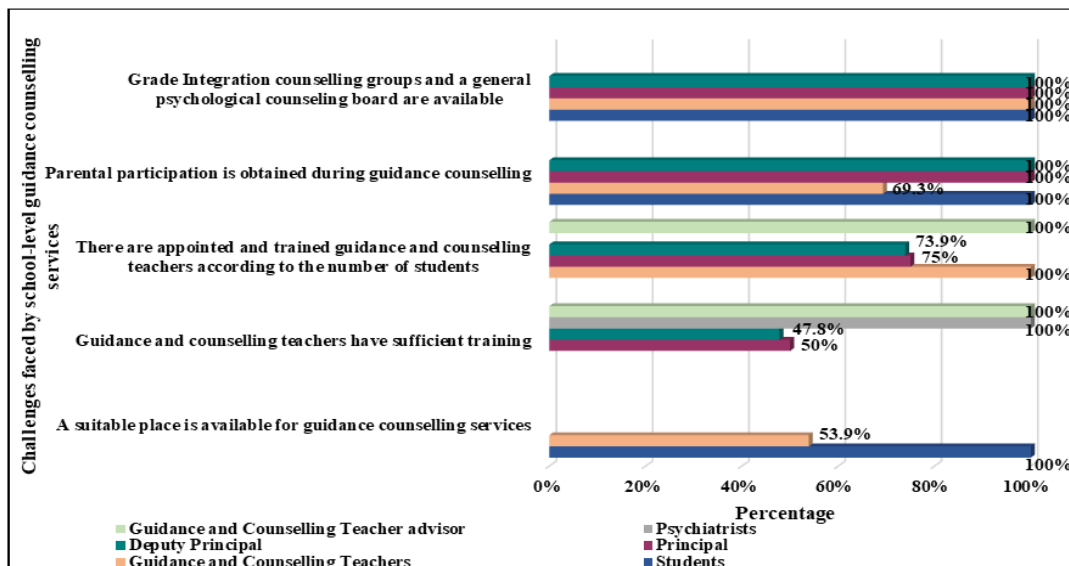


Figure 1: Challenges Faced by School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services in Sustaining the Mental Health of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

Accordingly, the students' response was $X=1.9569$, which falls within the range of $1.80 \leq \bar{X} \leq 2.59$. This indicates that most students agree that many problems are present in promoting mental health in schools. The guidance and counselling teachers' response was $X=2.7857$, which falls within the range of $2.60 \leq \bar{X} \leq 3.39$. This indicates that most teachers agree that there are moderate problems. The principals' response was $X=3.40$, which falls within the range of $3.40 \leq \bar{X} \leq 4.19$. This indicates that most principals agree that there are moderate problems. The deputy principals' response was $X=3.4022$, which falls within the range of $3.40 \leq \bar{X} \leq 4.19$. This indicates that there are moderate problems. Other samples also agreed that problems exist. Accordingly, it has been identified that school-level guidance and counselling services face problems in sustaining the mental health of G.C.E. Advanced Level students.

Proposing Guidelines to Improve Activities that Can Be Undertaken in Schools to Promote the Mental Health of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students through School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services

Data was obtained from the research samples to propose guidelines for improving the activities that can be undertaken in schools to sustain the mental health of G.C.E. Advanced Level students through school-level guidance and Counselling services. In this regard, guidelines were noted to overcome the problems mentioned above. The responses of the samples in this regard were as follows.

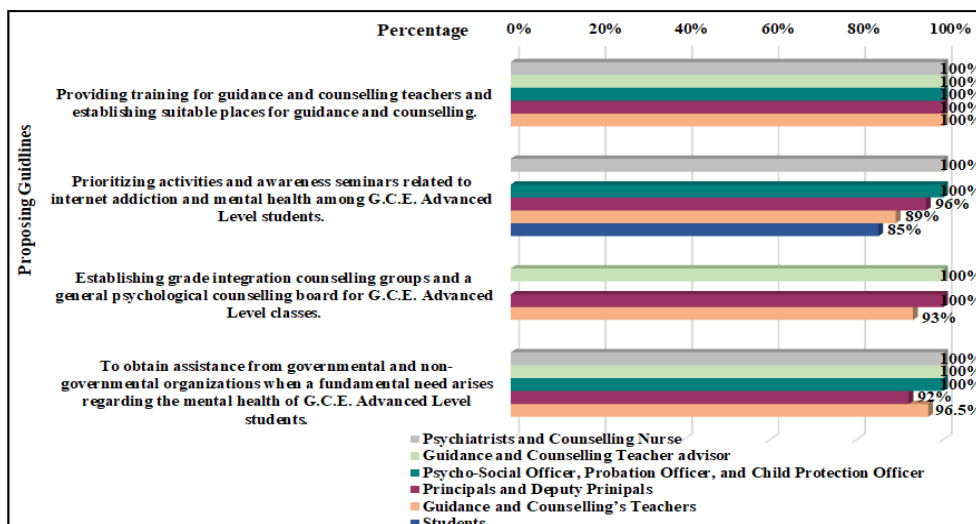


Figure 2: Activities to Be Undertaken by School-Level Guidance and Counselling Services to Sustain the Mental Health of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students

Accordingly, the students' response was $X=4.4014$, which falls within the range of $4.20 \leq \bar{X} \leq 5.00$. This indicates that most students strongly agree with the statements. The guidance counselling teachers' response was $X=4.5714$, which falls within the range of $4.20 \leq \bar{X} \leq 5.00$. This indicates that most teachers strongly agree with the statements. The principals' response was $X=4.6964$, which falls within the range of $4.20 \leq \bar{X} \leq 5.00$. This indicates that most principals strongly agree with the statements. The deputy principals' response was $X=4.6957$, which falls within the range of $4.20 \leq \bar{X} \leq 5.00$. This indicates that most deputy principals agree with the statements. Other samples also agreed with this. Accordingly, it has been identified that various activities need to be improved in schools to promote the mental health of G.C.E. Advanced Level students through school-level guidance and Counselling services.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through this study, the following conclusions were reached regarding mental health problems among G.C.E. Advanced Level (A/L) students, their causes, challenges faced by school-level guidance and counselling services in promoting student mental health, and necessary activities to enhance mental well-being through these services.

Conclusions

Among G.C.E. A/L students, 62.6% are affected by mental stress. Furthermore, drug use, self-harming behaviors, and conflicts are highly prevalent. The majority of students experiencing mental stress are those studying in the Biology and Physical Science streams. Among the identified causes of mental health problems experienced by G.C.E. A/L students, mobile phone addiction and excessive social media usage were identified as the most prominent reasons. Additionally, adolescent developmental challenges, academic pressures, and examinations are significant contributing factors. It was also noted that mental awareness activities are not regularly conducted for G.C.E. A/L students.

According to the 2024 handbook on the importance of school mental health counselling and vocational guidance division, given the distinct problems faced by children in each grade, multi-faceted counselling committees representing various grade levels should be formed. However, such committees have not been established in schools. Furthermore, Ministry of Education Circular No. 6/2013 mandates that teachers should be fully involved in counselling services when student numbers exceed 300. Despite this, there is a shortage of trained and appropriately appointed guidance counsellors relative to the student population in schools.

Recommendations

To effectively promote the mental health of G.C.E. A/L students, schools should prioritize mental health activities for students. When the need arises to address students' mental health problems, immediate assistance should be sought from parents, relevant governmental, and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, multi-faceted counselling committees for G.C.E. A/L classes and general mental health counselling sessions should be regularly implemented in schools. Continuous professional development and supervision for guidance counsellors should be conducted at both school and zonal levels. Additionally, guidance counsellors' other duties should be reduced, and sufficient time and dedicated space should be provided in schools for them to deliver mental health counselling to G.C.E. A/L students.

Furthermore, importance should be given to co-curricular activities to promote the mental health of G.C.E. A/L students. Mental awareness activities such as yoga practice, meditation practice, and mental awareness workshops should be conducted regularly. Encouraging activities should be undertaken in schools to reduce anxiety, stress, and mental fatigue caused by Advanced Level examinations. Appropriate home visits should be conducted, and regular meetings and discussions with parents or guardians should also be held regarding students' mental health. These comprehensive recommendations are designed to guide the improvement of mental health among G.C.E. A/L students.

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