

Review Article

The psychological well-being and self-compassion of Malaysian counseling and guidance teachers

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Abstract

The national development and government initiatives' in realizing educational transformation has made the profession of school counseling and guidance teachers facing a challenging and vulnerable role with stress that affects their well-being. The psychological well-being of school counseling and guidance teachers need to be explored and understood to ensure their services in schools are implemented effectively. The study aims to understand contribution of self-compassion to psychological well-being among school counseling and guidance teachers. The results of previous studies have found that; (i) self-compassion contribute to the psychological well-being of school counseling and guidance teachers; and (ii) good psychological well-being of school counseling and guidance teachers can improve the quality of counseling services. The implication of this study explains the need to improve psychological well-being among Malaysian school counseling and guidance teachers. Proposed follow-up recommendations need to be done by focusing on quantitative studies aimed at better understanding of this issue.

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Introduction

The role of counseling and guidance teachers in schools is very important in developing student human capital in line with the Malaysian government's ambition in the Second Core of the Education Development Master Plan (PIPP). As such, the Ministry of Education (MOE) intends to produce well-qualified, well-informed and knowledgeable individuals. In addition, guidance and counselling teachers are also responding to the government's desire to realize the transformation of education towards the integrated and holistic development of student potential. This is in line with the mission of counseling and guidance services which focused on efficient and impactful program management as well as producing students who are balanced in terms of intellectual, high-level emotion and high moral standards. Among them are the mentoring activities towards students' academic achievement to ensure students are learning in a positive manner. This is in line with the findings of [Salleh et al. \(2013\)](#), that career intervention programs have a greater impact on student learning motivation and learning skills. In addition, activities related to learning skills and motivation, which may help students see the relationship between their academic achievement skills with career goals.

In developing the potential of counseling and guidance services, MOE has outlined 22 roles of counseling and guidance teachers in schools ([Circular Letter No 3 / 1996-11 July 1996](#)). Succinctly, counseling and guidance teachers need to provide annual planning, identify needs in their services, regulate student inventories, promote services, conduct guidance and counselling activities for groups and individuals, manage activities related to learning skills, assist students in selecting elective subjects, be involved with educational activities focused on drug prevention, and providing students' direction to further their education. In addition, the teacher needs to conduct referral and consultation activities, collaborating in programs involving parents, government and private agencies, improving service quality, managing and facilitating internal training programs, offering crisis counseling services, acting as communications personnel, engaging as curriculum committee members and School Planning Council, mentor-mentee program coordinator, and student development programs' coordinator.

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In addition, another aspect that should be noted is the multicultural counseling competency, which is a key step in improving counseling services among counseling and guidance teachers (Amat et al. 2013). This is because the Malaysian population is comprised of 50.4% Malays, 23.7% Chinese, 7.1% Indians, and 7.8% of other ethnic groups. Meanwhile, other indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak make up about 11% of the population. It gives the impression that the counsellor has to deal with the various types of students that lead to different cultures among secondary school students. The characteristics and qualities that counseling and guidance teachers possess may have impacts on students' self-identity and national capital development. Amat et al. (2013) in their study suggested that counseling and guidance teachers should be competent; the competence of multicultural counseling in the context of Malaysian culture involves dimensions of awareness, knowledge and skills. Therefore, counseling and guidance teachers need to have great personalities and competencies in order to manage assignments according to the specific needs and requirements.

Currently, the National STEM Strategic Plan 2018-2025 by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) touched on the role of counseling and guidance teachers through the second focus area of improving teaching and learning (T&L) quality. In this focus area, the second strategy emphasizes the role of counseling and guidance teachers as important stakeholders in the school to encourage students to develop interests in STEM subjects. Counseling and guidance teachers not only play a role in developing students' potential but are also responsible for the growing issue of mental health problems. The Deputy Prime Minister said in a press statement that the findings from the 2015 National Health and Morbidity study, conducted by the Ministry of Health, indicated that 29.2% of 4.2 million people aged over 16 years old had mental health problems. In this regard, counseling and guidance teachers need to equip themselves with professional and personal skills. This is in line with the view of Lawson (2007), McLeod (2014), and Kim and Lambie (2018) that individuals involved in counseling services need to maintain their well-being in order to effectively deliver counseling services to their clients. Therefore, counseling and guidance teachers should be able to manage their professional interests while not neglecting their personal needs and welfare.

Welfare Issues of Counseling and Guidance Teachers

The ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association 2014), stated that counselors involved in personal care activities should monitor and maintain their well-being and that it is part of their professional responsibility. Furthermore, counselors are encouraged to monitor two important relationships: (a) between personal well-being and therapeutic effectiveness; and (b) between counselors and their colleagues (Callender & Lenz 2018). In addition, he said, counselors should emphasize on developing relationship skills in order to give a confident and vibrant service delivery. In contrast, Nelson et al. (2017) stated that concern for clients is one of the important features of counseling. Moreover, an important practice that counselors must learn is to practice self-care, and if counselors do not learn to look after themselves, they are likely to experience stress in their personal and professional lives, which may lead to burnout problem. Therefore, counseling and guidance teachers need to be proactive and always keep themselves in good condition for them to be able to practice well during the counseling sessions.

In Malaysia, some studies have found that the well-being of counseling and guidance teachers is only at a moderate level (Reping 2017; Kuen 2015). In addition, Abdullah (2003) found that 32.68% of counseling and guidance teachers lacked resilience and were followed by several studies which found that counseling and guidance teachers had problems with stress and burnout (Omar et al. 2009; Maruthaveeran 2011; Jaafar 2012). According to Omar et al. (2009), there are number of factors that lead to high stress on counseling and guidance teachers, which include managing crisis situations, working overtime, low self-development opportunities, lack of experience in performing new assigned tasks, lack of support from the school's top management, and lack of appreciation despite performing well. Moreover, counseling and guidance teachers are forced to perform tasks not in their job descriptions, heavy workloads, inadequate staffing to assist them, the need to make critical decisions spontaneously, conflicts with students, peers, and outside organizations (parents and others), competition in the process of self-development, having to meet deadlines for completing an assignment, not having a lot of personal time, and sometimes having to do other people's work. This finding is not surprising because, in conducting counseling sessions, variety of student issues are faced by counseling and guidance teachers, including school dropouts, learning problems, theft, drug addiction, smoking, unplanned pregnancy, rape, wandering, running away from home, social problems and deviant behaviour (Noor, 2014). There are times when family counseling is involved and counseling and guidance teachers are not confident in conducting family counseling sessions, especially those with less than five years of work experience. This

is because, education and training are insufficient to carry out an effective counseling process during their degree and master studies (Noor, 2014).

Recently, Huat (2018) found that counseling and guidance teachers in Sarawak face burnout risk. This is because of role conflict, in which they have to deal with a variety of tasks that unrelated, heavy caseload and there are times conflict between the roles of disciplinary teacher and counseling and guidance teachers due to lack of information on procedures for managing students' with discipline problems. In addition, students in the age of 13 to 19 will be at a transitional stage where all human doubts and uncertainties emerge at this level (Mansor et al. 2017). Most teens feel comfortable when they are with their peers, but problems start when they are friends with disruptive behaviours which can lead to indiscipline problems at school. Other than that, home environment, school culture, the media, social expectation, and information-communication technology are factors contributing to school discipline problem (Mansor et al. 2017). All of these scenarios raise concerns and illustrate that appropriate planning and action must be taken to ensure that the profession can be used effectively by students in the school.

A similar scenario is happening in the West in which counseling and guidance teachers face a range of personal issues. There are times when a client's suffering becoming a pain for the counselor. Therefore, it is important for a counselor to enter the world of others but at the same time not being lost in that world. This means that the counselor enters the client's life, but they should also be present in their own life (Skovholt 2016). In fact, a counselor who does not take care of his or her well-being will result in failure to instil the well-being to his client (Neswald-Potter et al. 2013). In addition, any difficulties experienced in the counselor's personal life or related to the work performed will make the counselor vulnerable to stress, feeling burnout, and compassion fatigue (Smith, 2017). Similarly, many researchers often associate this profession of counseling with burnout issue (Coaston, 2017; Mullen & Gutierrez 2016; Mullen & Crowe 2017; Kim & Lambie 2018; Bardhoshi et al. 2014).

Burnout among mental health service professionals is a major concern not only from the counselor's perspective, but also from the organizational and client perspective (Bardhoshi et al. 2019). According to Roxas et al. (2019), counselors are also human and they may also experience burnout, dissatisfaction, stress, and negative emotions. Although they may have the advantage of having a better knowledge about professional and personal issues, counselors are not immune to various threats to their well-being. On the other hand, counselors could benefit greatly from the profession including having a sense of purpose, a high sense of well-being, good relationships with others, and opportunities for personal growth. However, counselors face a lot of pressure when sharing their experiences with each client, doing their best to be competent, unbiased, non-judgmental, cultivate love for clients, and fully attend the clients. Thus, all of these emotional demands in counseling can cause a great deal of stress for the counselors (Friedman, 2017).

Looking from a broader scope, deterioration of the counselor's self refers to objective changes in the psychological professional which may result in an ineffective service or cause harm to those involved in their career (Wise & Hersh, 2012). The instability can be effectively overcome by counselors if the self-care method is proactively implemented. Self-care is an important practice in personal and professional life that should be practiced and aimed at maximizing physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Smith, 2017). Furthermore, it can be seen that careers dealing with mental health are constantly exposed to the stress and trauma of clients that can lead to emotional exhaustion. It is therefore important to ensure that individuals involved with mental health professions improve and maintain well-being not only for their own benefit but for the community that utilized their services. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2005), professional counselors have an ethical obligation to constantly evaluate their well-being throughout the continuum whether that are good, in stress, stressful or in an affected situations, and counselors under the ACA Code of Ethics are also expected to take steps to improve their well-being when necessary (Wolf et al. 2014). This can be exemplify and served as the basis for all individuals who wish to be involved in counseling services especially in schools so that the process of guiding and helping the selection of alternative solutions to client issues can be effectively implemented.

Psychological Well-Being of Counseling and Guidance Teachers

Ryan and Deci (2001) integrate well-being into two perspectives, in which hedonic well-being is associated with individual happiness by determining well-being in the pursuit of enjoyment and avoidance of pain or suffering; while eudemonic well-being focuses on the meaning, self-awareness of human potential and defines well-being as a fully functioning individual level. In addition, Keyes and Shmotkin (2002) described subjective well-being (SWB) as evaluation of life in terms of satisfaction and a balance between positive and negative affects while psychological well-being (PWB) required perceptions of engagement in the existence of life challenges. On the other hand, subjective

well-being describes how individuals value their lives, including emotional and cognitive and subjective well-being can be divided into two distinct areas: cognitive well-being and affective well-being (Diener, 1984). Furthermore, cognitive well-being is characterized by a cognitive assessment of life, often called life satisfaction, while affective well-being is characterized by the presence of positive effects and the absence of negative or unpleasant affects (Diener, 1984). Overall, western researchers have argued with solid theories and have a broad view of the concept of well-being.

Huppert (2009), for instance, explained that psychological well-being is about living a good life and is a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. In addition, sustainable well-being does not require individuals to feel good all the time; painful emotional experiences such as frustration, failure or sadness are a normal part of life and it is important for individuals to be able to manage negative or painful emotions in order to maintain long-term well-being. According to him, psychological well-being is compromised when negative emotions are extreme or at a high level and impaired an individual's ability to function in his or her daily life. The concept of good feelings incorporates not only positive emotions of happiness and contentment, but also emotions such as interest, engagement, confidence, and love. The concept of effectively functioning individual involved the development of an individual's potential, has the ability to control one's life, and has a sense of purpose such as working toward goals and developing positive relationships. Therefore, guidance and counselling teachers should apply the elements of psychological well-being in order to overcome the problems and challenges faced by in the career.

Well-being is a very important element especially in relation to psychological well-being. The psychological well-being model of Ryff (1989) is based on several theories that have been pioneered by few scholars. It described in detail the developmental psychology of life that offered a broad range of well-being including continuous development throughout life. These perspectives include Erikson's model of the stages of psychosocial development, Buhler's formula of the formulation of basic life principles that function in life and the emphasis on Neugarten's personality changes in adulthood and old age. Clinical psychology also offered many forms of well-being, such as Maslow's assertion of self-perfection, Rogers's view of fully functioning individuals, Jung's formulas of individual concepts and Allport's concept of maturity (Ryff, 1995). Finally, the well-being included Jahoda's formulation on positive criteria for mental health and Birren's conclusion about positive functioning in later life. Among the key dimensions of the psychological well-being model are self-acceptance, purpose in life, self-autonomy, control of the environment, good relationships with others and continuous self-development (Ryff, 1989, 1995). The concept of self-acceptance means not only positive attitudes toward oneself, emphasized by Maslow, Rogers, Allport, and Jahoda, but also perceptions of one's good and bad traits. Well-being generally includes a positive assessment of one's life, a sense of continual growth and development, believing that life is purposeful and meaningful, having good relationships with others, the ability to effectively manage one's life and the world around (Ryff, 1995).

From a broader perspective, the six dimensions of psychological well-being are defined based on the theory with high scores namely: a) self-acceptance, which are positive attitude toward oneself, acknowledging and accepting various aspects of self, including good and bad qualities and feeling positive about life in the past; b) have a positive relationship with others, which means having a friendly and satisfying relationship, having trust in relationships with others, caring for the well-being of others, capable of empathy, love and strong bonding, and understanding the tolerance in human relationships; c) autonomy, which is self-determined and independent, able to withstand social pressure, think and act in a certain way, to regulate behaviour from within, to evaluate oneself through personal standards; d) have a sense of self-mastery and competence in managing the environment, controlling various external activities, using effective environmental opportunities, being able to choose or create contexts that meet personal needs and values; e) have a purpose in life that is to have an aim in life, to feel that the present and the past are meaningful, to put faith in the meaning of life, to have dreams and objectives for life; f) personal development that is having a continuous sense of development; looking to grow, open to new experiences; a sense of potential, seeing improvements in self and behaviour over time, changing by reflecting more knowledge and self-efficacy (Ryff, 1995). It can be concluded that the psychological well-being elements discussed play a major role in helping counseling and guidance teachers to develop success in the service, have a positive and innovative way of thinking about work planning, be clear with the service mission while always having a good network with all parties for personal and professional interests.

There have been recent studies that support the importance of psychological well-being in counseling services as well as barriers such as stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and counselor's personal instability (Puig et al. 2012; Bilot 2012; Beaumont et al. 2016; Can 2018). A review of Can's (2018) study of 84 trainee counsellors in the United States found a negative relationship between well-being and compassion fatigue. This finding reinforces that counselors

need to be given training and wellness strategy courses to ensure they are able to perform services effectively and withstand any stress. In addition, psychological well-being can contribute to the well-being perceptions of the counselor (Harris et al. 2013; Meeryman et al. 2015). The study of Meeryman et al. (2015) looked at the relationship between psychological well-being and well-being perceptions of 100 undergraduate counselors through training programs in the United States. As a result, it can be seen that all six dimensions of psychological well-being have a significant relation to the wellness perceptions of counselors that we can assume as a person's assessment of their lives. Another dimension that has come to the attention of western researchers is that self-compassion is said to be highly related to the career as a counselor and can help with the challenges of burnout, stress and emotional exhaustion (Newsome et al 2012; Raab et al. 2015; Jones et al. 2015; Beaumont et al. 2016).

Self-Compassion of Counseling and Guidance Teachers

Self-compassionate counselors are able to develop the emotional and skills needed to show love to others. Strengthening self-compassion can be a powerful tool in enhancing personal and professional ability, self-development, vision and producing a better quality of life (Nelson et al. 2018). According to him, self-compassion and empathy are a necessary trait for those who choose a career as counselor. Counselors need to have high energy in helping others especially in clients' recovery, as well as training to self-heal. This can lead to fatigue, stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. An unstable counselor did not do self-care and ignores their own emotional needs, and this can be detrimental to clients, block the border, caused ethical conflicts, or made them withdrawn early in a counselling relationship. Patsiopoulos and Buchanan (2011) defined self-compassion as a gentle, self-aware behaviour, with a sense that we are always together in all things, it is important to speak the truth to ourselves and others, the development of spiritual awareness, and have an ethical professionalism. In addition, this practice enables counselors to develop self-awareness to understand the signs of burnout reach out for support in solving ethical issues and deal with such choices and decisions. As a result, it can improve overall well-being including physical, psychological and emotional health and having a deep spiritual connection (Friedman, 2017).

The dimension of compassion is based on the theory of Social Mentality by Gilbert (1989). This theory sees that the desire to form relationships such as sexual relations, friendship or status can be attained through the pursuit of various forms of biosocial – which can be shaped by understanding each other's role in a relationship. Neff and Germer (2017) explain that generally, self-compassion is a feeling that is directed from within the individual, that the individual can feel compassion for the suffering of others, can nourish themselves in the face of suffering, regardless of whether the pain is caused by external circumstances or due to personal weaknesses or failures or personal shortcomings. Therefore, self-compassion involves feeling touched by one's own suffering, not avoiding or relinquishing it, resulting in a desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal themselves with goodness. Compassion also involves the understanding of not judging one's pain, shortcomings and failures, and seeing this experience as part of a larger human experience.

According to Neff (2003), self-compassion consists of three dimensions; *self-kindness* that is the ability to be gentle and self-aware, especially in facing disorders, it produced a desire to heal oneself when facing good or bad circumstances. Self-kindness refers to the tendency to support and sympathize with oneself when one is aware of his/her own shortcomings rather than by evaluating or judging oneself harshly. Secondly, is *common humanity*, which refers to the understanding that one's failure and suffering are part of human experience. By applying the principles of human equality, one can see that pain, shortcomings and failures are part of human experience and not because of something wrong with the individual. These principles help individuals to not break free from their relationships, to label or to judge, or to isolate themselves when in distress. Practicing these skills helps individuals not to judge others' experiences and is important for an open counselling practice (Nelson et al. 2018). The third component of self-compassion is *mindfulness*, the ability to recognize one's feelings without avoiding them or to over-identify them. When an individual is careful, the individual will think and feel without judging or applying meaning to it. In short, always take the painful feelings as part of the experience and neither clinging to it nor running away from it. This concept of self-compassion is able to add value and is best used by counseling and guidance teachers in order to have a healthy lifestyle and to better focus on professional and social responsibility.

The Importance of Self-Compassion for the Psychological Well-Being

Hedonic approaches as discussed earlier are about happiness in which people pursue pleasure and try to avoid pain while eudemonic happiness involves the principle of seeking purpose and meaning in one's life. Ryan and Deci (2001) viewed self-compassion as an important source of eudemonic happiness. While Neff and Costigan (2014) explained

that self-compassion is an understanding of not avoiding pain, but nourishes it with goodness and goodwill, producing a sense of well-being that is fundamental to the experience of human. The component of self-compassion is linked to the concept of healthy personality by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers that emphasized unconditional acceptance and strived to reach the full potential of the individual. According to him, when individuals become aware of suffering and act in goodness, understanding that suffering is part of the human condition will make it easier for the individual to overcome life's struggles. This principle is very important and can serve as a guide for counseling and guidance teachers if it is observed and understood well in the face of a variety of social problems and worrying students' behaviour.

Many western researchers have found that self-compassion is related and contributed to the well-being of counselors (Patsiopoulou & Buchanan 2011; Beaumont et al. 2016; Fulton 2017; Todd, 2017; Nelson et al. 2017). For example, Jones et al. (2015) conducted a study of 198 psychologists who found that self-compassion predicted a significant negative impact on emotional regulation and stress. According to him, self-compassion is able to compensate for helping the professionals in difficult situations and make them able to use these opportunities to grow. This is in line with the principle of psychological well-being that sees individuals striving to grow, be open and aware of their potential. A qualitative study by Todd's (2017) on seven school counseling and guidance teachers found that through experience, they were able to incorporate the principles of well-being, compassion and resilience in their service. This action has a positive impact on school counseling services. Neff (2003) also emphasized that compassion has a positive effect on psychological well-being. All findings from the previous researchers agreed that compassion can positively influence psychological well-being, especially for the professions that engaged in helping services.

Conclusion

All in all, it is important to develop self-compassion and psychological well-being in school counseling and guidance teachers so that they can perform more efficiently. In other words, these elements may also build confidence and thinking ability and enabled effective counselling sessions. Thus, both elements shall be incorporated into university's counseling and guidance education in order to produce graduates who are capable of facing personal and professional challenges. This is in line with Osborn's (2004) view that focusing on building counselors' resilience, rather than focusing on the pressures and disadvantages that they faces because preventing fatigue or exhaustion is a reactive response while focusing on the well-being of the counselor is a proactive action. In addition, this model of psychological well-being can serve as a guide for the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) in formulating policies involving the teaching profession so that they can constantly focused on personal care. The ministry's ambition or initiative in improving the quality of student education is a noble effort and a wise step towards putting Malaysia at the forefront of the world as a knowledgeable nation. The ministry's efforts to spur education transformation should not override in-service training and continuous well-being to ensure that teacher momentum can be further enhanced and sustained.

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