

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COMMUNITY'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE AND CHALLENGES OF COUNSELLORS IN SCHOOL-BASED DRUG ABUSE PREVENTION IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the role of school counsellors in drug abuse prevention at the elementary school level in Malaysia, examining their contributions, challenges, and the effectiveness of their involvement in school-based initiatives. The qualitative research gathered insights from 16 participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and the analysis followed a grounded theory approach, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the responses. The findings indicate that counsellors are central to drug abuse prevention efforts, providing counselling services, conducting drug screenings and mental health assessments, and offering educational outreach to students, parents, and staff. However, challenges such as limited experience with drug abuse cases in elementary schools, inadequate resources, and heavy workloads were identified. Moreover, disparities in counsellor qualifications, especially in rural areas, and external pressures from communities often hinder counsellors' effectiveness. The research underscores the need for enhanced counsellor training, better resource allocation, and increased community support to improve the quality of drug abuse prevention programs in schools. These findings' implications suggest that school counsellors require greater institutional support to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Future research could focus on evaluating the impact of specialized training for counsellors, as well as exploring the role of community involvement and parental engagement in strengthening drug abuse prevention strategies at the elementary level. Enhancing these efforts may lead to more comprehensive and effective drug abuse prevention at an early stage.

Keywords: School counsellors, drug abuse prevention, elementary schools, challenges, community support.



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INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse remains a significant global public health challenge, particularly among young people. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2015), schools are a key entry point for implementing drug abuse prevention programs. These interventions may include programs, policies, and practices that address risk, promotive, and protective factors to reduce negative outcomes and promote positive behaviours (Biglan et al., 2011; Ranaweera & Samarasinghe, 2006). The early and middle childhood stages are critical for shaping vulnerability and resilience, making them key periods for prevention interventions (Richter, 2023). In Malaysia, government elementary schools employ various strategies under *Program Pendidikan Pencegahan Dadah* (PPDa) to prevent drug abuse (Daily School Management Section, 2022). These include curriculum integration, 5-minute messages, anti-drug events, counselling, drawing competitions, quizzes, and *Program Intelpek Asuhan Rohani 2.0* (PINTAR 2.0) (Ahmad Jazimin Jusoh et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2022). PINTAR 2.0 focuses on early detection, raising awareness, promoting life skills, and encouraging family involvement (National Anti-Drugs Agency, 2023a). Norsayyidatina Che Rozubi et al. (2023) found the program improved awareness, skills, spirituality, delayed drug distribution, and reduced misconduct. However, improvements are needed to address the root causes of high-risk behaviours, enhance agency collaboration, and overcome challenges like insufficient parental involvement.

The lack of focus on prevention at the elementary level is concerning, as this group is particularly vulnerable to drug abuse exposure (Chan et al., 2015). Recent reports also highlight drug use among lower elementary schoolchildren (Balvin Kaur, 2019; Tamarai Chelvi, 2024). Despite these concerns, programs such as PINTAR 2.0 operate solely at the upper elementary level (National Anti-Drugs Agency, 2016). The National Anti-Drugs Agency (2023b) also notes that drug education coverage at the elementary level remains only 8.7%. Ahmad Jazimin Jusoh et al. (2023) state that risk factors for drug abuse extend beyond the school and individual, influencing children's vulnerability in more complex ways. In Malaysia, these risk factors include peers both in and outside of school, lack of parental monitoring, low parental education, media, neighbourhood influence, as well as family structure, environment, upbringing, and drug use (Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al., 2017; Azmawati Mohammed Nawawi et al., 2021; Sefa Bulut & Ali Cisse Usman, 2020; Foo et al., 2012; Siti Zulaikha Mustapha et al., 2019; Shahera Nadia Sulaiman & Azizan Zainuddin, 2021; Fadhli Yusoff et al., 2014). While child-focused interventions are essential, a comprehensive strategy involving schools, families, and communities is most effective (O'Connell et al., 2009). These findings suggest that current approaches are insufficient, highlighting the need for a broader prevention strategy.

One of the core elements of content under evidence-based prevention programs includes services such as school, peer, or family counselling (Youth.gov, 2023). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2015) identifies behaviour modification skills as a key strategy for preventing drug use within the Asian school education system through providing guidance and counselling. Ratnayake (n.d) also highlights the importance of engaging counsellors in drug abuse prevention efforts. In Malaysian schools, counselling plays a crucial role in drug abuse prevention by providing early intervention and support to students (Ministry of Education, 2022). The increase in social cases among schoolchildren in Malaysia has made counselling services more relevant in elementary schools (Mohd Norazmi Nordin et al., 2021). Ku Suhaila Ku Johari and Mohamad Isa Amat (2019) emphasize the need to enhance these services to address growing challenges, urging authorities to prioritize them for better quality.

Although substantial research on school counselling exists, most literature examines school counsellors' roles and challenges in secondary schools or national-level studies, leaving a gap in

understanding the unique issues faced by counsellors working with younger students (Chan et al., 2015; Chan et al., 2016; Ciptro Handrianto et al., 2021; Nur Hidayah Salleh, 2022). Moreover, there is limited focus on the perspectives of the elementary school community, particularly regarding drug abuse prevention in Malaysia. There is also a lack of studies exploring the community's experiences that support or hinder counsellors in school-based counselling and drug abuse prevention programs. This gap presents an opportunity for further research to enhance the effectiveness of drug abuse prevention in Malaysian schools, particularly through counselling as a key intervention.

Furthermore, cultural norms in Malaysia, such as respect for authority and the value of "saving face," may influence how counselling services, including drug abuse prevention programs (Chen & Kok, 2015; Mansor Abu Talib, 2010; Norhayati Mohd Noor; 2014). Thus, understanding these dynamics is crucial for improving service effectiveness. Moreover, an evaluation of PINTAR 2.0 showed improvements in addressing high-risk behaviours, enhancing agency collaboration, and overcoming challenges like insufficient parental involvement (Norsayyidatina Che Rozubi et al., 2023). In line with this, the school counsellor is well-positioned to implement changes and additional programs, especially as the drug issue becomes more prominent (Mansor Abu Talib, 2010). Identifying current challenges from this research could also assist policymakers in improving education policies on mental health services, as well as counsellor selection and training.

This research aims to explore the role of counsellors in drug abuse prevention programs in Malaysian elementary schools and identify the challenges they face. It will address two key research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of the elementary school community on the role of counsellors in school-based drug abuse prevention?
2. What challenges do counsellors face in implementing school-based drug abuse prevention?

The research seeks to gather perspectives from the elementary school community, including teachers, parents, drug experts, community leaders, and others, on the effectiveness of counsellors' efforts in preventing drug abuse and to understand the support and resources needed to enhance these programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Counsellors in Drug Abuse Prevention in Schools

School counsellors crucially support students' academic, emotional, and social development. Bakar et al. (2011) note that counsellors provide individual and group counselling, psycho-educational outreach, academic advising, and supervision of counsellor trainees. They also lead programs focused on academic success, personal development, career planning, and drug prevention. According to Mohd Norazmi Nordin et al. (2021), counselling helps students develop positive behaviours, follow school rules, and improve social skills. Abdul Malek Abdul Rahman et al. (2013) emphasize that counsellors teach essential skills like decision-making and assertiveness, enabling students to resist peer pressure and make healthier choices. The Ministry of Health (2015) highlights the importance of coping mechanisms for managing stress, anxiety, and depression. Salleh Amat (2018) adds that group counselling, assertiveness training, and leadership activities enhance students' interpersonal skills. However, Yusni Mohamadd Yusop et al. (2020) and Samsiah Mohd Jais (2012) argue that the success of group counselling depends on the counsellor's leadership style and ability to build rapport with students.

Truancy and conduct disorders are key factors leading at-risk students to engage in negative behaviours, such as drug abuse, often linked to school disengagement and peer influence (Rozumah

Baharudin et al., 2005; Samsiah Mohd Jais, 2012; Tai & Siti Hajar Abu Bakar Ah, 2016). The school environment significantly influences truancy, especially through the formation of 'gangs' based on race or ethnicity or inter-racial conflicts (Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al., 2017; Samsiah Mohd Jais, 2012), increasing the likelihood of drug abuse and anti-social behaviours. Abu Yazid Abu Bakar and Noriah Mohd Ishak (2014) highlight the psychological challenges and counselling needs of Malaysian gifted students, while Salleh Amat (2018) emphasizes that students with special needs require more guidance than their peers. Thus, school counsellors are essential in supporting students' personal, social, academic, and career development.

Several approaches for identifying at-risk students include (a) collecting data from friends and teachers, (b) using observation methods, (c) approaching the student's parents and close friends, (d) enlisting teachers as co-counsellors, (e) utilizing peer counsellors (PRS), (f) collaborating with parents, (g) working with the Community Brigade and local leaders, and (h) involving peer counsellors or school prefects to report suspicious activities (Samsiah Mohd Jais, 2012). The PPDa program supports students at risk of drug use by offering counselling services, raising awareness about drug dangers, fostering self-confidence, and reducing drug use. It targets voluntary students, those referred for counselling, and students identified through urine screenings or family drug involvement. After completing the PPDa survey (Form B4), students receive confidential counselling, with continued sessions if a positive urine test occurs. If drug use is confirmed, the student is referred to the National Anti-Drugs Agency for ongoing monitoring. Counselling topics include self-management, interpersonal skills, decision-making, self-concept development, and assertiveness (Ministry of Education, 2022). Additional measures for at-risk students include rehabilitation counselling, group counselling, collaboration with agencies like the Royal Malaysian Police, a merit system, and coordination with teachers on student affairs and discipline (Low et al., 2013).

Counsellors play a key role in collaborating with parents to promote students' well-being (Abdul Malek Abdul Rahman et al., 2013). Parents serve as both risk and protective factors in preventing drug abuse among children. Counsellors help parents manage children's behaviour by addressing the challenges students face in school (Salleh Amat, 2018). Additionally, counsellors assist with educational options and academic planning (Saimi & Amat, 2011). According to Salleh Amat (2018), counsellors support parents by encouraging the formation of support organizations at the elementary level to address children's psychological stress. Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al. (2017) note that parent-teacher associations can raise awareness and fund counselling services through activities like seminars and family camps. Intervention programs, such as racial integration initiatives, are effective in schools with discipline problems, incorporating drug prevention discussions and offering a platform for parent-teacher communication about academic and behavioural issues. Leadership camps, self-esteem workshops, career trips, and stress management activities positively impact parents and students (Mohd Khairul Anuar Rahimi et al., 2019). For high-risk families, group interventions like motivational enhancement therapy, psychoeducation, and cognitive behavioural therapy may be offered (Teuku Tahlil & Aiyub Aiyub, 2021).

School counsellors play a crucial role in collaborating with the community and external stakeholders to prevent drug abuse at the elementary level. Low et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of counsellors working with the National Anti-Drugs Agency, government agencies, and community resources like religious organizations and hospitals to enhance prevention efforts. Counsellors can organize seminars, distribute educational materials, and invite anti-drug personnel or ex-addicts to share their experiences (Low et al., 2013; Salleh Amat, 2018). Collaboration with non-governmental organizations, businesses, and universities can further strengthen these initiatives. For example, counsellors have partnered with universities for education fairs and organized voluntary activities,

such as school beautification, benefiting the school and the community (Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al., 2017). Government agencies like the Royal Malaysian Police and the Ministry of Home Affairs and Welfare support counsellors by creating proactive programs. Police officers, for example, can educate students, staff, and parents about drug dangers and offer self-defence training (Low et al., 2013). In cases of student involvement in gang activities, counsellors may receive referrals after police warnings (Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al., 2017).

Challenges Faced by Counsellors in Schools

School counsellors in Malaysia face several challenges that hinder the effective implementation of counselling services. One significant issue is the qualification and training of counsellors. Ku Suhaila Ku Johari and Mohamad Isa Amat (2019) note that many counsellors feel ineffective in applying counselling theories, especially with child clients, as they often rely on conventional approaches suited for adults. Furthermore, while 75% of counsellors hold bachelor's degrees, 60.7% have received training for less than two years, which may contribute to a lack of confidence and skills in managing challenging student behaviours (Soon et al., 2024). Cultural factors also pose challenges. Mansor Abu Talib (2010) highlights that the differences between Western and Eastern counselling approaches affect the delivery of counselling services in Malaysian schools. The Western model, which emphasizes individualized approaches, may not always align with Malaysian cultural values, making it difficult for counsellors to engage effectively with students.

Another challenge faced by counsellors is the heavy workload and time constraints. Many counsellors are overwhelmed with administrative duties, program planning, and teaching responsibilities, leaving insufficient time for counselling (Ku Suhaila Ku Johari & Mohamad Isa Amat, 2019; Sidek Mohd Noah et al., 2005). The Malaysian Ministry of Education mandates that counsellors conduct at least one individual session daily and one group session weekly, but counsellors often fall short of these targets due to competing demands. Additionally, counsellors are frequently tasked with activities that align with school administrator and government requirements, limiting their focus on counselling services. The lack of adequate facilities also hinders effective counselling, as comfortable and conducive spaces are essential for successful sessions, yet many counsellors report that inadequate facilities impact their job satisfaction (Ku Suhaila Ku Johari & Mohamad Isa Amat, 2019). This issue is further compounded by a shortage of mental health professionals in Malaysia, with fewer counsellors available to meet the increasing demand for services (Tengku Amatullah Madeehah Tengku Mohd, 2023).

Many families in Malaysia seek counselling when problems become severe, such as when a child is involved in drug use (Norhayati Mohd Noor, 2014). This delay complicates counsellors' role in early intervention, especially in preventing issues like drug abuse. Chen and Kok (2015) identified that fear, shame, and a sense of responsibility often prevent students and families from fully utilizing counselling services, leading to underutilization of available resources. Counsellors also face challenges in referring students to external mental health services. Ku Suhaila Ku Johari and Mohamad Isa Amat (2019) found that 71.4% of counsellors struggle with referral procedures and family resistance when connecting students to specialized services, limiting their ability to offer comprehensive care. Finally, counsellor burnout is a significant concern. Muhammad Bazlan Mustafa et al. (2022) found that burnout is prevalent among secondary school counsellors, who often rely on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to manage stress.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research utilised a basic qualitative design (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative approach was chosen to understand participants' experiences within their context, as context shapes perceptions and behaviours in educational settings (Maxwell, 2013). The data provided insights into the importance of counsellors in prevention efforts and the challenges affecting the quality of their services (Green & Thorogood, 2018).

Sample and Recruitment

Sixteen participants were selected to ensure diverse perspectives, particularly in school-based intervention research, where various stakeholders provide unique insights. This sample size is typically adequate for achieving saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2002) and allows for a broad range of viewpoints without overwhelming the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A content analysis of literature, policies, and practices on drug abuse prevention in school-based settings in Malaysia informed the selection of participants. These participants were considered "subject matter experts" critical to the development of lower elementary schoolchildren (Naisola-Ruiter, 2022). Subsequently, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, who were identified through Google Search, LinkedIn, and referrals. Two participants were selected from each category, ensuring diversity by selecting individuals from different organizations, except the National Anti-Drugs Agency, due to the presence of senior officers at its headquarters (Merriam, 2009). Participants were selected based on established selection criteria and were informed of the voluntary nature and purpose of the research before their involvement. The selection criteria for various roles are as follows: Drug abuse experts must be expert advisors or scholars specializing in drug abuse-related issues in Malaysia. Lower elementary school teachers require three years of teaching experience in Malaysian government schools, while parents must have a child enrolled in a government elementary school, in standards one to three. Community leaders must have two years of service in a *Program Perumahan Rakyat* (PPR). Elementary school headmasters need three years of service, and counsellors must have three years of experience counselling in government elementary schools. Peer workers must be actively involved in a drug-related non-governmental organization, while officers from the National Anti-Drugs Agency should currently serve the agency's prevention department, with experience in designing and implementing school-based initiatives.

Participants

The participant group included individuals with diverse backgrounds and expertise. Participant 1 is a drug abuse expert and lecturer at the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, Universiti Malaya, actively researching sexual health, AIDS prevention, and drug abuse through the Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS (CERiA). Participant 2, a faculty member at Universiti Sains Malaysia, is affiliated with the Centre for Drug Research and has authored numerous publications on drug-related issues in Malaysia. Participant 3, a peer worker at *Persatuan Insaf Murni Malaysia*, is a former drug user with over a decade of experience. Participant 4, another peer worker, has volunteered with Drug Free Malaysia for seven years, focusing on school-based interventions using creative arts. Participants 5 and 6 are parents of elementary school children with varied professional backgrounds, including a bank officer and an office manager. Participants 7 and 8 are experienced elementary school counsellors, one based in Petaling Jaya and the other in Kota Kinabalu. Participants 9 and 10 are elementary school principals with extensive leadership experience. Participants 11 and 12 are elementary school teachers; one teaches English at the lower elementary level, while the other specializes in physics, mathematics, and physical education and is also a PPDA teacher. Participants

13 and 14 are *Program Perumahan Rakyat* (PPR) community leaders in Kuala Lumpur, involved in local leadership and school-based drug abuse prevention efforts. Finally, Participants 15 and 16 are prevention officers at the National Anti-Drugs Agency, each with significant experience in school-based drug abuse prevention across Malaysia.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (Reference No.: UM.TNC2/UMREC-2041).

Preliminary Interviews

An initial interview protocol was developed based on a review of relevant literature, practices, and policies on school-based drug abuse prevention and was subsequently validated by three experts in the field. Minor modifications were made based on their feedback, and the revised protocol guided two preliminary interviews. After incorporating participant feedback and the researcher's notes, the protocol was further revised. The final version was used for all 16 interview sessions.

Data Collection

The same researcher conducted all interviews in person or via Google Meet to ensure consistency and reduce variability, enhancing dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants received an information sheet and signed a consent form. They were instructed to respond in both English and Malay. The researcher created a neutral environment to minimize bias by using active listening and asking open-ended questions to let participants' perspectives lead the conversation (Patton, 2015). The researcher remained sensitive, non-judgmental, and respectful to maintain validity (Merriam, 2009). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with translated responses reviewed and approved by a senior lecturer from the Department of Education and Counselling at Universiti Malaya.

Data Analysis

The researchers analysed data from 16 interviews using the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcriptions were transferred to Microsoft Word, and open coding was applied to each line (Esterberg, 2002). Axial coding followed, organising codes into categories and subcategories using a constant comparative method. Categories were allowed to emerge naturally, remaining open to recurring patterns (Patton, 2002). Selective coding was then used to develop the final themes (Costa et al., 2016). Saturation was achieved when diverse perspectives and rich, detailed data were collected while maintaining focus on the research question (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Relevant categories were classified according to the identified themes, emphasising the role of counsellors and their challenges in drug abuse prevention for elementary schoolchildren in Malaysian government schools. Findings were reported concerning the research questions.

RESULTS

Based on the data extracted from the interviews, the findings were categorized into two core themes: the role and the challenges faced by counsellors in school-based drug abuse prevention in elementary schools. All interview quotes in this section are from personal communications with participants.

Theme 1: The Role of Counsellors in School-based Drug Abuse Prevention in Elementary Schools

The community views school counsellors as essential in drug abuse prevention at the elementary school level. Counsellors are responsible for engaging with students through counselling sessions, conducting drug screenings and mental health assessments, and addressing truancy and associated

risks. They are also expected to educate students on drug prevention, communicate with parents via digital platforms, and share relevant information with staff. Additionally, counsellors are tasked to connect families to external support programs and provide referrals for treatment and financial education.

Providing Individual, Group, and Family Counselling to Support Drug Abuse Prevention in Schools. Participants highlighted the vital role of school counsellors in prevention, emphasizing their direct access to students through counselling and the involvement of parents in family counselling.

Counsellors in schools play a huge role in prevention, as they have direct access to students through counselling sessions. (P3)

School counsellors can also engage in group counselling with students. They can also facilitate role-playing or activities during these sessions. (P5)

As a counsellor myself, I have invited parents to join the sessions or conducted family counselling to address my students' issues. (P8)

Conducting Assessments and Drug Screenings for Students. Participants emphasized counsellors' role in conducting drug screenings and mental health assessments, with some recommending age-appropriate tests, such as stress and personality assessments, to evaluate students' well-being.

The counsellor is the best person to conduct drug screenings and assessments related to their mental health. (P2)

At school, counsellors can administer age-appropriate tests to assess students' stress. A personality test could also be an option. (P5)

Engaging, Assessing, and Intervening with High-Risk Students and Families. Participants emphasized the need for counsellors to proactively engage with truant students, assess risks, address family concerns, and intervene when needed.

Counsellors need to be proactive in getting to know truant students, assessing their risks, listening to stories related to their families, and intervening when necessary. (P5)

Assisting in School Programs and Providing Drug Prevention Education for Students, School Staff and Parents. Participants highlighted counsellors' key role in drug prevention through school assemblies, digital outreach to parents, and sharing information with staff. While counsellors are best suited to lead drug abuse programs, they can also integrate drug prevention into the curriculum and teach students how to seek help.

During school assemblies, counsellors can spend a few minutes discussing current drug trends and refusal skills, keeping it brief since these are young children. (P7)

When it comes to drug abuse-related programs, counsellors are better suited to assist rather than lead them. (P8)

Counsellors can reach out to parents via WhatsApp, the school website, or the Facebook page to convey messages about drug abuse prevention. (P10)

Counsellors can also share drug education and prevention information with teachers and administrative staff. They can also provide guidelines on how to respond to drug-related cases. (P14)

School counsellors can also teach classes and provide drug prevention education through the curriculum. They can educate children on where to seek help and support when needed. (P15)

Promoting External Services and Programs for Students and Families. Participants emphasized that counsellors can connect students and families to external programs, provide referrals for drug abuse support, and share information on financial education and support services.

Counsellors can connect students and families to external school programs and activities run by non-governmental organizations or *Rakan Muda*. (P11)

Parents of children who are already abusing drugs can be provided with referrals to peer workers or services that offer support and treatment. (P12)

It is also important to share financial education, such as the services offered by *Pertubuhan Keselamatan Sosial (PERKESO)*, *Agensi Kaunseling dan Pengurusan Kredit (AKPK)*. (P3)

Theme 2: Challenges Faced by Counsellors in School-Based Drug Abuse Prevention in Elementary Schools

The research identified several challenges for elementary school counsellors in drug abuse prevention, including limited exposure to drug-related cases, insufficient resources, and a lack of specialized training. Counsellors also face heavy workloads, community pressure, and disparities in qualifications between urban and rural areas. Budget constraints further limit the effectiveness of prevention programs, highlighting the need for additional external support.

Limited Exposure to Drug Abuse Cases. The participant noted that drug abuse is more common in secondary schools and expressed unfamiliarity with addressing such cases, suggesting that elementary school counsellors may lack the experience or training to handle drug-related issues.

In my school, there aren't that many drug abuse cases; maybe they are more common in secondary schools. I'm not very familiar with how to address these cases. (P7)

Parental Initiation of Support. The participant noted that parents are the primary ones seeking support for drug-related issues in their school. The participant also expressed feeling unable to address these cases directly due to limited time and skills, instead offering emotional support.

For me, it is the parent that is reaching out for support through the counselling service. I may not have the time and skills to attend these cases. I can only listen and provide comfort. (P7)

Limited Resources and Need for Specialized Training. The participant mentioned that the only resource available for addressing drug-related issues is the PPDa program provided by the Ministry of Education. The participant also expressed the need for additional resources, such as counselling modules or drug abuse prevention activities, to better address these cases.

At the moment the only resource that we have are the ones provided by the Ministry of Education on PPDa. There aren't many other sources to obtain information around drug abuse related cases. It would be helpful to have a module for counselling or activities around drug abuse cases and its prevention. (P8)

Disparities in Counsellor Qualifications Across Locations. The participant highlighted a disparity in counsellor qualifications based on location, noting that while counsellors in urban areas are generally qualified, rural areas often face a shortage of trained professionals, leading some schools to appoint regular teachers to handle counselling duties.

I've seen that mostly in city areas the counsellors are qualified, however in some rural areas I've heard that some schools appoint regular teachers to perform counselling as there isn't enough. (P8)

Isolation and Overwhelming Workload for School Counsellors. The participant expressed feeling overwhelmed as the sole counsellor in their school, struggling to balance student management tasks with supporting students' mental health. The participant sought assistance from teachers or other staff to help manage students' well-being.

I am the only counsellor in my school and at times I feel overwhelmed as I have various other tasks I need to complete around student management. It would be nice if I got some assistance from teachers or school staff when it comes to handling the mental health wellbeing of these students. (P8)

External Blame on Teachers and Counsellors for Student Misbehaviour. The participant noted that the community often blames teachers and counsellors for student misbehaviour, suggesting that educators and school staff are held responsible for issues beyond their control, reflecting the pressure they face in managing student behaviour.

The community always blames the teachers and counsellors at schools for the students' misbehaviours. (P15)

Budget Constraints and The Need for External Support. The participants acknowledged that their school has a limited budget for programs and activities. They expressed a need for additional funding and suggested seeking support from community centres or non-governmental organizations as a potential solution.

I can see that in my school, we have a certain budget to run these programs and activities, oftentimes it will be limited. (P1)

Schools do need funding to run these programs, and it's okay to reach out for support from community centres or maybe even non-governmental organizations. (P12)

DISCUSSION

This research underscores the vital role of school counsellors in drug abuse prevention for elementary students in Malaysia, highlighting their involvement in counselling, mental health assessments, and connecting students with external support. However, it also identifies challenges such as limited resources, inadequate training, and a lack of specialized support that hinder the effectiveness of these efforts. School counsellors play a crucial role in drug abuse prevention by offering individualized, group, and family counselling. As noted by participants, counsellors can intervene proactively with direct access to students, addressing emotional, behavioural, and social factors linked to drug use vulnerability (Salleh Amat, 2018; Yusni Mohamadd Yusop et al., 2020). Involving parents in counselling, especially through family sessions, was also emphasized as an effective strategy for tackling family-related risks contributing to children's susceptibility to drug abuse (Salleh Amat, 2018).

Counsellors also play a key role in conducting drug screenings and mental health assessments, using age-appropriate tools like stress or personality tests to identify at-risk students. Early identification of emotional or psychological distress is critical in preventing drug abuse (Salleh Amat, 2018). However, participants noted challenges such as limited resources and a lack of training in specialized assessments. This highlights the need for additional resources and training, aligning with previous research pointing to properly trained professionals shortage (Ku Suhaila Ku Johari & Mohamad Isa Amat, 2019). Furthermore, although many counselling programs in Malaysia are influenced by the ASCA and Missouri Models, these models are largely focused on secondary education, which may not fully address the unique needs of elementary school students, emphasizing the need for tailored early intervention strategies (Beyza Nur Aktaş, 2021).

Additionally, this research emphasizes counsellors' proactive role in engaging high-risk students and their families. Participants highlighted the need for counsellors to assess risks and intervene, especially with truant students or those facing family issues. This supports previous research linking truancy and school disengagement to an increased risk of drug abuse (Rozumah Baharudin et al., 2005; Samsiah Mohd Jais, 2012). Implementing school-wide initiatives like drug education programs and community involvement, similar to practices used in the United States, can further enhance prevention efforts (Schmidt, 2005). Integrating counselling with other prevention efforts, such as drug education and school assemblies, was also identified as an effective strategy. Counsellors are well-placed to educate students, staff, and parents about drug abuse risks and teach refusal skills to prevent initial substance use (Abdul Malek Abdul Rahman et al., 2013; Salleh Amat, 2018). The research also highlights counsellors' role in connecting students and families with external services. Participants emphasized that counsellors facilitate referrals to drug abuse support, offer financial education, and link families to community programs. This supports prior research suggesting that a community-wide approach involving collaboration among schools, families, and external stakeholders is crucial for effective drug abuse prevention (O'Connell et al., 2009; Low et al., 2013).

The research also identified challenges counsellors face in implementing prevention strategies, particularly due to limited exposure to drug abuse cases at the elementary level. Participants noted that drug abuse is more common in secondary schools, resulting in a lack of familiarity with handling such cases in elementary schools. This gap in counsellor preparedness is concerning, especially with increasing reports of drug use among younger children (Balvin Kaur, 2019; Tamarai Chelvi, 2024). Consequently, there is a need for targeted training in early intervention strategies for counsellors. Moreover, the lack of adequate supervision and structured professional development in Malaysia further complicates the preparation of counsellors to handle emerging challenges in drug abuse prevention (Mey, 2013). Another key finding is the heavy workload and numerous responsibilities school counsellors face. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by academic advising and behaviour management, which left little time for focused counselling. This aligns with previous research that identifies counsellor burnout and workload as major barriers to effective service delivery (Ku Suhaila Ku Johari & Mohamad Isa Amat, 2019). The pressure to meet diverse student needs, along with limited resources and a shortage of trained professionals, complicates counsellors' ability to address drug abuse prevention effectively.

The findings also revealed disparities in counsellor qualifications, with urban schools generally having better-trained counsellors than rural ones, limiting the effectiveness of drug prevention efforts in rural areas due to a shortage of qualified personnel (Ku Suhaila Ku Johari & Mohamad Isa Amat, 2019). This gap highlights the need for consistent professional development and training, especially in rural schools. Participants also noted a lack of external support for drug abuse prevention programs, with limited resources and funding hindering comprehensive efforts. Despite

collaboration with external agencies, the need for greater community involvement and additional support was emphasized to strengthen prevention programs. While school counsellors in Malaysia are vital to drug abuse prevention, their efforts are hindered by limited training, resources, and heavy workloads. To enhance program effectiveness, investment in professional development, increased collaboration, and more resources, especially in underserved areas, are essential for better supporting counsellors and promoting student well-being.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the vital role of school counsellors in drug abuse prevention at the elementary school level in Malaysia. Counsellors engage with students through counselling, drug screenings, and mental health assessments, educating students, communicating with parents, and connecting families to external support. However, challenges such as limited exposure to drug cases, insufficient training, heavy workloads, and disparities between urban and rural areas hinder their effectiveness. Budget constraints and community pressures further limit prevention efforts, underscoring the need for more training, resources, and external support to improve the impact of drug prevention programs.

The findings of this research highlight key implications for school counsellors in drug abuse prevention. First, there is a clear need for enhanced training and professional development, as many counsellors struggle with drug-related issues due to limited exposure and specialized knowledge. Providing counsellors with the right tools for early intervention is essential. Additionally, adequate resources and funding for counselling and prevention programs are necessary, especially in rural areas where counsellor qualifications may be lacking. Schools must allocate sufficient resources to support these efforts. The research also suggests that counsellors should collaborate more with external stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations, health agencies, and law enforcement, to strengthen prevention programs and provide comprehensive support. Furthermore, greater involvement of parents is crucial for addressing drug-related issues early and connecting families with external support services.

The research has several limitations. Although the sample size is sufficient for qualitative saturation, its geographic focus may not capture the full range of experiences across all Malaysian schools, especially private or international ones. Language translation challenges could have impacted the accuracy of responses, and the researcher's language skills might have influenced how questions were phrased and interpreted despite attempts to reduce these effects. While grounded theory was applied, the subjective nature of coding may have influenced the emerging themes. These limitations suggest opportunities for future research to expand and address these gaps.

Future research should explore several key areas. First, studies should identify the most effective early intervention strategies for drug abuse prevention in elementary schools, particularly those easily implemented by counsellors. Additionally, the impact of specialized training on counsellors' effectiveness in addressing drug abuse needs further investigation to guide counsellor education. Comparing counselling practices in urban and rural schools could reveal disparities in resources and qualifications, offering insights into more equitable solutions. Longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of early drug prevention programs are also needed to assess their lasting impact. Finally, research on counsellor well-being and burnout is crucial, as the emotional demands of addressing drug abuse and mental health issues can affect their effectiveness. These areas of research will help improve the support and resources for school counsellors, enhancing drug abuse prevention efforts. By addressing these research gaps, future studies can help develop more effective drug abuse

MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY & COUNSELING

prevention programs and provide better support for school counsellors, ultimately enhancing student well-being and reducing youth drug abuse prevalence.

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