ORIGINAL ARTICLE

EMPOWERING ADOLESCENTS: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SCHOOL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING SERVICES IN ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

School Guidance and Counselling services are universally implemented to facilitate students in realizing their full potential and shaping their future lives (Smith, 2020)[1]. While these services play a crucial role in meeting the diverse needs of students in Sri Lanka, research indicates operational challenges (Buddhiprabha, 2016)[2]. This article presents findings from a survey study conducted to explore how school guidance and counselling units in Sri Lanka can contribute to resolving educational problems faced by adolescents. The main research study employed a mixed-methods design, incorporating 275 students, 24 class teachers, 5 principals and 5 counselling teachers in the Walasmulla Educational zone in Sri Lanka. The data collection involved the use of questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative analysis was conducted using percentages and charts, while qualitative analysis relied on summaries descriptive essays and structured compositions. Results highlights prevalent educational problems among adolescents, predominantly cognitive issues. Challenges related to studying, exams, the learning process, and external factors were also identified. Despite efforts by school guidance and counselling units to address these challenges, they have not been entirely successful. Notably, students who received direct counselling support reported significant assistance in overcoming their educational hurdles. This underscores the importance of formalized support structures within school guidance and counselling units in providing practical solutions to adolescents' educational challenges, ultimately better preparing them for the future.

Keywords: Educational problems, Adolescence, Counselling, School Guidance and Counselling Unit

Introduction

Due to the lack of an accepted or standard definition of adolescence, various researchers have constructed different definitions for this stage. According to the World Health Organization, adolescence encompasses the ages of 10 to 19 years (World Health Organization, 2023). Citing the United Nations, Liyanage (2024) states that adolescents are classified into four categories. According to this classification, youth are individuals aged between 15 and 24 years. Early adolescence spans from 11 to 14 years, middle adolescence from 14 to 17 years, late adolescence from 17 to 19 years and emerging adulthood from 19 to 24 years old (Liyanage, 2024). Apart from that, the United Nations Report (2022) indicates that the global youth population aged 10-24 years consists of 1.8 billion individuals, making it the largest population in history. Therefore, it is imperative to equip teenagers with knowledge, skills, and a positive mindset to prepare them for the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

According to the research findings, Sri Lankan school students face significant levels of anxiety, depression and other significant harms due to the highly stereotyped and standardized general education system in Sri Lanka. This includes the prevalence of teacher-centered learning approaches and the pervasive competitive examination culture (Gunawardana et al, 2017; Athukorale et al, 2020; Alwis et al, 2022; World Bank, 2011). The pressure on children is a major factor in stressing them due to parents' strong belief that exams will improve their children's future (Samudra, 2020). Tragically, as highlighted by Azimova (2020), some students resort to suicidal actions in response to exam failures and academic struggles.

The phase of adolescence, marked by biological transition from childhood to adulthood, is often called a crisis period (Casey et.al, 2010). During this crucial stage, adolescents strive for greater independence, fostering stronger connections with peers while distancing themselves from parental influence (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Schneiders et al, 2007). This transition frequently leads to conflicts within the family structure (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009) and the initiation of romantic relationships (Furman, 2002; Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003).

In the midst of these transformations, Rasalingum (2022) indicates that adolescents are faced with negative life experiences and although many copes with these challenges successfully, adolescence is a period of high risk for a variety of problems, including psychological problems. The process of preparing for a competitive exam with the new physical, mental, emotional and social changes that occur during the transition period for the adolescent who experiences puberty with the arrival of adolescence. Due to the competitive education pattern, students are compelled to engage in private tutoring alongside regular school activities. This added pressure, compounded by the competition among peers, parental expectations, and school assignments, weighs heavily on the child (Damayanthi, 2018; Samudra, 2020). This high-pressure manifests in both positive and negative impacts on their lives, leading to various challenges for students.

Various studies have shown that the impact of adolescent mental health problems affect their education. Perera (2006) revealed that a significant portion of young people suffer from acute stress, directly leads to academic difficulties. In a study of mental health problems of urban school children in Sri Lanka, Perera (2009a) reported that over 45.5% of participants showed mild symptoms. Another national survey conducted by Perera (2009b) revealed that 18.9% of the sample showed emotional and behavioral problems, with 12.6% experiencing severe impairment due to these challenges.

Yakandawala (2003) highlights the dual nature of development during adolescence, encompassing both physical and intellectual growth. He suggests that the pre-adolescent, who were confined to their sensory environmental and kinetic activities, self-centeredness and concrete materials, find it difficult to handle the concept of conservation, logical thinking, properly. Consequently, some individuals find themselves constrained by these cognitive limitations, hindering their progression to abstract thinking. Yakandawala emphasizes the significant impact of socioeconomic factors on educational challenges, suggesting that they outweigh physical maturation in this regard.

Similarly, Harris (2012) reveals that drug addiction among school students often stems from underlying mental weakness, leading to learning difficulties. Thabrew (2017) further explores abnormal behavioral traits among students, noting their direct and indirect interference with the educational process. These findings underscore the intricate relationship between mental health, behavior, and academic performance among school students.

In Sri Lanka, the absence of early detection opportunities for students' diverse challenges and the limited availability of appropriate therapeutic interventions contribute to various difficulties during the learning journey (Jayathunga, 2005).The modern psychological counselling process is positively important for the effective use of children's external and internal strengths for personal development and it contributes to enhance personality qualities by controlling stress, providing interpersonal relationships, and coping with educational problems and problem-solving guidance (Apsara & Subasinghe; 2021).

The School Guidance and Counselling Unit bears the responsibility of guiding students towards academic success and a brighter future (Sajeewani, 2011). This unit facilitates the holistic development of students, offering preventive, guiding, and developmental interventions, as well as supportive and remedial counselling services (Lai-Yeung, 2014). Such guidance and counselling are pivotal in helping students unlock their full potential and preparing them for future life challenges (Dhal, 2020).

However, despite its importance, only a fraction of schools in Sri Lanka have operational guidance and counselling units. Moreover, even where these units exist, doubts linger regarding their effectiveness and successful execution of related tasks (Buddhiprabha, 2016). These units are envisioned as multifaceted support systems within the school framework, aiming to address students' challenges and foster an optimal learning environment.

Objectives

The primary objectives for this article are to identify the nature of educational challenges encountered by adolescents and to assess the interventions implemented by the school guidance and counselling unit to address these challenges. Additionally, the study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the unit's actions, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, the research seeks to provide recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of school guidance and counselling services.
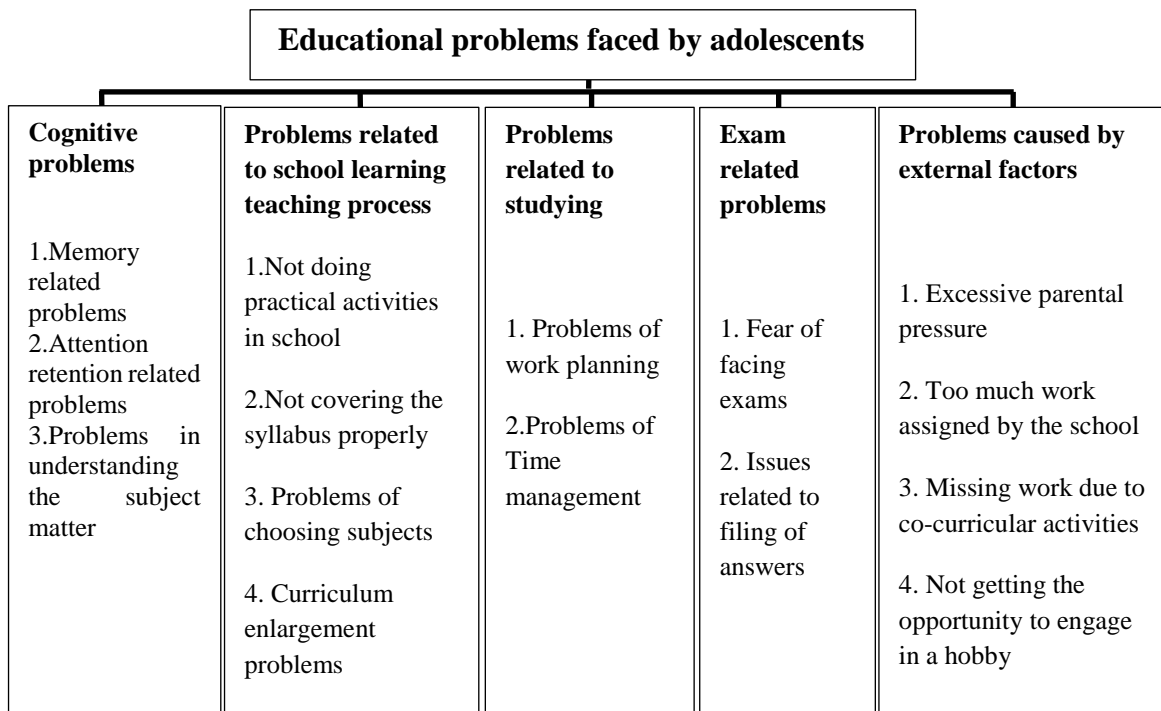
Methodology

The main research study employed a mixed-methods design, incorporating 187 female and 88 male students, 24 class teachers, 5 principals and 5 counselling teachers taken from five National schools in Walasmulla Educational Division of Walasmulla Educational zone in Sri Lanka. The data collection involved the use of questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative analysis was conducted using percentages and charts, while qualitative analysis relied on summaries descriptive essays and structured compositions.

Results of The Study

The results of the study are organized into purpose-oriented topics. The analysis of data collected from various instruments reveals the nature of educational problems faced by adolescents in Sri Lanka (See chart 1 below). The educational problems expressed by students, as identified from the questionnaire responses, can be categorized into five main themes.

Chart 1:
Nature of Educational Problems Faced by Adolescents in Sri Lanka

Educational problems faced by adolescents				
Cognitive problems	**Problems related to school learning teaching process**	**Problems related to studying**	**Exam related problems**	**Problems caused by external factors**
1.Memory related problems 2.Attention retention related problems 3.Problems in understanding the subject matter	1.Not doing practical activities in school 2.Not covering the syllabus properly 3. Problems of choosing subjects 4. Curriculum enlargement problems	1. Problems of work planning 2.Problems of Time management	1. Fear of facing exams 2. Issues related to filing of answers	1. Excessive parental pressure 2. Too much work assigned by the school 3. Missing work due to co-curricular activities 4. Not getting the opportunity to engage in a hobby

It's evident that a significant proportion of adolescents in the target group are grappling with academic challenges, with a staggering 97.82% reporting such issues, and a substantial 60.71% experiencing five or more academic problems. Cognitive difficulties affect 33.06% of the total sample, with 38.71% of female students particularly impacted.
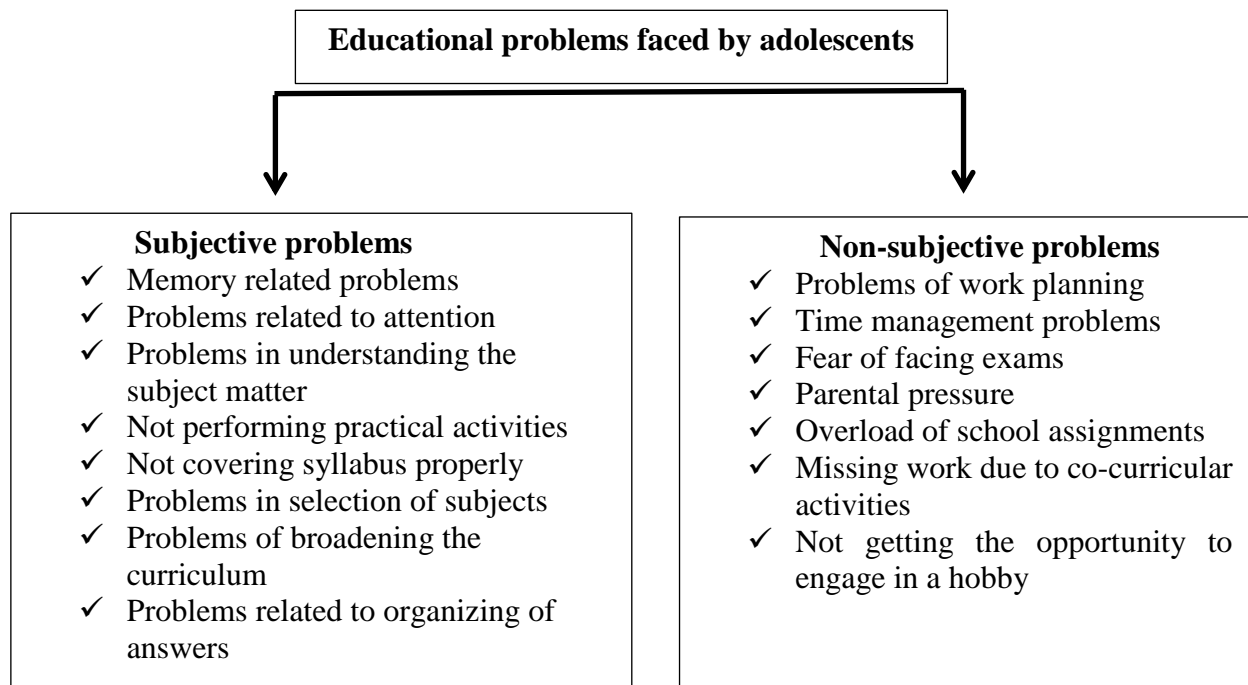
Gender disparities also manifest in the challenges encountered. Female students report issues such as attention retention, missing work due to co-curricular activities, lack of practical

activities in school, and incomplete syllabus coverage. In contrast, male students face challenges like filing answers, excessive parental pressure, overwhelming school workload, and limited opportunities for pursuing hobbies.

These problems can be categorized based on their subjective or non-subjective nature (See Chart 2 below). Regardless of gender, common issues include memory-related struggles, time management difficulties, comprehension challenges, exam anxiety, and inadequate work planning. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering academic success and overall well-being among adolescents.

Chart 2
Categorization of Educational Problems Faced by Adolescents in Sri Lanka

Educational problems faced by adolescents

Subjective problems
- ✓ Memory related problems
- ✓ Problems related to attention
- ✓ Problems in understanding the subject matter
- ✓ Not performing practical activities
- ✓ Not covering syllabus properly
- ✓ Problems in selection of subjects
- ✓ Problems of broadening the curriculum
- ✓ Problems related to organizing of answers

Non-subjective problems
- ✓ Problems of work planning
- ✓ Time management problems
- ✓ Fear of facing exams
- ✓ Parental pressure
- ✓ Overload of school assignments
- ✓ Missing work due to co-curricular activities
- ✓ Not getting the opportunity to engage in a hobby

Among the surveyed students, 61.81% identified mathematics as their most challenging subject. Additionally, English, science, and history were cited as problematic subjects. These findings suggest that both core and elective subjects contribute to the educational difficulties experienced by students.

Actions taken by the School Guidance and Counselling Unit to reduce the educational problems faced by the adolescents

According to the survey data, 37.09% of students reported that counselling teachers visit classes to offer advice, while 33.09% mentioned the organization of related lectures through the counselling unit. Additionally, 16.72% highlighted the conduct of study camps as part of the unit's efforts. Furthermore, 12.36% of respondents mentioned the implementation of parental awareness programs, and 2.90% indicated receiving advice directly through the counselling unit.

Moreover, 51.63% of students stated that the school guidance and counselling unit conducts programs specifically targeting educational issues. Among participants in these programs, 73.94% reported receiving very good solutions, and 23.24% found the solutions to be fairly effective. However, 2.82% of students indicated that they had not received successful solutions, underscoring the need for ongoing evaluation and improvement of counselling services to effectively support adolescent students. A breakdown of counselling support among students reveals that 5.81% received direct assistance from the counselling unit, while 57.81% accessed support through various programs. Notably, 35.63% of students did not receive any support from the counselling unit. Consequently, 63.62% of the entire sample received some form of support from the counselling unit, leaving 35.63% without any assistance.

Further analysis by gender shows that 8.56% of female students and 2.27% of male students received direct support from the counselling unit. Additionally, 75.93% of female students and 44.32% of male students received support through various programs. However, a significant portion of both female and male students, comprising 15.51% and 53.41% respectively, never received counselling support. These findings underscore the need for a systematic approach to identify and refer students with educational challenges who have not received counselling support. Implementing such a program in schools could effectively address disparities in access to counselling services, particularly among male students.

Support received by students counseled directly from the Counselling Unit.

Support received by students directly counseled by the Counselling Unit has been overwhelmingly positive. According to feedback from these students, all reported receiving excellent guidance from the school counselling service, with 88.88% successfully resolving their problems and 83.33% expressing satisfaction with the support provided. These results underscore the significant potential of the school guidance and counselling service in addressing educational challenges faced by students.

Awareness of the Students about school Counselling unit and Counselling teacher

Regarding awareness of the Counselling Unit and counselling teachers among students, the majority (77.81%) are well aware of the existence of a counselling unit in the school, with most being female students. However, 7.27% have only heard about its existence, and 13.09% are unaware of its presence, with a higher percentage being male students. Similarly, while 89.81% of students are aware of the presence of a counselling teacher, 2.18% have only heard about it, and 8% are unaware. Again, most of the students unaware of the Counselling teacher are male. These findings suggest the need for a systematic program to raise awareness within the school community about the counselling unit, its functions, the counselling teacher's role, and the services available.

Shortcomings and Weaknesses in Actions Followed by Counselling Unit

Despite the positive aspects, several shortcomings and weaknesses in the actions of the Counselling Unit have been identified. The absence of a female counsellor in the school counselling unit, identified by 61.81% of students, stands out as a significant drawback. Other weaknesses highlighted include insufficient awareness among students about the counselling unit, inadequate identification and action on educational problems, inappropriate location of the counselling room, and the counselor's busyness.

Moreover, concerns about the lack of dedicated space for counselling, infrequent visits by the teacher in charge, absence of full-time staff, and issues regarding confidentiality were also raised by students. These findings echo previous research highlighting similar weaknesses in the school counselling services in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the need for comprehensive reforms to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of counselling support for students.

Reasons for not referring students to school guidance and Counselling services

Several factors contribute to students not being referred to the school guidance and Counselling services. A significant portion of students, 20%, have not been referred simply because no one has directed them to these services, with a majority of these students being male at 14.18%. Additionally, a notable percentage, 12.36%, remains unaware of the Counselling unit's existence, underscoring the importance of increasing awareness within the school community. Some students, 6.18%, harbor doubts about the effectiveness of Counselling, while others, 5.81%, feel embarrassed to seek help. Addressing these barriers, including raising awareness, dispelling misconceptions, and reducing stigma, is essential to ensure that all students have access to the valuable support and guidance offered by school counselling services.

Discussion and Suggestions

The data analysis reveals that a significant majority of adolescents in Sri Lanka grapple with various educational challenges, encompassing cognitive difficulties, issues within the learning and teaching process, study-related obstacles, exam-related stress, and external factors. Cognitive problems appear to be particularly prevalent among students, indicating a critical area of concern. Moreover, the nature of these challenges varies based on gender, highlighting the importance of gender-sensitive support mechanisms.

In addressing these educational problems, the school guidance and counselling services have implemented various measures, including counselling sessions, lectures, study camps, and parental awareness programs. Feedback from students who directly received counselling support indicates that these interventions have been effective in providing guidance and assistance.

However, the data also points to several shortcomings in the school counselling service. There appears to be a significant gap in referring students to the counselling unit, with many students not accessing these services due to lack of referral, unawareness, doubts about effectiveness, or feelings of shyness. Additionally, there is a notable lack of awareness among students regarding the counselling unit, its functions, and the role of the counselling teacher. Furthermore, deficiencies in identifying and addressing educational problems, inappropriate counselling unit location, and the counselor's busyness are identified as weaknesses in the school counselling service.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of enhancing awareness about counselling services, improving the effectiveness of referrals, and addressing weaknesses within the counselling service to better support students in overcoming educational challenges and promoting their overall well-being.To enhance the contribution of school guidance and counselling services in mitigating educational problems among students in Sri Lanka, the following proposals are suggested:

1. **Identifying Educational Problems**:
   - Encourage regular classroom visits by counselling teachers to foster closer relationships with students and discuss any educational issues they may be facing.
   - Establish a mechanism, such as a "problem box," for students to anonymously communicate their educational challenges.
   - Inform class teachers about prevalent educational problems and provide guidance on identifying students in need of support.
   - Educate students on the importance of addressing academic challenges for their overall academic performance.
   - Regularly inform parents about their children's educational problems and the role of the Guidance and Counselling Unit.

2. **Providing Solutions**:
   - Conduct workshops and study camps to teach students successful study methods and alleviate exam-related stress.
   - Identify problematic subjects for students and collaborate with relevant teachers to provide necessary remedies.
   - Organize therapeutic programs to address existing educational problems.
   - Offer guidance programs to assist students in subject selection and provide formal measures for referring students with educational difficulties to the Counselling unit.

3. **Developing Counselling Quality**:
   - Generalize assistance from the counselling unit to all students and increase referrals.
   - Maintain maximum confidentiality in counselling sessions.
   - Seek support from school administration to prioritize counselling services.
   - Ensure the Counselling unit is located in a suitable place for accessibility.
   - Provide comprehensive Counselling training to all teachers.
   - Ensure gender diversity among Counselling staff in mixed-gender schools.
   - Implement regular monitoring and documentation of Counselling services.

4. **Building Counselling Capacity**:
   - Recruit qualified and trained Counselling teachers based on student population.
   - Establish a code of ethics for school counsellors to guide their professional conduct.
   - Incorporate Counselling training into pre-service teacher education programs.
   - Provide local and international training opportunities for Counselling teachers.
   - Adopt methods to continually update the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of counsellor about new Counselling approaches.
   - Keep counsellors informed about educational circulars and ensure their proper implementation.

By implementing these proposals, Sri Lanka can strengthen its school guidance and Counselling services to effectively address the educational challenges faced by students and promote their overall well-being and academic success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the pivotal role of school guidance and Counselling services in empowering adolescents and addressing educational challenges in Sri Lanka cannot be overstated. Adolescence is a critical period of growth and development, where individuals navigate academic pressures, social dynamics, and personal struggles. In this context, effective guidance and counselling services play a crucial role in providing students with the support, resources, and guidance they need to overcome obstacles and thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The proposals outlined for the development of school guidance and counselling services offer a comprehensive road-map for enhancing the effectiveness and accessibility of these vital support systems. By identifying educational problems, providing targeted solutions, and strengthening the quality and capacity of counselling services, Sri Lanka can create a more supportive and inclusive educational environment for its adolescent population.

Moreover, by raising awareness among students, parents, and educators about the importance of counselling services, Sri Lanka can encourage greater utilization and ensure that all students have access to the support they need to succeed. Ultimately, investing in the empowerment of adolescents through robust guidance and counselling services not only enhances educational outcomes but also fosters the holistic development and well-being of future generations, laying the foundation for a brighter and more prosperous future for Sri Lanka.

Summary

Although the support from the school guidance and counseling unit should be immense to solve the educational problems faced by the adolescents, that intervention is not enough in the school system of Sri Lanka. Therefore, the school guidance and counseling unit should be stronger to reduce the mental health problems of the adolescents. Through that, we can endow a future community with an active and healthy lifestyle expected in 2030.

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