

The Role of School Counselors in Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

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Abstract

School counselors are pivotal in helping students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to improve academically, socially, and emotionally. Empirical research emerges in prominence as significantly important in enhancing the interpersonal communication behaviors of such students in enabling effective peer interactions. Through systematic social skills training and behaviorally based interventions, school counselors enable ASD students to develop and sustain peer relationships, reduce vulnerability to bullying, and create a sense of belonging among their fellow students at school. Based on a quantitative survey of 253 participants of this study, this article writes about the attitude, concerns, and intervention measures of school counselors in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region alone for assisting students with ASD. Findings indicate that individual counseling and social skills training are most crucial but are greatly impeded by insufficient training, resources, and stakeholder support. The study advocates professional development, system support, and evidence-based practice to enhance counselor effectiveness. Schools, policymakers, and future researchers are recommended to ensure inclusive education and improved outcomes for students with ASD.

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, School Counselors, Inclusive Education, Social Skills Training, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by impaired social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviour patterns [1]. As the number of ASD diagnoses continues to rise globally, schools are now relying on school counselors to help students with ASD. Although of vital importance, counselors are often hampered by their preparedness and availability. It is in Kara and Demirtas's [2] opinion that inadequate training and the lack of specialized resources have the potential to exacerbate disparities in the provision of suitable, long-term support for students with ASD. This is a call for more professional growth and organizational support for the purpose of inflicting counselors' full potential. The counselors also collaborate with teachers to create and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and facilitate academic support using mentoring as well as organisational and time management abilities. They teach self-advocacy skills and offer social skills groups to help students improve social interactions, social cues, friendships, and conflict resolution.

Despite increased awareness of autism, students with ASD continue to face severe challenges in schools that affect their academic performance, social relationships, and emotional status. Some of these challenges are social communication challenges, repetitive behaviours, sensory challenges, and comorbidities such as anxiety and ADHD. The role of the school counselors is very important in helping such children, but they are not adequately prepared or experienced to work with ASD, making it a challenge for them to meet diverse needs. Schools are also not equipped with such facilities as sensory rooms and special mentoring programs. Ineffective communication and coordination between the counselors, teachers, parents, and external professionals' results in inconsistent support to students. Hong Kong Special Administrative Region school counselors play a critical but nuanced role in responding to the ASD needs of students, particularly in an evolving inclusive education system with problems of implementation [3].

This study identifies the roles, practices, and beliefs of the counselors working with these students regarding their academic, psychological, and social adaptation. Integrating students with ASD into general classrooms doubles the needs for one-on-one support and accommodation, placing additional burdens on teachers and counselors. Despite their crucial role (providing one-on-one and group counseling through empirically supported practices such as social skills training and behavioral interventions) counselors themselves acknowledge that they lack adequate training and equipment, and therefore there are inconsistencies in providing services.

The outcomes of this study have implications for a variety of stakeholders. Findings need to provide counselors' real-world guidance, such as intervention techniques, teamwork, and professional development. Increased support for

students with ASD can result in improved academic achievement, reduced social isolation, and more emotional adaptation. Schools can benefit from increased counselor-teacher collaboration in creating inclusive education practices. Families can be helped in making home-school collaboration better and becoming involved in their child's schooling. In addition, the research benefits the wider scholarly community by confirming gaps in counselor training and policy infrastructure. The study aims:

- (a) To provide direction for future training and policy development to maintain inclusive and effective learning environments for students with ASD.
- (b) To comprehend the challenges school counselors face in treating ASD students, such as inadequate resources and training, and how these affect their effectiveness.
- (c) To examine support strategies used and resources employed by school counselors and evaluate how they aid the academic and social growth of ASD students.
- (d) To explore the interaction of school counselors, teachers, parents, and other professionals in providing integrated support, and ascertain the influence of such interaction on student outcomes for children with ASD.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

2.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory [4] centers on the reality that one's development is affected by various environmental systems, including microsystems (parents and school), mesosystems, and exosystems [5]. School counselors are also bridgers of such systems by facilitating coordination and communication across all stakeholders. They inform parents about school expectations and interpret students' home requirements into teachers. Counselors' pooled resources and services in and out of school to provide integrated support for ASD students. They also assist in creating Individual Education Plans (IEPs) according to students' specific needs and advocate for equitable treatment and care in the education system. By collaborating with teachers, parents, and community services, counselors build a comprehensive support system that helps students with ASD to overcome obstacles and further develop themselves.

2.1.2 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, according to Firmansyah and Saopuloh [6], explains that individuals do not only learn behaviors directly but also by observing and mimicking others. This theory can be specifically used for school counselors counseling students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Guided role-plays are used by counselors as a principle of observational learning, in which the students can practice social interactions in a controlled situation before generalizing the skills to everyday situations. Furthermore, by promoting collaboration and support from peers—such as via group work or collaborative learning—counselors create environments whereby the students with ASD learn appropriate social behaviors from neurotypical peers with positive modeling reinforced [7].

2.1.3 Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Multiple Intelligences Theory [8,9] challenges conventional understandings of intelligence by proposing that human beings possess a variety of intellectual strengths—like linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal, or naturalistic abilities. For school counselors to aid students with ASD, this theory emphasizes the use of personalization to cater to different learning profiles. Counselors can vary interventions to incorporate visual aids, auditory cues, hands-on activities, or outdoor activities to reach diverse intelligences. Gardening, for instance, builds naturalistic intelligence, and scripted group discussions increase interpersonal skills. Using these multi-dimensional approaches, counselors facilitate ASD students to access learning more effectively, raise self-esteem, and implement individual strengths in school and social settings.

2.1.4 Positive Behavior Support

Positive psychology is interested in the strengths, potential, and happiness of individuals instead of problem-solving like in traditional psychology [10]. This theory can be applied by school counselors to assist ASD students through providing them with positive affirmations regarding their strengths and success in academic work and socialization and improving aspects where they need to work on. This is crucial to improve students' self-esteem. They can stage activities which allow ASD students to interact with peers in their areas of expertise, for instance, by being involved in a concert or science fair. Such activities may improve their confidence and social skills.

2.2 Roles of School Counselors

School counselors play an all-encompassing role to protect the well-being, educational progress, and all-around development of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their responsibility extends to several areas, including:

- (a) Academic Support -- Counselors work with teachers to develop and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), offer one-on-one tutoring in a tailored manner, and help students develop organizational and time-management

capabilities. These activities help enhance learning interest and academic achievement for ASD students. They also help students learn self-advocacy skills for successful communication in the classroom [11].

(b) Building Social Skills -- Counselors address social interaction difficulties with social skills groups, individual training, and facilitating practice sessions. They provide a crucial, multifaceted role in assisting students with ASD in several key areas:

(c) Social Development -- Counselors provide targeted instruction to allow students to decipher social cues, display appropriate social behavior, form and maintain friendships, and effectively resolve peer conflicts [12].

(d) Emotional Support -- To address co-occurring conditions like depression and anxiety, counselors offer individual and group counseling through evidence-based frameworks like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The services aim to improve control over emotions, self-esteem, and develop adaptive coping mechanisms [13].

(e) Behavior Management -- Counselors work together with teachers and parents in creating and implementing Positive Behavior Support (PBS) plans. The programs are designed to decrease problems or disruptive behavior and systematically reinforce alternative positive ones [14].

(f) Family Collaboration -- As a primary intermediary, counselors offer families information, resources, and strategies for ASD, along with practical tips to support their child's learning. Counselors also broker connections with external community services, such as therapy and support groups, to facilitate a coordinated support system [15].

(g) Systemic Advocacy -- Counselors advocate for the rights and interests of students with ASD within their school life. They work towards educating other school personnel and helping initiate inclusive policies and teaching practices [16].

(h) Transition Services -- They prepare older students for adulthood by providing career guidance, post-secondary planning, and life skill development. The key to this role is partnership development with community agencies to create opportunities for internships and vocational experiences [17].

2.3 Challenges Facing by School Counselors

School counselors play a significant role in assisting students with ASD, yet they experience numerous challenges that hinder their efficiency.

(a) The majority of the counselors have insufficient training and experience in ASD, which affects the detection of students' needs and the applicability of appropriate interventions. Research uncovers shortcomings in their understanding of autism's diagnostic criteria and functional interventions.

(b) Schools typically do not have adequate resources, such as specialized mentoring programs and sensory rooms [18], to cater to students with ASD. School counselors may also have issues with time constraints and heavy workloads, which limits the amount of personalized attention they can provide [19].

(c) Inadequate communication and coordination among counselors, teachers, parents, and external professionals may generate confusion about students' needs and a lack of services. Effective communication is crucial to ensuring multifaceted support [20].

(d) Successful integration of students with ASD into mainstream classes entails additional support and accommodation, which can be stressful for counselors and teachers. Teachers may need further training to be able to address the diverse learning and behaviour needs of autistic students [21].

(e) Students with autism may display problematic behaviours that are distressing to teachers and counselors. Their management requires a great deal of skill, time, and appropriate strategies [22].

(f) Counselors may perceive a lack of support from other professionals and school administrators, which may detract from their ability to provide quality assistance. They may also experience role conflict due to a lack of definite job descriptions [23].

2.4 Success Stories for Students with ASD

Emphasizing students with ASD's achievements demonstrates effective support systems and emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive environments.

(a) Academic Achievement: A student moved from a second grade reading level to reading fourth-grade material with individualized interventions, building their confidence and class participation.

(b) Social Skills Acquisition: A student gained the skill to start conversations and make friends after attending a social skills group, enabling them to engage in group work and expand their social network.

(c) Enhancement of Behavior: A student who used to frequently have temper tantrums reduced such incidents by 70% upon implementation of a behavior intervention plan, resulting in better classroom behavior and learning concentration [24].

(d) University Transition: A student transitioned successfully to the university through a challenging transition program [25], where they learned social and organizational competencies, engaged in clubs, and engaged in interesting activities outside the curriculum.

(e) Family Engagement: A family was actively involved in supporting their child's education through attending workshops and communicating with teachers, leading to significantly enhanced student behavior and academic performance [26].

(f) Incentives and Recognition: One of the autistic students received an award in an art competition, improving their self-esteem and motivation through capability recognition, following assistance from teachers and guidance counselors.

(g) Peer Mentoring: An ASD student was assigned to mentor younger peers who also had similar challenges, gaining leadership skill and sense of responsibility while having a positive influence on the school culture.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a deductive approach to establish whether phenomena under observation are consistent with expectations based on prior research. It makes it possible for hypotheses to be tested and statistical tests of results to a specified level of accuracy. Questionnaires are administered to give insight into the experience and challenges of school counselors, as a way of enabling schools to examine their policies for recruiting and retaining counselors. Data collected helps in analyzing counselors' experience, perceptions, and activities in assisting students with ASD. Additionally, the study aims to provide suggestions to school principals on how experienced counselors can be retained. Questionnaires allow effective collection of in-depth information to comprehend the strategies utilized by counselors to assist students with ASD, along with the perceptions of the evaluators.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The survey is targeted at local school counselors aged 20 to 60 years. All the participants provided voluntary consent and were not remunerated to participate, having been contacted over email or phone by the researcher. Any question they did not wish to answer was allowed to be skipped, and they were free to opt out of the survey whenever they desired to do so.

The survey is conducted for a large sample size, which has been restricted to 253 due to the limitations in the resources. Random sampling has been used to eliminate bias and ensure the sample is representative of the population. The method is designed to obtain diverse opinions and gather credible information that reflects the views of the school counselors regarding their experience.

3.3 Instrumentation and Procedures

Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire completed by 600 school counselors in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and had a response rate of 42.2% with 253 participants. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. Demographic gathers personal data such as rank, gender, age, marital status, qualifications, number of school counselors, and grade level so that comparison among the respondents can be made. Practices and attitudes target key aspects to assist students with ASD and employ a six-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," and the higher the score, the more they comprehend their roles. It also addresses challenges that counselors face, including a lack of professional knowledge, resources, time, and support from teachers and parents.

The survey includes the questionnaire which may be completed within a span of 10 minutes. The survey was conducted over two months, between 2 April and 1 June 2025.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study employs several statistical analysis methods to check hypotheses and determine variable associations.

(a) Descriptive statistics -- It describes and summarizes the characteristics of the research sample, calculating such measures as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution. The statistics will indicate school counselors' performance across various variables, such as how they are recognized and how often they interact socially with students with autism. The findings will be presented in tables and graphs for easy comprehension.

(b) Correlation analysis -- Pearson correlation coefficient is used to measure the linear relationship between two continuous variables. The coefficient ranges from -1 to +1 and larger absolute values indicate the stronger the correlations. The analysis will assess the associations between variables but will not imply causality.

(c) Independent samples t-test -- This test will be employed to compare two independent groups' means to determine whether the difference between them is significant. It could, for instance, compare the frequencies of social interaction among autism students who are receiving special education with those who are not receiving special education. The t-statistics and degrees of freedom will be employed to approximate the p-value, while a p-value below 0.05 indicates a significant difference between groups.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

(a) Content validity -- It assesses if the research tool covers all aspects of the topic needed [27]. Experts in the diagnosis, treatment, education, and school counseling of autism will analyze the content of the scale based on relevance and coherence with autistic students' needs and school counselors' roles. Revisions will be made based on expert feedback to enhance validity.

(b) Internal consistency reliability -- It measures the consistency between scale items [28]. Cronbach's Alpha will be calculated using statistical software like SPSS to find internal consistency. A Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7 is acceptable, and a greater value of more than 0.8 is good. If the alpha score is low, items will be screened and may be dropped to improve consistency.

(c) Criterion validity -- It measures how closely related the research instrument is to well-established scales with reliability and validity. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient will be calculated to determine the relationship between the study scale and a criterion scale. A coefficient greater than 0.5 shows some criterion validity, while a coefficient greater than 0.7 shows good validity.

(d) Construct validity -- It is to ensure that the instrument is measuring the theoretical construction that it was intended to measure [29]. It ensures the scale measures the concept that the research is trying to investigate.

4. Results

4.1 Demographics

Counselors and assistant counselors constitute 83.8% and 16.2% of the respondents, respectively. Male and female respondents constitute 39.9% and 60.1%, respectively. Respondents aged 40 or below constitute 77.5% of the sample. Single and married respondents constitute 88.5% of the total. Over 83% of the respondents possess a bachelor's degree or above. Approximately 65% have been in the service of guiding students with autism for more than 5 years. About 80% reported having three or more counselors in their schools. Those who work in primary and secondary schools represent 43.9% and 56.1%, respectively. More than 81% work with students with autism on a daily basis.

4.2 Key Findings

There was a significant difference between assistant counselors (2.34 ± 0.693) and school counselors (2.63 ± 0.694), $t(251) = 2.416$, $p = 0.016$. There was a significant difference between assistant counselors (3.56 ± 0.808) and school counselors (3.85 ± 0.613), $t(251) = 2.676$, $p = 0.010$. There were notable variations between the 5 years or less experienced group (2.23 ± 0.788) and more than 15 years (2.55 ± 0.853), $t(149) = -2.358$, $p = 0.020$. Differences between 6-15 years and more than 15 years were not observed.

No significant differences in challenges counselors faced were observed by rank or gender, or in requiring additional assistance. Similarly, intervention effectiveness was not significantly different by rank, gender, age, marital status, or qualifications. What was significant was that perceived role value for counselors did not differ significantly across these categories.

5. Discussion

5.1 Implications for Practice

(a) Individualized counseling plans -- Counselors should develop individualized plans that are tailored to each student's academic, social, and emotional needs, checked on a regular basis to examine effectiveness.

(b) Social skills training -- Role-playing and group work can be used by the counselors to help students practice social interactions and problem-solving skills.

(c) Parental involvement -- Parents should be told about the difficulties and accomplishments of their children by counselors and invited to contribute. Parental workshops can be held for educating parents on autism and how to assist in development at home.

(d) Professional development and training -- Counselors need to look for training sessions to improve their knowledge of autism and learn best practices, for example, approaches such as social stories and visual aids.

(e) Teacher collaboration -- Teachers can be provided with autism training by counselors to promote collaboration in creating inclusive teaching methods that enable students with ASD to learn.

5.2 Challenges of School Counselor

(a) Perception of role and academic achievement -- A clear perception and commitment to their role enables counselors to better serve students academically through practices such as developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), providing academic counseling, and providing organizational skills instruction.

(b) Social interaction challenges – Counselors also face challenges such as a lack of resources, inexperience, and difficulties in handling behaviour disorders. Such challenges can weaken their ability to offer effective social skills training and peer mentoring and thus affect students' social interaction skills.

(c) Communication and coordination of overall health -- Improved communication and coordination of the teacher, parents, counselors, and other professionals lead to improved student academic functioning, socialization, and emotional adjustment in students with autism. This suggests that coordination and team efforts are essential along with effective sharing of information to assist in providing integrated interventions to support overall student development.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for Schools, Government, and Counselors

(a) Schools should enhance professional training for counselors on autism to enhance their intervention skills and knowledge.

(b) Schools must devote more resources to students with autism, including hiring specialists, creating special counseling programs, and using sensory-friendly settings.

(c) Schools must have proper communication and coordination mechanisms to foster collaboration among counselors, teachers, parents, and outside professionals in providing integrated care to ASD students.

(d) Schools should encourage counselors to apply evidence-based interventions, including positive behaviour support (PBS), cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and social skills training, in an effort to maximize intervention effects.

(e) Schools should prioritize family involvement, build healthy relationships with parents, and collaborate to improve student support.

(f) Schools need to perform rigorous research, including experimental and longitudinal designs, to test causal effects among variables and monitor students' long-term outcomes.

(g) The government must implement a uniform autism training program with important information, diagnostic criteria, and intervention strategies.

(h) Periodically, refresher courses must be held to keep the counselors up to date with the latest research and best practices. There must be an arrangement for evaluation to ensure feedback from counselors and the adaptation of training material according to their needs.

(i) The counselors should collaborate with teachers, psychologists, social workers, and other professionals to ensure sharing of data and access to resources. Additionally, enhancing cultural sensitivity training will empower the counselors to offer effective service to diverse students and families.

6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Subsequent studies on the influence of school counselors on students with ASD should concentrate on the following essential areas.

(a) More studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions for autistic students, utilizing high-quality research designs to address student variability.

(b) Studies should investigate how cultural considerations influence the needs of autistic children and the assistance offered by school counselors, considering views from various cultures.

(c) Studies are needed to evaluate the long-term consequences of school counselor support to ASD students as they progress in education, career, and social life.

(d) Research should identify the specific training and specialist knowledge that school counselors require to be able to adequately support autistic students, thus evaluating the effectiveness of different training programs.

(e) Studies need to examine the role of family involvement in supporting autistic students, evaluating the effectiveness of different measures of family engagement.

7. Conclusion

School counselors play a critical role in helping students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral development. School counselors act as a bridge for every student, maintaining students, families, teachers, and community resources beyond the school system in communication and coordination. This is a key part of ensuring students with ASD are all fully supported.

There are various school counselor-related variables that influence students with ASD's well-being and academic achievement, according to research. In the first place, the counselors' self-conceptualization of their role significantly determines the extent to which they can help the students. Secondly, the issues they encounter as professionals, the

intervention approach they embrace, and their ability for coordination and communication with other specialists significantly contribute to students with ASD's overall well-being.

The findings of current studies highlight the imperative necessity for evidence-based reform that will enhance the authority and effectiveness of school counselors. By investing in counselors' professional development and resources, schools can both improve their counselors' performance and students' academic and social achievement with ASD. The reforms are necessary to provide a more inclusive and caring learning environment to ensure that all students thrive.

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