

## Major Problems of Counselling in Ethiopian High Schools

Seleshi Zeleke\*

*This paper attempts to examine the major problems of counselling in Ethiopian high schools. It examines the training of high school counsellors and the awareness of the school community. The paper is based on some surveys conducted in Addis Ababa. In fact, the writer's experience and personal communications with high school counsellors in the regions suggest that the status of counselling is no better, if not worse, in the regions. Particularly in remote areas, the importance of counselling is not recognized at all.*

### Training of High School Counsellors

One of the objectives of the Department of Educational Psychology in Addis Ababa University is to prepare qualified persons as guidance counsellors to work in schools, colleges and universities and in non-academic institutions (Department of Educational Psychology, 1998). To achieve this particular objective, the Department offers three courses in guidance and counselling for undergraduate students. These courses are:

- Introduction to Guidance and Counselling (EPsy. 232)
- Counselling Psychology (EPsy. 331)
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One basic question that may be raised is: Is the training adequate for students to assume the responsibilities of a counsellor upon graduation? Before trying to answer this question, let us first see whether or not graduates from other departments assume the same responsibility in Ethiopian high schools.

Because of the shortage of trained personnel, the Ministry of Education could not assign counsellors for all schools. This is particularly true of schools in remote areas of the country. From the writer's experience, teachers and directors in such schools select those teachers whose teaching load is relatively small and then assign them. But the fact that these teachers have not participated at least 6 in workshops and/or seminars pertaining to counselling which can give them some insight into their roles and/or activities as counsellors make the services they provide questionable. This does not, however, mean that these teachers should not assist students at all. Rather, it means that the teachers need to have at least some knowledge regarding counselling.

On the other hand, there are schools for which counsellors have been assigned by the Ministry of Education. Most of these have been trained as general psychologists. There are, however, many counsellors who were initially trained in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology and Education at Dar Teachers' College. Understandably, the general psychologists had a better theoretical background than the others. The reason is obvious. As indicated earlier, the general psychologists took three courses in guidance and counselling. Moreover, the other courses they took (from the different fields of psychology) would have positive contribution to their counselling practice. In contrast, counsellors from other fields particularly those from the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology took no course in guidance and counselling.

Coming back to the question raised earlier, one can see that there is no much variation among the opinions of authorities in the field as to what the education of the school counsellor must be. Most of them believe that a counsellor needs to have professional training in a postgraduate program. A counsellor is expected to have a minimum of a masters degree in counselling (Moser & Moser, 1963; Shertzer & Stone, 1980).

specifically indicated that the most typical requirement for the permanent type of counselling certificate in the United States of America was thirty semester hours of specialized work at the graduate level.

In addition to sufficient university training in the field of guidance and counselling, some scholars (Stoops & Wahlquist, 1958) believe that the counsellor should possess high competency with a wide and varied background of experience. Many authorities underscored the importance of teaching experience (Moser & Moser, 1963; Shertzer & Stone, 1980; Stoops & Wahlquist, 1958). Other investigators (for example, Dunlop, 1968) also stressed the importance of on-the-job supervision particularly during the first several months of a new counsellor's practice.

In a small survey conducted by the writer in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a course during his graduate studies, high school counsellors in Addis Ababa were asked to rate their professional training as adequate or inadequate. A greater proportion (67%) of the counsellors rated their training as inadequate whereas only some (22%) counsellors believed that their training was adequate. The remaining (11%) preferred not to rate the adequacy of their training. The difference among these proportions was statistically significant ( $\chi^2=52.87$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). More specifically, a substantially higher proportion of counsellors believed that their professional training was inadequate. Given the literature and the practical experience in Ethiopia, this result is not surprising.

It is generally assumed that a Masters program in Counselling would alleviate this problem. As a matter of fact, the Department of Educational Psychology has a plan to begin a Masters program in Counselling. This program is approved by the Senate of Addis Ababa University (Department of Educational Psychology, 1998). Had it not been for shortage of professionals that could teach at the graduate level, the program would have started long ago.

Meanwhile, other things may be done to assist high school counsellors.

- (a) Concerned bodies should create a forum (such as seminars) whereby counsellors can exchange their practical experiences. Resource persons can also be invited to present some papers related to counselling in such a forum. Although there were many problems that the participants raised, the Gender-Sensitive Counselling Seminar, which was conducted by the collaborative efforts of the Department of Educational Psychology and the Ministry of Education for about a month in the summer of 1999 was a good beginning in this regard.
- (b) A better working environment needs to be created in the schools that encourages counsellors to conduct small-scale research so as to enrich the knowledge they gained from their professional training rather than depend entirely on it.

### **The School Community's Awareness**

Primarily students should be aware of the existence of a counselling unit in their schools. Otherwise, no one would expect them to come to the counsellor's office in search of some assistance. Nevertheless, this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to search for counselling service. Thus, in addition to being aware of the existence of the unit, students should also be aware of the importance or values of counselling. In other words, students should recognize the fact that the counsellor is there to help them and that he/she can help them.

Likewise, teachers and the administrative staff should recognize the role of counselling in the teaching-learning process. It is generally believed that without the collaborative effort of the school community as a whole, counsellors could not play a significant role in schools. Especially the teacher, although not trained in counselling, is often a key person in

discovering the problem and needs of students. Relaying this information on to the counsellor, the teacher may be of real help to the student.

Unfortunately, however, studies seem to indicate that the public is not fully aware of the values of counselling. Nwagwu (1976), for instance, conducted a study on African students and concluded that the area of guidance and counselling has been to a great extent neglected in school practice and administration throughout the continent. The study further disclosed that from the five people (parents, friends, relatives, classmates, and teachers) consulted by students on their educational and vocational future, the teachers were the least frequently consulted. The latter result implies that either there were no counsellors in schools or they were not visited by students. Any way the result shows that counselling is not recognized by students or the public at large.

Another recent survey (Mpofu, Zindi, Oakland, & Peresuh, 1997) examined the public image of school psychology in twelve east and southern African countries including Ethiopia. According to the investigators, the public image was reported to be low. Reasons given for the poor public image include the limited services offered by school psychologists, public adherence to traditional beliefs, and professional complacency (i.e., low effort on the part of professionals and the lack of a body of research on which to base practice).

Likewise, the public image of counselling seems to be poor in Ethiopia. In the above mentioned survey, the majority of school counsellors in Addis Ababa judged students as conscious enough to seek assistance from counsellors. Counsellors give orientations for new comers at the beginning of each academic year. During the orientations, counsellors would also make students aware of the existence of a counselling unit in their respective schools and that students can use them. Nonetheless, most students do not use the services.

Another small survey (Seleshi, 1996) revealed that high school students' attitudes toward counselling is of mixed nature. Some recognize the value of counselling and thus have positive attitudes. These students frequently come to the counsellor willingly whenever they feel the need for help. In contrast, most students do not seem to recognize the values of counselling. Obviously, these students would not come to the counsellor. One possible explanation for the students reluctance is that students do not feel at ease to tell others about their problems for fear of being exposed.

On the other hand, most school principals do not give recognition to the role of counselling in the teaching - learning process. For example, some principals and their assistants appear to force school counsellors to perform other tasks in the school (Seleshi, 1996). In general, counsellors may perform activities other than counselling so far as these activities are compatible with their primary activity counselling. It must be noted, however, that school counsellors should not be forced to assume the responsibilities of a disciplinarian. This is because the task is not compatible with counselling. Thus, a school counsellor should never act as a disciplinarian. Such an argument is also supported by other authorities in the field (for example, Hamblin, 1986).

Unlike the attitude and behavior of school principals, attitudes of teachers do not seem to be uniform (Seleshi, 1996). Some have positive attitudes toward counselling. They also appreciate the activities of the counsellor. This group of teachers tend to work together with the school counsellor. Many teachers, however, do not recognize the importance of counselling at all. It is obvious that unless the counsellor performs his/her activities in cooperation with teachers, he/she cannot be successful (or effective) in his endeavors.

In summary, students, teachers, and principals do not appear to be fully aware of the values of counselling. Essentially, change in attitudes toward counselling on the part of the

school community is desirable. A significant role should be played by counsellors themselves in changing attitudes of the school community. Besides, inviting school principals and teachers to participate in seminars might give them some insight into the values of counselling.

### **Other Concerns**

Most counselling theories stress the relationship between the counsellor and the client as the common ground for the helping process. In other words, most theories underline the fact that the relationship (or rapport) is a necessary condition for bringing about a change in the client. According to Shertzer and Stone (1980), rapport is characterized by pleasantness, confidence, cooperation, sincerity, and interest.

To develop such a relationship, the counsellor must have his own office. The most important prerequisite of the counsellor's office is privacy. Counselees desire to have privacy (both auditory and visual) from peers, teachers, and others when they enter into a counselling relationship. Research findings indicate that reduced privacy decreases client self-disclosure (Shertzer & Stone, 1980). Thus, to develop a good counselling relationship, it is essential to ensure the client's privacy.

In Ethiopian high schools, counselling is not considered as a primarily useful service that facilitates the teaching-learning process. As a result, in most schools, a small office is assigned to two or more counsellors. This is particularly true for high schools in Addis Ababa and some major cities of the country. In some remote areas no office is assigned to counsellors. Even if there is a small office, sometimes the office serves two counsellors at the same time. Using such an office, the counsellor cannot ensure the client's privacy.



One other assumption in counselling is that the counsellor is an expert with knowledge and experience superior to those of the client. But we know also that knowledge and experience are not static. This implies that the counsellor should develop his theoretical knowledge through research and actual experience. He/she should also make himself/ herself familiar with new developments in the field. Unfortunately, in our country one can easily observe that there is a serious shortage of books and reference materials in the field. To make things worse, even if counsellors want to conduct some surveys and or small-scale research, they are not encouraged by the school's administrative staff. Personal communication with counsellors in the regions also indicates that the administrators do not even make stationery available to counsellors let alone fund small surveys the counsellors may want to conduct.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Generally, the training of high school counsellors does not seem to be adequate. As indicated earlier, most counsellors agreed with this point. Strictly speaking, the Department of Educational Psychology trains students in the field of general psychology, not in the field of counselling. One possible solution is to begin the Masters program in Counselling. Once again, this program has not yet started due to shortage of instructors in the area. The remaining alternatives, therefore, are conducting continuous seminars and preparing and distributing manuals and other useful materials for high school counsellors.

Another major task of counsellors and other concerned officials is that of sensitizing the school community. Some surveys revealed that the school community (including students, teachers, and the administrative staff) does not recognize the value of counselling. Counsellors must be the ones who should play the leading role in sensitizing the school community. In fact, in some schools where counsellors are

very close to students and teachers, the school community seems to be well aware of the importance of counselling.

Along with sensitising the school community, there is a need to have more counsellors in each school. Had it not been for lack of awareness on students' part, the work of counsellors particularly those in Addis Ababa high schools could have been unmanageable. Thus, it is necessary that concerned bodies recognize the need for more counsellors. Finally, it is essential that the counsellor works in close collaboration with teachers and the administrative staff. A counsellor can only be effective if he/she can work in collaboration with teachers and the administrative staff.

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