



Avoidance Factors in Seeking Counselling Help by High School Students in Bhutan

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Abstract

Adolescents are vulnerable to arrays of physical and mental problems, and some of them can have lasting consequences in their life. Embracing these concerns, Bhutan started counselling services in schools to curtail them as students inevitably confront them. Though schools hold a significant pool of adolescents and juveniles with various problems, many students do not seek counselling. Moreover, there is a scarcity of studies to comprehend the avoidance factors in seeking counselling by students in Bhutan. Thus, factors for not availing counselling by high school students were explored in this study. Total of 248 high school students was sampled using Yamane's formula and proportionate random sampling. Self-administered interview schedules were employed to collect data in September 2018 in Tendruk Central School, Samtse, Bhutan. Students experienced problems, including physical health (37.90%), mental health (37.50%), and academic (37.10%). Although more than half (53.63%) of the students showed a high interest in seeking counselling, only 17.34% of the students had received counselling. The top three avoidance factors were inadequate counselling rooms (1), feeling better about seeking help from a spiritual person rather than a school counsellor (2), and the fears of losing confidentiality by speaking to the counsellor (3). Students did not seek counselling services due to confidentiality fear. Therefore, the current results show that schools with similar settings need to ensure the availability and accessibility of secure counselling rooms. Counsellors further need to advocate students about counselling ethics and processes to gain their trust.

Keywords: Adolescent, Avoidance Factors, Help-Seeking

Introduction

Adolescents are susceptible to encounter various problems in their shift to adulthood. Some of these problems can have enduring consequences in their life (Barker, 2007). According to previous studies in Bhutan (Dorji & Choden, 2005; Lorelle & Guth, 2013; Dendup, 2016), adolescents' problems are diverse, including crime, substance abuse, mental disorders, divorce of parents, incarceration of parents, physical abuse, anger issues, low self-esteem, depression, and suicide. One approach to address these complications is by reinforcing vibrant counselling. Envisioning benefits of counselling, Bhutan started a counselling program in recent decades by institutionalizing full-time counsellors in schools. The counselling unit in Tendruk Central School (TCS) rendered its services over four years to diverse adolescents' problems. However, as reported in other studies (Zachrisson, Rödje, & Mykletun, 2006; Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Essau, 2005), most of the students do not seek counselling from the school counselling unit.

Schools need to inspire students to obtain counselling when they are in trouble and misery. Thus, inquiry on where, why, and how adolescents seek help (finding the sources and the nature of help available to them) is essential (Barker, 2007). However, there is a dearth of research on why students do not seek counselling in Bhutan. Students may avoid counselling for several reasons, including social stigma, confidentiality concern, lack of trust, treatment fear, problem denial, feeling of shame, negative attitude, low motivation, lack of knowledge about counselling, self-reliance, spiritual belief, inaccessibility and unavailability of counselling



service, and other practical barriers (Luu, Leung, & Nash, 2009; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Leavey, Rothi, & Paul, 2011; Ali, Farrer, Fassnacht, Gulliver, Bauer, & Griffiths, 2017; Chen & Kok, 2017).

Therefore, avoidance factors to seek counselling by high school students in TCS were identified in this study. Common problems faced by the students, the interest levels to seek counselling, and the prevalence of counselling seekers are covered in this study to understand the subject deeply. Findings of this study will guide TCS and other schools having similar settings to provide better counselling services to high school students.

Methods and Materials

The exploratory nature of this study demanded a cross-sectional research design. As shown in equation 1, this study determined the sample size using Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1967):

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} \quad (1)$$

Where; n = least sample required,

N = population, and

e = margin of error

The target population was 655 high school students (from class nine to twelve) in TCS, and the margin of error used was 5%. Thus, 248 was the least sample size needed in the study. The sampling method involved proportionate random selection. Table 1 presents the total students in each class category and the number of students sampled, respectively.

Table 1 Students Selected Using a Proportionate Random Sampling

Class Category	Males	Females	Total Students	Sample
Class Nine	78	119	197	75
Class Ten	95	117	212	80
Class Eleven	74	59	133	50
Class Twelve	74	39	113	43
Total	321	334	655	248

This study collected data using self-administered interview schedules. Questionnaire was partially adopted from previous studies, including, Luu et al. (2009); Gulliver et al. (2010); Leavey et al. (2011); Ali et al. (2017); and Chen & Kok (2017), with minor changes to fit the context of Bhutan. To ensure the reliability and validity of the interview schedule, researchers pre-tested it with ten students of TCS (not included in the sample) before the actual survey. Students completed all the questions with no difficulty indicating that the instrument was user-friendly.

Before the commencement of the data collection, researchers applied for administrative approval from the administration of TCS. Upon approval, the researchers distributed the interview schedules to students and explained to them the nature and objective of the study. Students self-administered questionnaires in the absence of any staff, including teachers and the counsellor. Students' identities were neither collected on the questionnaire nor reported in any part of the report to ensure the confidentiality of students. Additionally, researchers obtained verbal consents from the students before the data collection. Although researchers informed



them that they could rebuff their partaking if they were not keen to be part of the survey, none of the students withdrew their participation. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 19 was employed to compute descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentages.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Students

Table 2 shows the detailed profiles of the sampled students. The ages of the students were between 13 and 24 years. The majority (42.34%) of students were between the ages of 17 to 18 years, followed by 15 to 16 years (28.23%) and 19 to 20 years (22.98%). The mean age of students was 17 years with a standard deviation of 1.78, implying that most of the high school students were teenagers. There were more females than males with 50.81% and 49.19%, respectively. Of the three broad ethnic groups, the majority (62.10%) of the students were Lhotshampa.

Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Students

Variables	Categories	Number	Percentage
Age	13 to 14	6	2.42
	15 to 16	70	28.23
	17 to 18	105	42.34
	19 to 20	57	22.98
	21 to 22	7	2.82
	23 to 24	3	1.21
Gender	Male	122	49.19
	Female	126	50.81
Ethnic Groups	Lhotshampa	154	62.10
	Sharchopa	38	15.32
	Ngalop	38	15.32
	Others	18	7.26

Problems, Levels of Interest, and Prevalence of Counselling Seekers

Table 3 presents the problems confronted by high school students. Problems are arranged in descending order from the most common to the least common among the high school students. The top four problems were physical health (37.90%), mental health (37.50%), academic issues (37.10%), and family problems (23.79%). There are also sizeable students who experienced problems related to substance abuse. However, as desirable, none of the students reported the suicidal ideation at the time of the survey.

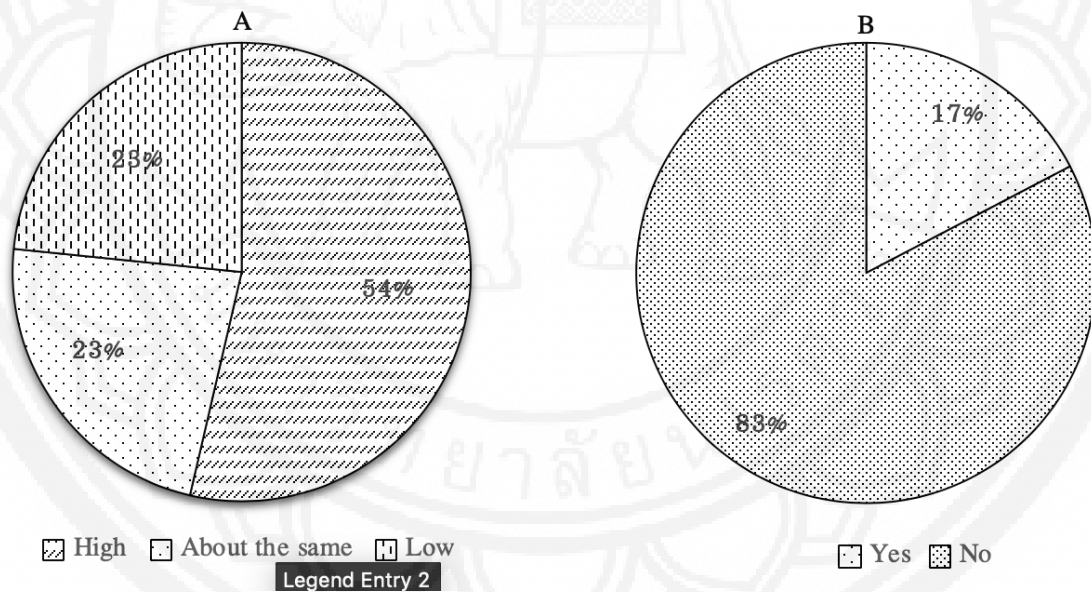
Table 3 Problems, Levels of Interest, and Numbers of Counselling Seekers

Problems Faced by Students in the Past	Number	Percentage
Physical Health	94	37.90
Mental Health	93	37.50
Academic Issues	92	37.10
Family Issues	59	23.79
Fights	27	10.89
Substance Abuse	25	10.08

**Table 3** (Cont.)

Problems Faced by Students in the Past	Number	Percentage
Absenteeism	18	7.26
Bullying	13	5.24
Relationships	7	2.82
Seizures	4	1.61
Suicidal Ideations	0	0.00

Figure 1 (A) shows the level of interest among high school students to seek counselling. The level of interest refers to the willingness of students to seek counselling during their tough times, including mental illness, discipline, academics, family, and substance abuse. More than half of the sample (53.63%) showed an elevated level of interest to obtain counselling services, while 46.37% of the students reported the same or low level of interest. This result confirms that most students were looking forward to receiving counselling services from the school. As shown in Figure 1 (B), this study also determined the prevalence of counselling seekers. Only 17.34% of the students reported receiving counselling services in the past 12 months. This finding suggests that the majority (82.66%) of students did not receive counselling from the school counselling unit. Therefore, it is crucial for all stakeholders to comprehend why students are not coming forward to get counselling help. The subsequent section identified the avoidance factors linked to seeking counselling by the students.

**Figure 1** Level of Interest to Seek Counselling (A) and Prevalence of Counselling Seekers (B)

Avoidance Factors in Seeking Counselling among Students

Figure 2 presents the avoidance factors based on responses collected from high school students. Avoidance factors are arranged in ascending order by the percentage of students who reported that these factors prevented them from seeking counselling during their hard times. This study predetermined nine avoidance factors based on previous studies. Among others, see Gulliver et al. (2010); Ali et al. (2017); and Chen & Kok (2017). The top three avoidance factors were lack of adequate counselling rooms (1), better to seek help from a spiritual person (2), and the counsellor will break the confidentiality (3) with 29.44%, 17.74%, and 15.73%,

respectively. However, the gender of counsellor and workload of counsellor prevented only a few students with 7.66% and 4.44%, respectively. Refer to Figure 2 for the detail statistics on avoidance factors in seeking counselling among high school students. The discussion section further presents the interpretation and elaboration of these avoidance factors.

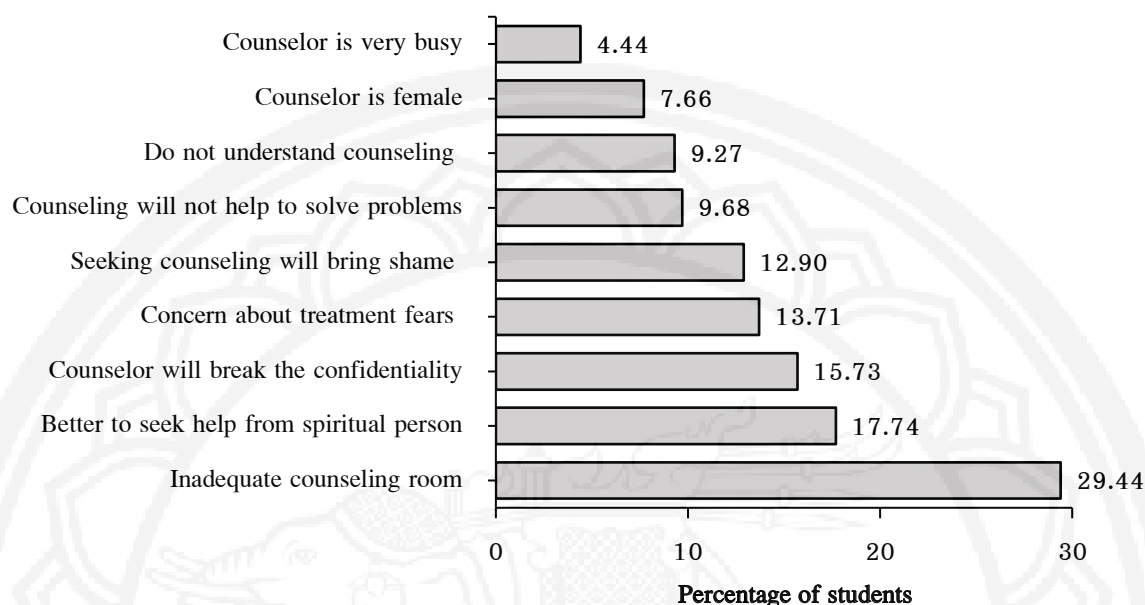


Figure 2 Avoidance Factors among Students in Seeking Counselling

Discussion

This study attempted to identify the factors that impeded high school students to seek counselling in Bhutan. Common problems, interest to seek counselling, and the prevalence of counselling seekers were also explored to gain deeper insights on the subject matter. The sample included students from Classes Nine to Twelve as they tally with the levelling of high school students. The sample comprised almost equal males (49.19%) and females (50.81%). The Lhotsampa group (62.10%) outnumbered other ethnic groups as they inhabit most of the communities in Southern Bhutan.

The students reported having encountered 11 predetermined problems. As shown in Table 3, the four principal problems were physical health (37.90%), mental health (37.50%), academic issues (37.10%), and family issues (23.79%). This result also suggests that problems related to students, academics, and the family were dominant among the high school students. In the same manner, several previous studies in Bhutan, including Dorji & Choden (2005); Lorelle & Guth (2013); and Dendup (2016), also reported the prevalence of these problems. This finding implies that high schools having similar socio-economic contexts need to emphasis on finding appropriate preventions and treatments measures for these problems.

This study further examined the level of interest among high school students to seek counselling during rough circumstances of their life. The students declared their level of interest on three-point Likert scales as 1 (Low), 2 (About the same), and 3 (High). The result shows that the majority (53.63%) of the students had a higher level of interest, while 46.37% of students accounted for a combination of the low and the same level of interest



to seek counselling. Therefore, this finding indicates that, in general sizeable, portion of students are willing to seek counselling services if school administration creates a conducive environment for the counselling.

The two preceding paragraphs articulated that the students encountered several problems, and they were interested in receiving counselling. However, the prevalence of counselling seekers was only 17.34% indicating that 82.66% of the students did not receive counselling. This implies that very few high school students did receive counselling services from the school counselling unit. Rickwood et al. (2007) also reported evidence that a very few students came forward to receiving counselling. Other studies also support the current finding; for example, only 34% of Norwegian adolescents (Zachrisson et al., 2006) and 18.2% of German adolescents (Essau, 2005) received counselling during their tough times. Therefore, the stakeholders need to understand factors hindering counselling seeking among the high school students. Such studies will help stakeholders to improve students' counselling seeking behaviour. Therefore, as presented in Figure 1, this study explored the avoidance factors.

Prior to the discussion on avoidance factors, a detail discussion on the leading problems among high school students is presented in the following few paragraphs. Lack of adequate counselling rooms prevented 29.44% of students from getting counselling. For instance, counselling room of TCS was located on the upper floor of the library. Librarians and students in the library see the clients who visit the counselling room. Various activities in the library also disturb the counselling sessions. This research finding highlights the importance of having a convenient counselling room. A study supported this finding that a counselling room with minimal privacy decreases clients' self-disclosure (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Another study further acknowledged the need for a quiet space for successful counselling as well (Pearson & Wilson, 2012). Thus, the school should set up a separate and secure counselling room—friendly enough to enable students to communicate their real complications.

Students also thought that it was better to seek counselling from a spiritual person. About 18% (17.74%) of students avoided seeking counselling because of this reason. This factor is correct as the Bhutanese believe that the spiritual forces cause illness. Bhutanese perform rituals to negotiate with spirits and local deities (Calabrese & Dorji, 2014). Thus, Bhutanese students prefer a religious person for counselling and treatment. A religious person implies either a monk or a local shaman. A study also agreed that religious identity and spiritual tradition influence the individual's counselling seeking behaviour (Plunkett, 2009). Students preferring other counselling providers (e.g. a spiritual person) also shows their weak trust and confidence in the professionalism of individual counsellor. Counsellors should attend refresher courses and training to maintain their credibility. While spiritual treatments are equally important, schools should also educate students on the benefits of counselling from professional counsellors.

Some students (15.73%) avoided counselling out of fear of breaking confidentiality by the counsellors. A study also agreed that students' perceptions of the qualities of counsellors, including the breach of confidentiality, deter the seeking of help (Helms, 2003). Similarly, a study reported that confidentiality was an essential concern for adolescents in seeking counselling (Sheffield, Fiorenza, & Sofronoff, 2004).

Confidentiality issue is due to treatment fears or after treatment fears. For example, people avoid counselling if they perceive that the counsellor will breach confidentiality (Gulliver et al., 2010). Sources of treatment fears are diverse, including embarrassment, fear of change, stereotypes, and stigma (Leavey et al., 2011; Chen & Kok, 2017). In agreement with the current findings, other studies have also identified confidentiality and trust as the barrier to seeking counselling among young people (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005;



Rickwood et al., 2007). Breaking confidentiality further causes shame to an individual and his or her family. This study also noted that students avoided counselling because of fear and shame involved in the treatment with their percentages of 13.71% and 12.90%, respectively. Some students consider that counselling is not confidential. Thus, counsellors should maintain confidentiality and rule it clear that it is an inevitable prerequisite of the counselling process. The school should also create vivid awareness that the counselling process is ethically confidential.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Despite diverse problems and elevated level of interest to seek counselling, only 17.34% of the students received counselling in the past 12 months. Therefore, this study identified the avoidance factors in seeking counselling by high school students. The top three avoidance factors were a poor counselling room, feeling better to get help from a spiritual person, and the fear of the counsellor breaking the confidentiality. The results indicate that confidentiality matters a lot for the high school students in seeking counselling. From these findings, this study recommends that high schools should set up a safe counselling room. Safe counselling room means any dedicated room that secures enough for students to communicate their problems in confidence. Counsellors should also make the students aware of confidentiality in the counselling process. School administration, along with counsellor, should convince students that counselling unit can manage some of their problems. Students experience problems related to their health (mental and physical), academic, and family matters; thus, counsellors as a focal person need to put extra effort in bringing students, teachers, and family to deliver effective counselling services. Findings of this study can apply only to high school students having a comparable situation like TCS. Therefore, future research in schools having different environmental settings and other groups of students (e.g. primary or college students) will provide deeper insights into why students avoid seeking counselling services.

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