GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN SCHOOLS IN KENYA: PRINCIPALS' USE OF COUNSELLING SKILLS

Geoffrey Wango

Abstract

Child or student counselling is a process in which the counsellor attempts to understand and help clarify those feelings in a child or student that may, and can, impede growth, maturation and overall well-being. The counsellor in the school has to regularly confront sensitive issues in the lives of the pupil or student, families and members of teaching and support staff. Issues include love relationships, depression, suicidal attempts, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual activity, parent-child relationships and self-injurious behaviours. The manner in which these issues are handled has profound effects on the well-being of pupils and students, their relationship with teachers and family, the school’s relationships with families, school culture, and on learning and general achievement. It must be emphasized that the school principal as chief executive bears the ultimate responsibility for all school programmes — including the school guidance and counselling programme. To fulfil the academic and other responsibilities, principals must understand counselling programmes and procedures, and work with the counsellor in the school to ensure they maximally benefit pupils and students within their jurisdiction. In particular, principals and counsellors must maintain amicable relationships with pupils and students, teachers, parents and support staff. Principals must consult with the counsellor about the handling of cases which present particular difficulties and others that touch upon the school’s interests, including acute cases of emotional disturbance, illness, indiscipline, crime, violence and drug abuse. This paper advances that while both the principal and counsellor require training in counselling, principals should make use of counselling skills to function within counselling professional, ethical and legal guidelines.

Keywords: School guidance and counselling, Principals, Student counselling, Counselling skills

The Principal in the School

School effectiveness, through effective school leadership, must go beyond administration and management to bring about desirable positive changes (Pashiardis, Thody, Papanauoum & Johansson, 2003). Principals as school leaders must offer more than the traditional role of administration and management, shaping the organizational conditions for successful and sustained implementation of school programmes and best practices (Diebold, Miller, Gensheimer, Mondschein & Ohmart, 2000; Davies, 2007; Jackson 2007; Wango, 2009). This includes astute management of school resources (Teachers Service Commission, 2015a, 2015b; Wango & Gatere, 2012) to incorporate all programmes such as guidance and counselling.

The provision of counselling psychological services has steadily increased in the world and in Kenya (McLeod, 2012; Wango, 2015), and guidance and counselling services have been extended to schools (Republic of Kenya, 1964, 1976, 1981, 1999, 2009, 2012). Part of the effectiveness of the counselling programme is to amass the synergy among teaching and support staff, parents and students
Wango & Mungai, 2007; Wango, Kimani, Osaka, Githinji & Amayo, 2015). Hence principals' involvement in the programme is critically essential.

Davies and Davies (2006) and Lambert (2007) outline some of the characteristics of effective principals, including building partnerships with various stakeholders in education and the community. These include: creating collaborative networks and alliances, providing direction, consulting widely with heads of departments and staff, empowering and mobilising others, understanding the complexities of education and schooling, and demonstrating effective financial management, integrity and accountability (Teachers Service Commission, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Wango & Gatere, 2012). It also includes ultimately translating strategy into school achievement through shared vision, evident in strategic planning. Strategic planning demands enhanced communication that can be improved through use of counselling skills.

School development is about clarity of purpose, and linked to the rationale is the high expectations hinged on pupil and student achievement. Yet achievement in learning is also related to growth and development of the learner. In that case, the school must address various facets of learner development that include the cognitive, the moral, the emotional and the spiritual. It is important to note that various pupils and students may also be emotionally in turmoil as they come to and/or while in school, and the school must attend to the guidance of all pupils and students as well as provide assistance to certain learners who may require it at their point of need. Guidance and counselling assists persons to deal with aspects of everyday living, and others in situational difficulty, to deal with various challenges of their life. The principal of a school is responsible for all school programmes (Teachers Service Commission, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Wango, 2007) including the guidance and counselling of pupils and students. He/she in turn assigns the responsibility to a conscientious teacher.

School Issues and Rationale for Guidance and Counselling


The whole school approach to guidance and counselling provision is viewed as a whole school responsibility (Hearne & Galvin, 2015) rather than the domain of the teacher counsellor (Republic of Kenya, 1988b, 1999, 2005b). This is because schools have to reckon with emerging issues such as gender, inclusivity, special populations, HIV and AIDS, parental issues, pastoral and religious support, cult and other forms of worship (Republic of Kenya, 1995), and financial support among others. The synergy in the whole school framework is expected to collaboratively develop school guidance and counselling programmes to support the needs of all pupils and students (Republic of Kenya, 1999; Wango & Mungai, 2007; Wango et al. 2005).

The central aim of a whole school approach to guidance and counselling is to support a student's personal, social, emotional, vocational and educational development (Republic of Kenya, 1988, 1999) including enhanced discipline (Republic of Kenya, 1991). A number of concerns have been articulated by principals, regular teachers and counsellors in relation to school guidance and counselling in a newly emerging landscape in Kenya and the world. The increased pressure on schools
to deliver a diversified academic and social care role is obviously insufficient (Republic of Kenya, 1991; Wango, 2003, 2006, 2015) and will require that the whole school guidance and counselling programme be more prolific (Republic of Kenya, 2012, 2013) especially by involving the regular teachers (Hearne & Galvin, 2015). Yet the role of the principal or head teacher in a whole school approach to guidance and counselling in Kenya has received very little attention (Republic of Kenya, 1999; Wango, 2003, 2006). It is the argument of this paper that principals should acquire prerequisite counselling skills.

**Pupils and Student Needs, Parental and Social Issues and Principal Involvement**

The principal is a major link between the school and the community. There must be formal and effective collaboration between guidance and counselling services, school management, the principal, counsellor (teacher counsellor or counsellor in the school), regular teachers, parents, resource persons, pupils and students. Despite a felt need for helping pupils and students in situational difficulty (Republic of Kenya, 1964, 1976), a major problem in schools is presented by for example parents whose values are at odds with the notion of counselling. Other parents may object to specific aspects of the counselling services rendered to the child. Resources including personnel (counsellor and resource persons) and a counselling room too must be allocated for the programme. Other helping cases may require referral. The school management and principal must take in these and other concerns in policy, strategic development and the planning of the counselling programme.

It is appropriate for a school to initiate a counselling relationship with a pupil or student with or without the prior permission of a parent. In the first instance, the school must make counselling a part of the school's curriculum and the services rendered by the counsellor are therefore part of their normal duties (Wango & Mungai, 2007). Parents are duly informed of this upon admission of the pupil or student in the school. The school could also prepare a permission slip and ask all parents to sign authorizing the counsellor to work with their child as part of the school's regular counselling program. Subsequently, description of the school's counselling policies and procedures should be made available in handouts, handbooks and at parent orientation meetings. This precaution protects typical school counselling services in that they are considered an integral part of the school. In the second instance, sensitive issues and extraneous activities such as arranging for a student's counselling for child or drug abuse rehabilitation requires that the school seeks parental consent. Counselling of the future must be conducted by professional practitioners (Wango, 2015) and adhere to a code of proficient conduct (Bond, 2000). The principal links with the parent and hence there must be collaboration in this noble endeavour. These matters are also delicate and must be handled skilfully.

It is important to note that counselling approaches may at times conflict with parental values. For example, parents or family are likely to disapprove of a counsellor's empathetic listening to a student's anxiety about sexual activity, sexual orientation (including homosexuality and lesbianism), abortion, birth control information, lack of interest in academics, religious and/or spiritual choices, and use of contraceptives. Yet these and others are issues of pertinent concern to the client (Wango, 2015). In such cases, the parent can demand the termination of a counselling relationship with their child, and the counsellor would have no choice but to comply. This is despite the conviction that termination is contrary to the student's best interest. However, the counsellor is ethically bound in these and other such circumstances to effectively assist the client as their primary concern (Wango, 2015) while at the same time informing the parent of the anticipated consequences of their decision for the child.
Counselling and Use of Counselling Skills

Pupils and students in school face various challenges. These include the academic demands to perform well, peer pressure, finances, attempts to identify one-self — including self-esteem — and maintaining personal relationship with peers, teachers, parents and other siblings. Difficulties especially in the school tender years can have profound effects on the child's experience, such as academic performance, emotional development, ability to progress, decision to remain in school, personal relations and indulgence in deviances such as taking tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. A child's overall psychological well-being is pertinent to their health. Childhood and adolescence are turbulent times, during which many of the major changes in human growth and development as well as dilemmas may be greatly experienced. The ability to equip pupils and students with coping strategies impacts on their reaction when faced with personal difficulties in the early and later stages of life. Schools in turn provide a range of problem-focused social support services to help pupils and students who may be experiencing personal difficulties. Many pupils and students may attempt to cope with their problems by seeking support from teachers, parents and other members of society. Guidance and counselling services provided by schools offer crucial support in the form of, for example, group guidance, career guidance, counselling, and academic support. The type of support provided by schools could be appropriately deemed as problem-focused social support (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). This is because it offers help and advice, as well as a range of solutions to the numerous issues that pupils and students face in school and in their immediate future.

Pupils and students are likely to be more psychologically comfortable and persist in institutions where a range of support services are available (Tinto, 2003). Pupils and students will also achieve more in school and in life if provided with the necessary support services to deal with various predicaments. However, it is acceptable to note that individual ways of coping with issues is also evident. Counselling support services can be used by academics, teachers and counsellors to assist pupils and students during their studies and in school, such as in identifying ways to improve their studies, career identification and placement (Republic of Kenya, 2009), and dealing with emotions and psychological disturbance such as trauma.

Pupils and students' problem-coping effectiveness is related to their psychological wellbeing (Lopez, Maurico, Gormley, Simko, & Berger, 2001; Nezu & Ronan, 1985). Heppner and Krauskopf (1987) define problem-coping as the regulation of affective, behavioural and cognitive responses. These responses may be successful or unsuccessful, conscious or unconscious, and involve approaching or avoiding the problem. This is what happens to children and young adolescents who may be disillusioned and in crises. Adolescence coping is evident in the reactive and suppressive styles associated with reports of depression and trait anxiety, sometimes leading to suicide and other self-injurious behaviour that if unchecked can lead to more psychological symptoms and stress (Heppner, Cook, Wright & Johnson, 1995; Chang, Sanna, Riley, Thomburg, Zumberg & Edwards, 2007). The reflective style is associated with fewer psychological symptoms and less stress (Chang et al., 2007; Nezu & Ronan, 1985)) and hence the need for school counsellors as well as principals of schools to have the ability to assist pupils and students in certain aspects.

Neville, Heppner and Wang (1997) found that progress in problem resolution was negatively related to general stress. Overall, ineffective problem-coping styles often obvious in young people, and the experience of stress, appear to render pupils and students more vulnerable to experiencing psychological distress (Nezu & Ronan, 1985). This is why this paper argues on the need for principals
of schools to adopt the use of counselling skills to enable resolve various issues — especially challenges facing young people in school.

There is a distinction between formal counselling and use of counselling skills (McLeod, 2003). Counselling is a process in which a practitioner with knowledge and skills is involved in a formal, assisting relationship with a client who is in situational difficulty. Counselling skills are a collection of techniques and strategies that are used to enhance communication in the counselling process and relationship, which skills can greatly be extended in other contexts. McLeod (2003) points out the fact that help in the form of counselling is offered in many relationship contexts such as principal and student and/or member of staff (teaching or support staff), in which the focus is on other, non-counselling issues. As argued by Wango and Mungai (2007) and Wango (2006, 2015) the school context is highly unique, and counselling as well as use of counselling should be highly considered. Students in particular are likely to share their concerns — including fears, frustrations, disappointments, anxieties and worries — with a person they can easily identify with, including the teacher and of course the school principal. The principal may need to find out why a student is performing poorly or is accused of misconduct, only to find that they are providing emotional support. Similarly, the extension of using counselling skills among the population increases the number of people in the population receiving necessary help in times of need (Kirkwood, 2000; McLeod, 2003). This includes para-professionals such as health/social workers and other professionals (Wango, 2015). It should be noted that the study carried out by Kirkwood (2000) was in a community where counselling had been recently introduced; hence, the school context and Kenya are significant.

The distinction between counselling and use of counselling skills is important because it reserves the profession of 'counselling' (and therapy or 'psychotherapy') for specific situations where there is a formal counselling contract (Bond, 1989; McLeod, 2003; Wango, 2015). This is also important in the school context, so that both principals and counsellors understand that the counselling has no other role in relation to the client. For example, the principal and/or teacher is not disciplining the student or admonishing them. It must be accepted that there are several situations where it is difficult to draw a line between counselling and the use of counselling skills, like in the school where the teacher/principal is also a surrogate parent, guardian and of course teacher. Notwithstanding, the use of counselling skills includes professionalism in counselling ethics, such as confidentiality of information received in the context of counselling and the limits to confidentiality. This is why training in counselling is a major requirement for professional competence and enhanced performance.

The School Counsellor: Counsellor in the School

It is important that the school delineates the role of the counsellor in the school. This is because counsellors often suffer from role ambiguity that leads to lack of clarity about their appropriate function in the school. This further creates a role conflict with other personnel such as the deputy principal or senior teacher often in charge of school discipline, and others such as the careers teacher, school nurse, teacher in charge of boarding and school chaplain. Counsellors may also be pressurised to perform tasks they perceive as inappropriate to their roles, including extraneous responsibilities and expectations such as sitting in discipline meetings. Principals of schools can effectively assign clear roles and responsibilities to the counsellor based on their expectations of the school counselling programme.

O'Bryant (1991) and Wango and Mungai (2007) describe the school counsellor's fundamental work activities as follows:
a) **Individual counselling**: The counsellor works privately with an individual student. This is usually on one or more aspects such as problem solving, decision making, career aspirations and discovering personal meaning related to learning and development.

b) **Group guidance**: The counsellor works with larger groups of students or classes on academic, career or life skills promotion.

c) **Group counselling**: The counsellor works with a small group of students on personal or academic issues.

d) **Consultation**: The counsellor assists peer counsellors, teachers, support staff, parents, chaplain and other adults become more effective at working with students.

e) **Coordination**: The counsellor manages services such as parent or community meetings, for example. These meetings indirectly address the counselling needs of diverse students.

These tasks are consistent with the guidelines set forth for heads of department in schools (Teachers Service Commission, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Wango, 2009) and aligned to quality assurance in the provision of guidance and counselling in institutions (Republic of Kenya, 2013; Simon, 2014; Wango, 2015).

An emergent theme in recent literature is the need for counsellors to focus more effort on reaching all students (through group activities) rather than just a few (though individual sessions in one-on-one settings are time-consuming). This is because the teacher has several pupils or students, depending on the size of the school. Group guidance and group counselling approaches may tend to be more comprehensive, developmental, or preventive than curative. Above all, the counsellor must remember that each individual is different. Brief counselling has also featured prominently in this respect, to cope with the large number of clients in schools. These trends may cause counsellors to direct more of their attention to group guidance, consultation, and coordination and less to individual counselling.

The school principal must therefore collaborate with the counsellor in the school in order to develop a more comprehensive school counselling programme (Wango & Mungai, 2007). A clear role delineation of the counsellor may relieve stress, promote mutual understanding of priorities, and serve as the basis for occasional future discussions to promote student wellbeing. A well designed programme that has the support of the principal and school management (Republic of Kenya, 2012) will also provide a rational basis for evaluation of the counselling programme and clarify for the principal the areas of the programme most in need of support and assistance.

Most principals are poorly prepared to deal with the unusually complex and ambiguous problems likely to arise in connection with school counselling programmes such as discipline and confidentiality of information received in counselling (Republic of Kenya, 1991, 1995, 1999; Wango, 2003). Counsellors themselves are often baffled by the profession's intricate ethical and legal requirements. This includes lack of formal training of many counsellors including in the school (Wango, 2006, 2015). Principals in turn are unlikely to offer the necessary support and supervision of the programme. It is therefore important that they have access to information about basic administrative issues in school counselling.
Clarifying the Counselling Roles

Principals, counsellors (school counsellor or counsellor in the school) and 'regular teachers' share the basic goals of creating a productive school culture and helping individual pupils and students grow in a safe, secure and enabling environment so as to reach their potential. The term 'regular teachers' was coined by Hargreaves (1994) and is classified as subject teachers who do not perform specific roles such as principal, deputy, senior or assistant principal. It must also be acceptable that the roles and responsibilities frequently assigned these staff lead them to approach issues from different perspectives. This is because 'regular teachers' are preoccupied with prevention of student problems, personal development and value formation. Yet guidance and counselling is rooted in a holistic approach that incorporates personal, social, educational and vocational dimensions (Wango, 2015). Kaplan (1995) has summarized key significant differences between the principal and the teacher counsellor, while the author has added the teachers:

Approaches to Counselling by Principals of Schools, Counsellors and Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Principals of Schools</th>
<th>Teacher Counsellor / Counsellor in the School</th>
<th>Regular Teacher</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of counselling programme</td>
<td>Consider the impact of the actions of a student or students on entire student body and school.</td>
<td>Focuses more on the growth and development of individual students.</td>
<td>Considers the overall performance in the class and subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour and personality</td>
<td>Concerned with the effects of student behaviour upon the school community.</td>
<td>Explores the behaviour, causes, effects and ways of assisting individual students.</td>
<td>Concerned with learning and classroom management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving and resolving issues</td>
<td>Seek to solve problems as quickly as possible and to enforce consequences including instilling discipline. This is to affirm school and community values.</td>
<td>Attempts to improve long-term student self-management to enable them resolve their issue/s.</td>
<td>Seeks to manage pupils and students and solve classroom issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>Frustrated by the confidentiality of students' conversations with counsellors, especially when they are convinced the information is useful for the well being of the school and community.</td>
<td>Counselling is by nature confidential and counsellors are bound by confidentiality that limits the information that is expected to be available for problem solving.</td>
<td>Teachers consider sharing as significant in order to assist each other resolve common misbehaviour problems among pupils and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School academic goals vis-à-vis goals of counselling</td>
<td>Often convinced that academic support and skill-building are the school goal and should be in the end the counsellor's most important tasks.</td>
<td>Often spend considerable time assisting pupils and students with personal growth issues which affect emotional well being, academic work as well as overall development.</td>
<td>Considers learning and academic support essential. Feels learning tasks must be accomplished, and guidance and counselling should assist learner to get back on track.</td>
</tr>
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*Adopted from Kaplan (1995)*
The differences illustrate the potential for misunderstandings and lack of coordination between the principal and counsellor. Indeed, these problems have emerged as significant factors in many schools, and counsellors often cite their relationship with the principal as a leading cause of job stress. Many counsellors are often convinced that the principal does not understand their role in the school, while principals contend that counsellors do not understand how schools function. The root cause is the failure and lack of understanding about the roles and responsibilities of each, as well as approaches. It is therefore necessary that the principal be familiar with the counsellor’s perspective, and the counsellor in turn understand the school more wholesomely.

Confidentiality and the Counselling Code of Ethics

Collaboration between the principal and counsellor is at worst when it comes to confidentiality. Principals, parents and counsellors will see information obtained in counselling from different perspectives. Often, principals are convinced that counsellors have vital information obtained from students that should be explicitly available to them as chief executives. Similarly, parents and guardians feel they are entitled to all information regarding the child, especially when this is critical to the child’s wellbeing. Counsellors, on their part, are bound by ethical standards. After all, counselling is confidential and must safeguard all information obtained in the counselling relationship. The counsellor must walk the tightrope between being a helper or a school informer, and the implications are obvious: students will trust a counsellor but will certainly stay away from the informer. It is the assurance of confidentiality that generates the trust necessary for communication between the student and the counsellor.

Counselling is guided by a code of regulations. The codes of ethics for counsellors recognize four clear exceptions to the general rule of strict confidentiality. In the absence of these exceptions, counsellors are legally justified and ethically required to withhold information in confidence even from inquiring parents, principals or other teachers. The exceptions are:

i. Where the student freely waives the right of confidentiality;
ii. Where disclosure of confidences is required by statute or court order;
iii. Where the student condition indicates clear and imminent danger to self or others; and,
iv. Where it is necessary for the counsellor to consult with other professionals about the student’s case.

These exceptions to confidentiality may appear rather straightforward, but a more detailed examination reveals numerous complexities and ambiguities especially in the context of the school (Wango, 2006; Wango & Mungai, 2007). It is therefore important that the counsellor in the school, while working closely with the principal, is well acquainted with the general guidelines, makes own decision based on set procedures (American Counselling Association, 2014; Wango, 2015) and adheres to professional ethics (Bond, 2000; Republic of Kenya, 2010, 2013, 2014; Teachers Service Commission, 2012, 2015a, 2015b).

Principals, parents, teachers and other administrators will frequently pressure the school counsellor for confidential information about students. In certain cases, they may not know or care about the ethical complexities of confidentiality. In other instances, they may be right to argue that the exchange of information would benefit the student. Usually, if the students are convinced that
disclosure will serve a productive purpose, they are willing to consent to it. But when the student is not willing to disclose information, the counsellor faces an ethical dilemma.

The counsellor should also consider other options that help the student while still preserving confidentiality. For example, a counsellor may respond to valid requests for information with general evaluative statements about the student such as: 'Student has been to see me for assistance'. It is essential that the school administration be willing to accept this lack of specificity when appropriate. When counsellors disclose confidences, they must remember that the privacy rights of children are legally controlled by parents although they may be bestowed on the school. In that case, disclosing sensitive information regarding a pupil or student without parental or school permission could in some circumstances lead to legal action for invasion of privacy. In practice, disclosure may be necessary for the student's progress but even then, information must be restricted.

Conclusion
The delivery of quality whole school approach to guidance and counselling for pupils and students must involve all school stakeholders, including the school management, principal, regular teachers, and the school counsellor. In Kenya, various policy documents have recommended that a coherent programme for effective delivery be put in place (Republic of Kenya, 1964, 1976, 1981, 1988a, 1988b, 1999, 2005a, 2012, 2013; Teachers Service Commission, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). However, there must be policy changes to guidance and counselling in schools and professionalism (Wango, 2015), with greater commitment of the government, school management and teachers to support additional endeavours. Counsellors and chaplains are validated for their services but must also be curtailed in providing quality services to pupils and students. This paper has outlined suggestions that may impact on the provision of guidance and counselling services in schools through enhanced skills in the use of counselling skills among principals.

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References


