

Four Pillars of Effectiveness of Peer Counselling Programs in Meru South District High Schools, Kenya

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to assess the factors hindering the efficiency of peer counselling program in high schools in Kenya with specific focus on Meru South District, Meru County. This paper undertakes to probe the four proposed pillars of effective peer counselling program namely, selection, training, supervision and evaluation. A descriptive survey research method and purposive sampling were used. Data was collected using questionnaires to probe the issues under the study. The research data were thematically analysed. The results revealed that peer counselling program is available in most of the schools but there are no coordinated criteria for selection, the training provided is inadequate, peer counsellors' supervision is not done and peer counselling programs are rarely evaluated. The challenges faced by peer counsellors include lack of confidence, criticism by other students, lack of well defined roles, lack of skills in counselling and shortage of time to engage in peer counselling.

Keywords: Peer Counselling, Selection, Training, Supervision, Evaluation, High schools

Introduction

There are many emerging issues affecting students in high schools in Kenya. However peer counselling program is internationally accepted as an intervention strategy in enhancing guidance and counselling services for the students in educational institutions. It is self condemnation to argue that counsellors comprise only of a small percentage of those who could rectify the situation, because it is us, who have created an artificially scarce helping resource by legally restricting help to a specific role and not teaching our colleagues, administrators, teachers, parents and children the fundamentals of helping others Rolsyn and Rachel (1993). Students given training on peer counselling can be of great help to their peers in schools.

Peer counselling is defined as a process in which trained and supervised students offer listening, support, alternatives and other verbal and non verbal interaction, but little or no advice to students who refer themselves Rolsyn *et al* (1993) Students in high schools have potential to revolutionize guidance and counselling services when equipped with skills and knowledge in peer counselling.

The rationale of peer counselling is based on assumption that people who share similar characteristics and age tend to influence one another's behaviour significantly Bett, J. C (2013). Developmental psychology identifies peer influence as major cultural factor among the adolescents Stone and Church (1979). Students peer counsellors who are good role models can influence other students developing positive behaviours in schools, homes and churches. The question on who to select as student peer counsellor is important in developing effective peer counselling programs in high schools.

Literature review shows that in some high schools in Kenya those selected as peer counsellors had some notable positive qualities such as being sociable, disciplined, average academic performance, good speakers, listeners and able to keep secrets Arudo, T (2008). The selection of peer counsellors in high schools can be a major pillar for success of peer counselling programs. Selection of peer counsellors should be based on specified qualities. Such qualities should include openness, understanding, good communication, devotion, humility, empathy, discipline and good at listening Lutomia and Sikolia (2002). Research has revealed that success in counselling depends more on personal qualities of the counsellors than on the correct use of specified techniques Tyler, L. E (1961).

Methods of selecting peer counsellors can vary but the qualities of the students appointed should never be compromised. Research has shown that involvement of students in selecting peer counsellors is crucial and desirable Chireshe, R (2013), Murangu, P.G, Bururia, D.N and Njonge, T (2012). Young people tend to respect, trust and support peer educators whom they have selected KIE (2004). When right students are selected their efficiency can further be improved through progressive training in peer counselling.

Literature review on peer counselling programs vividly shows a big gap in the quality and scope of training offered to student peer counsellors. The issue of training is controversial due to lack of harmonized training manual. Research findings on peer counselling programs consistently recommend adequate training especially in basic helping skills and life skills Chireshe (2013), Murangu *et al* (2012).

Training should be based on what the peer educators need to do for the planned activities KIE (2004). The training should be practical and focused on the prospective peer counsellors' values, attitudes, beliefs and weaknesses Lutomia *et al* (2002). Literature reviewed shows countries with effective peer counselling programs conduct needs assessment of their schools and develop relevant training for the peer counsellors to make the programs successful.

An important element of counsellor development, during training and throughout the working life is supervision. Supervision role in counselling is similar to that of the tutor or consultant Mcleod, J (2003). The effort put in by the peer counsellors needs to be recognized, and experienced individuals should be given the chance to take on more responsibility, their training and supervision KIE (2004)

Supervision in counselling literally means overseeing Nelson – Jones, R (2005). In schools peer counselling supervision refers to teacher counsellors and teacher mentors overseeing the peer counsellors. Regular supervision of peer counsellors is important in ensuring their efficiency. Effective supervision is determined by the level of training of the teacher counsellors and peer mentors. In some high schools counselling teachers are found to require more counselling than even the students under their charge Arudo, T.O.O (2008). Such teacher counsellors cannot offer supervision to the peer counsellors.

Supervisors should identify and address their own counter- transference distortions toward those whom they supervise Ladany, N.C, Costantine, M.G, Miller, K, Erickson, C.D and Muse Burke, J.L (2000). Supervision is often resisted, because people don't use it accordingly. Counsellors who disregard the supervision relationship will lose out and run the risk of their counselling becoming stale Stewart, W (2005). Supervision of the peer counsellors should be developmental, helping them examine their relationships with peer clients and the counselling process as they perfect counselling skills, gain more knowledge and experience for efficiency.

Peer counselling programs in high schools should be based on needs assessment survey involving teachers and learners. The program should be guided by well defined goals and objectives. The goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic and time bound KIE (2004). The set objectives should form the basis of evaluating the effectiveness of peer counselling program, identify weaknesses and strengths and develop strategies of improving the program. Evaluation of peer counselling program should be done at schools, sub county, county and national levels. Evaluation is important in determining whether the intended results of a program were realized Mugenda and Mugenda (1999). Evaluation would be the basis of any future decision making to better the peer counselling programs in high schools.

Statement of the Problem

Peer counselling program is ailing despite the awareness of its importance in helping students access guidance and counselling services in high schools. The Ministry of Education, school administrators and teachers do appreciate the need of peer counselling as an intervention approach to students' indiscipline, psycho- social challenges and academic underachievement.

This study sought to establish why the program continues to be ineffective with such enormous awareness of its significance. Counselling Research Institute of Kenya (CRIKE) in collaboration with the Meru South District education office organized peer counsellors training seminar and used the forum to explore the four pillars of peer counselling programs and its effectiveness in Kenyan secondary schools.

Objectives of the Study

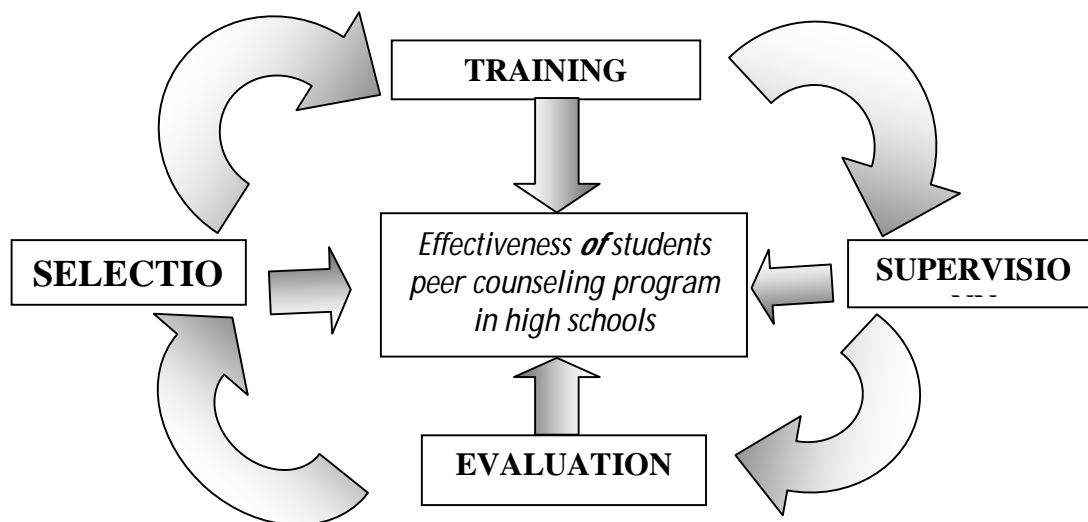
1. To find out the criteria used in selecting students peer counsellors in high schools in Meru South
2. To find out the effectiveness of training given to students peer counsellors in Meru South
3. To establish how students peer counsellors are supervised to ensure their growth and efficiency in schools in Meru South
4. To find out how peer counselling program is evaluated in high schools in Meru South.
5. To probe counselling teachers' views on selection, training, supervision and evaluation of peer counsellors

Research Questions

1. What criteria are used to select students' peer counsellors in high schools in Meru South district?
2. What is the effectiveness of training given to students' peer counsellors in Meru South district?
3. How are students' peer counsellors in Meru South district supervised?
4. How are peer counselling programs in Meru South district high schools evaluated?
5. What are counselling teachers' views on selecting, training, supervising and evaluating students' peer counselling programs in high schools in Meru South District?

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by simplified structure model to help in developing deep insight and focused on the key issues of peer counselling program in high schools being probed. The conceptual frame work shows the interrelationships between variables in the carried out research Orodho (2009)



Research Methodology

The study employed descriptive survey design. This is an attempt to collect data from members of a population in order to determine the current status of that population with respect to one or more variables Mugenda and Mugenda (1999). The research targeted 196 students peer counsellors and 25 teachers in charge of counselling departments from 25 secondary schools in Meru South.

The teachers were from different types of schools in the District. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the target population provided reliable information Kombo and Tromp (2006).

The students' population focused on the peer counsellors from the 25 schools. The sampling was done across the forms to ensure the information obtained was a representation of the entire school population with their diverse ages. In purposive sampling the major concern is to select a sample that is representative of, and will enable generalization to, a larger population.

Table 1: Summary of the Population of the Students Peer Counsellors and Their Ages

| Age | No. Students | % |
|----------------|--------------|------|
| Below 10 yrs | - | - |
| 10 – 14 yrs | 21 | 11% |
| 15 – 18 yrs | 140 | 71% |
| Above 18 years | 35 | 18% |
| | N = 196 | 100% |

Table 2: Summary of the Students who participated per form Across the Schools

| Class | No of students | % |
|--------|----------------|------|
| Form 1 | 51 | 26% |
| Form 2 | 47 | 24% |
| Form 3 | 54 | 28% |
| Form 4 | 44 | 22% |
| Total | N = 196 | 100% |

The main tool of data collection applied in the study was questionnaire. The questionnaire included both open ended and closed questions focusing on the selection, training, supervision, evaluation and challenges faced by peer counsellors in high school. Questionnaires were administered to teacher counsellors and students peer counsellors respectively but with difference in issues being probed according to the objectives of this research.

The participants were well informed that filling the questionnaires was voluntary and one was free to withdraw. Participation was voluntary and participants had the right to refuse to divulge certain information about them Orodho (2009). The right to privacy and confidentiality was guaranteed. Permission was sought from the head teachers and teachers present to allow students participate in the filling of the questionnaires. Descriptive statistics in percentages and frequencies were used to analyse the data obtained. Thematic analysis was derived from the open ended questions while percentages and frequencies cross tabulation was used to report analysed data

Results and Discussion

Selection of the Peer Counsellors

The first research question of the study was to explore the criteria used in selecting students peer counsellors. The respondents revealed peer counsellors were selected by the teachers and others volunteered themselves for appointments. In some schools where peer counselling is viewed as a club, membership is voluntary and no joining regulations are provided by the clubs patrons. Some of the teachers in charge of peer counselling clubs have no training in professional counselling. The study sought to find out how peer counsellors and teacher counsellors perceive peer counselling in their respective schools. Most of the peer counsellors 52% perceive it as part of guidance and counselling department, 21% perceive it as a club and 27% said they don't know. Majority of the teacher counsellors respondents 88% felt peer counselling is part of the guidance and counselling department and only 12% viewed it as a club. It can be concluded that teacher counsellors can have full control of the selection procedure of peer counsellors to ensure the right students are appointed to be the desired role models in all the guidance and counselling programs. The guidance and counselling must never take selection of peer counsellors lightly to ensure the peer counselling programs in high schools are effective in addressing indiscipline, academic underachievement and psycho- social challenges facing the students.

On the qualities to be considered when selecting peer counsellors both the students peer counsellors and teacher counsellors revealed that character is the most important quality to be considered. Other identified qualities include personality, academic performance, discipline, popularity, fear of God and gender. Table 5 show the students' peer counsellors responses and table 6 shows the teacher counsellors' responses.

Table 3: Summary of the Students Peer Counsellors’ Perception

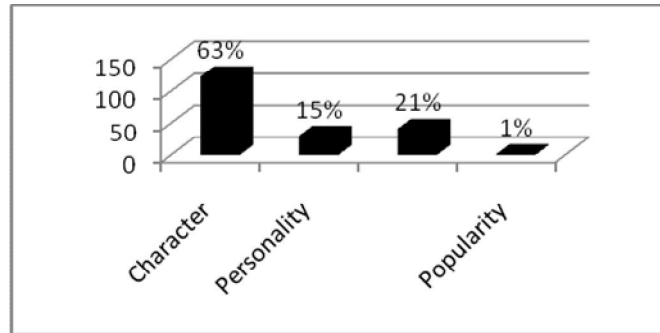


Table 4: Summary of the Teacher Counsellors’ Perception

| Qualities | Frequency | % |
|----------------------|-----------|-----|
| Character | 18 | 72% |
| Personality | 9 | 36% |
| Academic performance | 3 | 12% |
| Popularity | 1 | 4% |
| Discipline | 3 | 12% |
| Fear of God | 2 | 8% |
| Gender | 1 | 4% |

As shown in tables 3 and 4 above, it can be concluded that an effective peer counselling program in high schools should involve students who can be role models to others students in various aspects of life. Popularity and gender are less considered qualities and therefore least attributes valued when selecting peer counsellors.

Training of Peer Counsellors

The second research question of the study was to find out the effectiveness of training offered to students peer counsellors. Teacher counsellors were asked to rate the effectiveness of peer counsellors in their schools according to the training considering the training given 28% of the respondents rated peer counsellors in their schools as successful, 16% rated peer counsellors in their school as wanting and 56% rated the peer counsellors in their school as fair. It can be concluded that most of the peer counsellors don’t receive quality training. This was further supported by the response given by the teachers in the open ended question asking them on the challenges faced by the peer counsellors in their respective schools. Lack of adequate and quality training was overwhelmingly identified as a major reason for the ineffectiveness of peer counsellors. The teacher counsellors were asked to comment on how often they train the peer counsellors in their schools. 24% said one day three times a year, 48% said once a year while 28% said they don’t offer any training. Therefore it can be concluded that many schools offer inadequate training to the peer counsellors despite the significance of the peer counselling program in enhancing the psychological health, academic performance and discipline of the students.

The study probed the quality of training offered to the peer counsellors to make them effective. Teacher counsellors were asked to describe peer counsellors’ training they offer to the peer counsellors in their schools, 24% rated the training as adequate, 52% rated the training inadequate and 24% rated the training as wanting. Those who rated it adequate based their responses on notable improvement in academic performance and students discipline in their respective schools. Those who rated training as inadequate and wanting based their responses on lack of competent guidance and counselling teachers in the peer counselling program, brief training mostly taking a few hours in one day, lack of support by school administration in facilitating the training, limited time for the peer counselling programs in schools routines and lack of motivation for peer counsellors.

The study further probed on whether the peer counsellors are trained on their duties. The peer counsellors and teacher counsellors responses show clearly that there are no well defined roles of peer counsellors in high schools. Summary of the duties of the peer counsellors according to the students’ responses in the open ended questions was as follows

1. Helping students shape up their character
2. Helping students improve their self esteem

3. Helping students improve their academic performance
4. Helping students mend up their broken relationships with other students / teachers / parents
5. Help the G/C department identify the challenges facing the students that may need counselling programs
6. Help students with emotional problems
7. Help fellow students make good choices
8. Facilitate peer education programs on issues affecting them
9. Being role models to fellow students in behaviours / discipline and academic performance
10. Helping in mobilizing fellow students to donate items that can be given to the extremely needy students

The teacher counsellors' responses on the same question on the duties of the peer counsellors revealed different roles as summarized below

1. To identify and help students with needs
2. To serve as role model in self control and good behaviours
3. Help fellow peers manage stress due to challenges faced in life and school
4. Help fellow students solve their personal problems
5. Connecting students with guidance and counselling department
6. Identify areas / issues that may need intervention by G/ C department
7. Conducting peer talks on life issues in the schools

It can be concluded that lack of clarity on the duties of the peer counsellors is evidence of lack of effective training of the peer counsellors and teacher counsellors on peer counselling program in high schools. Effective peer counselling training should contain specific roles of both the teacher counsellors and peer counsellors.

The study investigated on the feelings of the teachers in relation to capacity building on peer counselling. They were asked if training on peer counselling program is important to them as a strategy of making peer counselling effective in high schools. 88% of the respondents indicated the training as very necessary and 12% indicated the training as necessary, while none indicated the training as not necessary. It can therefore be concluded that quality training of the teacher counsellors on peer counselling can be a milestone in enhancing effectiveness of the peer counselling programs.

The study further probed from the teachers counsellors through an open ended question the areas they would recommend to be included in a harmonized peer training manual to make peer counsellors in their schools effective and competent. The following areas were the identified but not in any order of prevalence

1. Life and leadership skills
2. Self awareness
3. Study skills and career selection
4. Relationship skills and sexuality
5. Drugs and substance abuse
6. Change in attitudes /
7. School discipline related challenges
8. Peer counselling skills
9. Roles of peer counsellors in high schools
10. Qualities of effective peer counsellors
11. Psychology of peer counselling
12. Adolescents developmental challenges
13. Coping with family and home related challenges
14. challenges of peer counselling and how to overcome them

It can be concluded that lack of harmonized peer counsellors training manual for high schools causes confusion on the training content to constitute effective peer counsellors training thus making the peer counsellors ineffective.

Supervision of Peer Counsellors

The third research question of this study was to establish whether students peer counsellors are supervised to ensure their growth and efficiency as para - professionals in counselling. Teacher counsellors were asked to indicate the pillars of peer counselling they apply in their school to make peer counselling program effective. The table below summarized their responses

Table 5: Teacher Counsellors' Application of Some Selected Pillars of Peer Counselling Program

| Pillar | Frequency | % |
|-------------|-----------|-----|
| Training | 13 | 56% |
| Selection | 4 | 16% |
| Supervision | 3 | 12% |
| Evaluation | 5 | 24% |

The study revealed that 56% of the schools do some training of the peer counsellors, 16% of the schools take the selection of peer counsellors seriously, 12% do the supervision of the peer counsellors and 24% do some evaluation of the peer counselling program in their schools. Therefore it is evident from the findings that most of the schools don't practice peer counsellors supervision. This could be reason why the peer counsellors continue being ineffective in their responsibilities despite them undergoing some training. The peer counsellors identified inability to handle their own personal challenges as a hindrance to their efficiency. This is evidence of lack of supervision since a wounded student cannot be expected to be effective in helping other wounded students.

Evaluation of the peer counselling program

The fourth research question of the study was to find out how often peer counselling programs are evaluated to establish their effectiveness. Based on the teacher counsellors responses in table 5 on how their application of some selected pillars of effective peer counselling revealed that only 24% of the schools evaluate their peer counselling program while 76% of the school don't. This can explain why ineffective status quo of the peer counselling program continues to persist.

The study further probed challenges being faced by counsellors as evidence that evaluation is an important strategy of discovering the weaknesses and strength of peer counselling program. The students peer counsellors and teachers counsellors were asked in an open question to identify the challenges that hinder the effectiveness of the peer counsellors in their respective schools. The following were identified;

1. Rejection by some students / lack of support by fellow students
2. Some students are resistant to changes
3. Lack of support by the school administration / teachers / lack of recognition / lack commitment by teachers
4. Lack of clear roles of the peer counsellors
5. Lack of cooperation among the peer counsellors
6. Challenge in handling personal issues / crisis
7. Inability to balance between academic work and peer counselling responsibility
8. Students don't trust peer counsellors with their deep personal issues
9. Students negative attitude toward peer counselling
10. Lack of adequate information on issues affecting the students
11. Lack of well developed programs to be facilitated by peer counsellors
12. Lack of adequate time to counsel peers due to academic pressure / poor time management
13. Lack of counselling skills / inadequate training
14. Failure of peer counsellors to be good role models
15. Lack resources for reference for peer counsellors
16. Peer counselling is treated as club affair so not taken seriously
17. Some students take advantage of the peer counsellors by asking for intimate relationships.
18. Discouragement when students don't change after spending their time helping.
19. Lack of self confidence as peer counsellors

Teachers' views on selecting, training, supervising and evaluating students' peer counselling programs

The last research question on teacher counsellors views are interspersed throughout the study demonstrating that there is urgent need to address all pillars of student peer counselling programs.

The challenges identified strongly supported the appropriateness of the objective of this study. All the areas of investigations were brought out as challenges affecting the effectiveness of peer counselling program in high schools.

Conclusion

The study established that selection of the peer counsellors as good role models is an important element of an effective peer counselling program in realising the positive behaviour change in schools. The training of peer counsellors in high school is inadequate and greatly wanting. It is necessary to harmonize peer counsellors training content for secondary schools. The schools teacher counsellors don't offer supervision services and most are incompetent in peer counsellors supervision training. The study concludes that the teacher counsellors and peer mentors in high schools get professional training in counselling and supervision of peer counsellors. The evaluation of peer counselling program is rarely done and this maintains the persistent status quo of inefficiency in peer counselling programs in high schools. The study revealed challenges hindering the efficiency of peer counselling programs in high schools which greatly supported the appropriateness of the study objectives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made

1. The school guidance and counselling departments should develop selection criteria to ensure students appointed are good role model in life and school programs
2. The teacher mentoring peer counsellors in high school need to be trained on the four pillars of peer counselling program covered in this study, that is selection, training, supervision and evaluation.
3. The peer counsellors in secondary schools need to be given quality, detailed and progressive training in peer counselling.
4. The peer counsellors and teacher counsellors are supposed to be shown their roles in school peer counselling program
5. The Ministry of education, Teachers Service Commission and school administrators need to ensure all teachers heading the guidance and counselling departments have training in professional counselling skills.
6. The school administrators and Boards of Management to ensure funds are allocated to support the activities of guidance and counselling departments like peer counselling programs.
7. The Ministry of Education and development partners should facilitate teacher counsellors Sub – County, County and National conferences to enhance their professional growth and exposure to the new emerging trends in the field of school counselling and create a platform for sharing research findings and experiences.
8. Further research on the effectiveness of peer counselling program in addressing specific issues affecting adolescents in schools such as homosexuality, violence, bullying and use of contraceptives is needed to come up with innovative ways of helping youth in high schools overcome such challenges and become successful in life and education.

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