

## Counsellor Competency for Non-Academic Issues: A Conceptual Framework for Indian School Counsellors

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### ABSTRACT

Children spend most of their time growing up in a school, so much that they have been considered a child's 'second home'. Due to the nature of development, children must be cared for in many avenues to grow into wholesome adults. School Counsellors, therefore, play a critical role in assisting and guiding students through adaptation and developmental difficulties. School counselling in India is still at a nascent stage. High school students especially face several concerns that are not limited to academics. The current paper attempts to understand the non-academic mental health concerns faced by Indian high school students and whether in-house school counsellors can deal with them adequately through a qualitative examination. A semi-structured interview was conducted with a sample of six high school counsellors in India with over two years of work experience. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that counsellors faced certain hurdles in several dimensions (access to resources, institutional interferences, ethical ambiguity, autonomy and additional responsibilities) that prevented them from providing their services appropriately. Additionally, the emerging results of the study were used to develop a competency checklist that could be used in institutes to recruit employees, review performance and develop a competency framework for present and future high school counsellors working in India.

**Keywords:** *Indian High School counsellors competency, Counsellor Role and Responsibility, Student Concerns, Issues in practice*

In India, school counselling is still at a novice stage. Due to the lack of defined scope, school counsellors often balance multiple roles (Jha et al., 2017), the student-to-counsellor ratio is alarming, and most students across the various education boards either have no access to or are dubious of accessing remedies that school counsellors can offer; existing counsellors are limited to offering academically-oriented or career-based intervention and the occasional adjustment issues, which is often preferred by the students as well (Venkatesan et al., 2015). Mental health issues and relationship and sex-related concerns are often not addressed appropriately or adequately. Literature and research that assess a school counsellor's role beyond the usual academic and developmental issues relevant to an Indian context are also limited.

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Johari and Amat (2019) found that counsellors had a broad scope of responsibilities besides counselling, such as administrative work and academic programs, which prevented them from performing their duties as counsellors; this was a component that negatively influenced satisfaction and competency. There was also a lack of adequate cooperation from the administration and faculty regarding counselling, making it hard for the counsellors to apply their skills and help the students effectively.

Administrative duties are understated but relevant expectations from school counsellors. Carey et al. (2020) conducted a cross-national factor analytic study to understand school-based counselling activities, noting that countries like the USA, South Korea and India regarded administrative tasks as inappropriate for counsellors. Conversely, Aleuede and Adubale (2020) validated the previous study on a Nigerian population where counsellors felt that administrative activities were appropriate.

On a theoretical level, even though counsellors may disapprove of administrative roles, there is an expectation in most developing countries to take on additional functions. From an ethical perspective, the role of counsellors as the administrative spokesperson who occasionally helps with career counselling questions the counsellor's competence.

High school students are perhaps the most vulnerable demographic of the student population, usually between the ages of 13 and 18. They face several conflicts, including the transition to adolescence, academic and career prospects, social concerns, academic and peer pressure, and grappling with their identity; the list is exhaustive. Among other problems, students are generally distrustful of authority or lack the awareness of reaching out for help (Jha et al., 2017). Hence, counselling and counsellors play a crucial role in creating awareness and being approachable to aid high school students' holistic growth and development.

### ***Objectives***

The primary purpose of the present study is to create a conceptual framework using qualitative data collected in order to give some structure to the counselling services and build competent individuals who can work for the benefit of the students. The framework will come in handy for training and recruiting possible counsellors and checking for efficacy on a periodical level. A framework for guiding the roles and responsibilities of counsellors also prevents administrative expectations from counsellors, periodically checking recruited counsellors' competency and allowing them to work competently in their expertise.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

The study implemented a qualitative research study using semi-structured interviews to collect data from six arbitrarily selected high school counsellors in India.

### ***Participants***

Participants for this study were recruited through online platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram. About twenty high school counsellors were approached for the study; however, only six consented to participate. Table 1 presents the participant descriptions.

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Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six high school counsellors presently employed as full-time counsellors in an educational setting. An expert-approved interview schedule was used to guide the interview process.

The sample chosen for this study is specifically counsellors who deal with high school students and have a minimum of two years of experience.

Out of the six participants, all identified as females and had completed at least one Master's Degree in Psychology. The participants varied in their years of experience as practising counsellors, although all met the minimum requirement.

**Table 1: Showing the participants' demographic details**

PARTICIPANT	GENDER	QUALIFICATION	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	TYPE OF INSTITUTE	NATURE OF EMPLOYMENT
<i>Participant 1 (P1)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Masters in Psychology</i>	<i>4 Years</i>	<i>Public School</i>	<i>Full-time</i>
<i>Participant 2 (P2)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Masters in Psychology</i>	<i>2 Years</i>	<i>Public School</i>	<i>Full-time</i>
<i>Participant 3 (P3)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Masters in Psychology</i>	<i>3 Years</i>	<i>Private School</i>	<i>Full-time</i>
<i>Participant 4 (P4)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Masters in Psychology</i>	<i>4 Years</i>	<i>Private School</i>	<i>Full-time</i>
<i>Participant 5 (P5)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Masters in Psychology</i>	<i>2.5 Years</i>	<i>Private School</i>	<i>Full-time</i>
<i>Participant 6 (P6)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Masters in Psychology</i>	<i>5 Years</i>	<i>Public School</i>	<i>Full-time</i>

### **Procedure**

The data for the present study was collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. A tentative interview schedule was developed with the objectives of the study in mind and sent to three experts in the field of psychology and/or school counselling via email. The changes suggested by the experts were incorporated into developing the final interview schedule.

The interviews with the participants were conducted online via Google Meet and lasted for about 30 to 45 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded, and the collected data were transcribed verbatim in English.

As per Castleberry and Nolen (2018), thematic analysis in qualitative research uses raw data to create codes that construct themes and thematic maps. Then, an interpretation is derived by contextualising and categorising these topics into themes and subthemes (Johari & Amat, 2019). The transcribed data were analysed through thematic analysis by coding. The coding of the data led to identifying a global theme, four organising themes and eighteen basic themes.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A thematic analysis of the data obtained through the interview revealed one Global Theme: High School Counselling. The following Organising and Basic themes were obtained as seen in Table 2.

*Table 2: Showing Basic, Organising and Global Themes*

<b>BASIC THEMES</b>	<b>ORGANISING THEMES</b>	<b>GLOBAL THEME</b>
1.1.1 Non-academic concerns 1.1.2 Student to counsellor ratio 1.1.3 Consequences of pandemic 1.1.4 Level of Awareness	1.1 Student Concerns	1. Counselling High School Students
1.2.1 Personal experiences 1.2.2 Autonomy 1.2.3 Additional Responsibilities 1.2.4 Initiative and Advocacy	1.2 Counsellor responsibilities and characteristics	
1.3.1 Capabilities 1.3.2 Overcoming hurdles 1.3.3 Ethical Ambiguity in Academic Institutes 1.3.4 Strategies 1.3.5 Personality factors 1.3.6 Staying updated	1.3 Counsellor Roles and Competence	
1.4.1 Issues with students 1.4.2 Access to resources 1.4.3 Institutional Interferences 1.4.4 Theory vs Practice	1.4 Issues in practice	

**1. Counselling High School Students**

Counselling high school students can be comprehended as the overarching theme of this study. As there is limited data that primarily focuses on the nuances of high school counselling, especially in India, it can be used to grasp the differences in counselling high school students to other students.

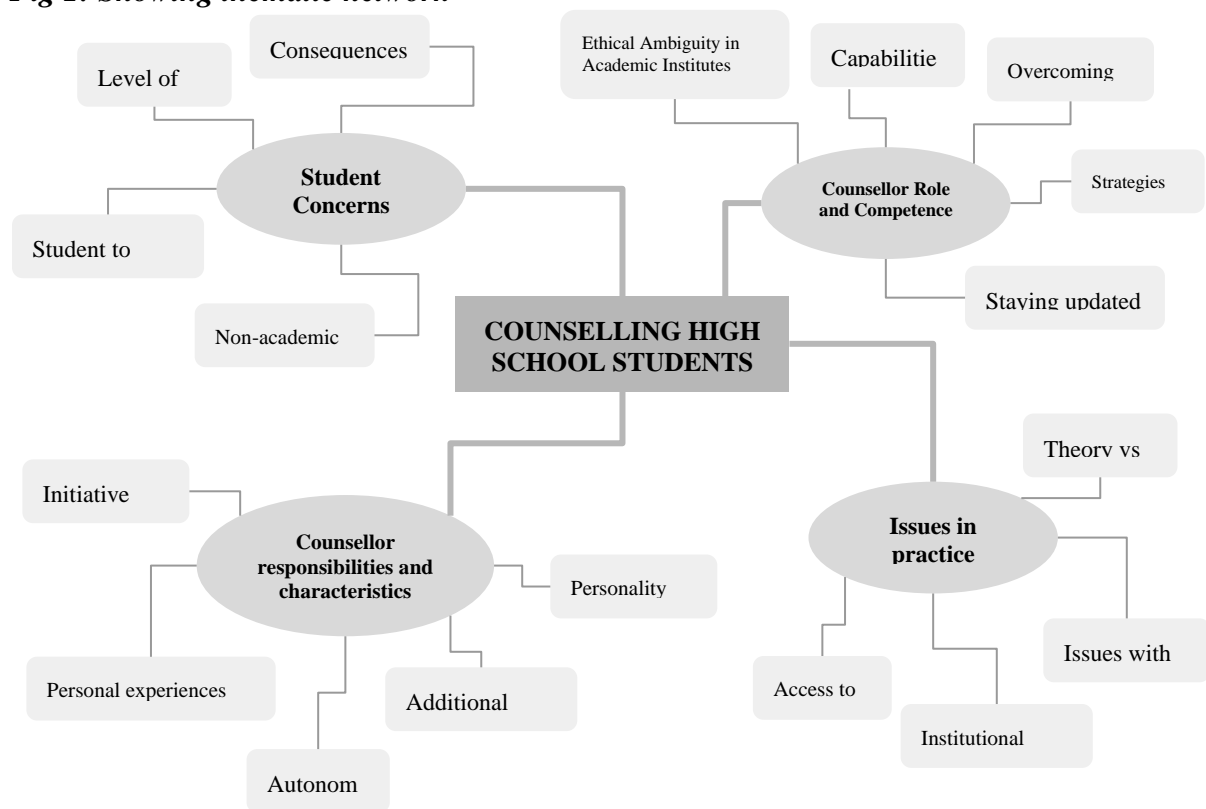
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In India, high school is typically the starting point of pressure when it comes to academics as well as overall well-being. As high school students are of adolescent age, it coincides with several possible issues arising from the developmental stage that may need to be addressed by counsellors and which may vastly differ from other age groups in a school or educational setting.

One of the objectives of this research is to generate a competency framework for high school counsellors by understanding the current phenomena of counselling high school students. A framework can be used to moderate professional conduct and negotiate challenges when they arise (BACP, 2018).

The global theme of Counselling High School Students has been categorised into four main organising themes: Student concerns, Counsellor responsibilities and characteristics, Counsellor Roles and Competence and Issues in Practice (as shown in Fig 1).

**Fig 1: Showing thematic network**



### 1.1 Student Concerns

In order to understand counselling high school students, it is crucial to know their concerns. For this study, the emphasis was laid more on the non-academic aspects of students' concerns. When counsellors are aware of the significant issues students face, it makes the counselling process more accessible and smoother while aiming for the student's best interests. High school students may not be most receptive to seeking counselling; however, with the recent emphasis on mental health and well-being, the student's first point of contact or interaction with therapy and counselling is most likely to be within their school setup. Therefore, the student must feel comfortable and confident to approach the school counsellor to address their issues. This theme has been further broken down into four basic

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themes: non-academic concerns, student-to-counsellor ratio, consequences of the pandemic and level of awareness.

### 1.1.1 Non-academic concerns

In school, counselling is often sought only when the student's academic performance is compromised or severe behavioural disturbances interfere with the student's academic performance. McIntyre et al. (2018) found that loneliness and assessment stress was a significant predictor of mental distress and academic predictor among University students. However, adolescents (and high school students) are not limited by academics and, therefore, might require intervention in various aspects of their lives, such as mental health, peer relationships, family relationships, experimentation, identity, and substance use, among several others. The theme explores the key recurring issues that counsellors have noticed that students approach them.

According to the data, students deal with peer pressure, bullying, body image issues, conformity, relationship and sexual issues, abuse, violence at home, emotional and behavioural problems, social interactions and expectations, restlessness and loss of focus, anxiety and depression. Assessing school-going adolescents for signs of depression and providing early intervention can reduce the risk of suicidal ideation and substance use, among other psychological and behavioural problems (Jha et al., 2017).

### 1.1.2 Student-to-counsellor ratio

A critical aspect that determines the effectiveness of school counselling is whether there is an optimum student-to-counsellor ratio that can cater to the demands of the students. As psychology and counselling are in their nascent stage in India, most schools are not equipped with enough counsellors available to the large population of students. This creates an issue of scarcity: of time, accessibility and priority. While a few private schools can hire a few more in-house counsellors, the same cannot be said for public and government schools, which typically have only one counsellor for the entire school (Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015) or no counsellor. Quite obviously, this interferes with the counselling process as counsellors are overburdened, and students' demands may not be met due to the insufficient availability of counsellors. The findings in this study mostly corroborate this understanding. Usually, one counsellor tends to a gross number of students beyond their capacity:

*"sometimes a lot of children want to see me and I don't have enough slots... that takes a toll that I have to attend and cater for each one of them"* (P4)

However, some institutes can afford to manage the student-to-counsellor ratio appropriately: *"I would say that the ratio is pretty good... where we are nicely distributed, we work as team"* (P3). The counsellors collectively work as a team to provide the best available services to the students.

### 1.1.3 Consequences of Pandemic

Post-COVID, while there has been a crop of newer, more unique issues, students may not find the help they need from school counsellors alone. However, most students have not been able to cope with online and offline transitions, as shared by most of the participants in this study. P6 shared that students *"do not want or have the skills to socialise and they feel very overwhelmed coming to college, doing the work, studying, and then going back. They also do not want to make friends and interact as well as they used to before."*

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Due to the novelty of the issues caused by the pandemic, even counsellors need time to get themselves trained to deal with the consequences of the pandemic appropriately so students can be more well-adjusted after massive psychological, emotional and social changes that occurred due to the pandemic and lockdown.

### **1.1.4 Level of Awareness**

There is an increased awareness of mental health, especially post-pandemic. Nevertheless, most students are frightened by the mystery of counselling and therapy, especially in a school setup, where students may not be comfortable expressing themselves. As counsellors take initiatives to generate awareness about mental health and demystify counselling, there may be a greater need for counselling from school counsellors, which invariably leads to an increased demand for counselling that, unfortunately, might not be met as discussed previously. It was commonly agreed that students have a higher awareness and understanding of mental health and well-being today.

### **1.2 Counsellor Responsibilities and Characteristics**

The school counsellor has specific responsibilities in high school counselling. While teachers and other educators have a basic knowledge of guidance and counselling, a trained counsellor will have a niche role in dealing with the student's concerns. The counsellors' personal qualities play a vital role in their services. Empathy, care, sincerity and respect are some virtues that are valued (BACP, 2018) and essential for counsellors.

In order to explore the various aspects of the counsellor's position in the institute, five basic themes emerged from the data collected: Personal experiences, Autonomy, Additional Responsibilities, Initiative and Personality Factors.

#### **1.2.1 Personal Experiences**

The counsellor's experiences contribute significantly to their professional skills and competence. Most counsellors can recount the differences in their ability to conduct counselling sessions from when they first started to where they are now. As they gather experiences in the field, the counsellors can pay greater attention to details, maintain ethical standards and observe students more professionally than when they were freshers. As they progress in their professional experience, school counsellors are able to negotiate with school administrations and other stakeholders regarding the students more appropriately (Venkateshan et al., 2015).

*"I'm still learning as it is an ongoing process... complicated situations that I'm able to handle pretty well... how to apply it only when I started my journey as a school counsellor."*  
(P4)

The counsellors' experiences also contribute largely to their ability to make quick, sound judgements and cater to the student's needs in a much more efficient manner. Gaining experience while working in an educational institution also allows the counsellor to navigate the bureaucracy and administrative policies within the loophole while keeping the child's best interests as the priority.

#### **1.2.2 Autonomy**

The counsellor must maintain unsaid loyalty towards the institution and the administration. Loyalty often comes at the expense of the counsellor's autonomy and authority to conduct their services relatively towards the students. The counsellor has limited autonomy in

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executing their responsibilities, often having to go through various levels of administration, faculty, Principal and other stakeholders before getting approval to handle the students' crises: *"Dealing with crisis by informing Principal. Principal takes necessary action."* (P1) The counsellor's degree of autonomy in rendering their services and doing their jobs differ from institution to institution, where one might grant their counsellors relatively more autonomy than the other. In Western countries, school counsellors typically work in collaboration with various stakeholders (ASCA, 2019). Whereas most Indian institutes follow a hierarchical system where the counsellor reports to a higher authority who will make the final decision: *"there is one that I report to, there is somebody who has a higher authority or management in the academic setting who I have to explain what exactly I'm doing on a daily basis"* (P5).

### 1.2.3 Additional Responsibilities

Most schools recruit an in-house counsellor as it is a requirement from the educational boards. However, these counsellors often take on several additional responsibilities that were probably not in their job description.

While Carey et al. (2020) found that India regarded administrative tasks as inappropriate for counsellors in a cross-national factor analytic study to understand school-based counselling activities, the findings of this study were contradictory.

Administrative work, *"also manage other things that I have to do other responsibilities"* (P4); life skills classes, *"responsibilities of teaching life skills paper"* (P3) and substituting other teachers, *"if there is like a free period, and teachers are not available, or the teachers have a meeting, then you know, it does require me to just like, go sit in the class"* (P5); are some additional responsibilities that school counsellors reported assuming. Most counsellors added that these additional responsibilities interfered with their ability to do their primary job optimally.

### 1.2.4 Initiative and Advocacy

A significant responsibility of the counsellor, apart from counselling, is to create awareness about mental health and reduce the stigma surrounding seeking psychological help. Additionally, the field is constantly developing with new methods and techniques, and the counsellor must keep seeking new information and developments to support them professionally and be updated. By building their skills, developing personally and professionally, and seeking to enhance their knowledge, counsellors maintain an ethical commitment to the profession (BACP, 2018).

This theme explores the counsellor's initiative in both these aspects, as seen in the data. Initiative refers to the counsellors' active efforts to work on their personal and professional development. All the participants of this study expressed that they actively developed their qualifications by seeking supervision, going to conferences and workshops, and taking therapy, with or without institutional support:

*"...that most of it is also done independently by myself. So there are the I'm not saying no, there have been instances where the institution also has, you know, sent me for specific workshops, or something that I feel is helpful. So yes, I do receive the support. But if there is some extensive online course or workshop that I want to... there is an expectation that I handled that independently of my work responsibilities."* (P5).



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Further, the counsellor plays a vital role in advocating for the mental health and psychological well-being of the students in the institute. Creating a safe space for discussions about topics high school students may not have other avenues for, and in general, generating awareness of mental health, identity (Maru, 2017; Simons, 2021), and the importance of therapy are a few methods where counsellors can advocate for students' mental health.

### **1.2.5 Personality Factors**

The present theme explores how counsellors work with and on their personality traits so that they can offer their best services as a counsellor. The counsellor's personality is an essential feature of the counselling process. Certain personality traits, such as being empathetic, cheerful, approachable, attentive and outgoing (BACP, 2018), among a few others, can assist the counsellor in their sessions. Certain traits can also be a hurdle in counselling as they can interfere with rapport building or establishing a therapeutic relationship with the students. P1 shared that actively working on the limitations set by personality factors is a professional duty and is an ongoing effort: *"being open-minded... the child is not here to align with your values"*.

### **1.3 Counsellor Role and Competence**

The counsellor's primary role is counselling, and in this theme, the counsellor's role and competence are investigated. Several aspects contribute to the counsellor's competence in providing student services.

Johari and Amat (2019) noted four domains in Malaysian school counsellors' roles in their study: Developing and expanding students' personalities, Strengthening discipline, Career Guidance, and the psychosocial and mental well-being of the students.

The present theme's primary focus, however, is explored across five basic themes: Capabilities, Overcoming Hurdles, Ethical Practices, Strategies and Staying Updated.

#### **1.3.1 Capabilities**

The current theme focuses on counsellors' capabilities in working through specific issues, navigating cultural aspects and capacity to develop their skills holistically. Each counsellor brings their unique skill set and capabilities to their practice. The counsellor's ability to navigate through the administration, advocate for students' mental wellness and work through the roadblocks that might occur in the process reveals their capabilities on the professional front. Understanding sociocultural and environmental influences, collaborating with stakeholders, recognising limitations and making referrals (ASCA, 2019) are some overarching capabilities the participants in this study demonstrated.

#### **1.3.2 Overcoming Hurdles**

Drawing from the previously discussed themes, another facet of the counsellor's competence is reflected in their ability to overcome the hurdles that might come in the way of their profession. A repeated pattern in how counsellors overcome hurdles was seen under the sub-theme of supervision. Tan and Chou (2018) found positive effects of group supervision on the competency and self-efficacy of high school counsellors in Singapore.

Supervision was observed to be the counsellor's primary go-to when faced with a challenge beyond their capabilities: *"...have a peer supervision group where we discuss about the*

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*clients, we discuss theoretical conceptualisations, what method of approaches, what therapy we can use with these clients.” (P3)*

Another critical aspect of overcoming hurdles is the counsellor’s ability to recognise the areas they feel they are not equipped to handle and how they steer through that process: *“..refer to supervisors when beyond my capacities, putting barriers while in session, maintaining separate personal and professional boundaries” (P2)*. Overcoming hurdles also involves a certain degree of on-the-feet thinking, especially when concerned with school administrations and parents of students.

### 1.3.3 Ethical Ambiguity in Academic Institutes

A counsellor’s competence is primarily reflected in how ethical their conduct and practice are. A vital marker of counselling ethics that is constantly at play in the school counselling setup, as the client is a minor, is the issue of privacy and confidentiality. When many stakeholders are involved in the child’s life, from family to school, most counsellors battle a tricky situation regarding confidentiality matters. The school and parents will often be curious and demand to be intimated about the counselling sessions of the students: *“When you work with schools, the confidentiality is not highly maintained. Heads or the Principal wants to know how many sessions you take with the students, who are the students, they want you to be in touch with what’s happening in the school” (P3)*.

However, the counsellor decides what, when and how much information can be shared with the various stakeholders: *“And even when I tell them, I tell them the overall essence of what happened and what exactly is their role in contributing to the problem. But again, this is after a lot of conversation and asking for consent from the child in concern.” (P6)*.

Aluede and Adubale (2020) reported that most counsellors assume a “pro-institution perspective over a student-centred approach”. Such an environment will prevent students from approaching the counsellors as they fear being punished for sharing certain information. Another observation under this theme was that not all counsellors would commit to ethical practices consciously or unconsciously, which can interfere with establishing trust and rapport with the students and make them wary of approaching counsellors in the future: *“we can’t like keep it fully confidential, then there’s also withdrawal at those levels.” (P4)*

### 1.3.4 Strategies

Drawing from the previous theme, how do counsellors overcome the roadblocks regarding ethics, lack of student reciprocation or undoing damage? The data revealed that through their experiences, counsellors build resilience (BACP, 2018) to challenges and either cope with resistance or work with it. Trust-building is an area that counsellors work on in their strategies as it is crucial to developing a therapeutic relationship. Counsellors also need to work towards demystifying and destigmatising therapy for the students. P1 shared that raising awareness through pop culture has assisted in better connection and communication with students. P4 used strategies to collaborate and build a therapeutic alliance with the students effectively.

Some counsellors also reported using strategies to work around the administrative expectations of sharing counselling notes with the faculty/Principal to minimise the ethical

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errors that might occur. The current study noted that all participants found that keeping the student in the loop about the possible breach of confidentiality was often respected, although met with resistance.

How the counsellor creates a non-judgmental, safe and open space for students to express themselves freely also depends on the practical strategies devised by the counsellor.

### **1.3.5 Staying Updated**

As discussed earlier under the Initiative and Advocacy sub-theme, staying updated is essential in the counselling and mental health field; integrity is an ethical expectation from professionals in the field (BACP, 2018). It was noted that nearly all participants actively worked towards building their skill set and knowledge by participating and pursuing information through webinars, conferences, workshops and supervision. The idea behind staying up to date with the latest developments in the field is to help students to the best of their abilities and be equipped to face whatever challenges might come their way. Being up to date with the developments in the field also reflects the counsellor's competency (ASCA, 2019; Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015) in engaging with new information consistently and allowing them to offer the best care to their clients.

### **1.4 Issues In Practice**

Every profession has a set of challenges. The challenges faced by school counsellors are markedly different from those faced by counsellors in a different organisational environment. What issues do counsellors face that prevent them or complicate their counselling process? In the present theme, four significant problems occur in the counselling practice at a high school level: Issues with students, Access to resources, Institutional Interferences and Theory vs Practice.

#### **1.4.1 Issues with students**

The counsellor's first issue would occur if students are not engaging or reciprocating to a counselling setting/session. From the students' point of view, confiding in an individual who could potentially share information with their teachers and parents is a matter of significant risk-taking. Besides, students would be more likely to communicate with their friends rather than approach an adult they fear might not understand them.

Additionally, gender-based, *"boys don't open up to female counsellors"* (P2); language, *"difficult to express terminology to Kannada speakers"* (P1); and cultural barriers, *"there are these nuances and intricacies that come because each child is different, and their environment is different, and how they process what they're going through is different. And then you need to become a different person for each of these students is very difficult to do"* (P5); between students and counsellors can affect the therapeutic relationship. Since the sample population in this study is entirely female, the most frequent issue with students was reported to be the opposite gender's reluctance to engage with a female counsellor.

Inaccessible terminology or appropriate translating of particular words can cause miscommunication during counselling: *"when they come for counselling, they find the language as major constraint... of these language barriers was one of the concern"* (P3).

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### 1.4.2 Access to resources

Access to relevant resources is an issue in school counselling. Often, counsellors have to seek appropriate supervisors when presented with a case that goes beyond their capabilities and without the necessary support from the institute. The counsellor also has to find appropriate specialists in the field where they can refer students who present with issues that require a specialist's attention.

Not all institutes provide counsellors with financial and general support to seek and pursue developments in the field: *"no supervisors, lack of adequate resources to face challenges, shortage of counsellors, shortage of information"* (P1).

### 1.4.3 Institutional Interferences

From the previous theme, it was observed that the institution could contribute to specific issues in the counselling practice.

As discussed previously, sometimes, institutes do not support the counsellor in developing their skills and staying updated with the latest field growth. Some participants reported that the institute would not even give them a day off to attend skill development workshops and seminars, among others: *"But as of the school encouraging me to go on these workshops, it's not necessarily true."* (P6).

Venkatesan and Shyam (2015) noted that institutional administration placed a greater emphasis on counsellors to liaison between faculty and students over a counsellor's actual responsibility. Another important aspect of this issue is the institute's expectations from the counsellor: assuming multiple responsibilities, sharing counselling details with the administration and several more.

The institute can act as a roadblock to the school counselling practice. *"... it's very accessible, because the counsellor sits in the school, but it might not be the best quality help because of a lot of intervening happening from the school."* (P4).

### 1.4.4 Theory vs Practice

A notable observation made by counsellors in the counselling practice is the gap between theoretical concepts and practical applications. Most, if not all, counsellors underwent training with a Western-oriented philosophy and theory, which may not suit the practice in a country as culturally diverse as India. Wijaya et al. (2019) found a gap in theory and assessment correlated to counselees' needs in an Indonesian population. The gaps in theory and practice are often bridged as the counsellor gains more experience in the field and refines their practice. Participants suggested that experience plays a crucial role in overcoming these gaps.

The findings of this study suggest that cultural and social gaps between theory and practice exist in the counselling scenario in India, especially with school and child counselling: *"...also there are not really, unless, again, unless you specifically study it, there are not really many subjects in psychology in general, which actually teach you therapy with children or counselling with children, right, because that is vitally from dealing with adult clients. And the sad part of it is they don't necessarily look for a person trained specifically in child therapy to practice school counselling, right? Anybody with a degree in psychology, a master's degree, can do it..."* (P6).

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The lack of licensing for the professional practice of counselling and psychology-related services (Jain et al., 2019), the applicability of ethical awareness in an academic institute (Wijaya et al., 2019) and the lack of institutional support to perform services (Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015) effectively are some practical aspects that theories do not prepare counsellors for.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study looks at the high school counselling scenario in India with specific attention to the non-academic mental health concerns of the students to develop a competency framework for counsellors. The study's findings were used to understand the relevance of establishing a framework that can guide and regulate the responsibilities and roles of counsellors within an academic setup.

While western countries such as the UK (BACP, 2018) and the USA (ASCA, 2019) have established guidelines that dictate or at least outline the role of a counsellor in an academic institute or the professional, ethical framework, there is none in India. The counsellor's professional identity is undefined or has multiple definitions based on the various stakeholders of the primary clientele (Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015). Additionally, the study found that high school counsellors in India are limited by the authority in their operations within the institute. There is a lack of governmental and non-governmental support for counselling services in most schools (Jain et al., 2019).

The current study is limited by the sample size which future studies can look at broadening in order to understand a greater diversity of experiences. Future studies can also use the data accumulated from this study to develop quantitative measures of counsellor competency, job expectations and satisfaction which can give better insight into the current trends in the school counselling profession.

The study has successfully identified areas or domains where counsellors can be supported in developing their competence in the field: supervision, autonomy, and institutional support for initiatives. The findings have also looked at the significant non-academic problem areas faced by high school students in the country, which can assist in the preparation and case formulation of trainee or professional school counsellors to work towards sustainable and effective treatment plans. The conceptual framework proposed by the findings of this study may be used to develop a more comprehensive and extensive project for future research or in an administrative capacity.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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