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Research Paper

Development of Counselling Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Dropout among Tribal High School Students, Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT

High school dropout is a major concern in Meghalaya. Although programs to reduced the dropouts rates have been introduced, there is no stress made on psychological aspects of a student's mental health. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to identify at risk students of dropping out of school and also in developing a group counselling strategy that will promote academic success among all students particularly those at risk of dropping out of school. A quasi-experimental research design was used to test the effect of the group counselling strategy. Participants of the control group and experimental group was drawn from 78 current students at risk of dropping out of school. Paired sample t-test and Independence t-test were used to test and check any statistically significant change in the attitude of students in control and experimental group. Qualitative analysis from the intervention is done by coding, grouping into three main themes which includes- Negative belief and problem, Causes of Negative beliefs, Opinions to Improve Academic Performance. In conclusion, the study has shown that targeted group counselling of at-risk students can be effective method in reducing school dropout.

Keywords: *At Risk Student, Group counselling strategy, Drop out student*

The pandemic affected more than 1.5 billion students, and youths, the most vulnerable learners, were hit hard (UNESCO, 2023). Similarly, among our Tribal students of Meghalaya the educational scenario underwent a tremendous challenge. According to the report from the Union Minister, about 3.5% of children have dropped out during the pandemic, 17% of them have dropped out of higher education and 10 million girls are at risk of dropping out of school (Rashir, 2022). As per the Draft Meghalaya Youth Policy 2021 the dropout rates in Meghalaya at both primary and upper primary level stands at 17.5% higher than the national level with 6.4% and 5.7% respectively. The Meghalaya Education Department has tried to identify the learning gaps of the students, but the reality is that there is no stress made on the psychological aspect of a student's mental health that would lead

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student dropout. The psyche of a teenager is so complex that at times, if not most of the time, damages the potential of excelling academically.

Factors Associated with dropout

There is no main factor that causes high school dropout; it may be a result of multitude factors. Several theoretical models have emerged to explain the phenomenon (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), Rumberger's research on high school dropout has a span of 25 years, and has developed two different perspectives that includes Individual factors and Contextual factors.

Causes of Drop out - Individual factors

One of the main factors that have the strongest effect on an increase in dropout rates is the personal characteristics (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). The personal characteristics include Students Motivation, Academic Achievement, and Grade retention.

Students Motivation: Motivation serves as a driving force behind learner's attainment of educational objectives, suggesting that learners' motivation is likely the most pivotal factor in the learning process. The significance of a student's motivation is underscored because the mere fact of students being in a classroom does not guarantee their intrinsic desire to acquire knowledge. It merely signifies their compliance with societal norms mandating school attendance (Filgona et al., 2020). In a study by Rone et al., 2023 illustrated that student's dropout of school due to Lack of Motivational, interest in student in the classroom, atmosphere due to concentration problem among students during classes or discussion that might discourage learning, difficulty in the lesson, learners are also motivated to learn due to the use of instrumental materials that are not appealing to the students.

Academic Achievement: Academic Failure is said to be one of the predictors for dropouts students, and the leading indicators for an at risk student includes failure, poor high school attendance, low course and low grade in school (M & Paul, 2016). Poor high school attendance or absenteeism have causes originating from the family, teachers behaviour, school setting and the environmental cause (Sahin et al., 2016). In other findings it was found that stress can affect academic achievement, evidently when there is too much exposure to stressful events it can lead to dropout; students with stress are at a higher risk than other students (Dupere et al, 2017).

Grade Retention: Learners that do not meet the specific requirement of any academic institution are retained in the class or Grade retention, especially in countries with limited socio-economic resources. This was implemented to enable a student to excel in their studies. However, in a study by Grossen et al., (2017) suggested that the policy of repeated scholastic retention does not contribute to academic achievement instead it is a strong predictor of eventual dropping out of school (Martin & Smith, 2017).

Cause of dropout - Contextual factors

Parenting Style: Parenting style plays a significant role in predicting dropout students in secondary school, while other factors play a minor role in predicting a student to drop out of school. In a study by Njagi & Mwania, 2017 shows that children having parents with an authoritarian parent style accounts for a high increase of dropout. It was characterised with high monitoring to show high secondary school students dropout rate as compared to permissive parenting style.

Peer relation: Apart from the parenting style that the students experience in their homes, a factor that predicts school dropout is the relationship they have with others excluding their family members. Omollo & Yambo, 2017 stated in their study on Influence of Peer Pressure on Secondary School students Drop out in Rongo Sub-Country in Kenya that peer pressure influence among secondary students, which is a kind of a social pressure on them to adopt a type of behaviour, dress or attitude in order to be accepted as part of a group, affects them positively and negatively.

Substance Abuse: A student dropout due to several reasons and substance abuse is one of the predictors of students dropping out of school. There is a significant relationship between substance abuse and dropout tendencies, which shows that secondary students abuse substances such as alcohol, marijuana, cigarette, cough syrups and others (Njoku et al., 2020). In a study by Valkov, 2018 indicates that promotion of family involvement, positive school and social behaviours can reduce the risk of substance abuse.

Significance and Need of the study

Preventive measures need to be put in place in order to curb this major problem of dropout in education. In the state there is a need for counselling intervention for students with the potential of dropping out and testing the intervention is important to implement important policies in education that would cater to the psychological needs of the student. It will promote and encourage further discussion and policy decisions by legislators and school authorities concerning students' mentality related to stress and other socio-economic factors that would push a student to drop out. Therefore, this study is conducted with the hopes that there can be a positive effect form of counselling.

Objectives

1. To identify the current students and their attitude and facilitators for dropping out of school.
2. To formulate suitable counselling strategies likely to be feasible, acceptable, efficient, and cost effective.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Data for this study were drawn from 849 High school students in 12 schools in both Urban and Rural area of Meghalaya, both male and female students participated in the descriptive cross-sectional study which validated a self-constructed questionnaire to measure their attitude towards dropping out of school in which, 294 out of 849 students were at risk. However, out of 12 schools a random allocation was done to select two private schools and two government schools from both Rural and Urban areas respectively for identifying as an experimental group, and 3 schools for the control group. There were 28 at-risk students within the 4-intervention school and 50 at risk students for the control group that were identified.

Materials

The at-risk students were identified using Students Attitude Towards Dropping out questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A of the questionnaire had items on the demographic profile of the student. Section B of the question has 10 statements that test the attitude of current high school students dropping out of school. The maximum score a student can obtained was 50, and the cut off score for the questionnaire was 40%, as

taking a 50% cut off score will not ensure adequate number of students required for the intervention, and based on the cut off score it was calculated that a student scoring more or less than 20 have a higher risk of dropping out of school. Student's attitude towards dropping out of school questionnaire was developed by the researcher after consulting different literature reviews and was also generated from the data collected from the teachers on the early signs' students show before dropping out of school. A Pilot study was conducted to identify problems the students are facing while filling the questionnaire, and minor changes were made to address the problems. The pilot study also helped the researcher to gain insight on the importance of the information of the Family background.

Research study design

The study design used a triangulation of method to develop the strategy by synthesising findings obtain a baseline study was conducted to identify the different factors that cause dropout among 150 students, and the importance of counselling strategy was important for students to understand the importance of education and also how different negative beliefs which affects their academic performance. In-depth interviews among 24 teachers show that the main reasons for students dropping out of school was due to negative thinking about their studies, failure, lack of interest, and poverty. The strategy was also developed based on related books and literature. The contents were revised after gathering feedback from the teachers and two Counselling Psychologists.

A quasi-experimental design was selected for this study. A random allocation was done to select schools for both the experimental and control group. For the experimental group, two private schools and two government schools from both rural areas and Shillong Municipal areas were selected. For the control group four schools were randomly selected.

Steps in Developing Counselling Strategy

The Intervention was developed based on the data that was obtained from the results collected from the school dropout students and teachers from the 12 schools which includes different factors that contribute to students dropping out of school such as poverty, lack of interest, no positive thinking and failure, the negative beliefs which affects their academic performance. Different books and articles were used as reference.

Purpose and Objective

This counselling intervention aims to counsel high school students or secondary students at risk of dropping out of school. The intervention includes the following objectives:

- To enable the group members to improve their academic performance by adopting suitable study methods
- To enable them to tackle the different beliefs and negative thoughts that can hinder their academic performance and to come up with an action plan
- To inform the group about the different schemes/scholarships/grants/financial aids for higher education
- The intervention includes six sessions which includes one hour per week with a group size of 6 to 12 members.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data

The Student Attitude towards dropping out of school questionnaire, was administered for the Baseline test and Endline test for both the experimental group and control group. The collected data from the questionnaire were entered and analysed using the SPSS version 21 for Windows (IBM Corp, Chicago, IL, USA). The procedures for analysis were as follow: The Pair t-test was used to compare between the pre-test and the post-test score of the experimental group and control group, in order to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. Independent t-test was also employed to compare between the test score obtained by the experimental and control group.

Qualitative data

The qualitative data were recorded through the use of in-depth interviews, the summaries of every session, the feedback of the students, the verbatim of the sessions (session 1 - session 6). An audio recording of all the six sessions was also maintained. In the analysis a thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used.

Table 1. Analysis of the qualitative data in six steps

Step 1	Become familiar
Step 2	Generate initial codes
Step 3	Search for themes
Step 4	Review themes
Step 5	Defines themes
Step 6	Write up

RESULTS

Intervention Counselling Strategy sessions

A group counselling session was developed as a counselling strategy in this study. High school students who are at risk of dropping out of school will attend the group counselling. The desirable size for a group or an ideal number of members was somewhere between 6 and 12.

Frequency and Length of Meetings: The group members met for six sessions and for one hour per week. The number of hours in each school can also depend on the number of at-risk students in a school.

Table 2. Content of the Counselling strategy

Session	Topic / Title	Description & Objectives
1	Why are we here?	The session starts with an introduction of all the six sessions, formulation of ground rules.
2	Why is it hard to do Well?	A develop Inspirational video and a worksheet "What holds you back" with an objective to identify their belief, and different academic hindrances.
3	Your Wall	Sharing by the group members on Pros and Cons of the belief, thoughts and problems.
4	Breaking the Wall	A worksheet entitled "Goals" enables members to come up with specific goals which is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reliable, and Time-bound).

Session	Topic / Title	Description & Objectives
5	Ready, Get set. Go!	A worksheet entitled "Steps to reach Goals" enable the group members to identify factors that helps them to reach their goals.
6	Learning more on Time tables and study methods	A worksheet entitled "Time for Time Tables" helps members to plan their study methods and the session ends with another worksheet "Inspire Yourself".

Contents for the counselling sessions were developed which include:

A. An Inspirational video on a local person who have overcome failure and problems during her school days
B. Worksheets and different pictures were developed based on the main reasons of dropout and they are used in different sessions.

Outcome of Pre-intervention

An Independent t-test was used to compare the mean score of the experimental group and the control group. Table 3 shows the mean of the experimental group (M= 24.66, SD= 3.64) and the mean score of the control group (M= 23.96, SD= 3.06). The P value is 0.395 which indicates that the difference was not statistically significant, and the experimental group and control group is more or less comparable.

Table 3. Comparison of Baseline score of the experimental and control group

Group	Baseline Score (SD)	P value
Experimental (N= 28)	24.66 (3.64)	0.395
Control (N= 50)	23.96 (3.06)	

Findings of Post intervention of at-risk students

Table 4 shows that the end line score of the experimental group was lesser (M= 16.53 ± 2.2) than the control group (M= 25 ± 5.2) and the difference was found to be statistically significant as the p value= 0.000.

Table 4. Comparison of the Endline score of the experimental and control group

Group	Baseline Score (SD)	P value
Experimental (N= 28)	16.53 (2.2)	0.000
Control (N= 50)	25 (5.2)	

Comparison of the Baseline score and Endline score of the Experimental and Control group

Using a Paired t-test it was found that there was a statistically significant reduction in the score of the experimental group (from a baseline of 23.96 ± 3.06 to an End line score of 16.53 ± 2.20), this implies that the intervention had a significant effect on the attitude of students towards schooling but in case of the control group there was no significant change (0.597) in the Baseline and End line scores (Baseline of 24.66 ± 3.64 and End line 25 ± 5.2).

Table 5. Comparison of the Baseline and Endline Scores of the Experimental and Control group

Score	Experimental Group (N=28)	P value	Control Group (N=50)	P value
Baseline	23.96 (3.06)	0.000	24.66 (3.64)	0.597
Endline	16.53 (2.20)		25.00 (5.20)	

Qualitative Findings

The findings in this section were gathered during the group counselling sessions in the four experimental schools in Rural and Urban Area. The theme indicates the different negative beliefs and problems, causes of negative beliefs and problems. The group counselling strategy also indicates the different themes that pushes an at-risk student to do better in life are given below:

Table 6. Themes from the Qualitative data

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Negative Beliefs and Problems	Negative beliefs and inferiority complex	"I feel shy because I keep on failing in my class" "I don't have a talent to go to school. Tired to study and I don't want to even look at my books"
	Lack of growth leads to demotivation	"The year is passing by and I feel like I'm not moving forward or going anywhere"
	Lack of skills and language	"I don't have the proper skills to study, that is why I cannot study"
Causes of Negative belief and Problems	Failure and demotivation lead to giving up or quitting	"I fail in my exams and I'm embarrassed to study because I am holder in position and I do not have any more confidence"
	Lack of language competency	"I don't understand English properly and it's very difficult to understand what the teacher is teaching in class, and it's very tough now"
	Failure to think of potential education	"I want to go and work like my friends, they are laborers, some of them work in the welding company, and I don't want to go to school especially if I have to study, and my friend told me that working is better than school because you can get money"
Opinions to Improve Academic Performance	Personal preference for studying	"I like to study during night time because early morning I cannot wake up, so I study only after dinner"
	Positive effect of motivation	"I study during morning time, because in the morning I am able to study since it is still fresh"
	Pushed to achieve success	"When My friend pass nicely in the exams, it feels like if she can do well in exams why I cannot do well in exams"
		"I keep on failing therefore, I want to study properly, my parents inspire me every now and then. I fail in the first year so I study hard in the second year. I should forget all the shame, and to study hard so that I will not feel a shame in life later"

DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings strongly suggest that the students before participating in the group counselling strategy had negative beliefs about themselves, during the group counselling sessions the students share that continuous failing in class made them believe that they are not good enough in their studies, and that they lack talent, and eventually lack interest in their studies. The result in a study by Fan & Wolters, 2014 also demonstrated that students' ability is mediated by students' educational experience which can also be one of the possible reasons for drop out because students are expected to pass in every grade, and failure leads them to develop negative beliefs about their capabilities.

Lack of skills and language is one of the findings, in this study, that leads to drop out. For instance- one of the students in the intervention stated that "I find it difficult in studying because I cannot understand English properly." One of the possible reasons for this difficulty might be, because the majority of the students come from rural areas in some of the schools in this study.

Failure and demotivation can lead to giving up or quitting, Lack of language competency, and Failure to think of the potential of education are the main causes that students at risk of dropping out face in this study, one of the possible reason for this is failure to understand the importance of education, as one of the student stated that "I'm tired to study, all my friends are working and I do not like studying."

In this study the at-risk students have come up with different opinions on how to improve academic performance. The students were given a worksheet "What pushes you to do better in life." Based on this worksheet one of the main points is personal understanding of oneself which includes the perfect time to study. One student answered, "Night time because early morning I cannot wake because I cannot wake up in the morning so night time only I like study after having dinner." Other students said one's personal growth pushed by motivation, like one of the students said "seeing my friend passed motivates me.", and others said that their parents, brothers motivate the students to study. Another research has shown that strong positive believes are likely to foster if parents, teachers, and administers provide students with a supportive instructional climate, educational programs, and activities that improve their motivation (Fan & Wolters, 2014).

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Conflict of Interest

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