

An Approach to Identify Potential Mental Health Counsellors amongst School Teachers

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Abstract

An orientation course was conducted to sensitise teachers to emotional problems of children. One hundred and eleven teachers were given a brief orientation course on causation, identification and referral of behaviour and emotional problems, poor school performance, psychosomatic illness, speech disorders, epilepsy and psychoses amongst school children.

An evaluation of information gained and of counselling potential of the participants was conducted by comparing their performance on specific parameters before and after the course. The trainee teachers showed significant gain in information. Their counselling potential as rated by four independent raters also showed significant improvement. The study highlights the rationale and methodology of one of the methods for detecting potential mental health workers.

Key words -

**Mental Health Counsellors,
School teachers,
Identification**

It is generally agreed upon now that in developing countries, mental health care programmes could be effective only if the scarcity of professionals could be compensated by utilising para-professionals and non-professionals. The authors have been involved in developing a variety of strategies involving para-professionals and non-professionals. One such attempt has been in the direction of mental health problems amongst children as well as in counselling work. In addition, the present study envisages no financial expenditure and makes use of manpower resources already available in the community.

Earlier attempts were to develop and evaluate suitable training strategies [1], [2], [3]. During the course of work it was felt that not only is it necessary to develop training programmes which would bring the best out of teachers but also identify amongst the teachers those who had the best potential for responding to these training programmes. There is no doubt that personality and motivational factors must be associated with such potential but earlier attempts to relate personality profiles to counselling potential utilising psychometric tests have not been particularly successful [4], [5], [6].

The present paper describes an exercise to develop a methodology of picking up potential counsellor based on an innovative approach.

Method

An orientation course was conducted in a school catering mainly to socioeconomically deprived section of the population in the city of Bangalore, India. The school has 6230 students and 138 teachers but no temporary structures with overcrowded class rooms. This unfortunately typifies the available learning atmosphere for large majority of poor Indians. The course was conducted separately for primary, middle and high school teachers. This course has developed out of a previous attempts at training school teachers [1] and booklet .

Available with the first author

has been prepared which was given to the teachers.

The authors feel that instead of concentrating on abstract personality and motivational factors it might be better to rely upon the quality of responses the teachers give to concrete situations depicting common mental health problems amongst school children and the capacity they show in improving on their responses after an orientation programme, preliminary to training in counselling.

The evaluation was conducted before and after the course with the help of two tools:

- (a) a questionnaire with questions of 'information' about mental illness, epilepsy, emotional behaviour and psychosomatic problems in children and
- (b) a set of vignettes depicting hypothetical situations which were encountered as problem situations in authors' previous work with school teachers.

The trainee teachers were asked to describe how they would face those situations. The responses were then assessed in a global fashion for counselling potential by four independent raters. (0 = poor, 1 = average, 2 = good responses). Two of the raters were those who had supervised the orientation course and the other two had no connection with this particular course though they were well versed in the field of child mental health. No formal guidelines were given for scoring of counselling potential except that it was understood that those whose responses were compassionate, understanding and pragmatic would have a higher counselling potential. Ten hypothetical situations were provided and they are briefly given in Appendix 1.

Results

1. Demographic description

One hundred and eleven teachers participated in the course on a voluntary basis. The group consisted of 45 males and 66 females. 92 were married and 19 were single. There were 37 teachers in the 21-30 years age range, 55 in the 31-40 years age range, 17 in the 41-45 years range and 2 in the 51-55 years range, 81 teachers had high school education while 30 had university education. Average teaching experience of the teacher was 12 and ½ years.

Out of 111 teachers who attended the orientation programme, 80 have been assessed before and after the course. The rest has missed out either the pre-assessment or the post-assessment due to various reasons. Those who completed the pre and post-assessment, and those who did not, were comparable

on the various demographic variables. The subsequent description pertains to these 80 teachers, 34 of them teach in the primary school, 26 in the middle school and 20 in the high school. Nearly all the primary and middle school teachers are matriculates while all the high school teachers have an university education.

2.Improvement in information

The Table below shows the changes in information regarding issues on mental health as tested by the questionnaire. The opinions of the teacher trainees both before and after the course were compared with consensus of opinion of the supervisors. It can be seen that on seven of the eleven items there is a statistically significant improvement in concurrence, with supervisor's opinion (items 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 10). On the other items (4, 11 and 12) there is, in fact, a slight decrease in concurrence with supervisor's opinion though not statistically significant. On item 5 there is no change at all.

Table I - Changes in 'knowledge' items towards the problems of children before and after the course (N:80)

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3.Improvement in counselling potential:

This is discussed under four headings.

- (a) Reliability of measurement
- (b) Assessment of group performance
- (c) Assessment of individual performance, and
- (d) Individual performance and socio demographic factors(a)

Reliability of measurement:

The four raters rated the responses to the hypothetical situations on a three point scale before and after the course.

Analysis of variance techniques was applied to compare the judgements of the four raters. The correlation coefficient between the raters is extremely high being 0.99 (F = 75.92) before and 0.98 (F = 46.42) after the course. This indeed is satisfactory.

(b)

Assessment of group performance:

The Table II shows that there is statistically significant overall improvement in group average from 83.79 to 99.17 (P < 0.02). A closer examination of the Table shows that for two vignettes (4 & 7), the initial score was already so high that not much improvement was expected. For the first and the second initial scores were low and yet no improvement occurred. There was improvement in the scores for the rest but reached statistical significance for the last 3 vignettes only.

Table II - The relationship of situations and counselling potential elicited by them (N = 80)

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(c)

Assessment of individual performance:

Individual performance of 65 per cent of 80 trainees showed improvement and it is statistically significant in 11 per cent of the subjects. However 35 per cent of them show decrement and 5 per cent of them at statistically significant level. Paired 't' test is employed to test the significance.

(d)

Individual performance and socio-demographic factors:

Those who had shown some improvement in scores (improved) were compared with those who had remained stable at their preassessment score or been fared worse (not improved). A number of variables - age, sex, marital status, duration of teaching experience and educational qualifications of teachers were taken as dependent variables and 't' tests was used for analysis. No statistically significant results were observed for any of the variables except educational qualification of the teacher. Those with university education had proportionately less amongst them who had improved as compared to matriculates and the difference was statistically significant at 0.001 level.

Discussion

1. The reliability of tools of evaluation

The most satisfactory aspect of the exercise is the construction of a tool of assessing counselling potential which has a very high inter investigator reliability. Not only the reliability is high between the two investigators who were involved in running the course which is not unexpected - but also between them and two others who were not involved in the course and for whom only data to draw conclusions were the problem vignettes and responses of various trainee teachers. This high reliability was obtained in spite of the fact that no formal guidelines were given to the assessment except to look for, arrange the responses on a 3 point scale according to what they individually judge their 'counselling potential' to be.

The assessors could globally assess counselling potential with a fair degree of reliability. In addition, the responses of the trainee teachers to problem vignettes a sufficiently explicit for the assessors to make their judgement.

The fact that the group performance as tested through this instrument improves after course might be taken as the evidence of its validity. Such a conclusion would be erroneous, for if the group performance had not improved might have been due to poor teaching. The real test of validity would only come after the second phase of the study is over. In this phase a group of teachers (including some who scored poorly) are being trained in counselling and would be assessed for their effectiveness as counsellors in the realistic setting of the school after the course is over.

The information questionnaire does not need any check on inter investigator reliability for obvious reasons. The questions are so simple and applied to the contents of the course that an acceptance of the face validity should be sufficient.

2. Improvement in group performance.

The results show that after a very brief orientation course the performance on both questionnaire as well as the set of problem vignettes has shown some improvement.

It might be worthwhile to examine the results on individual items on which the improvement did not occur. In the information questionnaire, most items on which the improvement did not occur were such

where the agreement with supervisors opinion was already high before the course. One item needs special mention. This is item 4 -'poor performance is often due to emotional problems'. On this item the agreement has actually come down though it is not statistically significant. It appears to the authors that this freak result might be due to the fact that during discussion many realistic problems like poor economic situation and parental and peer group conflicts were considered and given their due importance and this might have watered down the importance of 'emotional problems'.

In the set of problem vignettes, the two items on which there was no improvement were No. 2 i.e., 'bright child who is restless and distractible during the class' and No. 5 '.....unreasonable teacher who is the cause of the problems'. In the first case the authors feel that the teachers having worked in very depressed socioeconomic context were not equipped to deal with such bright children. On the second item perhaps raised personal anxieties. Findings such as these during the evaluation provide guidelines as to what should be focussed upon extensively in the teaching sessions.

3.Assessment of individual performance

Though 65 per cent out of the 80 teachers improved in performance the fact that 35 per cent showed decrement cannot be overlooked. Some of the reasons for this were obvious during the training session. These were poor motivation, distractibility, poor involvement in discussion etc. To some teachers additional burden of counselling to what they consider (which is a fact) to be heavy chores already must not have been a pleasant prospect. In this context the finding that 52 improved and nine of them exceptionally so is very encouraging. Thus a small band of dedicated teachers perhaps could handle effectively emotional problems of children in the school set up.

4.Sociodemographic characteristics related to improvement in performance

It is surprising that the only characteristic which was significantly associated with improvement was education level of teachers and contrary to a common sense expectation, those with university education performed poorly than matriculates.

The base line performance of the two groups was similar. On an enquiry subsequent to the analysis of results it was discovered that the former teach higher classes where different teachers teach variety of subjects while the latter teach junior classes where one teacher teaches all subjects in a class and consequently is much more closely related to a group of children as compared to those teaching higher classes. This, the authors feel could be an explanation for the unexpected results.

Conclusions

1. The instruments developed to pick out the counselling potential are reliable but assessment of their validity has to wait till full training programme is over.
 2. There is an overall improvement in knowledge and response to vignettes depicting problems.
 3. A majority of teachers show improvement in knowledge and response to problem situations after a short orientation programme.
 4. Teachers closely associated with children show better performance than those who are in touch with children for brief intervals.
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Appendix I

1. A child suddenly becomes fearful and refuses to enter the examination hall.
 2. A very bright child who is restless and distractible in the class...
 3. A dull child who is distractible in the class....
 4. After having talked to the child sympathetically you discover that his delinquent (difficult) behaviour is due to interpersonal problems of his parents....
 5. You find a child very upset and anxious and by talking to the child sympathetically discover that an unreasonable teacher is the cause of problem...
 6. A 16 year old girl who is pregnant and terrified of her parents seeks your help.....
 7. A child on admission to nursery school clings to the mother and refuses to enter the class....
 8. A student studying in the 10th standard is due to appear for the final school examinations. She is told by her father who is a school teacher not to sit for the examination, so that hey may become an examiner for the current year....
 9. A child in your class has physical deformities and other children make fun of him.....
 10. A child suddenly gets 'fits' in the class....
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