

School Counseling in Lebanon: Past, Present, and Future

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This article examines the status of school counseling in Lebanon. An overview that points out some weakness in the educational system, such as high dropout and repetition rates, is presented. Calls for counseling have been voiced partly because of the psychological consequences of social change, such as political instability in Lebanon. A sample of school counselors in public and private schools were surveyed. Private school counselors reported fewer stressors and more rewards than did their counterparts in public schools.

Lebanon is a small country on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea populated by approximately 4 million people, of which 96,000 are students (K–12) and 78,644 (Centre de Recherche et de Développement Pédagogiques [CRDP], 2007) are school teachers. When it comes to schooling, Lebanon has always included the three following systems: public schools, private subsidized religiously affiliated schools, and nonsubsidized private schools.

Most Lebanese who can afford the tuition fees prefer to send their children to private schools because they believe such schools provide better education and discipline. In fact, private school education has always played a major role in Lebanon, especially during and after the 1975–1990 Civil War as it grew to fill the gap left by the weakened public education system. Nonetheless, due to the worsening economic conditions in the aftermath of the war, enrollment levels in public schools increased.

Education is to some degree centralized in Lebanon because both public and private schools are required to follow the curriculum set by the country's Ministry of Education (MOE), in which Lebanese students are required to sit for government exams such as the Brevet Diploma (official equivalence of graduation from middle school) and the Baccalaureate Diploma (official equivalence of college freshman completion level). Private schools also offer additional programs such as the American high school program, the French Baccalaureate, and the International Baccalaureate. The elementary school system consists of a 6-year cycle, starting at age 6 years and terminating at age 11 years. Schooling for adolescents is divided into two levels: the 3-year intermediate cycle (ages 12 to 15 years) and a 3-year secondary cycle (ages 15 to 18 years). This program is divided into four tracks: scientific, humanities, economics, and technical/vocational (Center for Educational Research & Development, 1995). In general, the education sector witnessed some progress after 1990 and at the conclusion of the civil war: Primary education (Grades 1 to 8) is almost universal, with the net enrollment ratio at 91.2%; the net enrollment in secondary education (Grades 9 to 13) reached 70% in 1999; and, in the same year, the adult literacy rate reached 88% (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2004).

Despite the general improvement in all areas of education, some weaknesses remain. For example, high dropout (15%) and repetition rates (11%) at the secondary level are observed, whereas school life expectancy is 13 years for girls and 12.7 years for boys (UNICEF, 2004). A major setback is observed for schools in southern Lebanon and in the southern suburb of Beirut because of Israeli air strikes that damaged or destroyed at least 180 school buildings (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2006).

Development of School Counseling

In the last 40 years, there have been calls for the development of school counseling services in Lebanon (Bsat-Juma, 1994; Nassif, 1960; Saigh, 1984; Theodory, 1982). The need for school counseling is partly attributed to the inevitable psychological consequences of ongoing rapid social change, including the political instability of Lebanon (Moracco, 1978; Saigh, 1984; Soitman, 1986). In addition to such commentaries, empirical research results lent support for these calls and helped shed some light on the need for as well as obstacles to the development of school counseling services in Lebanon. A number of researchers found that Lebanese students experienced a range of social, emotional, academic, and/or physical problems to which the school staff, and sometimes parents, were insensitive to or not qualified to intervene (Kazandjian, 1975; Nassif, 1960; Theodory, 1982).

Other findings revealed that educators in Lebanon were aware of students' need for guidance and psychological assistance. They were also in favor of implementing school counseling programs led by trained counselors (Bsat-Juma, 1994; Day, 1983; Kurani, 1970). Furthermore, empirical studies that included counseling services to students showed positive outcomes in dealing with a range of students' needs (Day, 1983; Kazandjian, 1975).

Despite these findings, advancements in the area of school counseling in Lebanon were slow to develop. Most of the developments made were observed in the area of career guid-

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ance. The most sustained effort was the establishment of the Career Guidance Center at the American University of Beirut in 1985, which emerged in part because of the lack of career guidance and counseling services in Lebanon's schools. The Hariri Foundation originally established the Career Guidance Center as a means of assisting its funded Lebanese youth in selecting a major to pursue their higher education abroad. By the year 1993, the center grew to provide broader counseling services to college students in general and infused career education in the curriculum of several schools in the country (Hajj & Hamadeh, 1993). (In 1996, the Career Guidance Center moved back to the Hariri Foundation and became a part of its administrative channel under the title of Career Guidance Department [www.hariri-foundation.org.lb].) The Career Guidance Department at the Hariri Foundation has been holding a large-scale national annual career fair for the last 12 years. Yet, the aforementioned efforts have not yielded far-reaching consequences for Lebanese students in the area of career guidance and counseling as discussed later in this article. (A number of the ideas presented in the next section are based on the personal experience of the third author as a trainer of public school teachers, over a period of 4 years, and in her capacity as a UNICEF consultant on a school counseling project.)

Present State of School Counseling

Until June 2006, an estimated 35% of all preschool, primary, intermediate, and secondary students in Lebanon were enrolled in public schools (CRDP, 2007). This number is expected to increase further because of the devastating impact of the recent July 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon's national economy. The majority of the remaining students were enrolled in private schools (53%) or in subsidized private schools (12%; CRDP, 2007). When it comes to school counseling, a large discrepancy exists between the public and private school sectors in counselor preparation, qualifications, workload, and conditions. This discrepancy has important implications to envisioning a unified policy and professional standards for the practice of school counseling in the Lebanese context; therefore, we discuss school counseling in the two sectors separately.

School Counseling in Public Schools

Currently, there are school counselors present in approximately 100 public elementary and middle schools out of 619 public schools throughout Lebanon (CRDP, 2007); these counselors are assisted by a total of 20 school counseling coordinators. This came about through the efforts of the MOE's Office of Guidance and Counseling, in cooperation with UNICEF's Beirut office, which took the first step to train school counselors in 1996. In 2002, 120 elementary and middle school teachers with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience and holding at least a bachelor's degree in psychology, sociology, or philosophy were trained. Training

included theoretical and practical components that targeted a preventive developmental approach to school counseling and a follow-up phase during which the trainees applied supervised school counseling activities (for more details on the training program, see Mukallid, 2005). In 2003, the trained counselors were then appointed as teachers/counselors, with 25% of their workload assigned to teaching and 75% of their workload assigned to counseling.

It is important to note that these trained teachers/counselors and coordinators continue to maintain counseling services in their schools in the absence of policies, professional role statements, standards for the practice of school counseling at the MOE, and compensation for their additional counseling and coordination responsibilities. Further pressure has been added to their workload in public schools because they have been working in more than one school due to a shortage of trained counselors. Counselors complain of a shortage of affordable or government-sponsored supportive psychological services outside the school context for referral purposes. Such services are greatly needed, especially because public school students belong to relatively low-income families that cannot afford the expensive psychological services in Lebanon. The practicing school counselors do not hold academic degrees in school counseling, but they base their practice on an intensive in-service training program that focused primarily on the relatively recent developmental preventive school counseling approach. Accordingly, school counselors in public schools are in need of further training in individual counseling skills and crisis intervention as well as in developing a counseling curriculum that will serve as a major component of a comprehensive developmental school guidance and counseling program (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2003).

Public school counselors ($n = 42$) were surveyed while undergoing training about what they considered rewards and stressors in their work. The top five common rewards among 70% ($n = 30$) of the participants were regarded as (a) supportive parents, (b) cooperative school administration, (c) students' positive feedback, (d) meeting a dire need for counseling among students, and (e) making a difference in students' lives. In contrast, the share of common stressors was more than double among 65% ($n = 28$) of the participants than that of the rewards. Among the salient stressors were (a) lack of cooperation from school administration and from parents; (b) unavailability of private rooms for counseling; (c) viewing counseling as additional workload; (d) the stigma of seeing a counselor among peers and other teachers; (e) regarding counselors as disciplinarians; (f) reluctance of students to disclose to a stranger, a cultural attitude to some degree; (g) counselors' need of further training; and (h) not believing that counseling is worthwhile.

School Counseling in Private Schools

To gain more information on the practice of school counseling in Lebanese private schools, we developed and distributed a

short survey to 11 counselors practicing in private schools. The survey included questions about the counselor's duties, the academic level of the students served, the stresses and rewards of being a school counselor, and a free response question regarding potential problems the respondent would like to address in his or her role as a school counselor.

The majority (9 out of 11) of the surveyed counselors indicated they worked with students from all levels (kindergarten to secondary school), and the 2 remaining counselors worked with secondary students. This stands in contrast with counseling services in the public school sector, which are restricted to the elementary and middle schools. All but 2 respondents reported being the only counselor in their school, a finding that has implications for the ratio of students per counselor because the surveyed counselors work with more than triple the number of recommended students per counselor (ASCA, 2003).

Eight out of the 11 respondents reported allocating most of their yearly duties to individual counseling with students, which indicates an emphasis on the remedial function of counseling in the surveyed private schools. The preventive and developmental functions of school counseling, on the other hand, were not represented in the responses. Nonetheless, almost all counselors reported engaging in a number of other duties, mostly responding to crises and consulting with parents. Some notable inconsistencies were observed in the prevalence of different duties counselors engage in across the schools, which may indicate ambiguity regarding the actual duties of school counselors in the Lebanese context. Bsat-Juma (1994) commented on this issue, as her survey of school directors, teachers, and parents revealed that they all had very different expectations of a school counselor's role and function.

It is interesting to note that although 9 respondents work with secondary students, 3 of them do not provide any career counseling services and 6 counselors allocate a very small percentage. These observations are in line with Oueini and Abdo's (1999) findings concerning the dearth and underdevelopment of career guidance programs in the 14 Lebanese private schools they surveyed within the greater Beirut area. They further pointed to the very limited effects of the Career Guidance Center's efforts to infuse career education in the curriculum of Lebanese school systems (see earlier section).

When asked about the greatest stressors of being a counselor, most respondents listed overloaded schedules ($n = 7$) and/or issues related to dealing with the students' parents, whom they perceive as careless about their children's education ($n = 4$), abusive toward their children ($n = 1$), overinvolved in the counselor's work ($n = 1$), or too permissive in their parenting style ($n = 1$). Two counselors reported their need for more training as a great source of stress, and 1 counselor commented on the lack of resources in the community.

On the other hand, when the surveyed counselors were asked about the most rewarding aspects of their job, they almost unanimously identified "seeing kids succeed after some kind of

hardship" ($n = 9$) and "being able to be part of students' lives" ($n = 9$). Seven counselors additionally identified "getting students interested in their future" as a rewarding aspect. Five counselors included additional rewards, such as "fixing" learning problems, helping parents or teachers improve their skills, and providing room for children to express themselves.

Finally, the respondents were asked to list any problems they would like to address in their role as a school counselor. The majority of the statements revolved around the following themes: problems with parents, teachers, and/or community members lacking knowledge about counseling and its importance and students' misconceptions of and apprehensions toward counseling.

The qualifications and training of the surveyed counselors in the private schools are as follows: Of the 11 counselors surveyed, 5 held a master's degree in educational psychology, with emphasis on school guidance and counseling; 1 counselor had completed a master's degree in educational administration; 2 counselors held a master's degree in psychology; and 3 counselors held a master's degree in sociology. All counselors but one received their degrees from Lebanon. This type of training is different from what Saigh (1984) observed in the mid-1980s, when most counselors were trained abroad. This fact reflects a change in trend and in the educational background of counselors.

Despite their scarcity, counselors come to practice from various academic backgrounds, where psychology and sociology are the most frequent areas of specialization. This could be explained in terms of the shortage of colleges and universities in Lebanon that offer degrees in school counseling. Three out of 41 private universities in Lebanon offer a master's degree with an emphasis in school guidance and counseling. These universities have an American orientation in curriculum and instruction, and their tuition fees are relatively high. School counseling does not exist as an area of specialization, neither at the main French-speaking university in Lebanon nor at the national Lebanese University.

■ Impediments to School Counseling

Leadership was found to be a very important ingredient for the development of school guidance and counseling practices in states in the United States (Gysbers, 2006) and in some Arab countries (e.g., see Al-Sarraf, 1993, in Kuwait, and Farah, 1992, in Jordan). Such governmental involvement and initiatives have not been observed in Lebanon, even when related researched and documented recommendations were put forth for this purpose (CRDP, 2007). Most governmental efforts that were observed took place in the area of special education, which was considered to fall under the umbrella of guidance and counseling (G. El-Murr, personal communication, October 18, 2006). Although the MOE took part in the training and appointment of school counselors, school counseling is not yet fully part of the educational process. Because Lebanon has in the past and

continues to find itself in an almost permanent state of political instability and conflict, this may have served as one of the obstacles to governmental initiatives—an obstacle that was possibly aggravated by the sectarianism and institutional corruption brought about by and sustained through political conflict.

In addition to interfering with state involvement, war and conflict in Lebanon hampered school counseling developments on a number of other levels as well. Hostilities have made it difficult for counselors to reach certain regions and to conduct fieldwork, and a number of schools have been destroyed, especially in South Lebanon. These factors might partially account for why most school counselors are present in and around the capital Beirut (Ayyash-Abdo, 2003).

Another factor that possibly impeded the development of formal school counseling in Lebanon was the problematic use of imported foreign assessment tools in the Lebanese context, without much consideration for cross-cultural validation and the meaning of these tools in the Lebanese cultural context (Saigh, 1984). This problem might have been further exacerbated by the fact that the majority of school counselors received their training in the West (Day, 1983). This reliance on Western intellectual products and models can be observed across a large number of psychological studies and psychologists in Lebanon and in the Arab world and is considered detrimental to the development of science and practice in the field (Zebian, Alamuddin, Maalouf, & Chatila, 2007). The most common factors cited as needing special attention in the development of school counseling programs are those of distinct family patterns and child-rearing practices observed in Lebanese society, difficult and highly demanding school environments, and issues of adaptation to modernization among youth (Ayyash-Abdo, 2005; Brinson & Al-amri, 2005; Moracco, 1978; Soitman, 1986). Consequently, Ayyash-Abdo (2005) proposed an ecological model to school counseling for Lebanon.

Suggestions and Future Trends

Accelerated technological, economic, and social changes on the national and global levels necessitate significant adjustments on the part of the Lebanese government in collaboration with international governmental organizations in promoting school counseling. Chronic instability in Lebanon due to violence is another factor that exacerbates the need for school counseling services. Based on the limited empirical data provided by school counselors in both public and private schools and two of the authors' (the first and the third) experiences in two of the major universities in Lebanon, the following suggestions are set forth:

1. The MOE should establish a policy to integrate school counseling into the educational system at all levels. Educators and policy makers need to provide consistent quality education that includes the integration of school counseling throughout all schools, be they public or private. The old elitist approach

should be replaced by a more equitable and participatory platform, where all are concerned (parents, students, teachers, universities) realize that they have a stake in implementing school counseling at all levels (Ayyash-Abdo, Bahous, & Nabhani, 2009).

2. The MOE should pass legislation stating goal directives and procedural outlines concerning the regulations, practice, and licensing of guidance counselors. The Office of Guidance and Counseling in the MOE should develop a functional syndicate of school counselors. A qualitative leap in this domain is needed in lieu of the fact that military action is commonplace in the recent history of Lebanon (El-Amine et al., 2008).

3. A professional counseling association (once formed) will contribute to the development of professional identity among Lebanese counselors and will serve to promote accreditation standards, quality control, continuing education, as well as ethical conduct.

4. Higher education institutions in Lebanon are in a position to advance school counseling. Attention needs to be given to developing a school counseling curriculum as a major at the graduate level as opposed to merely an emphasis. Part of the training should focus on promoting resilience among students through improving academic performance, engaging in relational networking with family and friends, and active participation in community service.

5. More effort is required to clarify the role and purpose of school counseling. This effort should be focused on a framework that includes a developmental, preventive, and remedial function. An ecological approach that is multilayered and multifunctional and addresses the student's ecosystem is seen as one fitting approach to the Lebanese context. As such, special attention should target those who are most vulnerable, for example, children and youth from a low socioeconomic status and in areas with high exposure to warlike events.

Finally, affordable counseling services need to be extended outside educational settings, such as community mental health centers. Given the chronic state of political instability, war, and military intervention, community mental health centers that are geared to deal with the resulting imbalances of social structures would be vital for psychological well-being (El-Amine et al., 2008). This initiative will require government support and collaboration of different ministries. Such a center will not only facilitate referral from schools but also will provide access to mental health services to all Lebanese.

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