



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal homepage: <http://www.journalijar.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Mapping out the potential role for Sri Lankan school counselor: An exploratory study

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#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History:

Received: 17 March 2015  
Final Accepted: 18 April 2015  
Published Online: May 2015

##### Key words:

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#### Abstract

Globally, school counseling programs vary in format and the extent to which they are implemented (Gysbers, Lapan, & Blair, 1999). Reviewed comprehensive school counseling programs, seemed to map out a holistic role for the school counselors. Hence, while emphasizing the significance of school counselors' time direct services to students with a broader perspective they also seem to recommend reaching out to the support communities of the students as well as services such as advocacy and research. Following this global tradition, the article evaluates the present role of the Sri Lankan school counselor based on global as well as local parameters and outlines potential role of school counselors for the future based on the needs of the Sri Lankan students and their support communities such as teachers, school administrators, parents and the community at large. The article also provides suggestions and recommendations to the policy makers, teacher educators and school counselors in the Sri Lankan milieu.

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## INTRODUCTION

Large number of Sri Lankan students experience difficult situations and require solutions to challenging problems (Pathirana, 2014; De Zoysa, Rajapakse & Newcombe, 2004). Majority of the children in those difficult circumstances cannot think of solutions on their own to those problems. Moreover, the adults they interact with or friends they associate may not be able come up with workable/effective answers to the problems they experience. Therefore, they may require speaking to professionals who has the capacity to be non-judgmental and empathetic when addressing these issues. Hence, school counselors are in a unique position to provide services to children who display a typical behavior and children who experience difficult situations stemming from conflict within their varied embedded ecological spheres.

Moreover, since school may also be perceived as a surrogate home by children they may often will share home conditions/problems/conflicts experienced at home with teachers and school counselors that they may not disclose to other adults with whom they come in contact. As a result, school personnel are the first to know or gain insights that something is not right in the child's world.

Hence, there can be many advantages of aligning school counseling closely with the Sri Lankna educational initiatives. Especially given the current emphasis on school accountability and student performance, it is certainly prudent to note school counselors' many and unique contributions to student success (Green & Keys, 2001).

#### Potential role of school counselors in Sri Lanka

The aim of this articles is to present and discuss the potential role of the Sri Lankan school counselors in the context of Assessment; Consultation, Advocacy and Research. In doing so it accepts that the roles and responsibilities of the school counselors may vary due to geographical variations, number and needs of students in the school, nature of

the school community. It also acknowledges that potential role of the school counselors may also be based on the perceptions of what school administrators think as appropriate.

Moreover, the present article also believes that the Sri Lankan school counselors need to expand or change their roles in how they respond to student needs, from quasi therapists to relief teachers. Targeting students' academic struggles in isolation from external factors (e.g., issues occurring outside of school such as domestic violence) limits schools in addressing the struggling issues/ needs of the students and prevents from building on the assets of students and their communities. The article also is of the opinion that factors such as poor teacher quality, low morale, negative school climates (e.g., corporal punishment, expulsion of students), and limited family involvement cripple the capacity of schools to meet the vast needs of students. Further, research suggests that comprehensive, data-driven school counseling programs are more effective over disjointed, haphazard interventions for contributing to student outcomes such as student test scores, grades, school satisfaction and school climate and safety (Dimmit, 2003; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Sink & Stroh, 2003).

### **1. Assessment**

Cohen, Swerdlik, and Phillips (1996), defines psychological assessment as “the gathering and integration of psychology-related data for the purpose of making a psychological evaluation, accomplished through the use of tools such as tests, interviews, case studies, behavioral observation, and specially designed apparatuses and measurement procedures” (p. 6). Since school counselors work with students, parents and staff to help determine their academic skills, learning aptitudes, social/ emotional skills, behavior issues, learning environments, and special education eligibility; assessment could be viewed as one of the fundamental potential role of the Sri Lankan school counselor.

However, in the Sri Lankan context standardized psychological tests and assessments protocols have been a rare luxury available for an exceptionally few students. Even those assessments available were carried out using outdated ‘culture bias’ assessment tools, developed elsewhere in the world. Hence, the present article recommends the policy makers to develop culture friendly psychological assessment tools, and train Sri Lankan school counselors to administer them under the mentorship of more experienced counselors who had completed supervised internships. The article also recommends the Ministry of education, National Institute of Education (NIE) and universities offering counselling and psychology courses to develop standardized psychological tests and check lists (e.g. risk assessment criteria), as well as developing good practices of conducting interviews/ focus groups. The article envisions such tests would help school counselors to identify academic as well as social emotional need/issues within students of diverse developmental milestones. It is also envisaged that such measures would pave the way to create national as well as regional norms of intelligence, achievement and aptitude of the Sri Lankan student population.

### **2. Consultation**

The article is of the opinion that the school counselors must strategically tackle the educational, social and emotional challenges their students experience by engaging family, school and community members. The article is of the opinion such approaches would help close the achievement gap, strengthen the surrounding community and promotes psychosocial wellbeing within the students. In order to achieve this broad goal literature conveys that school counsellors require to identify the significance of including students, their families and teachers as well as school administration in school-based interventions (Holcomb-McCoy,2004) and partnering with the above mentioned sectors to create healthy school environments.

This article prefers to explore the concept consultation as relevant to the Sri Lankan context, mapping out the role of the school counsellors employing the framework of culturally competent model presented by Lee (2001) which provide four primary levels of service, they are: providing support to students, providing services for parents and families, interventions with educators, and community involvement.

#### **2.1. Providing support to students**

The article is of the opinion that activities to provide support to students can be carried out in several ways as mentioned below.

### **2.1.1. Conducting prevention programs for students**

A growing global trend in the field of counselling is the focus on prevention instead of intervention (WHO, 2002). Though school counsellors may have interacted with the students only after some crisis had occurred, in the past; at present there is a global recognition shift in the role of school counsellors to intercede prior to any incidents and to become more proactive in developing and enacting school wide prevention plans.

Therefore, the present article recommends conducting prevention programs on a regular basis for Sri Lankan students; as a potential role responsibility for the Sri Lankan counsellor. The article is also of the opinion that the school counselors need to prepare for this potential role by planning suitable prevention programs, collecting/developing resource materials and executing them in a manner developmentally/ geographically appropriate for their students. The article also endorses the value of reaching majority of the students in the school to participate in these preventive psycho-educational programs.

The article also identifies the potential content of the prevention programs such as social skill training for students (e.g. acquiring attitudes, knowledge, and interpersonal skills to understand and respect themselves and others), preventing bullying in schools, conducting study skills programs, implementing programs to build positive connections between students and the rest of the school community, identifying potential learning difficulties of the students, and designing preventive programs for children at risk.

The article is of the opinion that in prevention tolerance of diversity needs to be addressed as it is an important goal in a multicultural society as in Sri Lanka. The article recognizes that school counselors need to help all students to accept others regardless of sex, age, race, sexual orientation, culture, disability, or religious beliefs. While commending the considerable interest the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2013) has taken in peace education and harmony in Sri Lankan schools by setting up a sub branch of peace education; the article makes recommendation to the Ministry to systematically train school counsellors to fulfil this potential role through structured training programs, workshops, internships and monitoring/supervision.

### **2.1.2. Conducting intervention programs**

- **Develop individualized solutions for learning and adjustment**

One of the important potential role of the Sri Lankan school counsellors, the present article foresee is to design and deliver comprehensive intervention programs that promote student achievements as well as their social emotional wellbeing. The present study believes that these programs need to be comprehensive in scope, preventive in design and developmental in nature.

Traditionally, individual and group counselling approaches have been used as methods of intervention when dealing with student problems (Ministry of Education, 2013; Balasuriya, 2003; NIE, 2014) by the school counsellors in addition to approaches such parent-teacher conferences and referral to another professional (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). In the past, Sri Lanka school counsellors more or less seem to have followed one to one counselling approach when providing intervention for their students. In the above mentioned approaches, the student is identified as having the problem.

However, the present article proposes ecological and sociocultural perspective for Sri Lankan school counsellors in order to provide an effective and lasting change within the school community. The article believes that this perspective would remove barriers to academic and personal achievement within students. It also recommends that school counsellors should explore the interaction between home, school of the student and its impact on students' development before developing and providing interventions. Further, the article is of the opinion that once school counselors understand the impact of the ecological environment on student educational and mental health development, they would be in a unique position to create and promote policy that shifts the emphasis of interventions away from the student in their school environment to create collaborative interventions that "envelops students, families, and the contexts in which they live, work, and play".

- **Develop and implement intervention strategies to address substance abuse issues**

Substance abuse is an urgent and pressing issue which many Sri Lankan students struggle with, especially those studying in urban schools. Hence, it is proposed a potential role of the Sri Lankan school counsellors is to collect studying in urban schools. Hence, it is proposed that another potential role for the Sri Lankan school counselor would be to collect data, comprehend the depth and breadth of the substance abuse problem in their school and develop/conduct suitable intervention strategies with the assistance of the substance abuse prevention section in the Ministry of education (Ministry of Education, 2013).

- **Develop and implement intervention strategies to address at-risk students**

Since school counselors are in a unique position to comprehend and be sensitive of working with at-risk and low-socioeconomic (SES) students and their parents, the article identifies developing/ providing interventions for at-risk students and their families as one of the potential role of the Sri Lankan school counselors.

Globally as well as locally schools are taking considerable initiatives to reach students who are identified as at risk of becoming future dropouts due to poverty, social/emotional issues, behaviour, teen pregnancies and/or academic problems (Ministry of Education, 2013). Growing body of research suggest that at-risk students have special needs that must be met for them to be successful in school (Sullivan & Bishop, 2005). Literature also convey that since school counsellors receive specialized training in comparison to teachers pertaining to working with at-risk populations they would be in a unique position to meet student specific needs through the use of intervention and prevention strategies (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). The article also believes that schools which utilize the school counselor's abilities to reach this at-risk population have a better chance of meeting school wide academic and behavioural goals.

The article is also of the opinion that another extremely important potential role of the school counsellors is to work with other child psychosocial professionals such as child psychologists, paediatrician in the local hospital, probation officers, and psychosocial coordinators in order to identify parameters unique to their school, when developing and providing suitable interventions to at-risk students. Possible parameters could be mother migration to Middle East, domestic violence, poverty, death of a parent, single parent family, child in kinship care due to varied causes, parental unemployment/ terminal illness, and child abuse or prolonged absenteeism.

- **Develop and implement intervention strategies for students who have experienced abuse**

Given that Sri Lankan children and adolescents' spend a large amount of their time in school; teachers and school counsellors working in the field of education are in a unique position to contribute to child abuse and neglect detection and prevention. Hence, it could be said teachers and school counsellors have a unique role in child protection having far reaching influence because they are able to observe early signs of abuse, such as changes in behaviour or failure to develop typically.

However, the cultural milieu of Sri Lanka, which spontaneously expects a child's obedience, seems to perceive corporal punishment as a common and usual disciplinary strategy (Jayaweera & Gunawardhna, 2010; de Silva, 2007). It may explain the high prevalence of the corporal punishment (de Silva, 2007; de Silva, 2004) even though the government of Sri Lanka has banned the practice of it (Ministry of Education, 2008). Moreover, literature repeatedly conveys the adverse physical, and psychological effects of all forms of child abuse on children (Gershoff, 2002; de Silva, 2004; de Soyza, Newcomb & Rajapakse, 2008) as well as its negative long term effects such as delinquency in adolescence, spousal & child abuse and crime outside the family (Straus, 1991). Though measures have been taken to create awareness to promote child protection knowledge among teachers and preschool teachers by the government and non-governmental organizations (Pathirana, 2008) the article recommends the importance of the potential role of the school counsellors in creating awareness, networking with child protection agencies and providing interventions to the students, their parents and teachers. Since the school counselor technically is the first to know when a student experiences abuse (physical, emotional and sexual), the article also proposes the Ministry of Education to develop guidelines of good practices for the school counsellors to follow during such reporting's and when providing psychosocial first aid/ interventions to their students.

- **Develop and implement crisis intervention strategies**

Literature conveys that crisis interventions/ management as a continuous process being most effective when schools pre-determine an action plan, train staff to respond with correct intervention techniques, and navigates a seamless transition into crisis intervention and support mode (U.S Department of Education, 2003). Therefore, the article recommends planning and implementing crisis intervention strategies as the next potential role of the Sri Lankan school counsellor.

In the past, Sri Lankan students have experienced natural as well as man-made disasters. Conflict which prevailed for almost three decades, Tsunami and its repercussions, floods, and land-slides are some disasters which have left Sri Lankan students physically, emotionally and economically vulnerable. They are further disadvantaged due to the fact that after almost all the disasters school have been converted into temporary crisis centers for refugees.

Hence, following a crisis the article identifies a potential role of the school counselors is to promote interdisciplinary coordination among psychologists, probation officers, psychosocial coordinators, child rights officers, teachers, and administrative staff of the school. Moreover, the article recommends school counsellors to create student crisis support groups, immediately after a traumatic event enabling the students cope with intense feelings and assuring them that they are not alone. Moreover, the article also recommends the schools to make use of the school child protection committees established by the National Child Protection Authority (if they have already been established in the schools) or any other existing support group.

The article being aware of the natural and man-made crisis experienced by Sri Lankan students and the inadequacy of the educational system to effectively handle them recommends that Ministry of Education also need to prepare and train the school counselors to handle crisis and provide adequate intervention if and when required.

## **2.2. Providing support to teachers**

Another potential role that the article maps out for Sri Lankan school counselors is providing support to teachers. The article believes that school counselors can create a significant impact on the school teachers using the skills and knowledge that they have procured during their specialized trainings on counseling. They can impart services such as developing and maintaining peer support groups for teachers to discuss psychosocial issues that teachers as well as their students' experience. The article also recognizes the importance of regular meeting for such support groups to discuss topics including positive discipline, consequences and alternatives to corporal punishment, difficulties, working with at risk students, and teacher burn out/stress/anxiety.

In this context, the article views the potential role of the school counselor as a facilitator/the group leader, coordinators and a focal point for scheduling meetings/forming networks. Moreover, the article also recommends the schools counselors to meet the teachers regularly, conduct one to one discussions, pertaining to each student in the class with special emphasis on at risk students. The duration of discussion could vary from student to student or the willingness, experiences and prior training of the teacher/s. The article assumes that some teachers would require more discussion time specially if they have a significant number of at-risk students in their classes. Again, it is proposed that school counselor need to function as the facilitator, of such meetings; providing feasible/applicable recommendations/interventions if and when required.

## **2.3. Providing support to families**

The article stresses the importance of providing support to families as a potential role of a Sri Lankan school counsellor. A well-prepared school counselor can provide services to both children and their families that can alleviate the stress that may affect students' performance in the classroom (Kraus, 1998). The article is also of the opinion that one of the most significant roles of the school counsellor should be to specifically target families through parent education from a counseling perspective. Parent Education programs can be described as one of the most cost-effective strategies for preventing juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior'' (Haggerty, Fleming, Lonczak, Oxford, Harachi, & Catalano, 2002, p. 376). However, a major global barrier recognized to affect the efficacy of programming is the parental motivation to participate (Haggerty et al, 2002). Hence, the article recommends that Sri Lankan school counselors as well as the Ministry of Education should explore the possibility of developing and executing parental awareness/ education programs for students, especially those who are at risk for developing psychosocial problems or have already developed them. Further, the article suggests that parental recruiting for the proposed parent education program would be successful if they are to occur at the school level, based on class teachers' recommendations.

The article conveys that inclusion criteria should be flexible to allow parent/s of any student who demonstrates social and/or behavioral challenges to be eligible for a referral to the parenting education program. School could collaborate with universities or teacher training colleges in Sri Lanka to develop and conduct parent training/awareness programs, develop literature/resource materials, and provide resource personnel for these training programs. The articles also recommend that when such occasions arise the school counsellors could function as the coordinator of such events.

In addition to educational literature about the parent education program, a one-page form/ take home letter could be sent to parents or caregivers assessing their preferences for topics to be addressed in such programs, their willingness to participate, and any barriers that might hinder their participation (Haggerty et al., 2002). It is also recommended that the university or teacher training college could be assigned the responsibility of developing resource materials and providing soft skills to the school counselors (i.e. to train the parents and develop resource materials if and when required). However, when developing the resources and training counselors the university or the teacher training college need to consider the needs of the each school community (i.e. nature, content, sensitivity, and the type of issues to be addressed).

### **3. Research and Program Development**

Another fundamental potential role that the present article recommends for the Sri Lankan school counselors is to evaluate the effectiveness of the school counseling programs. The article envisions school counselors should analyse school counseling program data to determine their specific needs as well as the changed outcomes of the counseling programs (e.g. "how are the students are different as a result of the school counseling programs initiated and conducted?"). The article also proposes that school counselors can use this data to show the impact of the school counseling program on student achievement, attendance and behaviour. In addition, the school counselors could also use the analysed data to address the needs of all students at a preventative level, to guide future action to improve future results for all students; rather than just some students in a reactionary fashion, a recommendation also made by American School Counselor's Association (ASCA, 2004). The article also proposes that based on the student data interventions could also be developed which may include programs such as study skills and test-taking strategies, career and higher education planning, and anti-bullying prevention.

The article believes that the Sri Lankan school counselors are in a unique position to collect all types of data (e.g., process data, program evaluation data, or school related variables), or use existing data (e.g., student attendance, report cards) to analyse whether current activities are meeting the needs of the students, specially the needs of the at risk, low achieving students and those from low-income backgrounds. Unfortunately, the author has experienced that Sri Lankan school counsellors often do not fulfil this role maybe due to inadequate training, confusion of their roles and responsibilities and at time due to the enormous workload.

In order to fulfil their role as program evaluators the school counselors require training. Despite general global agreement about the need for more program evaluation training (Green & Keys, 2001; Paisley & McMahan, 2001), the information pertaining to the program evaluation training provided to the Sri Lankan school counsellors are limited. When reflecting on this issue, the author is of the opinion that the Ministry of Education has not allocated adequate funds or attention to this aspect and urgently requires to do so. Moreover, based on her experience as a trainer the author is of the opinion that program evaluation component of the school counseling training programs which comprise of three or four hour session is not realistic and is not sufficient to prepare school counselors to conduct sophisticated evaluation studies.

The article offers two suggestions to address this gap. First and foremost, appraising the content and quality of the outcome evaluation component offered in the Sri Lankan school counselor training programs and offer required content if the present content and practical training is not found adequate. Second, offering short term feasible trainings/workshops to Sri Lankan school counsellors on documenting outcome evaluations.

### **4. Advocacy**

Though it seems somewhat contradictory to write about the potential role of the school counselors' in the context of advocacy, the article identifies it as a significant factor due to several reasons. First, in certain circumstances such as offering data in support of program efficacy, school counselors can be described as fulfilling the roles of advocates for their work. Hence, based on this argument, one might go so far as to treat school counselor and advocate as

synonymous. In describing the work of a school counsellor operating in a development-in-context paradigm, Green and Keys (2001) essentially described a counsellor's work as advocacy, since school counselors are comparatively more focused on creating change in the student environment (e.g., classroom, school, family, neighbourhood of the students).

Therefore, the article proposes that an important future potential role of the Sri Lankan school counsellors should also be to function as the school leaders and/or team builders in schools by working with teachers, administrators, librarians, and most importantly students and their parents; improving teaching/ learning and to advocating equal opportunity and contributing to a quality education for all students. The article is of the opinion that school counselors training would enable them to develop and promote positive relationships through which schools can establish collaborative learning communities that promote academic achievement and psychosocial wellbeing of the Sri Lankan students'.

The article is aware of the fact that the school counselors have been conspicuously absent from Sri Lankan educational reforms in the past and are often viewed as peripheral to the main function of schooling and academic achievement even today. Hence, the article recommends to the concerned authorities that efforts should be made to bring school counselors into the mainstream of education reforms.

- **Collaborating with the school principal**

As part of the principal's education team in the schools, the school counselor has a vital role to play in supporting academic achievement by acting as a proactive leader and advocate for student success (Capuzzi 1998; House and Martin 1998; Lee and Walz 1998). However, again the article is aware that in the past, Sri Lankan school counsellors and principals may not have traditionally viewed one another as partners within the educational system. However, the article proposes that they can be powerful allies for school reforms, focusing on helping students understand and meet more rigorous academic standards as well as achieve social emotional wellbeing. The present study envisions forming new attitudes pertaining to school counselors and principals joining forces for leadership and advocacy can positively affect a school's mission, its climate, and its students' ability to achieve academic success.

- **Collaborating with the schools' special education teacher/s**

Since the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers and school counselors in the 21st century appear to be moving in similar directions, the article proposes they should work together, be advocates for each other. Both professions are experiencing a shift from the pull-out model of program delivery to one of collaboration and inclusion. Both are striving to provide more comprehensive programs that reach not only students with disabilities but all students. Both seem to be addressing concepts such as dependable settings, inclusion, developmental curriculum experiences, enrichment units, staff and family involvement, teaming, and alternative program delivery models. Hence, the article suggests that shifts would offer a window of opportunity for collaboration and consultation that benefits both types of professionals and the students they serve.

- **Collaborating with child mental health professionals**

Further, article also views collaborating with child mental health/ educational professionals as another potential advocate role of the Sri Lankan school counselors. Since many professionals, at present are working on adopting alternatives to traditional service delivery models, the article assumes that school counselors would be able to achieve harmonious work relationship with them. Collaborative consultation is one approach that may alleviate the pressures resulting from expanding workloads and scope of practice for both professions. In order to facilitate this collaborative model the article believes, evaluating and changing the school counselor training and creating awareness of their roles as advocates is essential.

- **Community collaborative programs**

Another potential advocate role recommended for the school counselor by the present article is to collaborate with the community agencies to support the social and emotional needs of school children (Adelman & Taylor, 1998; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998). Globally, this approach has been tried out with success and existing school-community collaborative programs include social skill groups, child abuse

prevention, planned parenthood, big brothers and big sisters, internships within the community, and various programs coordinated with policing services (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 1998).

Hence, it is proposed that Sri Lankan school counselors need to participate as members of the educational team and use skills of leadership, advocacy and collaboration to promote systemic change as appropriate. Effective school counseling programs are a collaborative effort between the school counselor, parents and other educators to create an environment that promotes student achievement.

## Conclusions

Hence, the present article recommends large scale potential roles for the Sri Lankan school counselors, in contrast to their present conventional and peripheral roles of being quasi-therapists and relief teachers. It also proposes a multi-phasic career ladder designed to allow the school counselors to assume wider range of responsibilities and greater financial rewards when fulfilling these responsibilities in their recommended potential roles. It also proposes rewards/ remuneration/ promotions to school counselors if and when they acquire qualifications, attend on the job trainings, acquire more experience, design culturally feasible interventions to benefit students and conduct research.

The article is also of the opinion that large scale changes maybe required to realise these potential roles and majority of the Sri Lankan school counselors may not feel prepared for it. However, some school counsellors working in the Sri Lankan context may already possess the skills needed and may already be engaging in roles, such as leader, collaborator, and advocate needed to create such collaborative partnerships. Therefore, the article recommends the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka to conduct an audit pertaining to the current competencies of the Sri Lankan school counsellors and initiate measures to bridge this gap.

However, article firmly believes that school counselors are ideally positioned within the schools to act as change agents and collaborative leaders to create relationships with school communities and families in the best interests of the students. Furthermore, literature conveys that when school counsellors perceive their role to be congruent with building school-family-community partnerships, they were more likely to be involved in promoting the wellbeing of the school community (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Moreover, the article is aware that school counselor programs implemented in Sri Lanka lack continuity in their implementation, and school counselors require knowledge/ skill training pertaining to the importation of the national standards and how to make their services valuable, cohesive, and organized.

Hence, this article acknowledges role of Sri Lankan school counselors as both given the context in which they work, (a) school counsellors primarily require to use their counseling (and other) skills towards the goals of enhancing the academic success and life career planning of all of their students, and (b) as the frontline mental health specialists in the schools, who thus must deal with the wide variety of societal issues confronting today's students and their families. However, the article also recommends, in accordance with global standards (ASCA, 2003; ASCA, 2004) that Sri Lankan school counsellors require a diverse set of skills and training to perform the proposed roles of advocates, catalysts, brokers, leaders, facilitators and systemic reformer in addition to their interventionist role to fruitfully effect school improvement and student achievement

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