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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### School Counseling in Sri Lanka: Analysis of the past recommending a way forward.

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#### Abstract

Despite a rapid increase in the number of school counselors in the recent past; procuring the service of school counselors is a luxury that many Sri Lankan schools cannot afford even to date. School counseling in Sri Lanka also faces new challenges in implementation due to its incapacity to reach generally agreed consensus on; training, ethical standards, role identity, counseling model, and structures for school counselors. Therefore, this paper addresses several issues. First, it reviews a brief history of school counseling in Sri Lanka and describes its current status. Second, it explores current trends/ problems specific to Sri Lankan school counseling milieu which has limited its progress. Third, it discusses societal and cultural concerns that are important to consider when implementing school counseling as a practice in Sri Lanka and provides recommendations to improve it.

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#### Introduction:-

Sri Lanka is an island surrounded by the Indian Ocean, with a land area of 65,610 square kilometers and a population of 20.3 million (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2013). In spite of almost three decades of conflict which prevailed, and the impact of the 2004 Tsunami, Sri Lanka has achieved middle-income status, with a score of 0.691 on the 2011 Human Development Index, ranking 97<sup>th</sup> out of 187 countries (UNDP, 2012), the highest in South Asia. Sri Lanka's HDI value for 2012 is 0.7151 placing the country in the high human development category for the first time and positioning Sri Lanka at 92 out of 187 countries and territories (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2013).

Sri Lanka also enjoys a literacy rate of 91.9 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2013) and a student teacher ratio of 20:1; almost in par with those of developed countries. However, in terms of perceived psychosocial distress Sri Lankan students report a high value. For example, in a study carried out by De Zoysa, Rajapakse and Newcombe (2004) on 12-year-old students in Sri Lanka, 44% of the children were evaluated as psychologically maladjusted. This finding was corroborated with another study carried out by the same research team (De Soyza, Newcomb & Rajapaksha, 2010) conveying 49.4% of the children were psychologically maladjusted. These findings are also supported by research studies conducted before and after the conflict (Catani, Gewirtz, Wieling, Schauer, Elbert, & Neuner, 2010; Fernando, Miller, & Berger, 2010)

This could be due to several reasons. First, decades of conflict which prevailed in the country may have created an uncertainty leaving its mark in the minds of the students, making them vulnerable for psychological distress and trauma (Somasundaram, 1998; Das, 1990; Catani et al, 2010; Fernando et al, 2010). Second, high prevalence of corporal punishment, practiced in Sri Lankan schools (de Silva, 2004, Jayaweera, & Gunawardena, 2010; Pathirana, 2014) also seem to cause serious issues widening the student-teacher relationship; even though the government in a circular in 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2013) has banned the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy. Third, due to vacuum of trained professional to provide quality psychosocial services and structured mental health

programs in the country; the psychological distress within students may not have been duly addressed leading to its escalation.

Till eighties hiring services of professional counselors has been a concept alien to Sri Lanka's educational institutions. The earliest records of organized efforts to introduce guidance or counseling services in the school context are reported in the circular issued by the Director of Education in 1957 (Wickramarathna, 1998). This circular seems to lay the general pattern of regulations for school counseling, emphasizing on vocational education. However, implementation of guidance activities laid down by the circular was slow to progress or almost stagnated till early eighties. In July 1983 Evaluation, Guidance and Research Unit was established by the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka to conduct the guidance and counseling programs of the Ministry of Education (Wickramarathna, 1998). Since the Ministry did not possess sufficient funds to independently carry out guidance and counseling programs it collaborated with the National Youth Council of Sri Lanka. As a result, preliminary guidance and counseling programs were carried out by the National Youth Council which was limited to few schools in Colombo (the capital of Sri Lanka) and suburbs. However, the literature conveys that the Ministry launched a separate counseling programs as a distinct parallel service in selected educational regions again (Wickramarathna, 1998) Eventually this unit was handed over to the National Institute of Education (NIE) along with the responsibility of conducting the afore mentioned programs. As a result, Guidance and Counselling Unit at National Institute of Education was established in 2006 (NIE, 2014). This unit's main objective was to meet the psychosocial needs in the education communities by improving curriculum, conducting assessment & evaluation procedures, training teachers with an ability to create learner friendly environments (NIE, 2014).

At present, the primary responsibility of delivering a comprehensive school counseling program seems to be shouldered by Ministry of Education (MoE), Sri Lanka (2014). The Psycho-social Felicitation and Counseling unit; responsible for addressing issues pertaining to school counselling is operating as a branch of a branch (i.e. under the Co-Curricular Activities, Guidance and Counseling and Peace Education); closeted with many other sub-branches including social integration & peace education, and alcohol relief; being deprived of due attention it requires (MoE, 2014). The website of the MoE (2014), describes the role of this sub-unit as empowering the students through schools on their education, individual development, social development and professional development, serving as the functional branch to prepare and implement national level policies pertaining to the school guidance and counseling, conducting provincial level programs through the psycho social centers established in the provinces, implementing professional level capacity development of the relevant resource persons of the guidance and counseling programs and coordinating with the appropriate government and non-government organizations on the subject. To achieve these objectives, the MoE in the past reports to have conducted several activities to develop and strengthen school counseling as a profession such as training school counselors (MoE, 2008), developing resources, and introducing guidelines for child friendly schools (UNICEF, 2013; MoE, 2012; MoE, 2008).

In spite of these progressive advances, several problems specific to Sri Lankan school counseling milieu seemed to have limited its progress. Among them, the most profound difficulty being; the inadequate number of school counselors. For instance, Ministry of Education (2012) report that there are 1086 guidance teachers employed in Sri Lankan government schools, providing psychosocial services to 4,004,086 students; making the counselor student ratio to be 1: 3687. This ratio is way below the counselor student ratio (1:250) recommended for a country by organizations which provide guidance/counseling services (ASCA, 2008).

Besides, almost all the Sri Lankan schools have only one school counselor for the entire school. Hence, based on these facts, if one is to take into account that there are 9905 schools in Sri Lanka, then 8819 schools would be without a school counselor (MoE, 2012) making only few Sri Lankan schools being fortunate to procure their services. Statistics also convey that about 74 Sri Lankan schools have more than 3500 students (MoE, 2012). Therefore, school counselors in these 74 schools would be providing their services to more students than the stipulated ratio (1: 3687) mentioned above, making an effective psychosocial service provision an impossible reality.

However, even those few schools that have been fortunate to procure the services of a school counselor may not be in a position to offer counseling in an efficient manner to their students due to several reasons. First, significant number of school counselors function as relief teachers due to lack of awareness within the school authorities pertaining to the role of the school counselor and shortage of staff due to unequal distribution of teachers across the country (MoE, 2012; UNICEF, 2009). Second, even if the school counselors are available, students may feel hesitant to approach them with their problems again due to issues such as their past experiences pertaining to the breach of

confidentiality (Pathirana, 2014b), location of the counseling room (i.e. often school counselor's room is located next to the staff room or the principal's room making the students reluctant to visit it) and approach of the school counselor (Pathirana, 2014b).

As a result, majority of Sri Lankan schools seem to offer counseling services in a chaotic, random, disjointed, and disorganized fashion; disconnected from the larger goals of the school counseling practice (ASCA, 2008). Therefore, school counseling by definition, providing services to all students in academic, career, and personal/social areas aligning with the developmental needs of children and adolescents, seems to have become a goal yet to be realized within the Sri Lankan education system. Hence, even though the Ministry of Education's initiative to increase the number of school counselors in the recent past need to be commended, this effort appears to be insufficient in catering to the psychosocial needs of the Sri Lankan students.

### **Recommendations:-**

Following recommendations are made, to improve the school counseling in the Sri Lankan milieu, based on literature and author's experiences as a child protection practitioner and trainer of school counselors.

#### **1. Certification/ licensing of Sri Lankan school counselors:-**

Currently, there is no certification/accreditation available within the Sri Lankan school counseling system; allowing individuals with and without qualifications the carte blanche to work as school counselors. Hence, the article stresses the importance of providing certification/licensing to school counselors employed in Sri Lankan schools (e.g. government, private, international) after evaluating their prior qualifications.

#### **2. Develop standards for certification/ licensing:-**

Currently, individuals coming from varied professional backgrounds (graduates of psychology, sociology, history, education, agriculture etc.,) are employed as school counselors in Sri Lankan schools. Hence, before certification, the article recognizes the importance of identifying the applicants' knowledge (i.e. proficiency in counseling), competence, skills and attitudes. To achieve this goal, the article recommends to the MoE to move toward implementing performance-based systems for school counselor certification, which usually require applicants to demonstrate satisfactory counseling performance through an in-depth interviewing process in addition to passing a written examination. Those who successfully meet these standards could be certified as school counselors while those who don't can be provided training to achieve them. To achieve this objective, the article recommends the MoE to stipulate minimum standards for certification. The article also recognizes the importance of maintaining professional standards and values by the school counselors after the certifications and also recommends the Ministry to stipulate a time frame in which their licensing is renewed (e.g. after every three or five years).

#### **3. Address ethical issues and develop a separate code of ethics for Sri Lankan school counselors:-**

The absence of unified ethical standards also creates varied difficulties for Sri Lankan school counselors. Currently, attention to the ethical standards of school counselors is limited and specific ethical standards for Sri Lankan school counselors remains absent. In the absence of specific guidelines, school counselors are recommended to refer to the code of ethics for general counselors which again are based on the global standards (ASCA, 2008).

This issue poses several problems. First and foremost, the practical values of these ethical standards are limited due to the fact that they are not developed based on the consideration of the unique situations in Sri Lankan school settings. For example, maintaining confidentiality can be more challenging for school counselors in Sri Lankan schools (Pathirana, 2014) due to past practices of student teacher interactions. Traditionally, Sri Lankan teachers fulfilled the role of the school counselors, though in a limited capacity, prior to the introduction of the post; 'school counselor'. In fact, in most Sri Lankan schools, teachers are still closely involved with the personal and social issues of students. Even though this practice allows school counselors to procure support from teachers, it also creates challenges when preserving confidentiality of students, since teacher may also want to know the problems which students discuss with their school counselor. On the other hand the students may perceive these teacher- school counselor discussions as a breach of confidentiality; restraining them from approaching the school counselors for problems (Pathirana, 2014).

Further, the lack of consensus on the ethical practice of record keeping (i.e. documenting/maintaining records, record accessibility) also creates confusion in the Sri Lankan school settings due to constant teacher transfers, role

confusions, role ambiguity and diffusions (e.g. teachers with less work load in the school fulfilling the role of the school counselor). Therefore, the article recommends the responsible authorities to address the specific ethical dilemmas in the context of school counseling by developing a separate code of ethics and best practice guidelines for Sri Lankan school counselors.

#### **4. Address role identity issues:-**

Based on her experiences as a child psychologist and a trainer the author observes role ambiguity (i.e. lack of a clear definition of school counselors' role) as a major problem in the current school counseling system. Presently, significant percentage of the Sri Lankan school counselors appears to be grappling with large number of non-counseling-related activities such as administrative work and teaching (e.g. being placed as relief teachers); with some school administrators seeming to define the role of school counselors simply as disciplining students. The author also observes that some Sri Lankan school counselors have unrealistic expectations of their role thus burdening them with clinical/therapeutic interventions beyond their training/expertise and scope.

Therefore, a clear definition of school counselors' roles can help decrease the discrepancies in role expectations among school administrators, teachers, students, and school counselors themselves (Pathirana, 2015), creating the basis for collaboration in school systems. Hence, the article recommends that MoE in Sri Lanka to document roles and activities of school counselors in order to achieve effective performance.

Globally, roles of school counselors are defined based on the specific contextual backgrounds, such as an integral member of the staff (ASCA, 2008), performing dual roles as teacher and counselor (Yuen, 2006), or as mental health experts exclusively focusing on intervening in psychological, developmental, and behavioral problems (Zaffuto, 2005). The differences in school counseling in other countries suggest that roles of school counselors in Sri Lankan need to be defined to reflect the country's social and cultural contexts.

Upon reflecting on the current problems in Sri Lankan schools, the article suggests that primary role of the school counselors should be to deal with psychological and behavioral problems of students with a preventive and responsive intervention focus. The school counselors also need to serve as gatekeepers to detect serious problems (conduct problems, substance abuse, and child abuse) and make necessary referrals. Further, school counselors should assume unified but flexible roles/ activities and be equipped to perform a wide range of activities (i.e. to promote academic, career, and personal/social development of students). Also, they need to develop the abilities to prioritize roles and activities to respond sensitively to unique needs at diverse developmental stages of students (in the continuum of early childhood to adolescence). At the same time, the article envisions the role of the Sri Lankan school counselors should also be flexible to work with school administrators and teachers with a shared vision in education and student development, being complementary and not competing with the roles of school administrators and teachers.

#### **5. Establish minimum pre-recruitment standards for Sri Lankan school counselors:-**

Currently, the training needs of the school counselors seemed to be fulfilled by governmental (NIE, 2014), and non-governmental organizations (UNICEF, 2009). Several national universities in Sri Lanka offer certificate and post graduate courses to train school counselors. For instance, the department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Colombo (2014) offers a Post Graduate Diploma in School Counseling since 1996; while the department of Philosophy & Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya offers a special degree in psychology with counseling as core subject (De Zoysa & Ismail, 2002) and a short term certificate course in counseling.

However, when school counselors are recruited, their pre-recruitment training qualifications have often been ignored. As a result, teachers with heterogeneous basic degrees are recruited or assigned to the post of school counselor; impacting the quality of service they provide to the students. Thus, some school counselors possess prior experience in counseling having completed a first degree in psychology/education or social work (Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, 2014; De Zoysa et al, 2002) while others without any prior knowledge or qualifications in the field (i.e. individuals with special degrees/general degrees with history, classics, agriculture) are appointed as school counselors. Even though this practice may have broadened the opportunities of applicants from varied fields to become school counselors, it has created gaps between levels of knowledge, competencies and skills of those who come from non-counseling backgrounds such as basic degrees in agriculture or history and of those who come from fields of counseling/ fields related to it. This concern warrants future effort to carefully define the

prior knowledge, skills and competency based expertise of school counselors. Therefore, the article recommends in establishing minimum pre-recruitment standards with preferential weight given to recruiting/appointing those with a first degree in fields of counseling or fields related to counseling.

#### **6. Establish minimum training (theory and practice) standards for pre-service/trainee school counselors:-**

School counselors need to perform a variety of counseling services for students, teachers, and parents. The successful performance of these services depends on a strong knowledge base and clinical skills obtained through experiential learning. The literature conveys that practicum training required for a Sri Lankan school counselors vary from four field trips (NIE, 2010) to 135 hours of field practices (National Institute of Social Development, 2015) while theoretical training vary from few weeks to two years. Analysis of the course contents of counseling in the Sri Lankan milieu conveyed that even though theoretical training is somewhat up to the global standards; the practical training appears to be exceptionally inadequate to allow sufficient opportunities for developing clinical skills and understanding practical issues in schools. Especially, when considering the depth and breadth of the complex work assignments and large student numbers. Other countries which offer school counseling as a service seem to have a large practicum component for their trainee counselors, going up to 700-hours (Yu, 2007).

Hence, the article urges the MoE to stipulate minimum standards of training for pre-service school counselor training programs. After evaluating global (ASCA, 2008) and local training requirements (NIE, 2014; Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, 2014) for school counselors, the article recommends the minimum credit component after a basic degree in a relevant field (Psychology/Education/Social Work...); to be 20 credit points, with one credit equaling 15 lecture hours and 45 field supervision hours. It also recommends a minimum of one year internship or probationary period before they work in schools as school counselors with pay, equaling 200 field supervision hours. Further, the article envisions that successful practicum experience requires collaborative supervision by both the academics in universities/teacher training colleges and school counselors in the field after careful review of literature pertaining to the issue (Romano, Goh, & Wahl, 2005).

The article also makes recommendations for course content of the school counselor training programs to include topics on child development with special focus on developmental milestones falling within the school context (i.e. early childhood to adolescence). The article is also of the opinion that specific issues related to home (child abuse, parental divorce/separation, death and mother migration to Middle East) and school (bullying, corporal punishment, and positive discipline) of students also need to be addressed in these training programs. In addition, course content should also include issues pertaining to children in difficult circumstances (e.g. disasters, poverty, children living in streets), research methodology, networking with mental health professionals (e.g. child psychologists, pediatricians, child psychiatrists, psychosocial coordinators, and family therapists) and conducting peer support groups to teachers/school administrators.

The article also believes that pre-service school counselor training programs should move beyond the traditional individuals Vs. group counseling continuum and encompass opportunities for school counselors to develop their skills with adult stakeholders in their practicum or internship sites, practicing their team facilitation and partnership skills with the community, family, and school during their training (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

#### **7. Address the post-recruitment training needs of the Sri Lankan school counselors:-**

The article recognizes the importance of providing a quality post-training for in-service school counselors to engage the community, advocate for student's needs, and participate in educational reforms. Therefore, it suggests that the post training curriculum of in-service school counselors should include both lecture/ seminar sessions and experiential training. While lectures, seminars, and workshops provide necessary knowledge, the practicum experience assists in service counselors, especially those without supervised experience in practical aspects of counseling/school systems to be aware of the discrepancies between knowledge and practice in school settings. The present article also recognizes that post training programs for in-service school counselors need to emphasize and equip school counselors with the tools necessary to be consultants, team facilitators, researchers, program implementers, advocates, and collaborators; enabling them to progress in their career as senior school counselors, researchers on school counseling or school psychologists.

The paper also recommends the MoE to conduct a need analysis to identify knowledge, skills, competency and attitudinal gaps of the in-service school counselors. Based on its outcome the need analysis the paper recommends of conducting workshops and short/long term trainings to bridge these gaps.

Moreover the paper acknowledges that the roles expectations of in-service school counselor are somewhat different at various grade levels based on the developmental stages of students they work with (primary/secondary/advanced level). Hence, it recommends future post-recruitment training programs to address this factor and establish appropriate grade based competencies for school counselors working at each level. For counselors working with primary school children, it recommends competencies on working with small groups, provision of training on art/play/drama interventions, and addressing issues pertaining to parenting of young children. For counselors working with middle school children, it recommends knowledge/competencies/skills on interpersonal issues, addressing issues pertaining to self-esteem, adjustment problems and study skills. The article suggests greater demand to be placed on imparting academic and career counseling for counselors who work with students in advanced level classes (high schools) where university entrance and job search are important goals.

The article also recognizes that the roles of school counselors may vary among settings, regions and needs of the school and suggest the MoE to provide mentoring services to the school counselors working in varied geographical areas/ cultural contexts to cater effectively to their service communities.

#### **8. Constant evaluation to maintain the quality of the training programs:-**

The article recognizes the importance of constantly monitoring the quality of the pre-service and post service training programs provided to the trainee school counselors and counselors in order to maintain the quality of the psychosocial service provided to the Sri Lankan students.

#### **9. Maintain a healthy school counselor student ratio in the best interest of the Sri Lankan students:-**

Since Sri Lankan government school systems are host to numerous academic as well as external challenges such as learning disabilities, exam stress/anxiety, mental health problems, bullying, disciplinary issues, school drop-out and problems associated with home (e.g. domestic violence, female migration to Middle East and lack of communication between children and parents) it is suggested that healthy counselor student ratio would achieve wellbeing within the students. Even though there is no simple solution to eradicate the problems experienced by the Sri Lankan school systems today or the psychosocial problems experienced by the Sri Lankan students/their parents; it could be hypothesized that healthy school counselor-student ratio can play a critical role in reducing educational impediments such as those previously discussed in this paper.

Research points out that lower student to counselor ratios decrease both the recurrence of student disciplinary problems and student involvement in disciplinary incidents (Carrell&Carrell, 2006). The American School Counselor Association (2004) recommends the optimal counselor, student ratio to be 1: 250 (Carrell&Carrell, 2006). In this light, the present estimated ratio of student to school counselor (1: 3687) in Sri Lankan schools does not appear to be adequate. Therefore, in keeping with the recommendations made by the ASCA (2004), and the after considering the issue presented in the Sri Lankan educational milieu, the paper suggests to the MoE to strive to achieve same standard of 1:250 counselor student ratio within the next 10 years.

#### **10. Develop a program structure and work plan for Sri Lankan schools:-**

At present, the primary focus of school counseling in Sri Lankan schools appears to be devoted to responsive services such as individual or group counseling to address mental health issues. However, this remedial model has limitations in meeting the needs of all Sri Lankan students. For instance, even though it is important to deal with immediate psychological and behavioral problems of students, intensive individual and group counseling can be provided to only a limited number, leaving little time for the majority of students (Martin, 2002) who may also require the services of school counselor to address their daily hassles.

Therefore, the article recommends the Ministry of Education to develop, and monitor the execution of a program structure and work plan for school counselors to include all students in the schools. Further, the article suggests that Ministry of Education to specify and document the contents of this program structure (e.g. number of minimum psycho-educational program/ sessions to be conducted for students by the school counselors, contents of the psycho-educational programs such as bullying/early violence prevention, time management, handling exam anxiety, interpersonal communication and good practices to be followed when conducting the individual/ group intervention sessions).

It also recommends the Ministry to outline the minimum number of peer support groups conducted for teachers pertaining to student academic achievement, positive discipline, addressing issue pertaining to at risk children in their classes and those specific to developmental milestones of the students (i.e. from early childhood to adolescence) by the school counselors.

In sum, the present article recommends an ecological approach which involves all students. The current approach addresses the needs of 'problem students' seem to be somewhat restrictive. It perceives the problem to be centered within 'the student' and not within 'the system'. Hence, the paper suggests the MoE to consider in forming a holistic framework of school–community–family collaborations as an intervention approach.

However, article believes that this proposed program structure and work plan needs to allow flexibility to provide programs culturally/ geographically feasible to the service communities (Lee, 2001). This work plan also needs to be in par with the school calendar to effectively execute it.

#### **11. Develop Resource Materials:-**

The article is aware that handful of user friendly resources (UNICEF, 2009) exist in the Sri Lankan school counseling milieu. However, it has questionable doubts pertaining to their circulation and recommends the immediate availability of those already developed resources to Sri Lankan school counselors in both hard and soft versions.

Considering the limited resources available for Sri Lankan school counselors, the paper stresses the importance of developing hand books, manuals, videos and study packs for them. It is also of the opinion that resource materials need to be user friendly and cater to varied training and awareness needs of Sri Lankan school counselors. Thus, when developing the resources the article believes that the resource developers require conducting a need analysis and identifying the prior competencies of the recipient school counselors.

For school counselors with a basic training in counseling and psychology (e.g. graduates having completed psychology degrees, post graduate diplomas in counseling) it recommends manuals and study packs for an in-depth knowledge. For those who have never received any formal training in counseling (e.g. those with basic degrees from other fields such as history, agriculture...) the article recommends booklets, study packs and educational videos for basic knowledge and awareness. However, it does not under value the significance of structured, systematic training programs and recommends such material be available only till the school counselors with heterogeneous trainings receive a formal training in school counseling.

#### **12. Provide a cohesive, comfortable physical environment for school counseling:-**

The article is of the opinion that child friendly, cohesive physical environment and an appropriate location of the counseling room (e.g. away from the staff room or principal's office) would make school counselors and counseling more student approachable and friendly. Therefore, it recommends the school administrators in creating a comfortable environment for individual/group counseling and appropriate location when setting up a counseling room. The article also recommends a school counseling unit or a separate building comprising of waiting area with rest room, office for the school counselor and minimum of two rooms for individuals and group counseling activities if and when possible.

#### **13. Address self-care needs of the school counselors (e.g. burn out):-**

Even though literature pertaining to Sri Lankan school counselor burn-out seems to be non-existent; it is worth exploring this issue considering the repercussion it pauses for the school counselors as well their clients. Hence, the article recommends the concerned authorities to take initiative to empower school counselors with self-care strategies.

#### **14. Develop a crisis intervention plan:-**

Literature conveys that after students experience a traumatic event, group counseling has found to be an effective tool to offset the effects of grief and distress (Pathirana, 2015). Following a crisis related to students and school, successful school-based intervention requires interdisciplinary coordination between child psychologists, counselors, probation officers, psychosocial coordinators, child rights officers, teachers, and administrative staff. Hence, this article recommends, a school community 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, school can also make use of the school child protection committees, set up by the National Child Protection Authority (2013) if

they have been already formed in the concerned school or any other existing support group. Further, the article recommends that School counselors should be aware of referral resources in the community and maintain strong relationships with them to ensure the on-going care of referred students if and when required. Hence, though commendable, the article also proposes the Ministry of Education to revisit its crisis intervention plans by mapping out a more comprehensive role for the school counselors.

### Conclusion:-

School counseling in Sri Lanka currently experiences new challenges including tasks of securing adequate/competent personnel to provide the service, and ensuring that they are satisfactorily trained. In spite of these challenges, school counselors have the capacity to play an important role in student development in Sri Lanka. The rapid quantitative growth in school counseling clearly reflects this. To rise to these challenges, the present article makes several recommendations. First is to establish the expertise and identity of school counselors through competence-based training and clearly defined roles. Second, set up a comprehensive and flexible framework for school counseling to help school counselors to perform their roles and deal with practical issues in school settings. Third, improve and establish internal and external support systems (policy makers, school administrators, and teacher educators/academics of the Sri Lankan universities) to enhance the performance of school counselors.

The article optimizes that all these recommendations would serve as catalysts for the concerns and challenges that Sri Lankan school counseling is currently experiencing; impacting improved school counseling services in Sri Lanka.

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