Available online at www.sserr.ro
Social Sciences and Education Research Review

(6) 2 104-114 (2019)

ISSN 2393–1264
ISSN–L 2392–9863

RURAL AREA STUDENTS' NEED FOR SCHOOL COUNSELING

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Abstract

The current study investigates students' in rural areas attitudes towards school counselling before and after participating in an information session. The study was developed as a single-group pre-test post-test experimental design in three phases: (1) administer the F1 Questionnaire for Students, (2) develop an information session and (3) administer the F3 Questionnaire for Students. The participants (N=43, M_{age}=13.8 years) were enrolled in the 7th and 8th grades in two different rural schools. The results show that there are statistically significant differences between the average of students' need for school counseling before and after the information session.

Keywords: *school counselling, rural area students, needs, attitudes*

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Introduction

In the school setting students are oftentimes confronted with behavioral problems, violence, early school leaving, career indecision, low academic performance and unmet psychosocial developmental needs (Hope & Bierman, 1998; Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Guerra & Braunguart-Ricker, 2011). Studies and reports show that in rural areas the school counseling services are disproportionately provided (Țecu & Langa, 2019).

Broadly, school counseling represents the process designed to address the physical, emotional, social, vocational and academic difficulties of students and other persons involved in the educational process (teachers, parents, tutors and school authorities) (Băban, 2009; Eyo et al, 2010). The school counseling services aim to provide a large series of interventions based on developmental, systematic, sequential and clearly defined measures, in order to assists students in developing a healthy life-style and in acquiring and using life-long skills (Băban, 2009). More specifically, school counselors, through individual or group prevention and intervention programs, employ strategies to enhance academic results, provide career awareness, encourage self-awareness, foster interpersonal communication skills, and impart life success skills for all students (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Therefore, school counselors, using their knowledge and professional competency offer valuable support for students, on the one hand, and for classes of students, on the other hand.

In Romania, the history of counselling in schools is very brief. The school counseling services were introduced in 1997, when the first counseling and guidance school programs have been developed within the reform of vocational and technical education (Țibu, 2017). The first Resources and Educational Assistance Centers were founded in 2005 and, since then, the school counseling services developed timidly.

A study conducted by Spencer and Bryant (2000) analyzed violent behavior differences in rural, suburban, and urban teens. The authors' results

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show that students in rural school districts were more likely to be victims of violence behavior than their suburban and urban counterparts. Boys, especially, reported being slapped, hit, or kicked more frequently than girls. These findings suggest that students in rural school areas are at a greater risk for participating in violence than suburban and urban students. In this context school counseling has an important part to play in enhancing students' cognitive and the personal/social effectiveness and thus, counseling services must be accessed easily by both students, parents and teachers.

Methodology

Objective

Studies show that the spatial factor together with the low socio-economic status play a significant role in developing social problems such as early school leaving, school violence (Liiceanu, 2002; Banciu & Balica, 2009), academic failure (Borca, 2011), career indecision (Mărghitan, 2011; Mihalcea 2012) etc. Therefore, a number of key institutions at central, regional and local level are involved in developing and implementing educational policies, services and activities aiming to correct these phenomena. In Romania the school counseling services are offered disproportionately. The students who live in urban areas have easy access to both information and school counseling services, compared to those who live in the rural areas. Given this situation, in the present study we aimed to examine the attitude of students coming from rural areas schools where school counselling services are not provided, upon psycho-pedagogical counseling. Therefore, our main objective was to investigate the 7th and 8th grade students' in rural area need for school counselling before and after participating in an information session.

We organized an information session for students, and we expected to find differences in students' the need for school counseling on issues such as school violence, bullying, indecision towards academic and career pathways,

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time management and personal development, before and after their participation in the information session.

Participants

For the current study we selected two random secondary schools in the rural area of the Olt county, Romania. The participating students (N=43) were enrolled in the 7th and 8th grades and have an average age of 13.8 years. 51% of them are boys and 49% are girls.

Procedure

We developed a single-group pre-test post-test experimental design in three phases. First, we administered a questionnaire for students (QSF1) which reflected their attitude towards school counseling. Then, we developed an information session, and in the end, we administered a second questionnaire (QSF3).

The information session was developed within the educational project "Caravan CJRAE", organized by the Olt County Center for Resources and Educational Assistance in partnership with the Olt County School Inspectorate and a series of secondary schools in the rural area, from Olt county, Romania. The project aims to inform students, parents and teachers about the specifics of school counseling and the ways in which these services can be accessed by rural communities.

The two schools were randomly selected from the list of schools in the north of Olt county. The experimental procedure was applied with the agreement of the Olt County School Inspectorate, the Olt County Center for Resources and Educational Assistance and the school managers.

In the experiment presented here the students were in the classrooms. In **the first phase of the study** were asked the students to fill in a questionnaire, without giving them other details regarding the research. The students were instructed to check the answer considered correct and were told that there are no

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right or wrong answers, the best answers being the honest ones. The students were also assured that the participation in the study involves no risks and that the information provided is confidential. During this phase of the study, the experimenter, who is also a school counsellor had no input regarding how the questionnaire should be filled in.

The **second phase** of the study involved implementing an information session for students. The session aimed to shed some light upon the school counselors' activity, the issues they address, the ethical norms that guide their activity and also the types of interventions they appeal to. The experimenter invited the students to ask questions regarding their expectations and the stereotypes or the prejudice linked to the counseling activity.

During **the third phase** of the experiment, the experimenter invited the students to fill in the F3QS. Again, they were instructed to complete the questionnaire in an honest manner.

The experimental procedure was developed during the 2018-2019 school year and was implemented during two working days. The students' participation in the study was optional. The students had the right to withdraw from the experimental setting at any time they felt uncomfortable.

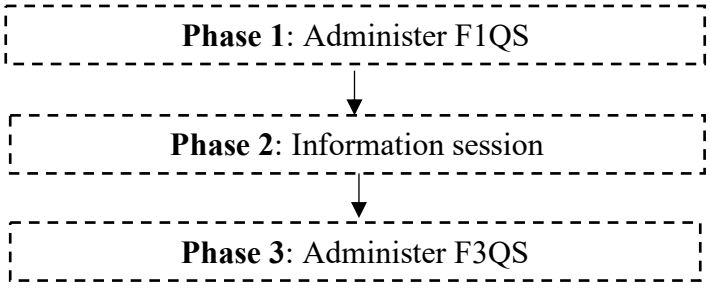


Figure 1. Visual representation of the experimental procedure

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Instruments

In order to gather the data we needed, we designed and develop two questionnaires for students. The F1QS consists of 5 items that targeted socio-demographic data about participants and 24 multiple-choice items that measured on the one hand students' level of knowledge regarding the specifics of the psycho-pedagogical counseling activity (such as: school counselors' background knowledge, abilities and competency) and, on the other hand, students' need for participating in school counselling activities.

The second questionnaire, F3QS consists of 11 items which targeted students' level of knowledge regarding the specifics of the psycho-pedagogical counseling activity after the students' participation in the information session, as well as their need for school counselling.

Both questionnaires were elaborated based on Adirana Băban's (2009) theory upon the objectives of the educational counseling.

Results

The data collected from the sample of participants allowed us to investigate the 7th and 8th grade students' in rural area need for school counselling before and after participating in the information session. As the distribution of the frequencies of students' responses was grouped and right-skewed we used the t test for dependent samples.

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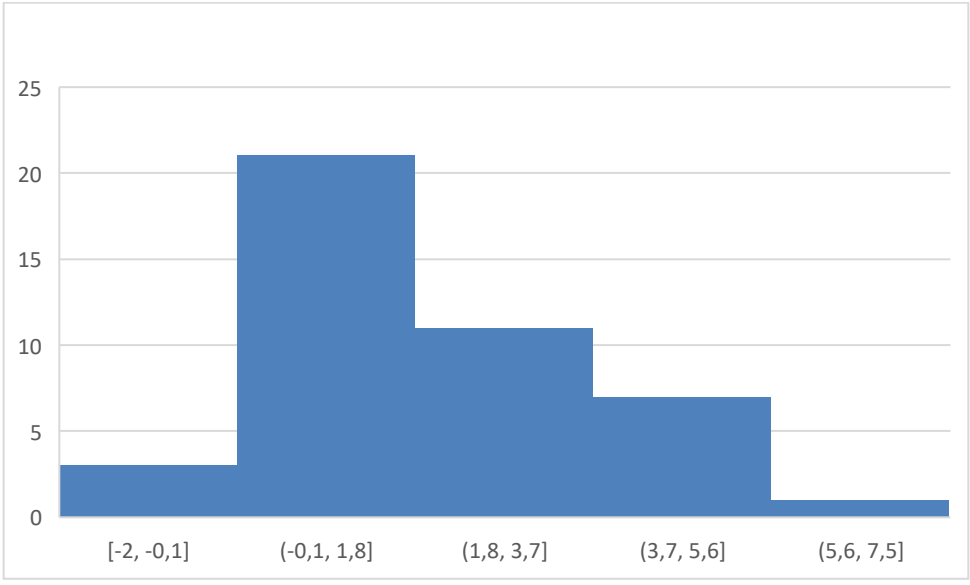


Figure 2: *Graphic representation of the distribution of the frequencies of students' need for school counselling*

Table 1. *Results of the t test comparing the difference between the averages of students' need for school counselling before and after the information session*

Dependent Samples Test							
	Need for school counselling	**N**	**Mean**	**Standard deviation**	**t**	**df**	**p**
One Paire	Before the information session	43	2.58	2.413	-6.506	42	<.01
	After the information session	43	4.95	2.093			

The results, t (42) = - 6.506, p = .000, highlight that there are statistically significant differences between the average of students' need for school counseling before (M = 2.58, SD = 2.413) and after the information session (M = 4.95, SD = 2.093).

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Discussions

The main objective of our study was to investigate the 7th and 8th grade students' in rural area attitudes towards school counselling before and after participating in an information session. Students' attitudes towards school counselling determine whether they will be inclined to access the services offered by the counsellors. The result of the study revealed a significant positive attitude of students towards school counselling services. Eyo and his collaborators (2010), through their study, also showed a positive attitude of high school students towards school counselling. Moreover, Fox and Butler (2007) conducted a similar study and showed that students who took part in focus groups highly valued the school counselor. Among the students, 21% indicated a lack of awareness of the school counselling service, and those who were aware stated that they have limited knowledge about the issue.

The informing session led the students to think in depth about the impact of guidance and counselling activities. Therefore, the students came to realize the important role that the school counselor plays in supporting their well-being and personal development. After participating in the information session, the students understood the importance of optimal social and psychological functioning and became aware of the issues related to mental health. At the same time, students became aware of the value of life skills and abilities such as creativity, critical thinking responsible decision-making, effective learning and social skills.

Studies show that students' positive attitudes towards school counseling can bring a positive impact upon their behavior, academic performance and their personality (Obiunu & Rachel, 2018). The school counseling process implies building a relationship between a student or group of students and the school counselor, based on professional assistance and support (Băban, 2009). The school counselling activities, through cognitive, motivational, emotional and/or behavioral intervention strategies can help students surpass a large spectrum of personal problems (Băban, 2009). In this context, the students who participated

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in the information session would advise a friend to access the school counselling services if he/she had an educational or mental health problem. In Fox and Butler's (2007) study one third of the students stated that they would go to see the school counsellor, and girls were more likely to state this than boys.

Conclusions

In the present study we examined the attitude of students from rural areas upon school counseling before and after an informing session. Through a pre-test post-test experimental design, we revealed that discussions upon the specifics of school counselling led the students to become aware of their need for counseling and to think about the possibility of accessing the services offered by the school counselors. As in rural areas from Romania the school counseling services are offered disproportionately, we recommend school managers to develop interinstitutional collaboration so that more students can access school counselling services. Given its' important cognitive, affective and behavioral implications, school counselling can bring a positive impact upon students' development on the short term, and upon society on the long term. Moreover, the educational environment is constantly changing and thus, the educational organizations must adapt so as to remain relevant and effective (Gherguț, 2007).

Our study is valid for a Romanian sample, especially in the southern area of the country. For further studies we recommend investigating rural schools teachers' and managers' attitudes towards school counseling.

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