

Original Paper

Demand for Counselling Heightens in Schools after COVID-19 Pandemic and Associated Socio-economic Setbacks

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Abstract

The departure from traditional family structure and the evolving social trends with a breakdown in the customary support system has created a gap for fulfilling the physical, psychological and social needs of the children. The emphasis is on the need for an alternative support system to mediate the needs of them and counselling in schools is definitely the bridge that fills this gap. There is no doubt that COVID-19 pandemic and associated socio-economic factors have heightened the need for counselors in schools. This study investigates the views of school administrators, principals, head teachers and classroom teachers regarding counselling in schools. A survey research design was implemented and a survey was executed to 100 participants in the western division. 78 of them responded by returning the completed survey giving a response rate of 78%, which is acceptable for discussion. Findings reveal that Fiji has seen an increase in counselling needs after COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. Findings also reveal that school leaders and teachers are looking forward to a counselling program that prepares counsellors who can assist students suffering from short-term and long-term psychological effects of the pandemic

and prepare students for the 'new norm'. Majority of the participants indicated that counseling skills are indispensable manifestations considering the current unprecedented epidemiological environment.

Keywords

counselling, mental health, substance abuse, stress management, pandemic, socio-economic impact

1. Introduction

Counseling in schools is a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success. School counsellors foster educational equity, access, and academic success in a rigorous curriculum to ensure that all students succeed in their education. This calls for trained school counsellors who must be an assertive in creating opportunities for all students to pursue dreams of high aspirations. The counsellor assists students in their academic, career, social, and personal development and helps them follow the path to success (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). The school counsellors serve as experts and work with teachers, administrators, parents and other school personnel to help each student succeed. The school counsellor as consultant empowers families to act on behalf of their children by helping parents and guardians identify student needs and interests, and access available resources. COVID-19 and subsequent socio-economic conditions have increased the seriousness of the counselling situation in Fijian schools. The COVID-19 crisis has generated unprecedented challenges for schools and their students globally.

School counsellors have specialized training which includes knowledge of human development, cultural diversity, counselling and consultation techniques (Perusse et al., 2004). Likewise, it is a profession which aims primarily to improve the academic performances of the students and helps in social and personal development of the students. It provides the much-needed bridge between parents and students and positively functions in preventive remedial and developmental modes. Counselling in schools involves the team efforts of the teachers, the parents and other school staff towards addressing the behavioural, emotional, social, academic or psychological needs of the students (Perusse et al., 2004). In the current era, COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant and unique challenges to the children and their families. The negative impact on livelihood due to the pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented lockdown on daily life and economic activities might account for part of the mental health problems in those whose earning capacities have dwindled. Likewise, disruptions to school, access to familial financial security and related consequences has left students with heightened anxiety and stress (Zenone et al., 2021).

The Ministry of Education Heritage and Arts (MEHA) has also made public statements about the need for more counsellors in schools. While making her response in the parliament on 18th May 2019, Hon. Rosy Akbar stated that “there was a shortage of counsellors in schools is due to higher education institutions not providing qualifications in counselling.” The Substance Abuse Advisory Council (SAAC) was established on 1st March, 1999 after the passing of the Substance Abuse Advisory Council Act of

1998. This statutory body was established under the Ministry of Education to collaborate with government ministries and NGO's to undertake counselling services to address problems arising out of drugs and substance abuse (SAAC, 2020). MEHA has a policy in drugs and substance abuse in schools. This Policy aims to promote and maintain a healthy, safe and drug free environment in our schools in Fiji where the welfare of students is paramount. The proposed diploma in counselling program is in response to the MEHA's policy and is meant for both teachers and working professionals who are related to the field of teaching. This program also intends to prepare counsellors who can assist students who are victims of COVID-19 related socio-economic issues like domestic violence stress and poverty.

2. Aim of the Study

The need for a counselling program to address the needs of students in schools provided the motivation for this study. The aim of this program is to prepare counselling practitioners gain knowledge and competence in working with young people aged 6-18 years in an ethical and effective way. This program intends to prepare counsellors who can assist students who are victims of bullying, teasing, substance abuse, drugs and COVID-19 related socio-economic issues like domestic violence stress and poverty. Likewise, COVID-19 Pandemic has presented difficulties for everyone, and academic stress and economic challenge has taken the center stage in this lockdown period and has shattered the education system across the globe. This study investigates the views of heads of schools and teachers in regards to the need for counsellors in the school system. The intention of the study is to investigate the role school counsellors could play in supporting teaching and learning and school development in relation to what benefit can emerge from having counsellors in schools.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i) Why is there a need for a counselling program for teachers?
- ii) What content would you like to be covered in a counselling program?
- iii) What impact has COVID-19 on the need for counsellors in schools?

3. Research Significance

The findings of this study are considered to be of great importance to various stakeholders for several reasons. Foremost, findings will assist the developers of the proposed program to upgrade and improve the content of it. The feedback from principals and teachers will be very informative in the development of the proposed program as they have had first hand experience dealing with counselling issues in schools. There is also a paucity of previous research on counselling requirements in Fiji and the findings will assist the administration in better understanding the counselling issues faced by teachers in schools. They will be able to develop appropriate strategies to handle such situations and prepare teachers accordingly. This study will help uncover critical areas and contribute to local literature on the subject, which in turn could be used by relevant authorities in improving their counselling initiatives. Teachers would be able to realize the importance of undertaking studies in counselling. The finding of this study will rebound to

the benefit of HE institutions by providing them important insights into counselling enabling them to strengthen their programs to better prepare counsellors to deal with the diverse exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study makes considerable contribution through its findings by revealing the intricacies associated with counselling considering COVID-19 and associated lockdowns and school closures (Nazish, Irum, Sharif, Zubair Hassan, & Sadiq, 2020). Notably, the findings will be of great value to the staff as they are in constant touch with the students and will be able to better understand their behaviour and address counselling issues amicably. This study would hopefully shed light on the pivotal role school counsellors can play in supporting the individual learner or teacher, as well as the school as a whole.

4. Literature Review

Counseling is a process in which a counselor provides psychological support to a specific person or a group. They give important tips to create insight that helps people to tackle their problems and channelized them in a better way. Nowadays lots of people are consulting counselors to reduce their psychological burden of lockdown of covid-19 (Kumari & Singh, 2021). Counselling was already an essential service that is needed in school pre COVID-19 and with an increase in covid cases in Fiji, the need for counseling will increase in the schools due to an increase in social problems. These changes included an increase in the number of single-parent families, divorce rates, issues of substance abuse, issues related to sexuality and reproductive health, especially among adolescent age groups and various mental health issues (Thomas et al., 2020). Some of the common disruptive behaviors identified in Fiji are teasing, fighting, bullying, taking other things forcefully, pushing, and swearing (Walker, 1994).

The factors that may have triggered these disruptive behaviors are numerous and includes, job losses in the family, domestic violence in the family, and relocations of their homes. Putting food on the table will be a dire need for any family that has breadwinners losing their jobs or their working hours reduced. According to UNESCO (2020) the impact which COVID-19 will have on poverty levels, it is observed that secondary education enrolment will remain below pre-COVID-19 levels even after the re-opening of schools. School attendance will become sporadic and home support may not be fulfilled. Home cultures of the majority of indigenous Fijians are not very supportive and accommodating to students to excel academically. Whilst the job losses are not only limited to a particular ethnic group, but the home support will also greatly diminish for the affected students. This will give an added burden on teachers to prepare students for their learning. In 2020, Fiji recorded an increase in domestic violence during the lockdowns (Cowley, 2020).

These lockdowns are not a favourable state to be in especially in an abusive relationship. The bully in the relationship is in close proximity to the other family members. When boredom or frustrations sets in, this is usually being meted out to other members as the oppressor is unable to get out of the house due to the legislated lockdowns (Beena Antony & Kaushik, 2019). The vulnerable members are usually at the mercy of the abusive members with an absence of external assistance. Similarly, a report on Fiji Gender,

Disability and Inclusion Analysis of COVID-19 and TC Harold reveals increased levels of stress and tension are widespread with greater potential for violence but adequate psychosocial support services are lacking. Children who are exposed to domestic violence will be traumatized and will have difficulty in concentrating on their studies. Students who are exposed to violence tend to utilize similar means and resort to bullying to show their frustrations with other students in schools (Cowley, 2020).

Subsequently, an increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders like depression among school-going adolescents was reported (Sindhu, 2020). School closures have also placed a huge demand on teachers in terms of syllabus coverage. The exam-oriented nature of Fiji's education system further exacerbates the issue. Regardless of the locality of schools, they are being measured by the same yardstick. This causes teachers to focus on average and above-average students to raise the school's achievement. School counseling increases student's ability to concentrate, study, and ultimately learn. It decreases classroom disturbances (Cowley, 2020). Counseling services support teachers in the classroom in order to enable teachers to provide quality instruction designed to assist students in achieving high standards. School counselors are trained to recognise early warning signs in at-risk youth (Chen & Kok, 2017; Daniels, 2013). School counselors work with principals, teachers, and other staff to develop and implement school safety, and to prevent school violence. Even with growing research about the positive impact of school counseling, school counselors face various challenges in their workplace. School-based counseling across the world shows great variability in terms of focus, role, training, and models (Theresa, 2018).

5. Research Methodology

Survey research is one of the most important areas of measurement in applied social research. The broad area of survey research encompasses any measurement procedures that involve asking questions of respondents (Peter, 2006). Different types of surveys are actually composed of several research techniques, developed by a variety of disciplines. Survey research does not belong to any one field and it can be employed by almost any discipline (Nardi, 2006). A survey design was most appropriate to collect ample information in a short duration of time. Surveys are a favoured tool for many who are engaged in research as it provides a quick and effective way of collecting data (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). In the current study, the nature of the research statements warranted the use of a survey research as survey was also used by Arredondo and Bauch (2006) in their study about principals' perception about climate change. As such, five point Likert type scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) was used for numbers 1 to 15 in the survey to develop a better understanding of principals' view of counselling in schools.

Selecting research sample is an imminent issue frequently raised by researchers and students (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) researchers are always concerned with what can be labelled as an adequate size for a sample. They further suggest that despite shortage of time and financial constraints into consideration, it is advisable to obtain "as large a sample as they reasonably

can” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 104). For the purpose of this study, principals and teachers from all over Fiji were targeted but it was not possible to reach them all due to demographical reasons and COVID-19 restrictions. The target population is the entire group a researcher is interested in and in this case the principals in the secondary schools. The survey was administered to 100 principals and teachers and 78 of them attempted the survey resulting in a response rate of 78% which is acceptable for discussion. Table 1 shows the respondents in the survey.

Table 1. Study Respondents

Position	N of Items
Principals	8
Vice-principals	4
Head Teachers	10
Teachers	56
TOTAL	78

The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha (α) was used to assess the reliability of the study constructs as it is widely used for assessing the reliability of measurement scales with multi-point items. Thus, the reliability of the constructs based on the 15 items was .707. Table 2 shows the Cronbach’s Alpha value of the study constructs. The stated value of Cronbach’s Alpha reveals it is at an acceptable level and that the constructs are reliable to address the research question.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics of Study Constructs

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
.707	15

The findings section will discuss the items in the table with reference to pertinent literature wherever possible.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings as per the research questions according to thematic approach. Table 3 shows the study constructs.

Table 3. Item-Total Statistics

Study Constructs	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
There is an urgent need for counsellors in Fiji schools.	63.45	15.186	.178	.707
There has been an increase in bullying and drugs related issues in schools	63.54	14.408	.212	.709
The counselling program should cover the different theories associated with counselling and mentoring.	63.73	13.836	.348	.688
The need for counselling in schools have increased after the arrival of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns	63.62	13.253	.510	.666
Most of the students requiring counselling are affected by the socio-economic impact of COVID-19	63.44	12.976	.518	.663
The counselling program should cover the different theories associated with counselling and mentoring.	63.41	13.336	.476	.670
Apply counselling skills in addressing issues associated with students in schools	63.37	15.873	.016	.723
Reflect on how their cultural background and worldviews affect their psychological practice;	63.38	13.668	.440	.676
Deliver imaginative, culturally mindful and inclusive counselling experiences for all clients	63.18	15.604	.086	.715
Ensure that efficient and effective counselling services is available to students at all times	63.19	14.703	.380	.688
Protect the confidentiality of students' records and release students' personal data in accordance with prescribed laws and school policies	63.37	14.600	.254	.700
Demonstrate crisis management skills and plan interventions accordingly	63.18	15.188	.221	.702
Demonstrate empathy towards the client so that they have better coping mechanisms in life	63.22	14.900	.288	.696
Develop and demonstrate well informed decision-making processes regarding dilemmas arising in counselling	63.36	14.363	.379	.686
The counselling program should be able to equip teachers and leaders on how to make referrals to higher authorities when a child is at risk	63.13	14.866	.368	.690

The above constructs are discussed using thematic approach in the forthcoming paragraphs. The constructs were informed by literature review and the aim of the research.

6.1 Need for Counsellors in Schools

The findings uncovered strong positive emotions about the need for counsellors in schools. Almost all the respondents agreed that there was an urgent need for counsellors in Fijian schools. Only a few teachers were unsure as they may not be facing any counselling issues in their respective schools. Likewise, majority (91%) of the teachers agreed that all teachers needed to have basic counselling skills. Findings provide sound justifications for having a counselling program for the teachers (see Table 4).

Table 4. There Is an Urgent Need for Counsellors in Fiji Schools

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	37	47.4	47.4	47.4
	Agree	39	50.0	50.0	97.4
	Unsure	2	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

Literature supports the findings of the study as counsellors are needed to facilitate academic as well as the social and personal development of learners. According to Daniels (2013) the evolvement of school counselling involves balanced approach to counselling which includes support for student development namely in careers, academics and personal or social development. The high need for counsellors is also mentioned by Kodad and Kazi (2014) who are assertive that changing family trends such as working mothers, divorces, single parent families have reduced the emotional cushioning provided so far by most of the families. Also, the immense technological advances, the increased social life and issues such as drug abuse have contributed to stress and strain on the students demanding for more counsellors in our education systems.

Findings reveal that majority (32%) of the respondents strongly believe that there was an urgent need for counsellors in schools (see Figure 1). There is an acute shortage of counsellors in schools and similar sentiments has been shared by educational administrators. One of respondents made the following comment in the survey:

“There has been a drastic need for counsellors in schools after COVID-19 and after lockdowns when students started coming to school again. They seem to have a lot of social problems at home. Teachers are not qualified to deal with delinquent student behaviours and attitudes”.

The respondents seem to be fed up with the counselling issues in their schools that they look forward to professional counsellors to deal with such issues. Respondents are certain that students wrestle with a complex array of life circumstances and suffer from a variety of mental disorders due to COVID-19

socio-economic impacts. These unprecedented situations challenge their ability to focus on their studies and achieve their academic potential, calling for qualified school counsellors who are prepared to provide responsive services to the students. While responding to the open-ended questions majority of the participants raised issues like social media abuse, tiktok, cyber-bullying sexual abuse and pornography. Some students also show symptoms of depression, grief and anxiety, while some go in denial and become mentally affected and become misfits in the classroom. According to respondents, demand for counsellors is severe especially after the lockdowns and the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic and its new B.1.617 variant.

6.2 Increase in Demand for Counsellors

Survey findings reveal that majority (92.3%) of the school leaders and teachers believe that the need for counselling in schools have increased after the arrival of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. As the world grapples with the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting millions of students worldwide, as emotional distress has become the “new normal”. A few (5.1%) of them were unsure while only a few (2.6%) disagreed (see Table 5). The massive agreement of teachers reveals that they must have experienced the need for counsellors after the emergence of COVID-19. It is reasonable that few of the teachers were unsure and disagreed as according to them there was always a demand for counsellors in the schools.

Table 5. Increase in Counselling Needs after COVID-19 and Subsequent Lockdowns

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Strongly Agree	30	38.5	38.5	38.5
	Agree	42	53.8	53.8	92.3
Valid	Unsure	4	5.1	5.1	97.4
	Disagree	2	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

Previous research on academic stress among college students during COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown reveals that majority of the college students in India had the common feelings of fear of death, fear of being isolated, sense of meaninglessness and anxiety. Moreover, the lockdown situation had shot up the academic stress levels among college students where they were clueless about what would happen next (Gupta, 2020). Likewise, according to Nazish et al., (2020) routines, social interactions and friendships are among the most important factors responsible for children’s normal psychological development. Since the COVID-19 related disease containment measures and school closures became common, an increase has been noted in students’ delinquent behaviours and stress levels. On similar note, survey data reveals that majority (92.3%) of the respondents agreed that there has been

an increase in bullying and drug related issues in schools. Although there had been some mixed feelings, respondents established that the effects of drug and substance abuse leads to increase in social problems such as crime, school dropout rate, family break ups, and long-term detrimental health effects.

Moreover, drug abuse has multiple negative effects on a student's academics. From continual absences to poor grades, abusing drugs and alcohol can cause damaging academic problems that are difficult to recover from. Drug use can also cause mental and cognitive impairments that make it difficult for students to succeed in school (SAAC, 2020). The MEHA is aware of this issue and has policy document in this regard. The policy aims to promote and maintain a healthy, safe and drug free environment in our schools in Fiji where the welfare of students is paramount (MEHA, 2008). The Ministry does not permit the possession, consumption promotion, distribution, or sale of all drugs including alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. More so, drug and substance abuse is ranked as one of the worst amongst Fiji's problems as it has detrimental effects on health, our society, the economy and security of the Nation. The National Substance Abuse Advisory Council NSAAC is a statutory body that was established through the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council Act of 1998 to work under the Ministry. Cabinet has agreed that the primary objective of NSAAC should be, 'the promotion of health and the minimisation of harm associated with the abuse and misuse of alcohol and other substances for students in schools and the community as well' (MEHA, 2008). A study undertaken in Malaysia revealed an increase in disciplinary, drug problems, vandalism and social problems in (Chen & Kok, 2017)

6.3 Socio-economic Impact

The economic impact of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns are evident in the decline in growth, trade and employment in all countries. Closure of businesses, job lay-offs and supply chain disruption have been prominent regionally. The impacts are more pronounced with the decline in income and rise in expenditure. The adverse impacts are significant and recovery and adjustment to the new normal will take time. Disruption to food distribution networks, loss of livelihoods, safety nets, panic hoarding of essential goods, limited access to healthcare and schools has led to counselling issues in schools. There is no doubt that, COVID-19 has created stress on our educational systems at all levels. School closures, even when temporary, are challenging for copious reasons. Foremost, there is a reduction in instructional time, which impacts learning achievement as when schools close, educational performance suffers.

The findings uncovered strong positive emotions about the need for counselling in schools. Almost all (91%) of the respondents are in agreement that majority of students who require counselling in schools are affected by the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 (see Table 6). There were only a few disagreements some were unsure as counselling is multi-dimensional and there are many variables to consider.

Table 6. Students Requiring Counselling Are Affected by the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Strongly Agree	45	57.7	57.7	57.7
	Agree	26	33.3	33.3	91.0
Valid	Unsure	5	6.4	6.4	97.4
	Disagree	2	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

Disrupting schooling also leads to other immeasurable losses, such as inconveniences to families, decreased economic productivity as parents struggle to balance work obligations with childcare. The closures also compound educational inequities because economically advantaged families tend to have higher levels of stress and their children also get affected (Kalim & Maleeha, 2021).

Similarly, the education disruption has had, and will continue to have, substantial effects on students. Closures of educational institutions hamper the provision of essential services to children and communities, including access to nutritious food, affect the ability of many parents to work, and increase risks of violence against women and girls (United Nations, 2020). Likewise, businesses have shut down and the closing of the borders has left many airport workers and those in related fields unemployed affecting hundreds of families in putting decent meals on their tables. Fiji has developed innovative approaches in support of education and training in form of radio and television to take-home packages. For it must be considered that there are many children affected by a lack of resources or enabling environment to access learning. It is true for the teaching profession and their need for better training in new methods of education delivery, as well as support. In essence, such initiatives place certain demands on the governments, respective ministries and school communities at large as they are key to building a better and more resilient education system. The situation calls for a new breed of counsellors who can assist students in schools whose parents have lost jobs and are unable to meet all the demands of schooling.

6.4 Application of Counselling Theories and Skills

This question in the survey tried to illicit participants views in regards to the contents of a counselling program. Counselling approaches are based upon theories about human function as determining whether one counselling approach works better than another is difficult, because there are so many variables to consider in the counselling process. Even when applying the same theoretical model, there can be major differences in the counselling outcome due to differences in the clients' histories and situations, differences in the counsellors' communication styles, and even differences in client and counsellor mood on the day of the comparison. The responsibility starts with becoming familiar with the models that have shown to be most beneficial in actual practice. Findings reveal that majority (94%) of the respondents

agree that a counselling program should cover the different theories associated with counselling and mentoring.

Table 7. Covering of Different Theories Associated with Counselling and Mentoring

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Strongly Agree	45	57.7	57.7	57.7
	Agree	28	35.9	35.9	93.6
Valid	Unsure	3	3.8	3.8	97.4
	Disagree	2	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

Literature reveals that different theories and models highlight different areas of interest, and seek help from different theories and models (Tveit & Sunde, 2016). The focus here is on theories and how different aspects of an act actualize different theories (Perrone, Perrone, Chan, & Thomas, 2000). The theories illustrate the framework in practice, and is suitable for ethical reflection. Theories enable counsellors to better understand their clients and apply appropriate theories in addressing their counselling issues in schools. Lindh and Dahlin (2000) are in concurrence with Perrone et al., (2000) that career counsellors need to stop relying on traditional theories and focus on sociological and psychological theories to better address counselling issues in the current era. Findings further reveal that majority (97%) of the respondents strongly consider counsellors should have adequate skills and apply them in addressing counselling issues in schools. Similarly, according to Stark and Mills (2020) counselling skills are seen as vital for effective counselling and rated counseling skills as either important or indispensable.

Apart from theories and skills, majority (94%) of the respondents ascertain the importance of cultural background and worldviews in providing psychological counselling to students. Cultural diversity includes beliefs, values, mores, religious background, sexuality, socioeconomic status. Participants are certain that counsellors should be able to investigate how the client's particular actions relates to their belief systems. It needs to be understood how the client's culture helped to develop them into the person they are today. According to Laungani, (1997) we live in a diverse society, and in order to counsel ethically and effectively, it is important that we are mindful of how diversity and difference impact on our clients, our profession, our own lives and the therapeutic relationships we form with clients. Multicultural counselling characterizes the counselling practice that offers effective interventions to culturally diverse clients. Race, ethnicity, and culture influence a client's identity and life circumstances. Other factors, such as gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability also play into the context of given client's mental health, and relational or personal issues. A culturally competent counselor considers all aspects of a client's worldview when selecting treatment

approaches (Laungani, 1997). Similarly, majority (96%) of the respondents determine that counsellors always need to be culturally mindful and provide inclusive experiences for all clients.

6.5 Conflict Resolution and Mediation

Conflict resolution and mediation are important aspects of the counselling process in schools. The key difference between negotiation and mediation is that in negotiation, the parties involved work out their own agreement (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, & Landry, 2000; Diamant, 2000). In mediation, students have the support of the third party, the mediator, to help them come to an agreement. In the school environment, conflicts are common and although a conflict by itself is not destructive, inadequate ways of resolving the conflict lead to numerous negative consequences (Daunic et al., 2000). Mediation is the involvement of an impartial third party to support and help those involved in a conflict to find a resolution. All the respondents in the survey agreed that counsellors should be able to demonstrate conflict resolution and mediation steps used during counselling. School leaders and teachers must have experienced conflicts among children and young people.

Table 8. Demonstrate Conflict Resolution and Mediation Steps Used during Counselling

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Strongly Agree	49	62.8	62.8	62.8
Valid	Agree	29	37.2	37.2	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

Conflicts in schools are specific and the process of conflict development among children and youths can be observed and described. According to Daunic et al., (2000) conflict starts when two or more children perceive great mutual differences in their interaction when trying to achieve their needs and goals. Children in such situations react with certain behaviours including aggression or other conflict reactions. Literature further entails that conflict escalates if there is an increase in the expression of anger, frustration or perceived threat, and if other children join in and take the side of any of the opposing parties (Daunic et al., 2000). Likewise, conflict can be reduced if children were friends before the conflict and if they focus their attention on the problem and not on the parties to the conflict, meaning children have know-how on resolving conflicts, or have someone who can help mediate in that situation (Daunic et al., 2000; Diamant, 2000).

Literature further entails that mediation, whether formal or informal, can often help solve conflicts that have gone beyond the negotiation stage. Conflicts happen whenever people have different expectations. This makes conflict management critical, whether avoiding arguments, disputes, lasting conflict or ultimately, litigation. Conflict can be avoided if steps are taken early in a discussion to diffuse anger and facilitate communication, and it can be resolved by applying a series of thoughtfully applied steps

(Daunic et al., 2000; Diamant, 2000; Peuraca & Vejmelka, 2015). The respondents in the current study unanimously agree that counselling is an integral aspect of schooling and ensure that efficient and effective counselling services should be available to students at all times.

6.6 Crisis Management and Interventions

Crisis counselling involves assessing the client's current situation and listening to the client, asking questions and determining the individual needs to cope effectively with the crisis. Crisis intervention requires that the person experiencing crisis receive timely and skilful support to help cope with situation before future physical or emotional deterioration occurs. For this reason, counsellors need to possess basic knowledge of crisis theory and intervention and must be able to recognize and assess for symptoms of trauma. Subsequently, almost all (99%) of the respondents maintain that counsellors should be able to focus on crisis management and design interventions plans. Crisis, disaster, and trauma are inevitable truths of our life, preventable but sometimes completely avoidable, as they occur with or without any early signs. The psychological trauma in the aftermath can be devastating for individuals who have directly and or indirectly experienced the incident, in the current context is COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, as professional counsellors, they need to possess basic knowledge of crisis theory and intervention and should be able to recognize and assess for symptoms of trauma (Pau, Ahmad, & Tang, 2020).

Table 9. Demonstrate the Ability to Focus on Crisis Management and Design Interventions Plans

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	57	73.1	73.1	73.1
	Agree	20	25.6	25.6	98.7
	Unsure	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

Literature further details that COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns have left school many children idle and left unsupervised. Many are unable to grasp the consequences of not adhering to lockdown regulations and the real impact of the crisis. Crisis is a ubiquitous experience, and all counsellors will inevitably encounter a client who is in crisis or has experienced a traumatic event. Thus, it is important for all counsellors to have a basic understanding of crisis and trauma theories, assessment, and interventions. Many students may not be able to deal with the trauma of being Corona Virus positive or having spent time in quarantine or isolation centres. According to Pau et al., (2020) trauma is much more difficult to define as the term has often been used to describe almost any stressor experienced by an individual. At the most basic level, trauma refers to the emotional response an individual has to an event that was perceived to be physically or emotionally harmful. Literature also spells out that traumas can have lasting adverse effects on an individual's mental, physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing. For while crises are relatively brief events, a trauma response is more extreme, enduring and involves specific

psychological and physiological responses (Levers, 2012). The effects of trauma can be prolonged, as individuals may have recurrent experiences of the event and such situations call for professional counselling.

6.7 COVID-19's Impact on Counsellors

Our education system needs a new breed of counsellors. Counsellors who are well equipped to deal with crisis management and assisting students physically, socially, psychologically, mentally and economically affected by COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. Mitigating the adverse physical health risks associated with COVID-19 has been a priority of public health incentives. Less attention has been placed on understanding the psychological factors related to the global pandemic, especially among our students (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Current findings reveal that majority (97%) of the school leaders and teachers are of firm believe that counsellors should be able to make well informed decisions regarding dilemmas arising in counselling and be able to demonstrate empathy towards students so that they have better coping mechanisms in life. Many a times discourses and policies around COVID-19 disproportionately focuses on the adverse effects of the public health crisis on adults.

Table 10. Make Well Informed Decision-making Regarding Dilemmas Arising in Counselling

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	44	56.4	56.4	56.4
	Agree	32	41.0	41.0	97.4
	Unsure	2	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

On similar note, previous research shows that depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress are the most common psychological reactions to the pandemic in adults, however, the impact of COVID-19 on young people is not fully understood. The United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) labels them a vulnerable group that is at-risk for becoming its biggest victims and for some, the impact would last for life (United Nations, 2020). Literature further illustrates that in order to curb the spread of Corona virus and its variant like B.1.617 many governments like the Fijian government have in place lockdowns and travel restrictions. The short-term policy strategies of governments have focused on mitigating the physical risks of COVID-19 by placing limits on social interactions. These policies have transformed the behaviour of children and young adults as their personal space and style of living has been affected (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Disruptions of this magnitude have been shown to disproportionately affect children, while reductions in families' incomes, from a decrease in work hours, have negatively impacted households' quality of life and student life. These factors have had significant impacts on children's health and wellbeing and this calls for well trained professional counsellors (Syed & Ahmad, 2020).

Previous research shows that social isolation and loneliness have had a great impact on children and young people (Loades et al., 2020). There have been increases in adolescent anxiety which has been due in some part to pandemic related restrictions (Qi et al., 2020). As discussed earlier, young people are sociable in nature and keeping them in restricted zones negatively affects their emotions and behaviour. The extent of the impact likely depends on other factors like age, gender, socioeconomic indicators, and country of origin (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). These pressing issues call for a new breed of councillors who are well trained to handle children and young adolescence who are mostly students. Likewise, the school leaders and teachers are certain (92%) that counsellors need to protect the confidentiality of students' records and release students' personal data in accordance with prescribed laws and school policies (see Table 11).

A student's right to privacy and confidentiality is the basis for an effective counselling relationship. Confidentiality ensures that school counsellors won't share students' disclosures with others except when the student authorizes it or when there is all clear and present no danger to the student and other persons. The school counsellor and parents need to build a relationship of mutual respect and trust to make the best decisions about the child. Trust means that what is shared is confidential and related to the child. The relationship between parent and school counsellor develops through working together. With a primary obligation to the student, confidentiality is balanced with an understanding of the parents' legal and inherent rights to be the guiding voice in their children's lives.

Table 11. Protection of Confidentiality of Students' Records and Personal Data

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	47	60.3	60.3	60.3
	Agree	25	32.1	32.1	92.3
	Unsure	6	7.7	7.7	100.0
	Total	78	100.0	100.0	

This study, alongside international research, illustrates that there are certain mental health challenges arising from COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions. Young people are at risk of suffering psychological consequences, and counsellors need to be aware of such uncertainties and be ready to assist them accordingly. In addressing these difficulties, there is a growing need to have well qualified counsellors who are ready to implement policies that will help children and adolescents cope with the short-term and long-term psychological effects of the pandemic, especially those who are deemed more vulnerable in this group.

6.8 General Views

The survey also had an open-ended question that tried to elicit respondents' general comments about counselling and what their expectations of a counselling program were. The responses were analyzed using thematic approach.

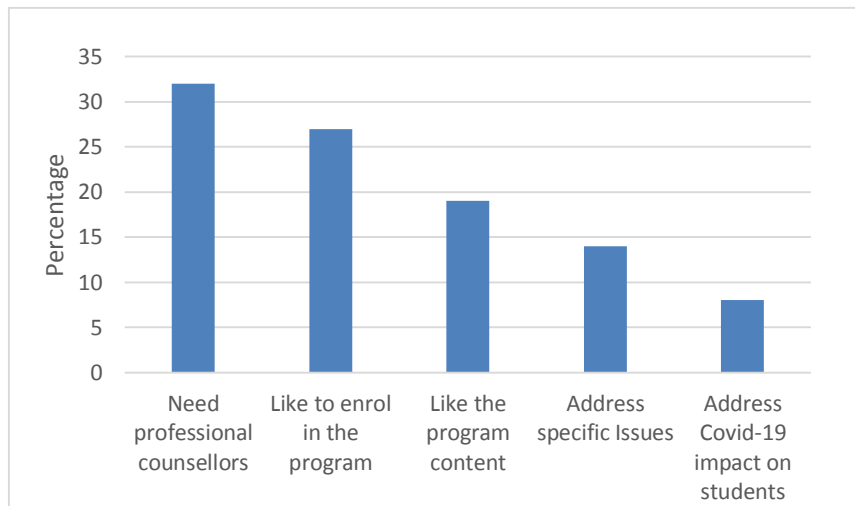


Figure 1. Respondents' General Comments and Recommendations

Findings reveal that many (27%) of the respondents are looking forward to enrolling in the proposed counselling program. While filling in the survey, respondents were able to derive the content of the program and thus were interested in enrolling in the program once it would be offered. Similarly, quite many (19%) of them like the content of the program as they found it relevant and very contextual. They are certain that the program would thoroughly prepare counsellors for dealing with student issues in the 'new normal'. Findings further reveal that some (14%) of the respondents had certain recommendations to make. Majority of them suggested that the proposed program should prepare counsellors who are able to address issues like bullying, teenage pregnancy, suicide, peer pressure, assault, stealing, delinquent behaviour and trauma. They also want counsellors to address issues like poverty, embarrassment, family negligence, drugs, boyfriend girlfriend affairs, stress and absenteeism. Respondents are in agreement (8%) that there is an increase in the previous mentioned cases after COVID-19 and that counsellors should be prepared to deal with such cases and prepare students for the new norm. The increasing anxiety and depression levels discussed among young people, calls for counsellors who can support them with healthy coping mechanisms considering the potentially adverse effects of COVID-19.

7. Limitations of the Study

Naturally, studies do have certain limitations, likewise this research has a few shortcomings. There is a lack of local literature and in reality, this paper may be the first research article on counselling in Fiji. Additionally, the time available for this research was very limited as certain deadlines had to be met but

a more detailed research will be initiated in the near future. The self-reported nature of the data, based upon school leaders' and teachers' perceptions is a limitation of the study, as the results in this study were not verified by triangulation or other independent measures. In addition, the findings may not be generalizable to the entire population of educators as limited number were considered for this research. As a result, these results should be viewed as a snapshot of principals' and teachers' perceptions and practices around counselling and as a starting place for discussion and further investigation.

8. Conclusion

Counselling in schools is a need and is here to stay considering the backdrop of COVID-19 and associated socio-economic and associated psychosocial problems faced by students. Counselling needs to cater for the emerging needs of the student community considering, drastic changes in family structures and changing social values that may lead to mental health issues and immense stress on them. Further our findings confirm the work of other scholars that a new pedigree of counsellors are needed who are well qualified to assist students' behavioral and mental health issues at a time of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. When providing direct responsive services to depressed students, school counselors should use their awareness of diagnostic skills to recognize instances in which students may have depressive disorders and provide appropriate crisis intervention, counseling and referral services. Their selection of interventions should be guided by research and reflect evidence-based practices. In essence, counsellors need to have not only the administrative knowledge and intellectual understanding of their field, but also the helping strategies to treat increasing psychosocial problems of the students and prepare them well for the 'new normal'.

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