PRACTITIONER PAPER

Can a five-minute meeting improve the wellbeing of students? The Indian school experience

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Abstract
In India, school psychology is an emerging field of study. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has mandated the appointment of school counsellors to boost mental health through counselling, life-skills education, and career guidance. In the present study, the school counsellor implemented a five-minute meeting to quickly interact with students to promote their wellbeing. Using universal sampling, data were collected from 78 students using a Google survey form at one of the leading private schools in Meerut city of Uttar Pradesh State, India. The findings of the study indicated an improvement in the personal-social and school-career domains of students' wellbeing. Approximately 72% of students reported being happy, and 58% shared being friendly (personal-social domain). Nearly 68% of students reported doing well in the school (school-career domain). Moreover, 65% of students expressed willingness to meet with the counsellor. The initiative received an overwhelmingly positive response (82%), indicating that it has increased the value of support for these students. This initiative provided an opportunity for both the counsellor and students to get to know each other and allowed the counsellor to plan individual and group counselling sessions as needed. Prospective studies could employ robust methodology with a larger sample size to evaluate the effects of this initiative on mental health outcomes.

Keywords: School counselling; middle years program; students' wellbeing; India

India is home to the highest youth population globally, with adolescents making up around one-fourth of the Indian population (Census of India, 2011; Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Adolescence is a critical phase marked by developmental changes in biological, psychological and sexual domains, with intense emotional experiences (Guyer et al., 2016). It is considered a period of 'storm and stress' (Arnett, 1999) due to changes that occur concurrently, such as physical maturation, neurological development, the drive for independence, and increased social and peer interactions (Casey et al., 2010; Spear, 2009, Spear, 2013). These factors collectively affect adolescents' mental health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Approximately 7.3% of young people aged from 13 to 17 years suffer from mental disorders (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2016). Additionally, school-age adolescents exhibit high stress levels in everyday life (Mathew et al., 2015). Recent studies have revealed that the prevalence of mental disorders among school-age adolescents in India is rising (Kharod & Kumar, 2015; Mangal et al., 2020; Nair et al., 2017; Puwar et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2017). Previous studies have identified stressors among adolescents, such as the pressure of academic performance, emotional distress resulting from difficulties in forming, maintaining and ending romantic relationships, negotiating autonomy with parents, safety, and risk of sexual harassment, bullying and teasing, among others (Parikh, Michelson et al., 2019). The stigma associated with mental disorders exacerbates the gap in accessing mental healthcare services in school settings (Gaiha et al., 2020; Parikh et al., 2016). These statistics underscore the need for resources to tackle mental health risks among school-age adolescents. Thus, schools are crucial settings for provisioning mental health

services. WHO (2017, 2020) has also emphasised schools' role in addressing adolescents' mental health needs. School counsellors play an essential role in providing mental health services within the school setting by promoting mental health awareness, addressing academic and career challenges, delivering brief counselling interventions, interacting with parents and teachers, and referring students to specialist mental healthcare services (Collins, 2014).

School Counselling in India

School counselling is in its infancy stage in India. With increased suicides and drug abuse among school-age children, the need for school counselling is becoming apparent (Kodad & Kazi, 2014). School counsellors or school psychologists' primary role includes helping students overcome career, academic, and personal challenges (Marini & Stebnicki, 2015). Recognising the need to equip students with life skills, provide career guidance and help manage psychological difficulties, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India has mandated the appointment of a school counsellor (Central Board of Secondary Education [CBSE], 2012) across the schools in the country. However, very few schools have appointed full-time school counsellors. A survey conducted in 2014 by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) revealed that only 3% of private schools had recruited full-time school counsellors (ASSOCHAM, 2014, as cited in Kakumanu, 2019).

The need for counselling is gaining recognition. Students, teachers, and parents endorsed in-person counselling in school (Parikh, Sapru et al., 2019), indicative of the gradual prioritisation of counsellors in school settings. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of the counsellor's role in the school context is limited. School counsellors face numerous challenges regarding expectations from management, teachers and parents, particularly in providing mental health services and research engagements in schools (Deshwal & Gupta, 2017; Thomas & Dey, 2020). The role of the school counsellor is often confused with the special educator (Sriram, 2016), and they are often entrusted with teaching and administrative responsibilities by the school authority (Akos et al., 2014; Jain & Sandhu, 2015), undermining the crucial role a counsellor has in addressing students' mental health. Parikh and colleagues (Parikh, Michelson et al., 2019; Parikh, Sapru et al., 2019) have iterated that consensus on the focus and content of school-based mental health services, particularly in low-resource settings, is restricted (Parikh, Michelson et al., 2019). In such circumstances, innovative approaches to promote the uptake of preventive mental health support services are recommended. Further, indigenous strategies to promote positive mental health and inform policies must be identified (Roy et al., 2019). Evidence-based policies and practices emerging from innovative methods and scientific studies will further increase competence in this direction (Singh, 2019). The present study assessed the school counsellor's initiative of a five-minute meeting with students from Grades 6 through to Grade 12 to quickly interact with them to promote wellbeing. The student participants in the study were from a well-established private school in Meerut city, Uttar Pradesh State, India, which appointed its first school counsellor in 2017.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design with a survey-based methodology (Bhattacherjee, 2019) to assess students' response to the school counsellor's initiative of a five-minute meeting and its outcome in two domains of wellbeing: school-career and personal-social.

Background of the School

The school was founded in 2008 in an urban city in northern India and was the first school to offer the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) curriculum in the city.

The school caters to all religions and to an upper-middle income stratum. The school is known for taking new student-centric initiatives such as the annual students' fair, fashion shows, art-craft sessions, career guidance sessions, elocution competitions, and painting competitions. A five-minute meeting was a first-of-its-kind initiative focusing on students' wellbeing.

Participants

Participants included students in Grades 6 to 12 from a private school in Meerut city of Uttar Pradesh State in India. The majority of the students belonged to the middle-income group (50,000 to 1 million rupees income per annum) and high-income (wealthy) group (>1 million rupees per annum).

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

Five-minute meeting

The five-minute meeting is a quick meeting with students and the counsellor once a week. This meeting aims to learn about the students' wellbeing and promote the uptake of counselling services. The school counsellor asks four questions during the five-minute meeting: (1) How are you feeling today? (2) What makes you feel the way you are feeling right now? (3) Is there anything you wish to share with me about the school, career, personal or social experience? (4) What is your plan for today?

School counselor

School counsellors are those who have completed a postgraduate qualification in psychology or a postgraduate diploma in guidance and counselling from a University Grants Commission (UGC) recognised university in India. There is no regulatory authority that governs school counselling practices. However, CBSE has mandated the appointment of a school counsellor. Their role is to provide academic, career and vocational guidance, address issues with peers, help students deal with psychosocial problems, and work with parents, teachers and school administration (CBSE, 2012). The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) – a council set up by the Government of India, has also issued a guideline. According to the NCERT (2015):

> Counsellors, specially trained in theory and practice of counselling, can guide the students and help them develop the right attitudes and competencies to cope with educational, personal, social and career related problems and issues. Providing these services in schools, particularly at this stage, would help students cope with increasing academic and social pressures. (p. 7)

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a positive outcome of life, including quality of relationships, positive emotions, resilience, and the realisation of potential or overall satisfaction with life. For this study, positive outcomes for students in two domains were considered wellbeing indicators: (1) school-career and (2) personal-social.

Research Instrument

The authors used a self-constructed survey tool. The tool comprised of two sections: (1) demographic information (participant's age, gender, and grade) and questions regarding the acceptability of the initiative; and (2) multiple-choice and short-answer questions adapted from a five-minute meeting agenda proposed by Johnson (2019). Johnson's model was the best fit to meet the need of the school counsellor to get to know the students from quick interactions across the domains under study. The wellbeing tool comprised two domains: (1) school-career and (2) personal-social. In total, the questionnaire had 12 questions; for example, 'How is your school year going?' 'What is the most

Table 1. Modification to the tool based on feedback received

Sr. No.	Questions	Modification based on feedback
1	Do you accept the 'five-minute meeting' initiative?	Do you endorse a 'five-minute meeting' initiative for this school?
2	If your answer is yes, explain the reasons.	What do you like the most about a 'five-minute meeting'?
3	If your answer is no, explain the reasons.	What don't you like about a 'five-minute meeting'?
4	How is your school year?	How is your school year going?
5	What challenges are you facing at present in the school?	What is the most challenging thing about the school this year?
6	Do you have anyone in the school whom you can talk to?	If you have any challenges, do you have anyone in the school whom you can talk to? If yes, whom do you prefer to talk to?

challenging thing about the school this year?' (school-career domain); 'How many friends do you have in school?' 'If you have any challenges, do you have anyone you can talk to in the school?' (Personal-social domain). The tool was shared with two teachers, one school counsellor, a postgraduate psychology student, and two students from Grades 6 and 12 each for their feedback. The research authors incorporated the changes shown in Table 1 into the tool to establish validity.

The tool was pilot tested with 10 students (12% of the study's total sample), who were excluded from the final study sample. Although the pilot test sample was small, we investigated the internal consistency of the questionnaire in our sample by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The results were found to be .73, representing adequate reliability of the tool.

Rapport Building With Students Before Executing the Five-Minute Meeting Initiative

The students, teachers and principal had no clear idea about counselling and the role of a counsellor. Since the researcher (first author) was the first school counsellor appointed in this school, she took this as an opportunity to build a shared understanding of the meaning of counselling and the role of a counsellor. Initially, she spent time in the library to meet and greet the students. She introduced herself to the students visiting the library, conducted fun group activities, and delivered a talk, 'Know your Counsellor', in the classroom to build rapport with the students. This ice-breaking activity helped encourage students to individually see a counsellor for a five-minute meeting. No formal assessment was carried out to know whether rapport was built with students; however, increased interactions of teachers and students with the counsellor were considered an outcome of the rapport-building process. Approximately two teachers and four students meeting a counsellor in a week indirectly indicated rapport with students and teachers.

Five-Minute Meeting

The counsellor carried out a five-minute meeting with students regularly. The present study was conducted three months after the introduction of the five-minute meeting. It continued for six weeks. The counsellor worked with the coordinator to set up a time during which they ccould interact with the students individually on three days, Monday (Grades 6, 7 and 8), Wednesday (Grades 9 and 10), and Friday (Grades 11 and 12). Initially, she visited students in their respective classrooms to share the five-minute initiative and help make students comfortable with the new initiative. Each student was then requested to meet the counsellor personally as per the scheduled day and time. All students participated in this initiative throughout.

Table 2. Student participants from Grades 6 to 12

Grade	Participants	
	Frequency	Percentage
6	19	24.4
7	32	41
8	13	16.7
10	8	10.3
11	2	2.6
12	4	5.1
Total	78	100

Data Collection

The first author collected the data from 78 students in Grades 6 to 12 who participated in the study. The counsellor went to each classroom, explained the research, its objective, risks, and benefits, and shared the Google form with all the students.

Ethical Considerations

Permission from the school authority, consent from the school principal, and assent from students were obtained before administering the questionnaire. Students were briefed on the role of the counsellor, anonymity, confidentiality, the five-minute meeting initiative, and the counselling process. Students were ensured that participation in the study was voluntary, and they could skip answering any questions. They were also informed that they could schedule an appointment and visit the counsellor if there was a need.

Results

Demographic Profile

Most of the students were Hindu (92%), followed by Muslim (8%). The majority of the students belonged to the middle-income group (50,000 to 1 million rupees income per annum) and high-income (wealthy) group (>1 million rupees per annum) as per the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE, 2021). The CMIE is a private economic thinktank and business information company in India. As indicated in Table 2, 78 students (47 boys; 31 girls) participated in the five-minute meeting. The mean age of students was 11.60 ± 0.493 years.

Domain Findings

The findings are presented for each domain: personal-social and school-career. It also presents results on willingness to meet the counsellor and acceptance of the initiative.

Personal-social domain

Most students (72%) reported being happy, 17% reported being extremely happy, and 4% expressed being sad (Table 3). Students reported being social, such as having friends and interacting with classmates; 74% reported having more than five friends in school. About 58% of students reported being friendly, responsible (13%), respectful (12%), and a thinker (9%).

Table 3. Personal-social domain (*N* = 78)

	Frequency	Percentage
Feelings		
Sad	3	4
Very sad	0	0
Neutral	6	7
Happy	56	72
Very happy	13	17
Characteristic that best describes you		
Friendly	45	58
Responsible	10	13
Respectful	9	12
Thinker	7	9
Creative	7	9

Table 4. School career domain

How is the school year going?	Frequency	Percentage
Going very well	53	68
Going okay	25	32
Most challenging thing about the school		
Being organised	12	15
Talking to others	9	12
Making new friends	8	10
Grades/exams	8	10
Staying focused	6	8
None	35	45

School-career domain

As shown in Table 4, 68% of students responded that they were doing very well at the school. Nearly 55% reported some challenges in the school environment, such as students expressing issues with being organised (15%), difficulties talking to others (12%), and having high expectations of getting good grades (10%) from the school. On enquiring whether the students can discuss their problems with anyone in the school, 65% reported discussing their issues with a counsellor or teacher and their peers (3%).

About 32% of the participants conveyed not discussing their problems with anyone in the school. Many of these students had reported concerns related to a career as their primary problem. Table 5 presents the career choices of the students.

Willingness to Meet the Counsellor

In the study, 65% of students expressed their interest in talking to a counsellor. Nearly 28% expressed talking to the counsellor about personal problems such as self-esteem, fear and exam stress, 19%

Table 5. Career choices of students

Career choices	Frequency	Percentage
Doctor	16	21
Civil services	14	18
Artist	9	12
Business	6	8
Sports	8	10
Acting	3	4
Engineering	13	17
Do not know yet	9	12

expressed talking about social issues such as friendship and family concerns, and 18% expressed talking about school-related topics such as exam stress and difficulties being organised and disciplined. It helped the counsellor to prepare individual and group counselling sessions to further meet the needs of the students.

Acceptance of the Initiative

Nearly 82% of students perceived the five-minute meeting initiative as very useful and expressed their willingness to continue this initiative, as it helped them familiarise with a counsellor (62%), break fear (20%), and ease their stress (18%). As an implication of the acceptance of the initiative, 50% of the students (out of 78) sought counselling sessions for their personal challenges.

Discussion

Role of the Five-Minute Meeting in the School

Much of the literature on school counselling and the school counsellor's role is derived from studies done in the Western context. The authors initiated the five-minute meeting as a novel approach to build rapport and as a quick check-in for the wellbeing of the students. Since the approach is novel, particularly in an Indian context, the research hopes to add a new dimension. McLaughlin (1993) argues that school counselling has an educative function, envisioned to develop students personally and socially within the context. The five-minute meeting approach has the potential to deal with the personal-social and school-career domains of the students. The five-minute approach has two roles: (1) empower the students and (2) empower the counsellors.

Empower Students

The method seems promising in a school-counselling context, especially to break the ice for students to see the counsellor. Five-minute meetings as one-on-one student meetings were scheduled with students as an opportunity to build rapport and as a quick check-in for their wellbeing. The five-minute meeting was also an opportunity for students to know when and how to reach the counsellor, since the school counsellor was appointed for the first time in the school. Quick check-in meetings are also expected to help plan individual meetings with students who need further assistance; for instance, to help students develop learning plans (American School Counselling Association, 2012) and help in the personal-social domain. The five-minute meetings also remind students that a school counsellor is a support person to whom the students can talk and share any challenges they face. Students' perceptions confirmed this, as 82% of students shared that the five-minute meeting initiative was beneficial.

Students developed a rapport with the counsellor and learned they could reach the counsellor to share anything challenging with family and/or friends. After this initiative, about 50% of the students met again with the counsellor.

Empower Counsellors

The five-minute meeting initiative helped the counsellor to identify at-risk students and plan further counselling sessions. Counsellors could learn about the student's perceptions of themselves and their worries and needs in social and school domains. For example, 65% of students had concerns to share with the counsellor, 3% had career-related queries, and 32% reported not talking to anyone about their problems. These students needed counselling support, and the five-minute meeting approach laid the ground for planning different activities to reach out to the students.

School counsellors are often occupied with multiple roles and involved in many activities that hinder working with individual or group students. The differences in beliefs and values between counsellors and other stakeholders such as parents, teachers and administrators have implications for a counsellor's role and the challenges the counsellor faces in corroborating their role as a school counsellor (Tammana, 2016). Vaishnavi and Aneesh (2018) also highlighted the challenges associated with the misconceptions and preconceived notions about the role of a school counsellor and the counselling process among parents. The role or category of a counsellor is a relatively 'fuzzy' one, lacking clarity due to the additional roles played by the counsellor in an Indian setting (Bhola et al., 2012). The first author echoed similar challenges as a school counsellor on the ambiguity of her role. Initiating the five-minute meeting approach has helped her clarify her role as a school counsellor to management, principal, teachers, students, and parents to a great extent. It also empowered the counsellor with a tool to understand students' issues and execute activities that could help students overcome challenges in school-career and personal-social domains.

Implications of the Study

Since the counselling service was new in a school setting, developing a tool for the five-minute meeting does help the counsellor to negotiate with the coordinator and principal to meet with each student to establish rapport with the students. It also allowed the coordinator and teachers to not label particular students as 'problem children'. In the Indian school context, a significant focus is on academic work, and taking time out for counselling is not always appreciated. Therefore, beginning with the five-minute meeting can lay the foundation for negotiating with the school authority since it does not take much time from the students' regular classes.

This approach can also help counsellors show the significance of counselling in a school setting to the stakeholders, such as principals, parents and students (Coll & Freeman, 1997; Sears & Granello, 2002). The immediate supervisors often misinterpret the school counsellor's role (Semichan & Nirmala, 2018). This five-minute meeting approach created a shared understanding among the teachers about counselling and its value and facilitated organising talks on psychosocial issues of children with subject teachers. Parents were also informed about the role and availability of the school counsellor during parent-teacher meetings. The approach of working together with teachers and parents helped to mainstream counselling in the school.

While clinical psychologists in India can now register with the Rehabilitation Council of India and are recognised as mental health professionals by Central and State Mental Health Councils, school counsellors still struggle to establish a professional identity. With very few accredited degree-granting programs in school counselling in India (e.g., a short-term program in school counselling at the Tata Institute of Social Science), the school counselling regulatory mechanism does not exist (Akos et al., 2014). However, professional groups such as the Counsellor Association of India, Bhartiya Counselling Psychology Association, and Indian School Psychology Association can hopefully collaborate to generate evidence and advocacy, develop job aids, and facilitate contextually relevant and culturally

sensitive skill-building training for school counsellors and counselling supervisors. The lack of research in this domain makes it challenging to evaluate its benefits. Further, future research could use pre-post and longitudinal research designs to generate evidence on the effectiveness of the five-minute meeting. Also, future research could focus on a follow-up of the five-minute meeting; for example, how a five-minute meeting could lead to planning and implementing further counselling activities to enhance students' wellbeing. Multicentric studies with robust methodologies (e.g., randomised control trials) are highly recommended.

Strength and Limitations

The current research attempted to investigate an innovative approach to promote positive mental health in schools. To our knowledge, this is the first study using a five-minute meeting in an Indian context. The approach proved helpful in establishing rapport with the students and to clarify and establish the role of a school counsellor. However, we want to acknowledge the limitations of the study. It included one school catering to the upper- and middle-class population, with a limited sample size. Thus, study findings remain contextual and have limited generalisability. The study did not assess rapport building with students and teachers with a standardised tool. Variables such as the counsellor's personality and communication skills should be considered while evaluating rapport building and a referral from teachers and students visiting the counsellor directly. The study has not systematically analysed data on the uptake of counselling services after a five-minute meeting. Despite these limitations, the present study has an essential contribution to counselling and school psychology.

Conclusion

A five-minute meeting approach is promising for empowering students and counsellors. This approach adds to the body of knowledge on counselling approaches in the school context, promotes the uptake of counselling services, and enhances the wellbeing of students, particularly in an Indian context. Much work needs to be done at the policy level to legitimise the profession and the role of school counsellors.

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