

# School Guidance and Counselling Services for Special Education Students in Malaysia: A Literature Review

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The Malaysian Education Act 1996 gave the liberty to the Minister to establish special education classrooms at any schools that needed them, provided the students' population in those particular schools is sufficient. This clause has motivated the establishment of Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI) in government schools ever since. This move encouraged parents who have children with issues like learning disabilities and other categories of special needs, to send their children into the mainstream education system, and the numbers are growing every year. The uniqueness of these students and the special learning needed by them makes it essential for the educational system to provide holistic support elements in school settings. One of these vital elements is the counselling provision specifically tailored for this unique population of students. However, the current school counselling services provided are based more on the "one-size-fits-all" philosophy; thus, tends to ignore the needs of special education students. On top of that, the PPKI teachers are not given proper training or knowledge in counselling and guidance, which prevents them from helping the students effectively in school. This paper analytically reviews the literature, internationally and locally, with the main purpose to establish an overview of the provision of school counselling for special education students in Malaysia. Consequently, this literature review will initiate further research works to plan integrated strategies to enhance the existing school counselling services in the Malaysian education system.

**Keywords:** *Counselling and Guidance, Literature Review; School, Special Education, Malaysia*

## Introduction

Special education students are a population of students who fall into the category of disabilities such as severe physical disability, severe and moderate abstinence, various abilities and more. As defined in the Education Act (1996) specifically, special education students are categories of students with learning disabilities such as sight, hearing, speech, Down Syndrome, mild autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), minimal mental disorders retardation and dyslexia. Special education students are those who need other supportive facilities and services to ensure they are successful in their educational programs (Milson, 2002). Unlike other mainstream students, special education students need different attention and have different needs than other students. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the needs of these groups to provide the support and facilities to meet the needs of special education students to achieve the highest level of education. Special needs students and academically gifted students can enjoy the individual counselling process (Erford 2003) and although special education students differ from other general students, they may also enjoy the guidance and counselling services provided.

It must provide all students with support in learning, career, personal and social development to help them achieve their goals in education (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Therefore, there is no exception in getting the best services for special education students according to their specific needs. However, are their special needs met and the support services provided at the school fully met? A good and balanced academic and psychosocial development are essential for students in ensuring quality and effective learning for students.

Guidance and counselling services are services provided to all classes of citizens of any age regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. In a school context, guidance and counselling provide services for all students, including special needs students. Although guidance and counselling services are no longer new to special education, most of the approaches used to help these groups focus on skills and careers for entrepreneurship target and the survival of the special needs group while seeking employment and adapting to society. The main aspects of guidance and counselling services include: to drive behavioral change, assist clients in decision making, develop self-esteem skills, rationalise client thinking and help clients improve their relationships with others (Muhd Mansur and Siti Nordinar 2010). Thus, it is essential that guidance and counselling services provided are not only focusing on skills and careers but also on fulfilling their specific needs so that the help received includes all aspects that are the same as normal groups.

Guidance and counselling services are a medium of support for students in the form of social, emotional and behavioral health and the ability to meet challenges. School counsellors should work with special needs students and include them in the guidance and counselling services of the school (Trenhaile 2007). The comprehensive model that is the basis of the Malaysian

Guidance and Counselling service suggests that this service is for all students (Ministry of Education Malaysia 1993). Counsellors should accept all students unconditionally and not allow discrimination against students because of race, gender, religion, ideological status, and physical or mental disabilities (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2009). Like other students, special education students also need counselling services to ensure a balanced and holistic psychosocial development. However, school counselling and counselling services only focus on students and there is no special emphasis on the needs of special education students (Abu Yazid & Noriah 2019, 2016). Therefore, the guidance and counselling services provided should meet the needs of not only normal students but also special education students.

As a group gifted and talented students' population with special needs, special education students also need specialised support to help them in the learning environment at school and in the learning process. Therefore, guidance and counselling in school should take into account the special needs of diverse learning for a special education student population. Do the existing counselling services in Malaysia fulfil the special needs of unique and different special education students? What is the best approach for guidance and counselling services in handling the special needs of special education students?

### **International research**

According to the Representative Council of American School Counselling Association (ASCA) in 2003, guidance and counselling services are for all students, including those with special needs. It is the counsellors's responsibility to help students with special needs regardless of the challenges they face by using their knowledge and skills in helping all students especially students with special needs (ASCA 2010; Serres & Nelson 2011).

Studies from Frostad and Pijl (2007) found that students with special needs suffer from communication problems and in understanding their peers, especially those with autism, behavior problems and intellectual disabilities. This is because they find students with special needs have lower social skills than their peers (Greenspan & Granfield 1992; Garrison-Harrell & Kamps 1997; Pfiffner & McBurnett 1997; Scheepstra, et al. 1999; Soresi & Note 2000; Monchy et al. 2004; Frostad & Pijl 2007). Having training and guidance of social skills from the counsellors can help students with special needs to avoid further isolation from their peers and they should do early stage training to ensure that they have the right skills (Frostad & Pijl 2007). Thus, school counsellors play an important role in helping students with special needs to adapt to school environments among their peers.

According to Bridgeland (2011), school counsellors have a unique experience in which they look at the student's life in school and consult with family and students on their educational, emotional and social needs. This is supported by Gewertz (2011) where counsellors have the advantage of interacting with students because of the relative time spent with students at school

and it is a disadvantage if these relationships are not utilised in helping them. It shows that good relationships between counsellors and students also play an important role in assisting students with special needs because school counsellors are the closest individuals who understand and witness the difficulties of students when they have been in school for the period of time.

In 2004, the ASCA declared a need for a national model to outline the role of counsellors in dealing with special needs students in schools. As ASCA (2010) has suggested, school counsellors should work with special education staff, provide support to special needs students and consult with support staff to fulfil the unique needs of each student. In ensuring the fulfillment of special education, the cooperation of the school counsellors and school staff is important so that this can be addressed effectively.

House and Hayes (2002); Moore III, Henfield and Owens (2008), also agreed that school counsellors should work closely with education staff to ensure quality curriculum and programs are provided to students with special needs. The counsellors and teachers involved need to develop specific intervention plans and adapt the existing counselling services strategies to the individual needs of special education students (Erford 2003). With unique characteristics of each student, it is advisable that the guidance and counselling services provided fulfil a variety of unique needs to meet the support the students need.

Good school counsellors can guide and motivate students and empathy (Tait 2013). As recognized by Friend and Cook (1994), cooperation is when two parties interact directly to achieve a goal through joint decision-making or mutual agreement. According to Dixon, DeVoss, and Davis (2010) collaboration among school counsellors with educators can occur through two-way interactions that focus on the educational and emotional needs of special needs students. Therefore, counsellors should always be willing to cooperate with various parties in ensuring that the services provided to special needs students reach their maximum potential in helping students achieve their maximum potential in learning. Only the involvement of all parties in education who focus on the special needs of students with special education and social support can achieve this.

Most studies also emphasise the capacity and the capability of school counsellors in handling students with special needs. The study of Nichter & Edmonson (2005) found that most special education students receive guidance and counselling services from counsellors who are not skilled in dealing with special education students. School counsellors should develop and expand their knowledge and skills in dealing with special education students like any other mainstream student.

Milsom and Hartley (2006) state that school counsellors should know students' unique abilities or needs and that they need to understand the problems and how it can impact students' learning



ability. However, Deck et al. (1999); Nichter and Edmonson (2005) found that most school counsellors do not feel ready and that their skills cannot handle special needs students upon completion of their training program. Martin's (2002) study also suggests that most school counsellors are not yet ready to lead engagement with special needs students due to poor school counselling training and the constraints faced by school administration.

Some researchers agree that formal preparation for school counsellors is disadvantaged and existing counsellors education programs do not provide adequate exposure and experience to counselling graduates. This has caused most of the counsellors to feel that they have insufficient skills in dealing with special education students. This creates discomfort and creates an impasse for school counsellors in dealing with special needs students. Therefore, it is important for school counsellors to be more prepared to provide guidance and counselling services to special education students by attending courses and workshops to strengthen skills and experience with special education students (Milson 2002; Tait 2013).

Most studies do not provide a clear and detailed description of the official protocols or guidelines that can be followed and used as a manual in helping school counsellors deal with special needs students. However, as previously mentioned, the ASCA has outlined the national model. Moore III researchers Henfield and Owens (2008), based on the themes that emerged in their study, have proposed the House and Sears (2002) and Martin (2002) Transforming School Counselling Initiative frameworks to assist school counsellors. This emphasises support, leadership, a unifying and collaborative approach, counselling, consulting and data usage on special needs students. The goal of the Transforming School Counselling Initiative is to encourage the development of a new program model as a pre-service training for school counsellors. This is to prepare for school counselling graduates to serve as student advisors and academic advisors who have expressed confidence that with all students that they can achieve high levels of academic achievement (Martin 2002).

Through the conducted research, it shows that to make the program successful, and to provide the best support services for special needs students, requires the cooperation and help of various parties in special education. School counsellors play an important role in ensuring that students with special needs receive academic and social support to reach their full potential. Guidelines and national models are a great help to school counsellors in ensuring the quality of service provided, meeting all the special needs of students, providing confidence and improving the quality of service provided.

### **Domestic research**

The National Education Philosophy stressed the need to produce a generation of students who are balanced physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially. This aspect of student-centered schooling should be implemented by taking into account the diversity and uniqueness of each



individual. In line with Gardner (2011) who stated that it should focus sustainable education system initiatives on polishing students' diverse talents and personal potential according to the uniqueness of each individual. Diversity is considered being a set of student populations comprised of groups that are distinguished by the level of learning ability, including those with one or more learning disabilities, the ordinary (normal / average), including a smart and talented student group (Abu Yazid & Noriah 2019, Tarver-Behring & Spagna 2004; Asselin & Mooney 1996).

Education Act 550 (1996) classified the population of special education students as a class of pupils who had either severe physical disability, severe and moderate abstinence, or multiple disabilities that do not allow them to study in the schools run by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In line with MOE's mission of educating special needs students to make them self-reliant, successful and in order to contribute to the community and the nation, MOE has established a Special Education Integrated Program (SEIP) in selected government schools to assist teaching and learning (PdP) students' special needs.

With the diverse aspects of special needs students, paying special attention in developing effective teaching and learning strategies and alternatives is needed. The unique self qualities that these special needs students possess makes them more likely to need a support system for specialised learning than their normal peers. In the school's context environment, guidance and counselling services are psycho-educational support services capable of helping students with various problems (Kahveci 2016; Ayodele et al. 2013).

Like other students, it does not exempt special education students from seeking guidance and counselling in schools. However, the study found that the involvement of these special education students was indirect in that the programs or activities undertaken were common and similar to the mainstream students. There was no specific program planning that catered to the needs of special education students conducted by the school counsellors (Norafifah & Mohamad Hashim 2017). Hanani (2014) also supported the results with a lack of service by school counsellors to special needs students. In addition, a study by Hanani Harun Rasit, Hasnah Toran, & Salleh Amat (2012), showed that guidance and counselling services for special needs students was also not extended by school counsellors.

According to Norafifah and Mohamad Hashim (2017), the guidance and counselling unit of the school has specific guidance from the MOE (2012) which places emphasis on the welfare, convenience, soft skills and career pathways of special needs students. However, the guidelines that have been provided as a service guide for special needs students are not as detailed as the service guidelines for mainstream students. This presents a major challenge for school counsellors in providing services that meet the special needs of students with special needs.

In addition, the lack of research on implementing counselling and counselling services in Malaysia is a reason school counsellors only run programs that suit most students in schools

without regard to the special needs of special education students. In addition, there is also a lack of information on transition planning and forms of support for school counsellors in dealing with special education students (Melissa Ng Lee Yen 2013, Norafifah & Mohamad Hashim 2017).

The challenges and responsibilities of school counsellors practicing the Special Education Integrated Program are increasingly challenging. The needs of special education students have special needs compared to mainstream students. The results of Norafifah & Mohamad Hashim's (2017) study also found that the main challenges faced by school counsellors were applying the guidance and counselling approach to special education students where there were differences in issues faced by special education students compared to mainstream students. Therefore, the approaches used to address unique issues and differences by special education students should also take into account their specific characteristics.

Some studies support that guidance and counselling services in schools provide specialised services as there are differences in needs when compared to special education students with mainstream students. In addition, these studies also support that if there are specific guidelines detailed by the MOE, school counsellors can implement guidance and counselling services that are more holistic and focused on the needs of special education students. Therefore, the cooperation between the special education and the guidance and counselling units in finding the best initiative so that guidance and counselling services for special education students can be made.

Based on the library study, most of the studies conducted for guidance and counselling services for special education students in Malaysia are limited and intended to provide an initial picture. Most studies that measure the ability and readiness of school counsellors in schools have found that school counsellors ability to handle programs or activities involving special education students is weak. The main factor that most school counsellors highlight is that they are unsure and do not know how to provide special services when engaging with special education students in schools. In addition, it also highlighted communication issues with special education students, also in the study of Norafifah & Mohamad Hashim (2017), in which school counsellors who were not exposed to the disabled group had identified barriers in applying guidance and counselling services to students. Therefore, special education students do not enjoy the comprehensive guidance and counselling services. Because of the lack of exposure and lack of specific guidelines, special education students in schools are given the same treatment, programs and activities as other mainstream students without having to emphasize the special needs and unique features they have.

The study of Azharizah and Salleh (2011) found that knowledge of guidance and counselling services for special education students was very limited. This is consistent with a study



conducted by Lee (2015), who found that school counsellors have less knowledge about special education policy and are burdened with a lot of cases.

Most studies have found that most school counsellors do not get the proper training to understand and explore the uniqueness of the issues and problems as well special needs of special education students. Most of the SEIP teachers who are assigned to assist these students are also not given the training, skills and techniques of systematic counselling. As a result, many school counsellors and SEIP teachers feel less confident in dealing with these special needs students. Lack of exposure causes counsellors to experience fear and anxiety when dealing with a disabled group (Zahra, 2014).

However, the study of Norafifah and Mohamad Hashim (2017) found that there was no difference in applying guidance and counselling services to special needs and mainstream students as expected by the school counsellors which causes them to delay assisting this group while school counsellors only needed to integrate traditional counselling approaches with clients of various cultures (Corey 2013). However, cultural factors play a role as there are cultural differences between Malaysia and Western countries. Norafifah and Mohamad Hashim (2017) added, among the constraints of providing comprehensive counselling services to special needs students, are issues of collaboration between school counsellors and other school staff. Therefore, to be successful in providing guidance and counselling services to special needs students, there must be cooperation from all parties involved in the education of special needs students.

In addition, the study of Azharizah and Salleh (2011) also found that negative perceptions of school counsellors to students with special needs at an early stage are an obstacle in implementing guidance and counselling services to students with special needs. This finding is in line with the findings of Hasnah, Tajul, Mohd Hanafi, Mohd Mokhtar and Nur Hazwani (2010), where negative thoughts and attitudes influence school counsellors' actions to take part fully in providing guidance and counselling services. Zurida and Hashimah (2004) stated, attitude is one of the important elements that influences one's thinking and actions. As a school counsellor, it is important to instill an unconditional acceptance, positive attitude and empathy to create a sense of comfort between the school counsellors and the special needs student and in facilitating the mentoring and counselling process.

Finally, the education program needs to establish a psychological support system that should take into account the unique characteristics and needs of the student population (Abu Yazid 2014). This is because identifying and helping students with special needs to adapt to the life aim by providing guidance and counselling services in schools (Suradi 1996; Abu Yazid 2014). Therefore, the importance of guidance and counselling services in schools is concerned with the effectiveness of the services provided to special education students by examining specific needs to assist students' self development holistically.

## Conclusion

Like other mainstream students, special needs students face an identity crisis, social issues, physical and personality development and experience complex systems development in a society where special needs students cannot solve that. Therefore, students with special needs need the support of school counsellors to address this problem and to meet their specific needs in optimising their learning experience. As a result of studies conducted both domestically and broadly, special needs students are not excluded from receiving support from school counsellors. However, there are some gaps in the services provided in that the unique features of special needs students are not taken into account in implementing support services or programs. The question is whether the existing guidelines for school guidance and counselling services are mainly being referenced for school counsellors to achieve the overall aim in assisting the learning and development of psychosocial special education students in schools?

However, most of the research done in Malaysia has provided a preliminary picture of implementing guidance and counselling services for special education students. Most studies that measure the ability and readiness of school counsellors have found that the school counsellor's ability to handle programs and activities involving special education students is weak. The main factor is the lack of confidence and not knowing how to provide special services when engaging special education students in schools from lack of exposure and lack of specific guidance. The lack of exposure to these groups has caused school counsellors to doubt their skills in managing special needs students. The school counsellor's education program which lacked exposure to the special needs also contributed to the difficulties experienced by school counsellors in handling cases involving special needs students. This affects the level of effectiveness of the guidance and counselling services provided.

In addition, to make the best of guidance and counselling programs and services, there is a need for a collaborative network between school counsellors and staff involved in the special needs student curriculum so that the support provided can reach the full potential of special needs students in their learning and psychosocial development.

The limitation of this study is the lack of resources in Malaysia regarding guidance and counselling services that involve special education students an in-depth. Most of the studies that have been conducted provide a glimpse into the situation of school counsellors in addressing guidance and counselling services to special needs students. Because of resource constraints, researchers have not yet found a comprehensive national model or framework that includes guidance and counselling services for special needs students in Malaysia as developed by overseas researchers.

Therefore, in line with the MOE mission in educating students with special needs to make them self-reliant, successful and able to contribute to the community and nation, it is appropriate that



improvements can be made to existing guidance and counselling services at schools involving special education students, in-depth studies of guidance and counselling services for students with special needs carried out and to develop a national practice or model that can assist and serve as a formal guideline for school counsellors in conducting guidance and counselling services for special needs students. School counsellors are invaluable resources in helping students with special needs because their knowledge can help the special needs student in terms of curriculum and thus serve as a link between special needs students and the community (Hott, Thomas, Abbassi, Hendricks, & Original, 2014).

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