

Peer Counseling as an Alternative to Psychological Support in Schools

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Abstract

Mental health problems among students are increasing, while the number of professionals such as psychologists and counselors is still limited in many schools. Peer counseling has emerged as an effective alternative in providing psychological support in educational settings. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of peer counseling as an alternative psychological service for students in schools. With a qualitative descriptive approach and case studies in several secondary schools in Indonesia, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that peer counseling helps create a supportive environment, increases students' openness in expressing problems, and strengthens social relationships between students. However, the success of this program is highly dependent on adequate training and support from the school. This article recommends the development of policies and systematic training for peer counselors to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the program.

Keywords: Peer Counseling, Psychological Support, Student Mental Health

Introduction:

In recent decades, attention to mental health among adolescents and students has increased significantly. The academic, social, and emotional pressures faced by students in the school environment have contributed to the increasing cases of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and stress. According to WHO data (2021), around 10-20% of adolescents worldwide experience mental health problems that are not adequately addressed. In Indonesia itself, the results of a survey by the Ministry of Health showed that more than 6% of students

experience psychological problems, but access to psychological services in schools is still very limited.

While the need for counseling services is increasing, the reality is that most schools in Indonesia do not have enough professional counselors or psychologists. Even in schools that already have guidance and counseling (BK) services, the ratio between counselors and students is often unbalanced, making intensive and personal counseling services impossible. In this context, alternative approaches such as peer counseling are important to study and develop.

Peer counseling is a form of emotional and psychological support provided by students to each other. This concept relies on the strength of social relationships between students to create a safe, open, and empathetic space in conveying and dealing with personal problems. Unlike professional counseling services, peer counseling is informal but still based on ethical principles of counseling, such as confidentiality, empathy, and nonjudgmental.

Various studies in developed countries show that peer counseling can be a complement or even an alternative to formal counseling services. A study by Carter and Evans (2018) in the UK found that students were more open to sharing problems with peers because they felt better understood and less judged. In addition, peer counseling also encourages the formation of communication skills, empathy, and leadership among students.

However, the implementation of peer counseling is not without challenges. Among them are students' limited understanding of the role of peer counselors, the risk of ethical violations, and the lack of support and supervision from the school. Therefore, it is important to examine in depth how peer counseling is implemented in schools, the factors that influence its success, and strategies to increase its effectiveness.

This study aims to explore peer counseling practices in several secondary schools in Indonesia, identify the benefits and challenges faced, and provide recommendations for the development of more structured and sustainable programs. By using a qualitative approach, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the potential of peer counseling as an alternative psychological support for students in the school environment.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of peer counseling practices in school environments. The research locations were selected purposively, namely three high schools in urban and semi-urban areas that have implemented peer counseling programs.

Data collection techniques include:

1. In-depth Interview: It is carried out on students who act as peer counselors, students who are clients of peer counselors, guidance and counseling teachers, and school principals.
2. Participatory Observation: Directly observe peer counseling activities and interactions between students in the program.
3. Documentation Study: Analyze documents related to peer counseling programs such as training modules, activity reports, and school policies.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, with the following steps:

- Transcription and coding of interviews and observation results
- Identify key themes related to the benefits, challenges, and implementation strategies of peer counseling.
- data through triangulation of sources and methods

Research ethics are maintained by ensuring the confidentiality of informant identities, obtaining approval from the school, and conveying the objectives and benefits of the research transparently.

Results and Discussion:

The results of the study show that peer counseling provides a number of real benefits for students, both in terms of emotional, social, and academic. In this discussion, several key findings will be outlined:

1. **Increasing Student Openness:**Most students feel more comfortable talking to peers because they feel they are not being judged. This encourages openness in conveying personal problems such as family conflicts, study pressures, and social relationship problems.
2. **Developing Peer Counselor Social Competencies:**Students who become peer counselors experience improvements in listening skills, empathy, and problem-solving abilities. They also develop a sense of responsibility and leadership.
3. **Creating a Supportive School Environment:**The peer counseling program contributes to creating a culture of caring and support among students. There has been a decrease in bullying cases and an increase in the sense of togetherness.
4. **Constraints in Implementation:**Some of the obstacles found include the lack of special training for peer counselors, limited time in implementing counseling due to busy academic schedules, and minimal supervision from BK teachers.
5. **Institutional Support:**The success of peer counseling is greatly influenced by support from the principal and BK teacher, including the provision of special space, special time, and formal recognition of the role of peer counselors.

These results are consistent with findings from international research such as that conducted by Topping & Ehly (1998), which stated that peer support can be an early intervention for mild psychological problems and help reduce the stigma towards counseling services.

Conclusion

Peer counseling has been proven to be an effective alternative to provide psychological support in the school environment. This program is able to encourage openness, strengthen social relationships, and improve students' emotional skills. However, to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness, systematic training for peer counselors, strong institutional support, and integration of this program into school policies are needed. Peer counseling is not a substitute

for professional services, but a strategic complement in building a psychologically healthy school ecosystem.

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