Abstract

This study reports issues found among Malaysian gifted students population attending the program in comparison to other nations. The data was tabulated from the counseling session forms and the Critical Incident and Medical Report (CIMR) forms, both used daily during the 3-week tenure of the program. To illustrate, homesickness was identified as the most common issues among the students during the first few days of the program, whilst other findings also confirmed that Malaysian gifted students attending such program were no difference from their counterparts in other countries.

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Keywords: Counselling issues; Gifted children; Residential program

1. Introduction

Pusat PERMATApintar Negara (PPpN) is the national center of excellence for Malaysian academically gifted children, which has been recently launched in early 2009. The holistic aim for its’ establishment is to develop a comprehensive educational program that would be responsible to foster positive growth of the nation’s gifted students, in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social aspects (Noriah, Rosadah & Siti Rahayah, 2009). The setting up of PPpN was a sign of commitment from the government to restrenghtened its’ national policy on special education which in return should benefit the country in the long run.

Malaysian gifted education program began in the 1960s with an idea of accelerated learning program conducted by the Ministry of Education. Students were given the opportunity to skip grades, complete elementary education shorter than the intended period and move on to their secondary education. However, since its development has been sporadic and no specific planning was set to help the students cope with their secondary and tertiary education at a younger age, the program ended in the 1980s.

Malaysia’s gifted education program was revived in early 2009 following a debate lead by the present Malaysian First Lady, over an intended program for a mathematically precocious nine year old boy. The program encompassed both enrichment and accelerated curriculum intended to accommodate his learning, socio-emotional and psychological needs which at present, held no provision within the Malaysian Education Act 1996. Such program is crucial since Malaysia in general, has its fair share of gifted children. According to Clark (2005) and Claxton (2003) for every 100,000 children, there is one gifted children. In the local context, Malaysia has 4.5 million children from the age group of 9 to 15 years old (Noriah, Rosadah & Siti Rahayah, 2009); hence, Malaysia would have 4500 gifted
children within that age group for any particular year that need academic and psychological support from the present education system. Therefore, the PPpN is structured in such a way that it should cater for these purposes. Organizationally, the PPpN is targeted to achieve these objectives through three main components comprises of: (1) The School Holiday Camp Program; (2) The High School Program; and (3) The Pre-University Program. All of these programs are structured to be a National Holistic Gifted Development Model as explained in Figure 1.

1.1 Psychological and Socio-Emotional Supports of Gifted Student

Generally, gifted students are different from their normal peers in many developmental aspects such as physical and psychomotor, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Touron, Touron & Silvero, 2005). Studies in educational setting revealed that gifted students experienced intense social isolation in a regular classroom that may lead to ongoing emotional stress (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002; Wood, 2006); sometimes, they always feel socially isolated because of their intellectual ability (Neihart, 1999; Silverman, 1993). Furthermore, gifted students are commonly associated with emotional instability reflected through behaviors like oversensitivity, isolated feelings, and perfectionism, due to their unique self-characteristics and environmental factors (Abu Yazid & Aliza, 2009; Ng & Sandiyao, 2005).

Not only that they experience social and emotional difficulties (Neihart, 1999; Yoo & Moon, 2006), gifted students are also challenged with more affective and psychological issues than other students (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002; Bailey, 2007; Rosadah, 2004). Some of these issues including anxiety (Cho-Hee Yoon, 2009; Berlin, 2009), identity formation (Zuo, Li & Tao, Liqing, 2001; Graham & Anderson, 2008), and self-esteem (Vialle, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007).

Due to all the research findings mentioned above, it is safe to say that the population of gifted students living and learning together will require a systematic psychological and socio-emotional support, especially in terms of counseling provision. Davis and Rimm (1998) stated that the need for counseling increases with the intellectual capability of an individual. On the other hand, Bee (1999) found out that children with high intellectual ability, in comparison to his or her peers, were normally facing self-adjustment problem. In other words, these facts somehow
proven that psychosocial support in terms of counseling service has to be provided in the setting of gifted education (Abu Yazid & Aliza, 2009).

1.2 The PPpN School Holiday Camp

Despite of numerous constraints faced in the very first year of its’ establishment, PPpN had successfully conducted its’ first School Holiday Camp from 30 November until 18 December 2009. The 3-week camp had been conducted in affiliation with the Johns Hopkins University-Center for Talented Youth (JHU-CTY) International Division. In order to select the camp participants, 212,486 students age ranged from 9 to 15 years old had been screened throughout the country, using the administration of UKM1, a first stage online filtering test equivalent to Ravens Standard Progressive Matrices-Plus Version and Mill Vocabulary, in which 4,682 students were qualified to go through the second phase UKM2 online test, equivalent to the fourth edition of Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) (Siti Fatimah, Shahrir & Noriah, 2009). Finally, the 405 selected and identified gifted students were brought to the campus of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in Bangi to attend an enrichment program comprised of academic, extra curricular, and recreational modules, developed based on the model structured and used by JHU-CTY. During the tenure of the camp, the students had been divided according to their ages and placed into one of these classes: (a) Be a Scientist, (b) Mathematical Reasoning, (c) Writing and Imagination, (d) Crafting the Essay, (e) Introduction to Robotic, (f) Cryptology, (g) Biotechnology, (h) Fast-Paced Biology, or (i) Invention.

A study conducted by Cross, Cassady, Dixon and Adams (2008) on gifted adolescents attending a residential academy, found that subjects shows signs of depression, psychomotor retardation, mental dullness as well as social acceptance issues that lead to maladjustment, during long period of stay in residential setting. Another study done by Cross, Speirs Neumeister, and Cassady (2007) to determine the psychological types of gifted students attending a residential academy had found that they shared a personality predisposition that may make them more subject to procrastination and disorganization, which in return may lead to many psychological issues that can trigger stress. Similarly, an analysis on medical history form of gifted students participated in a summer residential program suggested that some of them had been diagnosed with psychological issues for which they were receiving or had received medical or counseling interventions (Jarosewich & Stocking, 2003). Based on such findings, as the first time organizer to such a program, PPpN has prepared itself in all management aspects including the provision of psychological and socio-emotional support services during the camp to ensure the well-being of participants of this pioneer program. Hence, proper positions of academic counselor had been established to provide supports (to the students) in terms of: (a) Providing brief counseling for students, (b) Assisting staff in identifying ‘red flags’ or warning signs of potential student issues, and (c) Providing resources for a variety of issues (homesickness, relationships, academic stress, suicide, depression, diversity, eating disorders, etc.).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Procedures

The study was a qualitative in nature, using the document analysis design. Data was tabulated from two documents used daily during the tenure of the camp. The first document was the Critical Incidence and Medical Report Form (CIMR) which was used by any of the administrative/teaching/residential staff to report any kind of observations/complaints regarding a particular student. The second document was the Counseling Session Form which was used by the academic counselors to record information obtained during the session. The students attended such sessions could either be referred by any of the administrative/teaching/residential staff, voluntarily walked in to the counseling room, or picked by counselors during their routine walk rounds.
2.2 Measures, Data Collection and Data Analysis

Both CIMR and Counseling Session forms were gathered and being compared, in order to map the Malaysian gifted students’ issues and their counseling needs while attending a 3-week residential school holiday program. The data was descriptively translated to enable the researchers to describe the findings in a more meaningful manner.

3. Results

Since this study was an initial effort to gather data on counseling issues faced by Malaysian gifted students attending a school holiday program that was conducted for the very first time by PPpN, the data was considered pioneer in the field of gifted counseling in local scene; therefore, there was no other local data to be used as comparative benchmark to the findings of this study.

The comparative analysis done on both CIMR and Counseling Session forms revealed that a total of 47 students had either being reported in CIMR form, attended/referred to counseling sessions, or being reported in CIMR and also attended/referred to counseling sessions. Out of these 47 students, 33 were females and 14 were males. Table 1 described the detailed demographic findings of this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reported in CIMR Form</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended/Referred to Counseling Sessions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported in CIMR Form and Attended/Referred to Counselling Sessions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another important finding of the study elaborated on the categorical issues faced by the 47 subjects after comparative analysis has been completed on both documents. Since some of them were not only reported by any of the administrative/teaching/residential staff, but also attended the counseling sessions on either voluntarily or referral basis, some subjects in the study were observed to have multiple counseling issues while attending the program. Table 2 illustrated the detailed issues and the frequency of each issue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Homesickness”/Adjustment Issue</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Relationship with Peers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress/Anxiety/Depression due to multiple causes</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallucinations/Delusions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Menstruation Experiences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude/Behavioral Issue</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal Ideation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discussion

Finding in Table 1 reflected that female gifted students attended the first PPpN school holiday program were facing more issues in comparison to their male counterparts. This data is indirectly supporting findings by other researchers which revealed that female students were more prone to psychological issues compared to male students. In terms of research conducted in the field of counseling the gifted, lots of focus had been directed to female population (St. Clair, 1989; Colangelo, 2003) whereas studies on male population were very few (Wood, 2006). Instances of gifted counseling research that put focus on female gifted students can be found in findings such
as high reasons to seek counseling (Noriah & Abu Yazid, 2010), high extroversion personality trait (Cross, Speirs Neumeister & Cassady, 2007), and stressful career decision making process (Greene, 2002).

Finding in Table 2 additionally confirmed that the Malaysian gifted students attending PPerN school holiday program were also facing the same issues as their peers in other parts of the world. To illustrate, anxiety and depression issues found in Malaysian context could also be found in Jarosewich and Stocking’s study, and Cross, Cassady, Dixon and Adams’ research. Moreover, social and behavioral issues of Malaysian subjects in this study, had always been the concerns in Germany and Hong Kong (Heller, 2005; Chan, 1999). Surprisingly, the suicidal ideation which is considered taboo in Malaysian values in comparison to western norms did exist in two sessions handled by PPerN’s academic counselor. All in all, counseling issues pertaining to gifted students attending a program in residential setting are quite common and universal.

5. Recommendation for Future Research and Conclusion

Due to the facts that before PPerN is being established, gifted education has always been discussed partially in the area of special education, there should be more areas of specialization to be explored now after its’ establishment. To illustrate, there were lots of local discussions regarding the socio-emotional issues of gifted students, but little emphasis on the psychosocial support like counseling service in gifted education was touched. Since gifted counseling is generally still at its infancy in Malaysia, more local studies need to be done in the future to further justify these pioneer findings.

Future researchers of counseling for gifted and talented should focus on aspects such as school counselor roles for gifted students, career counseling for gifted students, and counseling for family with gifted children. The authors believe that these are the three main areas which attract established researchers’ attention the most. However, in Malaysian context, the knowledge of gifted counseling have to be disseminated and shared with all parties involved (counselors, teachers, parents, policy makers) in education process of these unique population, before we should embark on any future research. It is significant that all parties really understand the gifted students and their necessities first, before we should proceed. With the commitment given by the government of Malaysia, signalled by the establishment of PPerN; the opportunity for future endeavours in gifted counseling/gifted education does look bright.

References

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