

Research Article

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS AS THAI NATIONALS AND FORMER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WORKING IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN BANGKOK

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the perceived benefits and challenges for school counselors, who identify as host country nationals and local international school graduates, when counseling Thai nationals in international schools in Bangkok using a phenomenological qualitative approach. This study aimed to fill the gap in exploring the area of similar student-counselor membership group identities, perceived benefits and challenges these similarities have on the practicing counselors' counseling process with their students, and how these school counselors manage the challenges they face. Participants of this study include four individuals who have currently been engaged as a school counselor in an international school in Bangkok for at least one year, were Thai nationals, had attended an international school in Bangkok for a minimum of six years, had graduated from an international school in Bangkok receiving a High School Diploma, had a minimum qualification of a master's degree in counseling psychology, and had participated in the interview in English. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: respondents' narratives on experiences in the role, membership group identity similarities between respondents and students, perceived benefits of identity and qualifications of and by respondents in the role of a school counselor in an international

school setting, challenges, and respondents' strategies for managing challenges. This study suggests ways for new, current, and future practitioners and international schools, to consider the results of this study when working in such positions and hiring such individuals. Further exploration from the perspectives of host country students is recommended.

Keywords: School Counselor, Identity, International School, Membership Group Identity, Nationality

INTRODUCTION

For many international schools, their pragmatic approach to teacher hiring is grouped into three distinct categories: 1) host country nationals, 2) local hire expatriates, and 3) overseas hire expatriates (Hayden & Thompson, 2000). As the medium of instruction in the majority of international schools worldwide is English (Hayden & Thompson, 2008), international schools aim to recruit native English-trained teachers, preferably from countries such as America, Canada, Australia, England, South Africa, and New Zealand (Canterford, 2003; Bates, 2010).

There has been a shift, however, in the hiring process in some international schools in Bangkok, from hiring only expatriates to hiring locally. Some international schools in Bangkok have started opening positions to locals, specifically hiring Thai nationals as school counselors, mainly those who attended an international school in Bangkok.

Through a review of the literature, research has shown that counselors who provide counseling to individuals with similar group membership identities may experience benefits as well as challenges in their therapeutic work with their clients (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Burch, 2018; Goode-Cross & Grim, 2016; Parhar, 2022).

Although multiple studies exist, there has been a lack of research that looks into the membership group identities these counselors who identify as Thai nationals and local international student graduates share with their host country students, the perceived benefits and challenges these school counselors have in their roles with their identity when counseling host country students, and the ways these school counselors manage the challenges they face. This lack in studies has formed a need to explore this new phenomenon.

Research Objectives

For this reason, the present study is an attempt to fill the gap by conducting a phenomenological study to explore the similarities in membership group identities of four school counselors and their host country students, the perceived benefits and challenges school counselors face with their identities counseling host country students, and how school counselors manage the challenges they face in the international schools they work at in Bangkok.

Research Questions

What if any, are the perceived benefits and challenges for school counselors, who identify as host country nationals and local international school graduates, when counseling host country students in international schools in Bangkok?

What membership group identities do school counselors, who identify as host country nationals and local international school graduates, share with their students in international schools in Bangkok?

How do school counselors, who identify as host country nationals and local international school graduates, manage the challenges they face

when counseling host country students in international schools in Bangkok?

Research Scope

For this reason, the present study aimed to fill the gap using a phenomenological qualitative approach in exploring the membership group similarities these four school counselors share with their host country students, the benefits and challenges they experience in their counseling practice with their host country students, and how they manage the challenges they face when counseling host country students in the internationals schools they work at in Bangkok.

Literature Review

The similarity-attraction theory describes the phenomenon that people are attracted to those whom they perceive as similar to them in things they consider important (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969). Additionally, the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that people prefer to associate with those who are perceived to be similar to themselves for self-serving purposes, such as self-serving comparisons. The application of these theories points towards the principle that clients tend

to prefer therapists who they perceive are similar to themselves (Cabral & Smith, 2011).

A stronger therapeutic bond is shown among dyads with similar ethnic backgrounds, according to research by Gray-Little and Kaplan (2000). The matching of clients' and therapist's demographic factors such as gender and ethnicity can contribute to the therapeutic process by influencing the client's attitudes toward therapy, the therapist's assessment of the client, and the treatment outcome (Fujino, Okazaki, & Young, 1994).

Through a review of the literature, the perceived benefits for counselors working with clients of a similar background include: stronger therapeutic relationships (Chapman & Schoenwald, 2011) facilitates therapeutic process and positive client outcomes (Arbuckle, 1956), counselor's treatment commitment (Goode-Cross & Grim, 2016), ability to self-disclose to help the client (Boy-d Franklin, 2003), meeting client's preferences in similarity of characteristics (Nerison & Claiborn, 1990) being able to intervene in more culturally congruent ways because of a more nuanced understanding of the same culture (Cabral & Smith, 2011), being personally invested in clients (Goode-Cross & Grim, 2016)

concordance in language (Alegria et al., 2013), ability to having a deeper level of empathy (Parhar, 2022); a sense of comfort, ease, solidarity, and connection (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), feeling rewarded (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), and serving as a role model (Banks, 1975).

The perceived challenges for counselors working with clients of a similar background include: maintaining ethical boundaries with clients (Burch, 2018), dual role (Parhar, 2022), counselor's assumptions and expectations of the client based on similarities in background (Aymer, 2012), working with client's assumptions and expectations of the counselor (Greenberg, Vinjamuri, Williams-Gray, & Senreich, 2018), overidentifying with the client (Goode-Cross, 2011a), experiencing judgment or rejection by the client (Ablack, 2000), under-pathologizing and clouding clinical judgment (Goode-Cross, 2011a), transference and countertransference (Burch, 2018), risk of oversharing (Barnett, 2011), assumed similarity bias (Comas-Díaz & Jacobsen, 1991), confirmation bias (Rogerson, Gottlieb, Handelsman, & Knapp, 2011), loss of curiosity (Raja, 2016), holding the belief in being professionally culturally competent therapists (Raja, 2016), and

leaving countertransference unmonitored and unchecked (Banks, 1975).

Some ethical considerations for counselors when working with clients of a similar background include: counselors questioning their assumptions and biases as this could lead to an inaccurate case conceptualization of the client (Raja, 2016), self-reflect and their monitor thought process to avoid the risks of confirmation bias (Rogerson et al., 2011), keep up to date with research and evidence that support or go against demographic matching (Rogerson et al., 2011), consult with colleagues and supervisors (Rogerson et al., 2011), practice self-awareness in acknowledging emotions and reactions (Raja, 2016), be aware of heuristics and biases (Raja, 2016), be aware of transference and countertransference (Raja, 2016), and indulge in more educational or training opportunities (Goode-Cross, 2011a, 2011b).

Research Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative approach was found to be appropriate as the experience of each participant requires a thorough understanding (Creswell, 2017).

Participants

The study include four participants who were selected through purposive sampling and fit the inclusive criteria of (1) being currently engaged as a school counselor in an international school in Bangkok for a minimum of one year, (2) being a Thai national, (3) having attended an international school in Bangkok for a minimum of 6 years, (4) having graduated from an international school in Bangkok and received a High School Diploma, (5) having a minimum qualification of a master's degree in counseling psychology, and (6) were able to participate in interviews exclusively in English.

Instrumentation

Focusing on the narratives of such individuals, the researcher employed the qualitative method of inquiry based on a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, including 9 questions the researcher formulated with main and sub-aspects to gather the primary data.

Data Collection

The researcher approached the potential participants who fit the criteria by e-mail with a letter introducing the study. As the researcher also fits the inclusive criteria for the selection of participants, the researcher was a part of the school

counseling network for international schools in Bangkok. Once participants were found, they were asked to sign a consent form. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in one round. The interviews were conducted using Zoom, an online platform for video and audio connection. Each interview was recorded. The interview lasted about 90 minutes with each interviewee. The round of interviews was conducted between July 2023 to August 2023. The demographic questionnaire was sent for participants to fill out and send back.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were assigned a pseudonym. All recordings, transcripts, notes, analysis, and documentation were stored securely and used these pseudonyms only. All digital files that were collected (audio files, notes,

transcripts, signed consent forms, demographic questionnaires) were kept in a password-protected laptop of the researcher, which did not leave the researcher's possession during the study. The participants were offered a chance to be debriefed about the study.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis, which is a method of analyzing qualitative data, was chosen for this research paper. The main goal of thematic analysis is to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis included: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

Table 1 Themes and Sub-Themes Concerning the Experiences of School Counselors, Who Identify as Host Country Nationals and Local International Student Graduates, When Counseling Host Country Students in International Schools In Bangkok

Themes and Sub-themes

1. Respondent Narratives on Experiences in the Role
 - a. Equal Commitment to all Students No Matter Host Country Student or Expatriate Student
 - b. Perceived Benefits in Working in a School Setting as a School Counselor
 - c. Perceived Benefits in Being a Local International Student Graduate and Host Country National
 - d. Perceived as a Benefit to Themselves: Having Local and International Student Graduates as School Counselors in International Schools Benefits Students in the Counseling Process
 - e. Benefits of Local and Expatriate School Counselors in the Counseling Department in International Schools
 - f. Multicultural Professional Development Not Necessary
 - g. Mixed Thoughts on how Respondents Feel on Whether Students Would Prefer to Have Them as Counselors over Expatriate Counselors
 - h. Mixed Explanations on Reasons Schools Hired Respondents
 - i. Students are not assigned by Membership Group Identity Similarities
 - j. Schools Kept Respondents as Long-term Employees
2. Membership Group Identity Similarities between Respondents and Students
 - a. Shared Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs
 - b. Shared Ethnicity
 - c. Socioeconomic Status and Privilege
 - d. Fluency in English and Thai

Table 1 (to)

Themes and Sub-themes

- e. Shared Experience of Being Third Culture Kids and Cross-Cultural Kids; Understanding Both Worlds, Multiple Worlds and Third Culture Kids and Cross-Cultural Kids World
- f. Eastern and Western Values and Attitudes
- 3. Perceived Benefits of Identity and Qualifications of and by Respondents in the Role of a School Counselor in an International School Setting
 - a. Multiple Common Denominators, Feels like Counselor is on Students' Level
 - b. Being able to Self-Disclose is Helpful to Students
 - c. Is an Asset to the School and Students
 - d. Understanding Parent Expectations of their Children Due to Being in the International System and Having Been Raised in Thailand
 - e. Speaking Thai is a Plus Point
 - f. Being Helpful to Expatriate Counselors in Understanding the Local Culture, a Consultant for Host Country Student Cases
 - g. Being able to Communicate to Parents in Thai; Beneficial with Connecting with Families and Building Strong Relationships with Both Parents and Student
 - h. Students See Themselves in Respondents
 - i. Awareness of Culture
 - j. Is Committed and a “Stayer” in the Country and School, Unlike Expatriates who May Often Move Frequently
 - k. Serve as a Role Model to Students
 - l. Students feel Understood
 - m. Viewed as a Strength to Parents
 - n. Able to Empathize Deeper
 - o. Understanding of School Curriculum and International System
 - p. Background Helps Connect with Students

Table 1 (to)

Themes and Sub-themes
4. Challenges
a. Conflicts of Interest; Dual Role with Those Living in the Same Community
b. It is Tough not Having a Team in the Counseling Department
c. Thai Nationals are Paid Less than Expatriate Counselors Despite Similar Qualifications
d. Respondents Need to Work Harder than Expatriate Counselors
5. Respondents' Strategies for Managing Challenges
a. Future Education for Managing Challenges
b. Having a Supervisor to Manage Challenges
c. Referring Students for Managing Challenges
d. Talking to Heads of School for Managing Challenges
e. Being a part of the School Counseling Network in Bangkok; Attending Workshops, Seminars, and Keeping in Touch
f. Self-Reflection for Managing Challenges
g. Counseling Department Team in School Useful for Managing Challenges

Results

The participants of the study included four respondents. The respondents all met the sample criteria. All respondents were granted one interview of approximately one hour each. No follow-up interviews were needed. All respondents were female, three being of Indian ethnicity and one being of Thai ethnicity. All participants were born and raised in Thailand and held Thai citizenship.

The first theme identified in the analysis entails their stories and experiences in their specific roles as a school counselor in their school. This broke down into ten sub-themes: (a) respondents' felt that they were equally committed in counseling both host country national students and expatriate students, (b) respondents' had their own perceived personal benefits in working

in a school setting as a school counselor, (c) respondents' had their own perceived benefits in being a former local international school student and host country national, (d) respondents' perceived themselves to be a benefit to students in the counseling process, (e) respondents' perceived the benefits of having other counselors with a similar background to them hired as school counselors in international school settings, (f) respondents' stated that multicultural professional development courses are necessary to work with students from different cultural backgrounds, (g) respondents' having mixed thoughts on how they felt about whether students would prefer to have them as counselors over expatriate counselors, (h) the reasons respondents' think their employers have hired them, (i) how students are assigned to respondents, and (j) how long respondents are employed for.

The second theme identified in the analysis entails all the membership group identities respondents felt they share with their students, and that their students also fall into these categories of group membership identities. This broke down into six sub-themes: (a) respondents felt their students had similar values, attitudes, and beliefs to them; (b) respondents felt

students identified with the same ethnicity as them, (c) respondents felt that their students were almost, equally, or more privileged than them, (d) respondents' felt that students were also fluent in the same languages, such as English and Thai, just like them, (e) respondents felt that they had a shared experience with their students of being a Third Culture Kid and Cross-Cultural Kid and being able to understand both worlds, multiple worlds, and Third Culture Kids World and Cross-Cultural Kids World, and lastly, (f) respondents felt students had a mix of Eastern and Western values and attitudes just like them.

The third theme identified in the analysis entails all the perceived benefits of the respondents' identities and qualifications by the respondents in the role of a school counselor in the international school they work at. This broke down into sixteen sub-themes: (a) respondents felt like having multiple "common denominators" of similarities helps with connecting with students and makes the students' feel like they are on the counselor's level, (b) respondents' felt being able to self-disclose about similar experiences is helpful to students, (c) respondents'

felt they are an asset to the school and the students, (d) respondents' understand parent expectations on their students due to being in an international school as a student and having been raised in Thailand, (e) respondents' being able to speak Thai is viewed as an advantage, (f) respondents' felt that they are able to help expatriate counselors in understanding the local culture, (g) respondents' felt the ability to communicate in Thai was beneficial with connecting with Thai parents and families; (h) respondents' felt that their students could see themselves in them, (i) respondents had awareness of the culture, (j) respondents' felt like they were committed and a "stayer" in the country unlike expatriates who may often move around, (k) respondents' felt they served as a role model to students, (l) respondents felt understood, (m) respondents' felt they were viewed by parents as a strength, (n) respondents' felt they were able to empathize deeper with their students, (o) respondents' felt they had a good understanding of their school curriculum and international system, and lastly, (p) respondents' felt that their background helps them connect with their students.

The fourth theme identified in the analysis entails all the perceived challenges respondents face in the role of a school counselor in the international school where they work. This broke down into four sub-themes: (a) having students in the school who respondents know are living in the same community as them can cause conflict due to dual role, (b) respondents' find it hard when they are hired as the only counselor their counseling department, (c) when respondents' find that they are paid less than expatriate counselors despite having similar qualifications, and (d) having expectations to work harder than expatriate counselors.

The fifth and last theme identified in the analysis entails all the ways respondents manage the challenges they face in the role of a school counselor in the international school where they work. This broke down into seven sub-themes: (a) further education would be required to help manage the respondents' challenges, (b) having a supervisor helps in managing respondents' challenges, (c) referring students helps in managing respondents' challenges, (d) talking to the heads of school helps in managing

respondents' challenges, (e) being a part of the school counseling network in Bangkok and attending workshops, seminars, and keeping in touch with members of the network helps in managing respondents' challenges, (f) self-reflection is a form of challenge management, and lastly, (g) having a counseling department team is useful in managing respondents' challenges.

Discussions

Parts of the school counselor-host country student similar membership identity findings found in this research were relative to some studies found of similar membership identities between counselors and clients were: (a) shared cultural values (Banks, 1975), (b) ethnicities (Atkinson, 1983), and (c) language concordance in communicating in Thai and English (Alegria et al., 2013).

This study found additional findings outside of the literature as counselor and client similarities in membership identities, in this case, between school counselors and their host country students, such as (a) shared attitudes and beliefs, (b) socioeconomic status, (c) shared experiences that shaped their Third Culture Kids and Cross-Cultural Kids identities and (d) shared values.

Parts of the respondents' benefits in being a host country national and a local international student graduate, were relative to some studies in the findings of the benefits of similar membership group identities between counselor and client were: (a) ability to self-disclose about own experiences (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), (b) language concordance in communicating in Thai and English to their host country students and their parents (Alegria et al., 2013), (c) understands the Thai culture (Banks, 1975), (d) sees themselves as role models for their host country students (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), and (e) able to empathize and connect better with their host country students (Parhar, 2022).

This study found new findings outside of the literature on the perceived benefits for school counselors, such as (a) having a common denominator, feeling that students felt the respondents as school counselors were on their level, (b) they felt they were an asset to the school and to the students, (c) that they understood the parents' expectations of their students due to being in the international system and having been raised in Thailand, (d) that they found they could be helpful to expatriate counselors in helping them understanding the local culture by becoming

a consultant for host country student cases, (e) that it was helpful to have a deep awareness of the culture, (f) that they felt committed and identified as a “stayer” in the country and school, unlike expatriates who may often move about frequently, (g) they felt that students felt understood by the respondents, and felt as though the respondents were (h) viewed as a strength to the parents, (i) and that they felt as though they understand their school curriculum and international system.

Parts of the respondents’ challenges in being a host country national and a local international student graduate, were relative to some studies in the findings of the challenges of similar membership group identities between counselor and client: (a) having conflicts of interest in a dual role with those living in the same community (Parhar, 2022).

New findings outside of the literature on the perceived challenges for school counselors, such as (a) found that it was tough not having a team in the counseling department, (b) Thai nationals such as themselves are paid less than expatriate counselors despite similar qualifications, and lastly (c) that respondents need to work harder than expatriate counselors

at the international schools in which they as school counselors.

And lastly, parts of the respondents’ strategies in managing challenges they faced with their host country students were relative to some studies in the findings of the strategies used to manage the challenges counselors who had similar membership group identities with their clients: (a) further education (Goode-Cross, 2011a, 2011b; and (b) self-reflection (Rogerson et al., 2011).

New findings outside of the literature on the strategies used by school counselors in managing challenges, such as (a) having a supervisor, (b) having the option of referring, (c) talking to the heads of the school, and lastly (d) having a counseling team in their counseling department to help manage their challenges at the international schools they work.

Suggestions and Recommendations

These findings have elicited opportunities to understand and strengthen the delivery of counseling services from these individuals who identify as local international student graduates and are host country nationals when working as school counselors counseling host country nationals in their Bangkok international school.

The study can be used as a guide for other local international school graduates and host country nationals, who are newly in, currently working, or looking to be future school counselors in Bangkok international schools, on how to navigate as a school counselor working in such an environment, while identifying as a local international student graduate and host country national. The study can also provide valuable information to international schools who hire and take on local international student graduates and host country nationals as school counselors in their international schools, by helping them understand what resources these types of individuals bring in addition to being qualified counselors, and on how to help these individuals manage the challenges they might face.

Therefore, it is recommended that such benefits of having such individuals in these roles be recognized and utilized, challenges minimized, and the ways to handle challenges used by such

individuals in these schools and other international schools be recognized by other individuals who fall into this demographic and recognized by international schools who hire or plan to hire such individuals in the future.

Future research should look into the perspectives of host country national students, and expatriate students, as well the voices of such international schools and other expatriate counselors who are counseled by or work side-by-side with such individuals who identify as local international student graduates and host country nationals about their perspectives as to what they believe such individuals bring or face into the role of a school counselor in the international schools where they work. Future research should look into the perspectives of such students and examine whether they find it beneficial or challenging to have such individuals as school counselors in the international schools they attend in Bangkok.

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