



CULTURALLY APPROACHABLE SCHOOL-BASED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND ADOLESCENTS MENTAL HEALTH IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent mental health in Sri Lanka has emerged as a pressing concern shaped by social, environmental, and cultural conditions. Challenges such as substance use, intense academic pressure, weakened family ties, and the long-term effects of national crises have collectively affected young people's emotional well-being. While schools offer counseling services and mental health programs, many of these systems are modeled on Western frameworks that do not always fit Sri Lankan cultural realities. This qualitative study explores how school-based psychosocial support systems relate to adolescent mental health through a culture-informed lens. Data were collected from students, teachers, parents, and school counselors in both urban and rural schools using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (We collected data from 48 participants from three schools, each school we collected 5 parents, 5 students, 5 teachers and one counselor). Thematic analysis revealed that cultural norms, religious values, family expectations, and social stigma strongly influence how adolescents perceive and access counseling services. Drawing on these insights, the study proposes a culture-informed framework that blends indigenous Sri Lankan values with evidence-based counseling approaches. The findings contribute to national and global discussions on developing localized, culturally responsive school-based mental health models that reflect the lived realities of Sri Lankan adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescent Mental Health, School Counseling, Cultural Sensitivity, Psychosocial Support

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1. Introduction

Education should be the birthright of every child,” said C.W.W. Kannangara, a statement that continues to resonate deeply within Sri Lanka’s educational philosophy. Education, however, is not limited to academic instruction; it also shapes children’s emotional and psychological development. The family and the school together provide the foundation for this growth, nurturing the ability to think clearly, regulate emotions, and build healthy relationships.

Adolescence marks a critical phase in this process. It is a period of intense biological, emotional, and social change, during which the foundations of adult mental health are laid (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Many Sri Lankan adolescents experience heightened stress due to academic competition, family expectations, economic pressures, and peer influences. Because they spend much of their time in school, the school setting is an ideal environment for early mental health support through structured counseling and psychosocial interventions (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2019).

However, the current school counseling system often falls short of its potential. Many existing approaches are based on Western psychological models that do not always align with the collectivist, family-centered nature of Sri Lankan society (Perera & Fonseka, 2022). As Fernando (2018) notes, counseling practices that neglect cultural context can inadvertently reinforce stigma and alienate students who most need support. This raises a vital question: *How can Sri Lanka’s school-based psychosocial systems be adapted to better reflect the cultural, social, and religious fabric of local communities?*

This study was designed to address that question by exploring the intersection between school-level counseling systems and adolescent mental health within a culturally grounded framework. By drawing from diverse voices of students, educators, parents, and counselors, research seeks to understand how cultural norms shape both the accessibility and effectiveness of existing psychosocial support systems. The findings are intended to inform policy discussions and inspire the development of school-based mental health models that are both contextually relevant and socially inclusive.

2. Literature Review

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) defines mental health as “*a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his*

or her community.” Adolescents’ mental well-being has become one of the major developmental concerns globally, with schools identified as critical environments for early recognition and intervention (Patel et al., 2007).

In the Sri Lankan context, increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among adolescents are often attributed to intense educational pressure, parental expectations, and rapid social change (Samarasekara et al., 2020). Although school-based counseling services have been introduced to address these issues, many of these interventions are adapted from Western models that lack cultural alignment with Sri Lankan values and social norms (Perera & Fonseka, 2022).

Research in counseling and cross-cultural psychology highlights that socially responsive and culturally grounded approaches, those which integrate local beliefs, traditions, and family systems can enhance both engagement and effectiveness in mental health programs (Sue et al., 2009). However, there remains a significant gap in empirical studies examining how such approaches function within Sri Lankan schools and how they affect students’ well-being. This study, therefore, seeks to address that gap by analyzing the relationship between school-based psychosocial support systems and adolescent mental health through a Sri Lankan socio-cultural lens.

The current research is focused on secondary schools in selected regions of Sri Lanka, examining existing counseling practices and the socio-cultural factors that influence their success. Narrowing the study’s scope allows for a more in-depth exploration of culturally grounded guidance systems relevant to the local educational environment.

Global and Regional Perspectives

A growing body of international research emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive counseling models that respond to local realities. Harper, Terry, and Twiggs (2016) note that dominant U.S. counseling frameworks often overlook the complex intersections of culture, gender, and socioeconomic status faced by marginalized youth. Their study on African American adolescent girls demonstrated that interventions failing to consider cultural identity and community context risk alienating the very individuals they aim to support. In contrast, culturally attuned approaches help to build trust, encourage participation, and enhance long-term outcomes.

Global studies reinforce this position. Both the World Health Organization (2021) and Patel et al. (2007) argue that mental health programs in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) must be embedded within local cultural and social systems. Effective interventions are those that connect education, social work, and health sectors, while engaging families, teachers, and community leaders in collaborative implementation.

Such integration not only reduces stigma but also places emotional well-being at the heart of community life.

In South Asia, similar cultural patterns are evident. Research by De Silva et al. (2021) on mental health systems in India and Sri Lanka revealed that adolescents often turn to family members and peers rather than professional counselors for support. Stigma, limited confidentiality, and insufficiently trained staff further discourage help-seeking. These findings suggest that interventions grounded in collective resilience, family involvement, and culturally sensitive dialogue are more effective and sustainable than the individually focused therapeutic models common in Western settings.

Local Context and Research Gap

In Sri Lanka, existing literature on adolescent mental health remains limited and largely descriptive, emphasizing prevalence data rather than intervention effectiveness (De Silva et al., 2021). Moreover, cultural taboos surrounding mental illness continue to discourage both discussion and help seeking behavior. As a result, many adolescents remain underserved by current school counseling systems.

This study, therefore, aims to fill a critical research gap by exploring how cultural values, family expectations, and community norms shape the functioning and effectiveness of school-based psychosocial support systems. The ultimate goal is to identify strategies for developing culturally responsive, sustainable models of school-based counseling that can enhance adolescent mental well-being within the Sri Lankan socio-cultural context.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how school-based psychosocial support systems influence the mental health of adolescents within Sri Lanka's socio-cultural environment. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables a deep understanding of participant's lived experiences and cultural perceptions regarding mental health and counseling.

Participants and Sampling

Data were collected from students, teachers, school counselors, and parents representing both urban and rural secondary schools. We collected data from 48 participants from three schools, each school we collected 5 parents, 5 students, 5 teachers and one counselor and participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that each had direct experience or insight into school-based mental health practices. This approach allowed

for rich, contextualized data that reflected the diversity of Sri Lankan cultural and educational settings.

Data Collection

Two primary methods were used, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interviews provided detailed personal perspectives, while FGDs encouraged dialogue and shared reflection among participants. Each session was conducted in Sinhala and was audio-recorded with consent.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the National Institute of Social Development (NISD). Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and written consent was obtained from all adult participants and from the parents or guardians of student participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and all identifiers were removed from the data prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, reviewing and defining themes, and producing the final report. The analysis emphasized culturally embedded meanings and community-based interpretations of mental health and support systems. Triangulation of data sources, students, educators, and parents was used to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed several interconnected themes that explain how Sri Lankan cultural norms, family expectations, and institutional factors shape the effectiveness of school-based counseling and mental health support systems and also this discussion based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

4.1 Culturally Incompatible Counseling Models

Many school counseling practices are modeled on Western, individual-centered frameworks that often clash with Sri Lanka's collectivist traditions. Teachers and counselors reported that students and parents frequently misunderstand counseling as a service for "mentally ill" individuals rather than as a supportive space for emotional well-being. This perception limits participation and reinforces stigma.

In some schools, counseling responsibilities are still managed by teachers with minimal training, emphasizing academic guidance over psychosocial care. Although the Ministry of Education's initiative to appoint full-time counseling teachers is commendable, many of these professionals continue to face resource shortages and institutional barriers that hinder their effectiveness.

4.2 Socio-Cultural Influences on Help Seeking

Cultural values such as respect for elders, family reputation, and religious beliefs strongly influence adolescents' willingness to seek help. Many students prefer confiding in family members or peers rather than counselors. Family disruptions such as parental separation, migration for employment, or domestic conflict were identified as major contributors to adolescent distress. However, discussing such issues openly remains taboo in many communities.

Counselors emphasized that involving families in awareness sessions, school assemblies, and parent-teacher meetings helped reduce misconceptions about counseling. Small initiatives such as celebrating Mental Health Awareness Day and linking counseling outcomes to improved academic performance were found to encourage acceptance.

4.3 Institutional and Structural Barriers

Despite the growing recognition of school mental health, infrastructure remains inadequate. Many schools do not have a private space dedicated to counseling, even though classrooms exist for other subjects such as home science or dance. Furthermore, some principals and teachers still prioritize discipline and examination results over student well-being. In a few schools, punitive approaches such as suspension or expulsion are used to address behavioral issues, reflecting a lingering belief that punishment leads to character development.

4.4 The Need for a Culturally Grounded Counseling Model

The study highlights the necessity of counseling frameworks that align with Sri Lanka's collectivist and relational culture. Effective school counseling should integrate family involvement, community collaboration, and the use of culturally familiar language and metaphors. This approach resonates with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which views adolescent mental health as shaped by interactions between the individual, family, school, and society. Strengthening these linkages through joint family-school programs and community outreach can significantly enhance student well-being.

Incorporating Sue et al.'s (1992) Multicultural Counseling Theory, the research suggests that counselor education must include training in cultural humility, linguistic sensitivity, and the use of community-based strategies. Similarly, Rogers' (1951) Person-Centered Approach with its emphasis on empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard remains highly relevant. Informal conversations and peer-support circles were found to be particularly effective for adolescents, creating safe spaces for sharing and emotional growth.

4.5 Implications for Policy and Practice

1. **Policy Integration:** The Ministry of Education should formally include culturally responsive counseling within national education policy.
2. **Training Curriculum:** Institutions such as the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) should strengthen modules on humanistic, ecological, and culture-based counseling theories.
3. **Community Engagement:** Partnerships with religious and community leaders can reduce stigma and promote collective awareness of mental health.
4. **Professional Development:** Regular supervision, mentoring, and refresher training for school counselors should be institutionalized to ensure quality and accountability.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that promoting adolescent mental health in Sri Lanka requires a deeper engagement with the nation's cultural and social fabric. School-based psychosocial support systems can only be effective when they are grounded in the collective values, traditions, and community structures that shape young people's lives.

The findings show that the dominance of Western, individual-centered counseling models often limits the relevance and acceptance of school counseling in Sri Lanka. A culturally grounded approach, one that respects family bonds, community involvement, and indigenous coping practices, offers a more sustainable pathway for adolescent well-being. To achieve this, policy reforms must strengthen the link between education, social work, and community development. Training institutions such as the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) have a vital role to play in equipping future counselors with cultural competence, empathy, and contextual awareness.

Ultimately, the protection of adolescent mental health should be seen not merely as an educational responsibility but as a collective national commitment. By embracing culturally responsive counseling frameworks, Sri Lankan schools can nurture emotionally

resilient, socially connected, and mentally healthy citizens capable of contributing to the country's long-term development.

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