

# School-Based Counseling in Mainland China: Past, Present, and Future

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## Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive review of the past, present, and future of school-based counseling in mainland China. First, this article summarizes the historical antecedents and important policies that have influenced the progress of school-based counseling in China. Next, the current situation of the profession is discussed, including relevant government policy, school and school counselor practice, and current challenges. In the final section, the implications for policy-makers to further support the profession are explored.

*Keywords:* school-based counseling, mainland China, school counselors, policies

## Introduction

During the past four decades, China experienced continuous dramatic economic growth and societal changes (Guthrie, 2012). These changes brought enormous social competition and stress for the Chinese people (Cook, Lei, & Chiang, 2010). Among China's 1.3 billion people, at least 100 million have various mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, bipolar depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and social phobia. These disorders account for 20% of hospitalization in the country (Fei, 2006). Suicide is the leading cause of death for Chinese individuals between the ages of 15 and 34 (Ji, Kleinman, & Becker, 2001). Xinhua News Agency reported that out of 340 million youth under the age of 17, 10% experienced mental and/or behavioral problems, including anxiety, depression, alcoholism, and criminal activity (Radio Free Asia, 2006). Houri, Nam, Choe, Min, and Matsumoto (2012) compared mental health conditions among Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean youth, finding that Chinese youth experienced significantly more depression than their counterparts. In addition to mental health concerns, there are many other reasons for Chinese youth to seek psychological help; among the most common are school-related problems, family relationships, peers and teachers, and test anxiety (Chang, Tong, Shi, & Zeng, 2005).

In the current literature on school-based counseling in mainland China, there exists a variety of terms that have been used to describe school counseling. These include school mental health education (Caldarella, Chan, Christensen, Lin, & Liu, 2013), comprehensive

school health program (Aldinger et al., 2008), school psychological services (Ye & Fang, 2010), school psychology (D'Amato, van Schalkwyk, Zhao, & Hu, 2013; Ding, Kuo, & Van Dyke, 2008), student services office (Dwyer & McNaughton, 2004), school counseling (Leuwerke & Shi, 2010; Liu, Tian, & Zheng, 2013; Shi & Leuwerke, 2010; Thomason & Qiong, 2008), and mental consultation (Thomason & Qiong, 2008). This article will use the term "school-based counseling" to encompass the varied formats of psychological counseling services being provided in China's schools. In addition, some of the school-based counseling literature discussed in this article is relatively outdated due to the limited amount of research conducted in China.

When looking at the educational, social/emotional development and mental health issues of Chinese adolescents, it is important to consider the differences between urban and rural areas due to the disproportionate economic growth among regions in China (Cook et al., 2010). In rural China, there remains a sizable number of youth left in their rural hometown by one or both parents who moved to cities for better job opportunities (Luo, Wang, & Gao, 2009). Chinese scholars described the rural children as the "left-behind" children (Luo et al., 2009; Zhao, Liu & Shen, 2008). These children suffer from low life satisfaction, low self-esteem, and higher levels of depression (Sun et al., 2015). Whereas in urban China, given the country's One-Child Policy and limited educational opportunities, parents often put a great deal of pressure on their only children to succeed academically. Therefore, urban children are mainly suffering from education-related problems, such as test anxiety and academic pressure, loneliness, social discomfort, internet/video game addiction, self-centeredness, and reclusion (Davey & Zhao, 2015; Worrell, 2008). Previous research identified factors that contribute to Chinese youths' mental health problems. The primary reasons suggested were academic pressure (Dwyer & McNaughton, 2004; Thomason & Qiong, 2008; Worrell, 2008), being an only child (Liu, Munakata, & Onuoha, 2005; Thomason & Qiong, 2008), physical abuse (Wong, Chen, Goggins, Tang, & Leung, 2009), lack of coping skills (Tang, 2006), and a generation gap between children and their parents/caregivers (Thomason & Qiong, 2008).

In addition to educational and psychological needs,

Chinese students require career guidance and counseling. This need increased exponentially in the late 1970s and 1980s (Zhang, Hu, & Pope, 2002) after the Cultural Revolution ended and China became more open to Western counseling ideas. However, there has been no proper career guidance and counseling services in primary and secondary schools in China and most Chinese were largely unfamiliar with the term career guidance and counseling (Zhang et al., 2002). Teachers were the ones who provided students career guidance, but the assistance was only based on minimal personal experience and limited information (Zhang et al., 2002).

Despite such prevalent and urgent counseling needs, school-based counseling has not kept pace (Leuwerke & Shi, 2010; Shi, Liu, & Leuwerke, 2014). Chinese students normally solicited advice from teachers about academic problems, asked for help from friends regarding peer and family relationships, and some students received no counseling services for their problems (Hourii et al., 2012). This reluctance of Chinese students to seek counseling might be related to the culture and political background in China. Collectivism has been always valued in China and hence individuals are instructed to engage in “self-criticism and mutual criticism... to get rid of their individualism and capitalistic thinking” (Yip, 2005, p.110). Moreover, harmony and filial piety, the most important Chinese traditional value and the most basic components of Confucius’ overall vision of society, could impact Chinese people’s help-seeking behavior. Chinese students are less likely to share their concerns or problems with people outside of their family or close friends circle because they feel shameful to let their parents lose face (Hou & Zhang, 2007; Thomason & Qiong, 2008). A recent survey conducted by Wu, Huang, Jackson, Su, and Morrow (2016) among 1,891 high school students in a southern city in China showed that 25% of the adolescents expressed needs for mental health services but only 5% of the sample reported having used school-based mental health services. Zheng, Zhang, Li, and Zhang (1997) suggested that the high prevalence of Chinese students’ mental health problems could be related to the fact that parents and teachers did not attend to students’ psychological problems. In fact, it is homeroom teachers who are providing a wide range of counseling services to students because of their direct daily interaction with students (Shi & Leuwerke, 2010). However, teachers do not possess sufficient training and preparation in providing counseling services. As a result, there has been increased attention from both the Chinese governmental authorities and interested researchers to improve school-based counseling in the country. In this article, school-based counseling policy and practice in China’s primary and secondary schools will be reviewed. A summary of the historical development, status, and future direction of the country’s educational system will

be provided. Policy implications are discussed in the closing section.

### **Historical Context**

Upon reviewing the literature, the historical development of school-based counseling in mainland China has progressed through three major stages: Infantile (early 1900s to late 1970s), exploration (late 1970s to early 1990s), and development (early 1990s until now).

#### **Infantile (Early 1900s to Late 1970s): No School Counseling**

In the early 1900s, Western missionaries influenced mental health services in China (Pearson, 1991). Prior to 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was founded, China only had eight psychiatric hospitals providing mental health services and the profession was not recognized by either the government or the professionals (Yip, 2006). After 1949, mental health services improved slowly and gradually until 1966 when China’s Cultural Revolution started. During those 10 years of Cultural Revolution, the profession of psychology paused and practitioners were exiled to work in the countryside (Pearson, 1995). There was no school counseling practice in this stage.

#### **Exploration (late 1970s to early 1990s): First Government Policy Issued**

In the late 1970s, the Chinese government initiated the open door and economy reform policy, which not only opened doors for economy development but also brought increasing government support for psychology (Tisdell, 2008). This government support resulted in the advancement of Chinese mental health education. In 1985, Chinese Association for Mental Health (CAMH) was formed (Hohenshil, Amundson, & Niles, 2015), which was a significant milestone in the identity of Chinese mental health professionals. With the formation of the CAMH, came along a burgeoning interest in psychology, mental health publications, and research. In 1988, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the first government policy referring to psychology and mental health practice in schools, which suggested that Chinese students be trained in moral and psychological domains. This explains why Chinese mental health education has always been closely related to moral education with a focus on patriotism, socialism, communism, and helping students construct their worldview and value system (Maosen, 2011).

#### **Development (Early 1990s Until Now): Rapid Development of School Counseling**

Starting from early 1990s, China’s Communist Party and government started to pay unprecedented attention to psychological and mental health education and related

educational policies (Ye & Fang, 2010). In 1992, the former State Education Commission (now Ministry of Education) issued *Basic Requirements for the Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial)* (State Education Commission, 1992), that listed school psychological service as one of the eight key educational contents in primary and secondary school curriculum. In 1993, *Guidelines for China's Educational Reform and Development* was issued and this policy rendered the psychological quality of students as one of the criteria for the all-round development of an educated person (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, 1993). In 1994, *Suggestions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Strengthening and Improving School Moral Education* clearly pointed out that schools should help students upgrade their psychological characteristics, personality, and adaptability to the environment (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1994). In late 1990s, an education reform known as *Quality Education* was mandated in China and students' abilities to adapting to the society and the importance of school psychological services were reemphasized (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, 1999). In the *Quality Education* reform, mental health is a necessary component in students' healthy development and successful adaptation to society. With this reform, psychological health lessons were mandated in primary and secondary schools.

In 1994, *Several Suggestions on Improving Mental Health Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools* was issued and this policy identified moral and politics teachers, homeroom teachers, Communist Youth League Cadres, and school counselors as the responsible personnel in schools to address students' mental health needs (State Education Commission, 1994). From then, China's primary and secondary schools with available resources and funding were required to establish counseling offices and school counselors were identified as the leaders of this system. This served as a critical moment for the school counseling profession in China because it incorporated school counseling as a participating member in Chinese school systems (Jiang, 2005). Before the school counselor position was initiated it was homeroom teachers who had been playing an important role in providing school counseling services in China (Jiang, 2005; Lim, Lim, Michael, Cai, & Schock, 2010; Wang, 1997).

Starting from early 2000s, the Chinese school counseling profession underwent a rapid development. Jiang (2005) used a metaphor of "a child running at the speed of an adult" (p. 1) to describe the development of the school counseling profession in China, which vividly expressed how weak and underdeveloped was the profession's foundation. This weak foundation was partially due to a lack of literature on school-based

counseling in China. However, with more support from government policies, both practice in psychological services and research in this field gained momentum. Research started to burgeon around 2005. The Journal of Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary School was founded during this time (Hohenshil et al., 2015). Important articles were published in English-language peer-reviewed international journals (e.g., Caldarella et al., 2013; D'Amato et al., 2013; Gao et al., 2010; Guo, Liu, & Xue, 2009; Leuwerke & Shi, 2010; Liu et al., 2013; Loyalka et al., 2013; Shi & Leuwerke, 2010; Shi et al., 2014; Thomason & Qiong, 2008; Wang, Ni, Ding, & Yi, 2015; Ye & Fang, 2010; Yuan, 2017). This research greatly advanced the knowledge base of school-based counseling in China and laid foundation for the profession's further development.

With the development of both school-based counseling practice and research, there was a substantial need to set up training and certification systems in the field. In 2002, China's National Counseling Licensing Board was formed, and a three-tier national licensing system was implemented (Lim et al., 2010). There existed more than 30 locations across mainland China that offered qualification exams for counselors, including a national exam to license school counselors (Lim et al., 2010). Some universities and colleges started to actively create new majors or adjust existing programs to foster qualified service providers and strengthen the training of professional skills. Beijing Normal University, in collaboration with Rowan University in the US, was reported to be the first university in China to offer a school counseling training program (Lim et al., 2010). Since 2002, many classroom teachers have been certified and received national vocational qualification training for psychological counseling (Lim et al., 2010).

### Contemporary China

The current scene of school-based counseling in China differs significantly from what it existed in the early 1990s. In the recent ten years, there has been a proliferation of research investigations. In 2012, the Ministry of Education released the updated version of *Guideline of Mental Health Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools* that described the goals, content, and methods of mental health education as well as the personnel responsible for the delivery of services (Ministry of Education in China, 2012). In August 2015, China's Education Ministry specifically regulated the arrangement of counseling rooms (space, size, furniture, equipment, etc.), ordered schools to improve mental healthcare for students, but banned compulsory testing and irresponsible labeling of students as mentally ill (School Counseling in China, 2015). The Ministry told primary and middle schools to establish psychological counseling offices/rooms and provide free counseling to both students and teachers. The Ministry also required

that a counseling room should always be open during school hours and must have at least one full-time or part-time counselor who holds an equal status to a classroom teacher (School Counseling in China, 2015). Confidentiality for the first time was emphasized in this policy to protect students and others in schools.

### **Utilization and Practice of School-Based Counseling**

Until now, there was no previous literature that investigated the extent of utilization and practice of school-based counseling in China at a national level (Ye & Fang, 2010). However, some regional studies were published in recent years and provided valuable information in this field. For example, Shi et al. (2014) examined students' utilization of school counseling services and their perceptions of school counselors in two high schools in Beijing. Results showed the majority of participating students met counselors one to three times and no students reported seeing counselors more than five times. The most positive evaluation of school counselors was related to their friendliness, approachability, and ability to explain things clearly (e.g., college application procedures, scholarship opportunities, students' developmental concerns, etc.) (Shi et al., 2014). Based on Wang et al. (2015), the school psychological service providers (SPs) to student ratio in elementary and secondary schools in Beijing was 1:1360. Only 34.8% of schools had SPs who were certified as mental health counselors or who had degrees in psychology and 19.6% of schools did not have any SPs. Based on teachers' reports, SPs' role mainly focused on services for students (e.g., teaching mental health lessons, counseling and consultation), with a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention (Wang et al., 2015). In terms of theoretical models used in school-based counseling, Wu et al. (2016) found the most popular theoretical models used in Chinese middle schools were behavioral, person-centered, rational-emotional, and psychoanalysis.

Leuwerke and Shi (2010) investigated school counselors' views of their practice and perceptions of the profession. Fourteen school counselors working in two large cities in China were interviewed. In terms of daily duties and practice, school counselors talked about the wide variety of tasks and responsibilities they regularly undertook, including classroom guidance lessons, individual and group counseling with students, training homeroom teachers, communicating with principals and parents, counseling teachers, and serving as an administrator. School counselors shared that their satisfaction in the profession came mainly from students' improved mental and behavioral conditions after receiving counseling services. At the same time, it was found that school counselors were dissatisfied with their position when they were not valued and respected by colleagues, students, and parents. Due to the relative

scarcity of professional school counselors, especially in rural areas in China, homeroom teachers continue to perform a variety of tasks normally provided by school counselors in the U.S. (Shi & Leuwerke, 2010).

Despite a lack of national investigation on the practice of school counselors in China, three major themes emerged from studies using regional data: (a) school counselor position is most prevalent in universities, followed by junior middle schools, primary and senior middle schools, and kindergarten; (b) schools in urban areas have a higher coverage of counseling offices than rural areas, where in most rural primary and secondary schools, counseling services are missing; and (c) inter-regional development is inconsistent due to uneven resources and funding available (Ye & Fang, 2010).

### **Preparation and Training**

Currently, many universities in China provide training and preparation for school counselors at the undergraduate level and some also provide master's and doctoral level programs, such as Beijing Normal University. However, there are no standards or guidelines for these degrees or programs. The government has not officially approved any formal training programs, certification, or accreditations in school counseling (Caldarella et al., 2013; Ye & Fang, 2010). In fact, Western counselor education programs are providing training and education to an increasing number of Chinese counseling professionals through in person and online programs (Cook et al., 2010). In large cities, it is the responsibility of each school district to train school counselors. The training normally includes lectures and meetings where school counselors share their knowledge and experience.

Gao et al., (2010) conducted a national survey among mental health practitioners in China. Most of the participants had a bachelor's degree or lower and were employed part-time with no affiliation or any professional association. The participants in this study also reported having received primarily short-term training and theory-based workshops with no supervision or opportunities for consultations. Yuan (2017) explored pre-service school counselors' learning needs by surveying counselor educators and pre-service school counselors. By conducting in-depth interviews and reviewing curriculum documents, this study found four critical needs of pre-service school counselors: (a) developing a strong knowledge foundation with research competence, (b) linking theories with practice in specific institutional and socio-cultural contexts, (c) seeking social support and emotional guidance, and (d) constructing a sense of vision and agency.

Pre-service school counselors in China are likely to receive limited on-site supervision during their field placement experience since their on-site supervisors

might not have adequate preparation (Cook et al., 2010). One area that Chinese school counselors especially lack training and preparation in is providing responsive counseling services (Cook et al., 2010). Furthermore, there are very few counseling professionals in China who are qualified to serve as counselor supervisors and Chinese universities that offer counseling programs do not require experiential learning as part of the curriculum (Hou & Zhang, 2007). These barriers all contribute to the lack of supervised practicum and internship experiences among Chinese counseling students (Cook et al., 2010).

### **Evidence-Based School Counseling Intervention in China**

In mainland China, empirical studies started to emerge in the beginning of 2000s. However, the speed of research production stays relatively slow. Thus far, only a handful of studies could be located in the literature that examined the effectiveness of school counseling interventions in China. For example, Dou, Zou, Wang and Qiao (2016) used pre-and-posttest with control group design to examine a classroom guidance lesson based on Cognitive Information Processing Theory. Results found the classroom guidance lesson significantly improved high school students' level of major decision-making, self-efficacy, and decreased their major decision-making difficulty (Dou et al., 2016). Furthermore, an eight-session group counseling intervention's impact on social anxiety was examined in a pre-and-posttest control group design comparing middle school students with college students (Su, 2002). The results showed this group intervention did not work for middle school students in reducing social anxiety and improving self-esteem as well as for college students. However, Su (2002) suggested that the following factors might explain this result: (a) participants in the middle school were not participating voluntarily; (b) no individual counseling sessions were provided to supplement the group counseling; and (c) some group sessions were interrupted due to time conflicts. Further, Wei (2000) examined the efficacy of a group counseling intervention in reducing test anxiety among high school students in a pre-and-posttest with-control group design. Group intervention was found to have significant impact on decreasing student test anxiety.

### **Future Perspectives**

The future of school-based counseling in China has both challenges and opportunities. School-based counseling in China underwent noticeable development, and currently, the profession is provided major opportunities for further development. Specifically, China's government has realized the importance of mental health and psychological well-being of students and the school counseling profession is now recognized

as a legitimate entity by both the government and the society. Moreover, training opportunities for school counselors are growing thanks to the increasing partnerships between Chinese and Western universities as well as the popularity of online and distance learning adopted in Western universities (Cook et al., 2010). However, school-based counseling in China is still at a nascent stage compared with Western countries. Consequently, the profession is facing some major problems and obstacles.

### **Major Challenges**

First, even though the Chinese government has focused increased attention and provided more support in the recent years, school-based counseling and mental health education are not valued at the same level as other academic subjects in Chinese education system (Davey & Zhao, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). One possible explanation for this lack of recognition could be that Chinese students are pressured to excel academically in order to be admitted into universities in China and they normally would pay far more attention to their academic performance in those subjects to be tested in college entrance exams. Moreover, seeking counseling is generally seen as a stigma in China, so that fewer students are less likely to pursue it. This reality contributes to school counselors' dissatisfaction with their job (Leuwerke & Shi, 2010; Wang et al., 2015) and negatively impacts the development of the profession. Fewer people may want to stay in their position, which may result in fewer counselors in place to meet the huge needs of the student population in Chinese schools. In rural areas, the shortage and needs are even more urgent. In this situation, Chinese students' mental health issues are being sufficiently addressed.

Second, there is a substantial need to improve the qualification and skills of practicing school counselors (Wang et al., 2015). There is also an extensive need to keep building and developing training programs in universities to provide higher quality preparation for pre-service school counselors (Wang et al., 2015). A key to this problem is that there is no standard national accreditation system in place that could guide the teaching practice and curriculum development in counselor education programs. The current training programs are not sufficiently meeting the learning needs of pre-service school counselors due to the linear curriculum structure and some contextual obstacles, such as the exam-oriented system and social bias present in society (Yuan, 2017). Yuan (2017) suggested a recursive, integrative, and context-specific counselor curriculum in which pre-service counselors could be provided a rich practicum experience and sufficient social and emotional support. More importantly, a standard accreditation system is needed to guide the training programs and regulate teaching practice.

Third, there is no Chinese national model for school counseling. The profession needs a coherent philosophical foundation to base practice as well as effective methods to deliver, manage, and evaluate services. Regrettably, school counselors in China do not follow the same standards or delivery format for their practices. On the positive side, using the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2012) as a starting point, researchers interested in Chinese school counseling have started work on developing a comprehensive program that is suitable for the Chinese educational system (Shi, in progress). However, considering the Chinese political context, it is unclear whether a framework based on an American model will positively impact Chinese students.

Fourth, there is a massive need for empirical research on school counseling in China. Although the literature has grown tremendously in the past few years, there is still much to be learned. More research is needed that explores the training, preparation, and professional development of school counselors as well as what counseling interventions work for Chinese students with various needs. Also, currently there is no empirically based literature that examines the role, functioning, and scope of work of school counselors in China (Shi et al., 2014).

Finally, there exists no evaluation system in China's school-based counseling field and no attention has been paid to accountability. There is no previous literature that provides information on evaluation of school counseling interventions and accountability of school counselors. There is scant literature that focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of counseling interventions in China (section above for additional discussion). In brief, more research is needed in this area (Thomason & Qiong, 2008).

### Policy Implications

To address these challenges and to further advance the profession, here are some suggestions for Chinese policymakers, stakeholders, counselor educators, researchers, and practitioners:

1. The Ministry of Education could set up an office or committee that is delegated to support the development of a national accreditation system for university-based training programs (Wang et al., 2015; Yuan, 2017). This office could also facilitate the development of a national model for school counseling practice and a national organization specially for school counselors.
2. Government education officials could further emphasize the importance of students' mental health wellness and help remove the barriers or biases about counseling in the society.
3. School counseling researchers are encouraged to produce more empirical research that could

contribute to filling the literature gap in this field (Jiang, 2005; Thomason & Qiong, 2008).

4. Governmental officials could support the implementation of career education and counseling interventions in all schools.
5. School counseling educators in both China and Western countries are suggested to establish partnerships that could benefit counseling students in China via culturally appropriate curriculum and training programs.

School counseling practitioners are encouraged to implement evidence-based intervention, use data to advocate for their profession, and demonstrate their effectiveness (Shi et al., 2014). Policymakers in China should formulate policies that directly address the needs for Chinese school counselors to do regular program evaluations. It is critical for counselor education programs in China and abroad to start preparing Chinese school counselors for conducting program evaluations that focus on program outcomes instead of simply reporting what services the program provides (Shi et al., 2014).

### Conclusion

This article provides an up-to-date review of the past, present, and future of school-based counseling in China. Despite the evident achievement in its development, the school counseling profession faces tremendous challenges and opportunities. To further advance the school counseling profession in China, school counselors' work must be valued and respected by the general population, as well by students, parents, and school staff. In order to reach this goal, government officials and school counseling practitioners are both responsible. Policies are needed to regulate and guide the development of the profession. Practitioners need to use meaningful data to demonstrate their effectiveness and address accountability issues. The ultimate goal is to ensure that school counselors are helping students to become well-rounded and educated citizens.

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