

TRUANCY AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN: REASONS AND COUNSELLING EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Truancy is one of the top discipline problems in Malaysia and the national prevalence of truancy indicates a significant number of students are truant. Counselling at school aims at helping schoolchildren in personality development and discipline. This qualitative study aims to research the experiences of counselling on schoolchildren who were reported for truancy.

Methodology: The research participants involved ten schoolchildren who had played truant and were required to participate in counselling sessions. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and diary entries on two occasions for each participant. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes related to the participants' experiences.

Findings: The findings showed that the reasons for truancy among the school children involve self and relationship with others. After being in sessions with school counsellors, the children reported being more responsible, which included behavioural, emotional and goal-based changes. The relationship with the school counsellor allowed them to experience belongingness, which supported them in choosing positive behaviour, emotions and goals, which is related to having a sense of responsibility.

Contributions: This paper argues that engaging in counselling with a school counsellor helped the schoolchildren to make responsible decisions about their behaviour, emotions and goals. The most important factor is the "relearning experience" in promoting responsibility among schoolchildren.

Keywords: Qualitative research, truancy, belongingness, school counselling, responsibility.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Truancy among schoolchildren is a never-ending issue, and many studies have been conducted to investigate the factors behind and consequences of this behaviour. Several studies have indicated that truancy is a major social issue that is linked to a range of poor outcomes across the life course, including poor educational outcomes, drug and alcohol abuse, and antisocial behaviour (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett, & Eggins, 2017). It is also linked to various health concerns and health risk behaviours (Askeland, Haugland, Stormark, Bøe, & Hysing, 2015) and is associated with negative outcomes such as poor examination results, unemployment, feelings of distress, and the inability to cope with everyday life (Attwood & Croll, 2015).

In Malaysia, truancy has been classified as one of the top discipline problems (Ishak & Low, 2015; Yoep et al., 2016), and the national prevalence of truancy is 29.4% (Ministry of Health, 2017). In addition, the Ministry of Education's records in 2010 indicate that out of 111,484 discipline problem cases, 19,545 (17.5%) cases involved truancy. In 2011, from the 108,650 discipline problem cases, 18,550 (17%) involved truant behaviour (Ishak & Fin, 2013). Other disciplinary issues for school children include bullying, drug abuse, illegal group activities, theft, and other crime-related activities (Katmun, Zakaria, & Jusoh, 2014). In short, truancy is a major social issue that is associated with negative behaviour outcomes as well as health concerns.

Schoolchildren who were reported for truancy were required to participate in counselling, and this study aims to gain an understanding of their counselling experiences. It seeks to answer the research question "In what ways does the counselling impact schoolchildren in combating truancy?"

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reasons for Truancy

Previous studies have shown that factors relating to family, school, economic status, and the students themselves, such as attitude, behaviour, and personal character can contribute to truancy (Veloo & Ng, 2014; Yoep et al., 2016). Truancy was more frequent among adolescents

with less educated mothers (Askeland et al., 2015), from families in lower socio-economic groups (Attwood & Croll, 2015), because of a lower degree of parental academic involvement at home. In addition, truancy must be seen in the context of the many difficulties facing young people and as part of the broader issue of social adjustment (Attwood & Croll, 2015).

Some studies in the Malaysian context have shown that family experiences are important for schoolchildren and thus contribute to truancy. For example, one study found that students with single parents were almost twice more likely to be involved in truancy (Yoep et al., 2016). Conversely, other studies indicated that there was no relationship between truancy and the experience with family among schoolchildren (Shah et al., 2012; Suboh, Azizi, & Hamzah, 2011). In addition, some studies found that the teacher's personality and style of teaching were significant factors associated with truancy among schoolchildren (Ishak & Low, 2015; Mohd-Nawawi, Mohd, Md-Saad, Baharuddin, & Ismail, 2016). A study also revealed that teachers who were too exam orientated, serious, and hot-tempered and like to nag discouraged students remaining in the school (Ishak & Low, 2015). Clearly, truancy among schoolchildren is alarming and there are many factors – family, schoolchildren, and schoolteachers – that are interrelated.

2.2 School Counselling

As a way of promoting development among schoolchildren, school counselling was introduced in Malaysia's school system in the 1960s, with an emphasis on school guidance (See & Ng, 2010). In 1980, there was a revived plan by the Ministry of Education to provide guidance and counselling activities, with guidance and counselling teachers being appointed at secondary schools (See & Ng, 2010). In 1996, the directive from the Ministry of Education clarified the roles and functions of school counsellors, and emphasized (a) academic-related issues, (b) career guidance and development issues, and (c) psychosocial and mental-health-related issues (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1996). Starting in 2000, every secondary school in Malaysia had at least one full-time counsellor who had graduated with a bachelor's-level degree in counselling. However, in 2012, there was a directive from the Ministry of Education that the counselling services provided should be reengineered according to students' personality development and discipline (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2012). These efforts were aimed at developing students who were knowledgeable, skilled, humane, and with a sense of moral values.

Although the counselling profession has made substantial progress over the last 40 years in Malaysia, only a few studies have been conducted on the impact of school counselling.

One such example is a doctoral research project that indicated that individual counselling had a positive impact on aggression, parental attachment, and self-disclosure among secondary schoolchildren (Shaari, 2014). The findings also indicated that the experience of individual counselling fosters a positive relationship between the client and the counsellor. Another study indicated the positive effects of the individual counselling experience on personality development, such as motivation and curiosity, the feeling of being cared about, and feeling better about oneself, as well as learning to make decisions for oneself (Zakaria, 2016). Other studies have focused on group counselling and interventions, the effects of group counselling on students' social competency (Husain, 2016), and the impact of group counselling on depression and resiliency (Bistamam et al., 2015).

Knight, Gibson, and Cartwright (2018) argue that school counselling, particularly the counselling relationship, offered an important refuge from the pressure of the school environment, which led young people to feel accepted, valued and supported. School-based counselling is evaluated positively and perceived as an effective means of bringing about improvements in students' mental health and emotional wellbeing as well as enhancing their engagement in studying and learning (Cooper, 2013). It is evidenced that young clients experienced a positive change in their sense of self, and they perceived counselling as a source of care in the face of difficult circumstances, being the resolution of a clearly identified problem; however, a small number reported no positive effects from the counselling (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014).

Counselling provides opportunities for both the counsellor and the client to experience a relationship which contributes to clients' well-being and is important for understanding changes experienced by the client (Elliot, 2008). Past studies have investigated clients' meaningful experiences in counselling (Sackett & Lawson, 2016), and counselling in the workplace managed to reduce absence rates in clients by up to 60% (McLeod, 2010). In the Malaysian context, a study indicated that clients shared this positive view, i.e., they were aware of the importance of responsibility and confidence in light of changes resulting from counselling experiences (Mat-Min, 2016). However, there is still a great deal to learn about the experiences of clients in counselling (Sackett & Lawson, 2016), especially those of youth, including children (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014). With the aim of understanding the experience of young clients in the counselling process, a recent qualitative study conducted with eight young clients indicated that they experienced positive changes in their lives that resulted from their experiences in counselling, and they perceived that since they had begun counselling, they

were happier and had learned self-acceptance as well as a chance to learn about both themselves and how to be in better relationships with others (Sackett & Cook, 2021).

2.3 Responsibility as a Theoretical Framework

The concept of responsibility is at the core of the Adlerian life task of work, and failure in this life task significantly affects people's behaviour. An individual's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, character, and actions reflect a life plan that allows for a self-selected life goal (Corey, 2017). In relation to this, Rasmussen (2014) highlighted three critical qualities in promoting social interest: responsibility, cooperation, and respect. Responsibility requires an understanding of one's welfare and a willingness to be accountable for employing the most adaptive methods in fulfilling life tasks, as well as managing life challenges (Rasmussen, 2014). This means that individual choices in self-selected life goals reflect their attitude of responsibility, and the willingness to take responsibility means that an individual is less likely to engage in negative health and behaviour outcomes. The experience of schoolchildren who were reported for truancy and participated in the counselling sessions might be related to changes in the element of responsibility in their lives.

To recap, truancy is associated with multiple factors: family, school, teacher, and the students themselves (Veloo & Ng, 2014; Ishak & Low, 2015; Yoep et al., 2016). Counselling provides opportunities for both the counsellor and the client to experience a relationship which can encourage the client to reflect on and allow for a self-selected life goal (Corey, 2017). School counselling promoted positive experiences among schoolchildren, i.e., they learn to make decisions, as well as develop social competency (Zakaria, 2016; Husain, 2016). Yet, to know about the experiences of clients, particularly young people, requires more research (Sackett & Cook, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to answer the following question: In what ways does the counselling experience impact schoolchildren in combating truancy?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach was adopted in this research. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) highlight that, 'one major feature of well-collected qualitative data is that they focus on the naturally occurring, ordinary events in a natural setting so that we have a strong handle on what "real life" is like' (p. 11). The focus of this research was on understanding the individual stories of school children with maladaptive behaviour. The qualitative phenomenological approach allows the subjective experience of the participant

to be explored and understood. In other words, this research was not looking for objective facts and objective truth in respect to the school children's experiences. Furthermore, the individual stories of school children were presented in their own words. These research participants comprised school children who reported truancy and were required to participate in counselling sessions as part of the relearning process. As mentioned previously, this study aimed to gain an understanding of the experience of counselling among school children who played truant. With this aim, and to understand the current issues as well as previous findings, the participants were allowed to share their experiences of engaging in counselling. It is expected that each of the school children might have his or her own experiences of being engaged in that behaviour as well as the requirement to participate in counselling sessions. Furthermore, how they encountered those counselling experiences needs to be explored.

The participants of the study were school children at one school on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, and they were truants. The population of the selected school was 99% Malay. The school children who had played truant had skipped school or lessons and were referred for counselling by the disciplinary committee. Ten school children aged 14–16 years were selected to participate in this study based on purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were (i) they were engaged in truancy, (ii) they had been referred to counselling and (iii) they had participated in at least one counselling session. A description of the research participants is presented in Table 1. All names are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Table 1: Description of the participants

| Name | Description |
|-------------|---|
| Jannah | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 15-year-old Malay girl who started to play truant at the age of 13 years.● She skipped school and her truancy was related to her lack of interest in certain subjects. |
| Dayah | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 14-year-old Malay girl who started to play truant at the age of 13 years.● She skipped lessons due to her poor interest in certain subjects. |
| Pipah | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 14-year-old Malay girl who started her truancy at the age of 12 years.● She skipped lessons because of peer pressure. |
| Shahrul | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 15-year-old Malay boy who started his truancy at the age of 14 years.● He skipped school and lessons due to peer influence. |
| Adwa | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 16-year-old Malay boy who started to play truant at the age of 14 years.● He skipped school and lessons due to peer pressure. |
| Naza | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 16-year-old Malay boy who started his truancy at the age of 15 years.● His truancy was related to his poor experience with a teacher. |
| Arif | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 16-year-old Malay boy who started to play truant at the age of 15.● He skipped lessons due to his poor experience with teachers. |
| Shahir | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 16-year old Malay boy started his truancy at the age of 15 years.● He skipped lessons due to a poor experience with a teacher. |
| Asyraf | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 16-year-old Malay boy who started to play truant at the age of 14 years.● He skipped school and lessons due to his poor interest in certain subjects. |
| Syafiq | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A 16-year-old Malay boy who began his truancy at the age of 14 years.● He skipped school as a result of his poor interest in learning. |

Prior to data collection, a list of names of children who were truants and currently engaged in counselling was obtained from the management office of the selected school. The researchers contacted the potential research participants and explained about the study as well as encouraged them to participate. Being provided with an explanation and encouragement promoted willingness to participate in the study amongst the school children. Sensitivity to the challenges and ethical issues of interacting face-to-face with the potential participants is crucial, as it contributes to trust in the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The 10 participants gave their informed consent prior to data collection. Informed consent is a process of giving permission for their experiences to be part of the data in this study, and it has been agreed upon by the individual who is to take part in an event based on his or her choice, free of elements of assault, threat, injustice or manipulation (Berg & Lune, 2011). Openness about the study will develop a sense of trust between the

researcher and the participant regarding the study (Miles et al., 2014). Informed consent is important and encompassed an awareness of the confidentiality of the information as well as the experiences the participants shared in the study.

The study employed semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and diary writing to provide the primary data of the study. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to enter into the experiences of people and uncover their thoughts and feelings (Patton, 2015). A semi-structured interview involves a flexible style with which to accumulate information, permitting participants to describe their experiences in their own words and ways (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, ‘this format enabled the researchers to ask questions systematically, but the answers given by the participants had no limit and no special structure’ (Mat-Min & Tuan-Abdullah, 2017, p. 91). In relation to this, the interview protocols were formulated prior to the data gathering, and they served as guidelines for the interaction between the researcher and the participant. Interview protocols concern the questions or issues that are to be explored during interviews (Patton, 2015). Within three months of the data being gathered, each subject took part in two interviews conducted after his or her counselling sessions. Prior to the interview, the researchers gave chances to the participants to decide on the date, time and place for the interview. The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 60 minutes, including warming up, the interviewing phase, and cooling down. Interviews were based on protocols as stated below; however, most of the participants’ stories were presented in complex lines and intertwined with one another. Therefore, the researchers needed to listen carefully and also try to understand the meanings of their experiences.

Table 2: The interview protocols

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1. Background and current situation
 2. Experience in counselling
 3. Relationship with the counsellor
 4. Impact of counselling activities on the self
 5. Expectations regarding counselling
 6. Changes that occurred as a result of counselling
 7. Things that contribute to the changes
 8. Feelings after having been through counselling
-

Observational data were also gathered in this study. The purpose of this method was to collect information on the setting, the natural processes that occurred within that context, and the people who took part in the activities (Patton, 2015). In this study, non-participant observations were conducted, and the researcher was not involved in the activities of the participants. Observations were performed twice for each of the study participants, and each for the duration of one hour. The researcher presented herself at the school grounds and sat at a location near to the research participants' classroom. During the observation, the behaviour of the participants and the atmosphere in the classroom were recorded in the observation description. All the observations were conducted before conducting interviews with the research participants.

Diary entries were another source of data in this study. Writing a diary or diary entry refers to a record of the ideas, beliefs, feelings, or actions prepared by the participants. The diary entries and written experiences of the participants allow for a comparison of the self-reported data by the participants during an interview (Berg & Lune, 2011). In this study, the diary entries prepared by the participants describe their experiences as a truant and their engagement in counselling sessions. They were required to complete pre-prepared statements, which were open-ended, and based on answers to the prompts (i) "my most significant experience", (ii) "my worst experience", and (iii) "what I had learned from the experience". They were able to choose their words and style of writing concerning their personal experience. Two diary entries were required for each participant during the three months of data gathering. This method enabled the researcher to grasp the underlying issues that might not be described by the participants during the interview.

The data in this study involved the interview transcripts, diary entries, and observation notes. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allows the identification of themes and sub-themes from the interview transcripts and diary entries as well as observation notes. Thematic analysis is a process for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

All the participants' experiences, which included the interview transcripts, diary entries, and observation notes, were read several times to try to make sense of the experiences of the participants, and any themes emerging in their stories were noted down. The first three stages of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) were performed by the second author. In this stage, the initial codes and the search for ideas was conducted through the use of NVivo 8. Both the first and second authors were involved in the last three stages, which were reviewing, defining and naming, as well as producing the report. At these stages, the themes that emerged in the stories

were renamed, combined, and some were discarded when they did not add clarity to the overall themes. Triangulation of the three main data sources was done to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data analysis. The themes were revisited a number of times during the process of searching for consistency between different types of data. The researchers learned that ‘revisiting’ is an important process during this stage. The more they revisited the themes, the greater the understanding they developed of the central themes. The analysis process is not a linear method but rather an interactive and reflective process that evolves over time and involves constantly moving back and forth between phases (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Providing an exhaustive account requires descriptions and interpretations. Furthermore, understanding the experience of particular schoolchildren requires a holistic perspective. Again, this involved much ‘backward and forward’ movement throughout the analysis.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Reasons for truancy

The results present the experiences of ten schoolchildren. For the purposes of this study, their names (not real names) were Jannah, Shahrul, Adwa, Naza, Arif, Pipah, Asyraf, Dayah, Syafiq, and Shahir. Their experiences indicated reasons for their truancy, which included peer influence, attitudes, and relationship with the teacher. However, being in counselling with the school counsellor, they learned to be responsible for their behaviour, emotions and goals. There were similarities as well as differences in their experiences.

Stories from the schoolchildren regarding their truancy, which was defined as not attending lessons and school, were based on two main sources: self and others. The element of *self* consists of “no interest in school”, “not performing homework” and “cannot concentrate”. The element of *other* consists of “peer influence” and “attitudes of the teacher”. Table 2 shows their stories of truancy in relation to the two sources.

Table 3: Reasons for truancy

| | Self | | | Relationship with Other | |
|---------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| | No interest in school | Not perform homework | Cannot concentrate | Peer influence | Attitude of teacher |
| Jannah | | / | | | |
| Dayah | | / | | | |
| Pipah | | | | / | |
| Shahrul | | | | / | |
| Adwa | | | | / | |
| Naza | / | | | | |
| Arif | | | | | / |
| Shahrir | | | | | / |
| Asyraf | | | | / | |
| Syafiq | | | / | | |

Table 3 shows that relationship with others, which includes peer pressure and teacher attitude, was the most common reason for truancy among the participants. Comparing the two sources, peer pressure is the most common reason for truancy. Despite that, each of the participants had different stories of peer pressure and its relationship with their truancy.

Adwa's experience of truancy is related to the influence of peers. His story suggests that spending time with friends and doing activities undisturbed by an adult were the reasons for his truancy.

"I played truant, skipping school. Normally, we spent our time lying around at my friend's house, and doing nothing. We stayed at our friend's house, only us, and there was no one else at the house, because both of their parents worked. We watched movies on TV, talked and smoked, but I don't smoke. There are times that we are loitering, doing nothing at unattended places, or we spent our time in the city centre." (Adwa)

Another participant, Shahrul, described the impact of peers' influence on his truancy. His truancy is related to his lack of interest in being in school. Also, Shahrul also reported that his act of truancy is about acceptance with peers.

“I have nothing special about my truancy. I just want to go back earlier than normal school hours. I do this because of my friend. Sometimes, my friend asked me to follow them to go back early. There are times that I did not want to go, but they insisted I follow them. I did that because we are friends. It is no good if I did not follow them. Most of the time, I follow my friend’s request.” (Shahrul)

Shahir’s story indicates that his truancy is related to the attitude of his teachers. Although he is aware that the act of truancy is wrong, he could not accept the “fierce” behaviour of his teacher towards him.

“Truancy is no good, but sometimes when there was something wrong with the teacher, my friend and I decided to play truant. I don’t know how to explain this: sometimes the teacher was fierce without any reason. For him, it is wrong when we prepared our homework at school, and it is also wrong when we did not complete our homework at home.” (Shahir)

Another participant, Arif, reported that he played truant because of the fierce behaviour of a certain teacher. He avoided that particular teacher by skipping the lesson.

“I am not sure, but I felt scared of the strict teacher, and he taught our class. I am afraid of him. He was very fierce. I am okay with other teachers, but I am very lazy to do homework for the subject taught by the strict teacher, so I skipped that lesson.” (Arif)

The stories of Jannah on truancy were different, which is related to her sense of self. As shared by Jannah, she played truant because of her attitude, not completing the homework as required by teachers.

“I skipped lesson[s] because I failed to complete homework.” (Jannah)

Another participant, Syafiq, had a different story for his attitude. He was involved in truancy because of his failure to accept the reality of school hours.

“I played truant because of school time. I felt that school hours were too long to finish. I felt very sleepy in the morning, and I had to go to school. I needed to walk home after school finished, and it was very hot.” (Syafiq)

Truancy among the participants is a behaviour related to skipping school and lessons. Their accounts indicate that truancy is related to two main elements, attitude of self and relationship with others, and the latter contributed more to truancy. Their stories also showed that relationships with others, which includes those with peers and teachers, are significant in creating certain behaviour. The findings showed that the impact of relationships with others was explained in terms of feelings of belonging. Subjects' stories indicated that they would do whatever necessary to achieve the experience of belonging, and that truancy is a failed act in performing responsibility amongst schoolchildren.

4.1.2 Responsible changes

Being in counselling and experiencing a relationship with the school counsellor changed the behaviour, emotions, and goals of the participants. After participating in counseling, they chose to make responsible changes. Table 4 shows the changes reported by each of the participants, and the area of behaviour showed the most change, followed by emotions and goals. The participants' stories indicated that changes of behaviour affected their emotions, as did changes of goals.

Table 4: Responsible changes reported

| | Responsible Changes | | |
|---------|---------------------|---------|------|
| | Behaviour | Emotion | Goal |
| Jannah | / | / | |
| Dayah | / | / | |
| Pipah | | | |
| Shahrul | / | | |
| Adwa | / | | |
| Naza | | | / |
| Arif | | / | / |
| Shahrir | | | / |
| Asyraf | / | | |
| Syafiq | | / | / |

The findings indicated that 50% of the research participants reported responsible changes in their behaviour. However, each subject experienced changes in their own way. For example,

Dayah started playing truant at the age of 13 years, but she changed her behaviour after participating in counselling. She explained her experience:

“Now, I feel excited to do homework and look forward to my days in school. Counselling has helped me a lot, especially with my behaviour. I have engaged in two counselling sessions with the counsellor. Since then, I do not play truant anymore. I have changed. Another thing: I try to listen to my parents.” (Dayah)

This was demonstrated during the observation of Dayah’s class. During the observation, Dayah concentrated on her lesson, copying what was written on the whiteboard into her book and remaining in her seat even when other students continued to enter and exit the class. Dayah’s experiences showed that she changed and acted responsibly as a result of her counselling sessions and relationship with the school counsellor. Her diary entries also described her emotions related to the counselling.

“Feeling relaxed and more motivated to come to school. I’ve been trying to get my schoolwork completed while I’m in school; if not, I will complete [it] at home.” (Dayah)

Another participant, Jannah, also changed her behaviour. She immediately stopped playing truant after participating in the counselling sessions. She reported that she would complete her homework as a result of the counselling. She also shared her experience with the school counsellor, as well as their topic of discussion and her promise to the school counsellor.

“...I changed. My behaviour and attitudes are totally different now. I did not do truancy since my first counselling session. During the session, the counsellor discussed the positives and negatives of not attending lessons. I still remember things that we discussed. I promised to her [the counsellor] and would remember all things we had discussed. I have changed to a new person now. I do not do truancy anymore. I completed my homework. I don’t have the feeling of boredom about doing homework.” (Jannah)

Jannah’s behaviour and answers were consistent during both the interview and the observation. She tried to concentrate and pay attention during her lesson, actively engaging in schoolwork by doing things like copying lessons into her workbook. Evidently, the counselling session

promoted her willingness to act responsibly, which also affected her emotions. Her diary entries described her as feeling motivated to attend school after her counselling experience.

“I feel motivated and interested to come to school.” (Jannah)

Arif shared his experience of making responsible changes. Previously, he did not have a goal as a student. However, being with the school counsellor changed his attitude toward having a goal, which made him think of the purpose of going to school. Starting from that experience, he began to identify his goal during his participation in the study.

“Previously, I am not sure what I am to do, why I come to school, and I don’t have any goal. When the counsellor ask[ed] me what I want [to] do after [I have] finished school, then I was shocked. I tried to think about my future. After that, in the following session with the counsellor, I told her that I want to focus on my studies I am trying right now.”
(Arif)

Arif noted his emotions, which are related to his goal, in the diary entries,

“My feeling in our session was that I felt relieved because the counsellor allowed me to share about problems that I have in school or at home. I felt relieved because she keeps me motivated.” (Arif)

Another participant, Shafiq shared his adoption of a responsible goal during the interview, which was to complete his study. He is aware that his academic performance had been poor; however, he aimed to finish his studies with a good record.

“At first I thought that I was going to be expelled from school. After that, I needed to go to counselling sessions, and from that experience I told myself that I want to change. My goal now is that I want to change and finish my school. Exams will be soon, and I am not a clever student. I want to finish this with a good record.” (Shafiq)

His diary entries about the change are as follows:

“I learned a very important lesson from this counselling session, which is that I need to change and stop skipping school. I promised the school counsellor that I would put all of my effort towards the coming exam.” (Shafiq)

4.2 Discussion

As school children, their required tasks are to attend school and lessons; however, they skipped those things. The behaviour of skipping can be discussed in terms of their responsibility for actions within their control. The participants' behaviour of skipping school and lessons might be related to a poor understanding of the responsibility that they have as school children. However, being in counselling changed their behaviour, emotions, and goals. They reported their changes towards being more responsible, which is to perform the tasks required of school children, which are to attend school, attend lessons, and do their homework.

In their stories, the participants reported that their truancy was related to a desire to feel that they belong. The experiences of Pipah, Adwa, Shahrul, and Asyraf indicated that they engaged in truancy because of their relationships with their peers. Their stories explained such negative behaviour – skipping lessons and school – as being a result of pursuing a sense of belonging with their peers. The experience of the schoolchildren supports the idea highlighted by Watts (2012), that social interest influences an individual's attention, perception, thinking, and overt behaviours. Individual behaviour is related to their responsibility, cooperation, and respect (Rasmussen, 2014). This shows that their belongingness with peers and others makes them unable to perform required tasks, i.e., completing their homework and participating in their classroom activities. Despite acquiring belongingness, they failed in being responsible in terms of fulfilling their tasks as schoolchildren – attending school and lessons. However, by being in counselling with the school counsellor, they were able to feel accepted, valued and supported (Knight et al., 2018), which contributed to their responsible changes in behaviour, emotions and goals. Clearly, negative behaviour is related to poor responsibility, and the stories of the participants indicated that responsibility can be developed through counselling experience, which was also related to the experience of belongingness with the school counsellor.

Playing truant is an indication of not being able to differentiate between positive and negative behaviour in the pursuit of belonging. Behaviour involves overt actions and internal processes, all of which need to be learned (Corey, 2017). It is possible that the failure to differentiate between positive and negative behaviour is related to a prior learning experience. In other words, an individual's development of belongingness is related to the learning process,

which contributes to healthy or negative behaviour. Clearly, this study supports the idea of Corey (2017) that negative behaviour is a result of a failure in learning and that responsibility must be taught (Rasmussen, 2014).

Another important finding that can be highlighted concerns relearning experience (Corey, 2017). The schoolchildren reported poor responsibility and negative behaviour, but, despite that, they managed to create new positive behaviour after engaging in counselling with the school counsellor. This study indicates that the participants experienced emotional wellbeing, engagement in learning (Cooper, 2013), awareness of how to make a decision (Zakaria, 2016), and awareness of responsibility (Mat-Min, 2016). Their stories showed that the counselling sessions helped them to accept the tasks required of schoolchildren, i.e., attending school, attending lessons, and completing homework, as well as coming to understand their responsibility for completing their required tasks.

In addition, the findings of the study address how students can learn about themselves and develop a better relationship with others (Sackett & Cook, 2021). The participants' stories indicated that counselling created an opportunity to have a relationship with the school counsellor. Miller and Taylor (2016) highlighted that being in a relationship creates a sense of belonging. With the experience of belongingness, the participants were able to discuss their negative behaviour, which is truancy, and decide on new positive behaviour, emotions and goals that are relevant to their lives as schoolchildren. In other words, the counselling experience promotes their feelings of belonging, which promotes their sense of responsibility. This finding puts forth another perspective on counselling research in Malaysia, which was not explained in previous writings (Mohd-Daud & Bond, 2013; Shaari, 2014; Zakaria, 2016) the impact of school counselling on the development of responsibility among schoolchildren.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Truancy is related to schoolchildren's sense of responsibility. Despite that, this sense of responsibility can still be learned. Engaging in counselling with the school counsellor creates an opportunity for schoolchildren to experience belongingness in a positive way, which provides an opportunity to choose positive behaviour, goals and emotions, which contributes to the children gaining a sense of responsibility. Consequently, the experience of counselling provides opportunities for schoolchildren with negative behaviour to learn and develop the qualities of responsibility. The implication of the findings indicated the importance of counselling at school as well as the school counsellor in promoting positive behaviour, goals, and emotions, which are also related to the qualities of responsibility among schoolchildren.

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