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## COUNSELING AND MENTORING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEXT OF NAGALAND

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**Abstract:** In light of the escalating concern for managing the mental well-being of students amid the waves of societal changes, this paper delves into the imperative for educational institutions to address not only academic success but also the mental health of students. The discourse emphasizes the need for a comprehensive supportive system that fosters holistic education. Specifically, the paper advocates for the integration of counseling and mentoring services in higher education to facilitate the all-encompassing development of students. To substantiate this argument, two student testimonials are presented, providing real-life perspectives that further underscore the case for the incorporation of counseling and mentoring services in the higher education landscape.

**Keywords:** Counseling, Mentoring, Holistic Education

### INTRODUCTION

In the domain of higher education, counseling and mentoring are indispensable threads, weaving a support system that extends beyond traditional pedagogy. The academic journey is not only about acquiring knowledge but also navigating personal and professional challenges. In this context, counseling serves as a proactive intervention, addressing mental health concerns, academic pressures, and cultural adjustments. Mentoring, on the other hand, is pivotal for the holistic development of students. Beyond imparting subject-specific guidance, mentors play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and career development. The purpose of this paper is to delve into the intricate relationship between higher education, counseling, and mentoring in the context of Nagaland. It aims to present a discourse on the critical role played by counseling and mentoring programs in facilitating academic success, personal development, and mental well-being. Through this exploration, it is anticipated that a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between counseling, mentoring, and higher education in Nagaland will be achieved.

## DEFINITION OF COUNSELING AND MENTORING

Counseling is a purposeful collaboration facilitated by a trained professional, aiding individuals or groups in exploring and comprehending various facets of their personal, academic, or professional life. Schneier, MacCoy, and Burchman (1998) link counseling with traits like empathy, assisting in overcoming setbacks, and providing encouragement and advice. Minter and Edwards (2000) suggest that counseling is applicable to individuals whose performance issues are more related to attitudinal and behavioral problems than deficiencies in skills, knowledge, or abilities, especially addressing marginal performers. Geroy, Bray, and Venneberg (2005) view counseling as an intervention process for performance problems, concentrating on confronting and rectifying substandard performance.

Regardless of the variety of definitions, the primary goal of counseling is to establish a supportive and confidential environment wherein individuals can articulate their concerns, gain insights into their challenges, and strive for positive change. Effective counseling transcends mere advice-giving; it involves active listening, empathy, and the application of therapeutic techniques to help individuals develop coping strategies, make informed decisions, and improve their overall well-being. The aim is to create a space where individuals can actively engage in their personal growth journey.

Effective mentoring is a dynamic and reciprocal professional alliance, wherein a seasoned or knowledgeable individual (the mentor) guides, supports, and encourages a less experienced counterpart (the mentee) to foster their personal and professional development. This relationship is defined by mutual respect, trust, and a dedicated commitment to the mentee's advancement. Beyond the transmission of knowledge, effective mentoring involves nurturing the mentee's self-confidence, assisting them in navigating challenges, and empowering them to reach their goals.

As per Garvey (2004), mentoring encompasses various dimensions such as induction, career and personal development, and support during periods of personal and career change. In the educational domain, mentoring proves particularly relevant during key transitional phases in students' academic journeys. Schneier, MacCoy, and Burchman (1988) further conceptualize mentoring models as establishing a relationship to transfer skills and knowledge, sponsoring a junior individual, and serving as a model of effective behavior.

According to Geroy, Bray, and Venneberg (2005), mentoring is characterized as supporting the learning and development of highly motivated individuals seeking personal and professional growth. A study conducted by Kleinman, Siegel, and Eckstein (2001) underscores the considerable influence of mentoring functions on socialization and personal learning. The findings stress the pivotal role of mentoring as a forum for individualized learning.

## THE NEED FOR COUNSELING IN EDUCATION

In the pursuit of higher education, students in Nagaland, akin to their counterparts worldwide, grapple with a myriad of academic pressures and challenges, underscoring the indispensable need for a robust counseling infrastructure. The competitive academic milieu, coupled with familial and communal expectations, places a significant burden on students, necessitating tailored support mechanisms.

Firstly, Nagaland's rich cultural heritage, while a source of pride, can pose challenges for students, especially those from rural areas unfamiliar with the customs and expectations of college life. Counseling emerges as a vital tool in aiding students' adjustment to these changes, fostering their development of essential skills crucial for success in the collegiate environment.

Secondly, Nagaland's strong tradition of community and family, while a source of support, can also exert pressure on students. Mentoring interventions play a crucial role in helping students strike a balance, fostering independence, and empowering them to make informed choices about their future amidst societal expectations, especially in navigating the sometimes overwhelming pressure for academic excellence.

Thirdly, the modernization and pervasive influence of social media contribute to the rise of substance abuses and intoxicants among students. In a post in eastern mirror (26<sup>th</sup> June, 2020), Ritse, raised the concern that substance abuse is prevalent among school and college going students in Nagaland while also raising a call for collective effort in addressing the problem. In this context, counseling services emerge as a guiding force, helping students navigate the complexities of peer pressure and societal influences, facilitating informed decision-making and healthy lifestyle choices.

The escalating global concern for the mental health of students is mirrored in Nagaland, where issues such as anxiety, depression, and the associated stigma of seeking mental health support persist. This paper highlights the critical importance of integrated counseling services in addressing these challenges. Additionally, it explores the pivotal role mentors can play in recognizing and addressing early signs of mental health issues, advocating for a holistic and proactive approach to student well-being in the unique context of Nagaland's higher education landscape.

## **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

Several theoretical frameworks provide support for the implementation of counseling and mentoring in education, offering insights into the psychological, social, and developmental aspects of individuals. However, for the purpose of the study, the developmental theory has been emphasized as offering support to the integration of counseling and mentoring in the domain of higher education. Developmental theories play a pivotal role in understanding the intricate journey of individuals as they progress through various stages of life. When applied to the realms of counseling and mentoring in education, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for supporting the personal, academic, and socio-emotional growth of students. This alignment recognizes that individuals, at different stages of development, require tailored guidance and interventions to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented in educational settings.

According to the American Psychological Association (2020), developmental psychology is defined as the examination of alterations in physical, mental, and behavioral aspects from conception to old age. This field investigates a wide array of factors influencing human growth, including biological, genetic, neurological, psychosocial, cultural, and environmental elements (Burman, 2017).

The origins of developmental psychology trace back to the late 19th century when it emerged as a distinct area of study (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2007). Initially, the focus was primarily on child and adolescent development, emphasizing concerns related to children's minds and learning processes (Hall, 1883). Over time, the scope of developmental psychology expanded, incorporating adult development and the aging process by the 1920s (Thompson, 2016). In contemporary understanding, developmental psychology is recognized as encompassing the entire lifespan, reflecting the dynamic changes individuals undergo from birth through old age (Baltes et al., 2007)

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory is a comprehensive framework that outlines the psychological and social stages of human development across the lifespan. Erikson proposed that individuals go through eight distinct stages, each characterized by a psychosocial crisis or conflict that must be successfully navigated to achieve healthy development (Knight, 2017). For instance, the adolescent stage is marked by the task of identity versus role confusion. These stages span from infancy to old age, and each stage

presents a unique set of challenges that contribute to the formation of an individual's identity and personality. Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory emphasizes the importance of successfully resolving each stage's conflict for healthy psychological development. The theory highlights the interconnectedness of social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of human development, providing a valuable framework for understanding individuals' lifelong journeys of self-discovery and growth. In counseling, understanding a student's current psychosocial stage informs interventions that address identity formation, self-esteem, and the exploration of future roles. Mentoring, in this context, becomes a valuable support system, guiding students in shaping their identities and navigating the complexities of role expectations.

Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory delves into the phases of intellectual maturation, serving as a fundamental framework in developmental psychology to scrutinize how individuals construct and organize knowledge during their growth. Piaget's theory places emphasis on the qualitative shifts in thinking and comprehension that manifest in children as they navigate distinct stages of cognitive development. As children progress from one stage to the next, their cognitive abilities undergo qualitative changes (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Piaget posited that cognitive development is a continuous process, asserting that all children, irrespective of diverse environmental contexts and cultural variations globally, follow the same sequence of cognitive development (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2011).

His work has significantly influenced education and has implications for understanding the learning process. Aligning this theory with counseling involves recognizing that students operate within specific cognitive frameworks. Counselors can adapt their approaches based on the cognitive abilities of students, offering age-appropriate guidance and educational support. Mentoring, as an extension, involves fostering cognitive skills and critical thinking through interactive experiences and exposure to diverse perspectives.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development is a psychological framework that explores how individuals develop their understanding of morality and ethical reasoning throughout their lives. Kohlberg's theory builds upon the earlier work of Jean Piaget and extends the study of cognitive development into the domain of moral thinking. Newton (1978) highlighted that the advent of this theory presented a significant challenge to conventional Western moral education, prompting the overhaul of school moral education, and exerting a substantial impact on moral education practices worldwide.

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory outlines stages of moral development, emphasizing the progression of ethical reasoning. In counseling, recognizing a student's moral reasoning stage informs interventions that address ethical dilemmas and decision-making. Mentoring aligns by fostering moral development through ethical discussions, role modeling, and encouraging principled behavior.

Counseling and mentoring, when informed by developmental theories, become powerful tools for supporting students at various stages of their educational journey. Recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by each developmental stage, practitioners can tailor their approaches to address the specific needs of individuals. Whether guiding students through identity formation, cognitive growth, or moral reasoning, the alignment of developmental theories with counseling and mentoring ensures a holistic and individualized approach to fostering student success in education.

To supplement the discussions above, two student testimonials have been presented. The testimonials have been extracted from the student feedback forms at Pfutsero Government College, Nagaland. At the conclusion of their academic sessions (6th semester), students are tasked with providing feedback on various facets of their college experiences. The two testimonials presented here are authored by students specifically addressing the counseling and mentoring program offered by the college.



## STUDENT TESTIMONIAL 1

*When I first stepped into college, I carried with me a hesitancy that weighed me down. The struggles I faced were deeply personal, and unfortunately, my family could not comprehend the challenges I grappled with. Instead of the understanding and support I longed for, I found myself confronted with skepticism, as if my issues were dismissed as mere excuses to shirk responsibilities.*

*In the halls of my college, I became the target of hushed whispers and hurtful names. The isolation was suffocating, and the constant feeling of being deemed worthless took a toll on my spirit. Even in the supposed sanctuary of learning, I felt alienated, as if my struggles were a burden that no one cared to understand.*

*It was in the midst of this internal turmoil that I stumbled upon a lifeline—my college's counseling and mentoring program. It was a beacon of hope in a sea of darkness, offering the support I so desperately needed. In the third semester, I summoned the courage to seek help, unsure of what to expect but desperate for change.*

*The teachers in the program became my pillars of strength. They listened without judgment, providing a space where my struggles were acknowledged and validated. Recognizing the depth of my challenges, they took a proactive step and referred me to a professional counseling center that had forged a partnership with the college.*

*Engaging in counseling sessions marked the turning point in my college life. Slowly, I began to unravel the complexities of my own problems, and the weight that had burdened me for so long started to lift. What I thought were insurmountable obstacles became manageable with the guidance of professionals who understood the intricacies of mental health.*

*As the counseling sessions progressed, I discovered a newfound resilience within myself. Encouraged by the support system around me, I started to socialize with my peers, breaking free from the shackles of isolation. The co-curricular activities that once seemed out of reach became avenues for self-expression and personal growth.*

*My college journey transformed from a bleak struggle to a meaningful exploration of self-discovery. The counseling and mentoring program not only helped me confront and overcome my challenges but also instilled in me a sense of self-worth that I thought was lost. Through understanding and guidance, I emerged from the shadows, realizing that my journey was not defined by the perceptions of others but by the strength I found within myself.*

## STUDENT TESTIMONIAL 2

*Since my early years, I've carried the diagnosis of autism, a label that has made life an intricate puzzle to solve. Placed in regular schools by my well-meaning parents, I often found myself in the role of the "odd girl in the corner." Despite the challenges, I managed to navigate my way through school, each day presenting its unique set of hurdles.*

*However, it was in college that the trajectory of my life took a transformative turn. The introduction of a counseling and mentoring program became a beacon of support, offering a lifeline that I hadn't fully realized I needed. As part of this program, students were grouped, each assigned a teacher mentor. Little did I know that this mentorship would become a cornerstone of my college experience.*

*My teacher mentor, the guiding light of my group, extended a level of attention and care that surpassed my expectations. Initially hesitant and doubtful, I gradually found the courage to open up during our counseling sessions. What unfolded was not just academic guidance but a profound understanding of my unique needs and abilities.*

*In the face of academic challenges, my mentor tailored tasks to align with my comfort zone, creating an environment that fostered both learning and self-discovery. As a result, my learning journey became not just bearable but significantly better. The once daunting obstacles were now navigable, thanks to the personalized support and encouragement I received.*

*One of the most remarkable outcomes of this mentorship was the unveiling of a hidden talent. As I approached graduation, my mentor helped me recognize my proficiency in artworks, particularly painting. This revelation has ignited a passion within me, and I am now determined to pursue my interest in painting beyond the confines of the college walls.*

*Looking back, the impact of mentoring on my life is immeasurable. It transcended the boundaries of academic support, delving into the realms of personal growth and self-discovery. As I stand on the brink of graduation, I am not just equipped with a degree but with a newfound confidence in my abilities and a clear vision for my future pursuits.*

## **DISCUSSION**

The testimonials highlight a significant transformation in the individual's lives, emphasizing the pivotal role of counseling and mentoring. The support provided becomes a catalyst for personal growth and positive change. Both testimonials touch upon personal challenges faced by the individuals, whether it's dealing with skepticism, isolation, or the complexities of autism. The narratives underscore how counseling and mentoring acted as crucial support systems during these challenging times. Personalization emerges as a key theme in both testimonials. The mentors in each case provide personalized attention, recognizing the unique needs of the individuals and tailoring support accordingly. This approach is instrumental in fostering a sense of trust and empowerment. The testimonials demonstrate that counseling and mentoring go beyond addressing academic concerns. They contribute significantly to personal development, self-discovery, and the cultivation of confidence and resilience. In both cases, the individuals found a renewed sense of purpose and direction.

The first narrative is a powerful testament to the transformative potential of counseling and mentoring in reshaping perceptions of self-worth and overcoming the psychological impact of societal judgments while the second narrative celebrates the importance of recognizing and nurturing individual strengths. In summary, these testimonials collectively emphasize the profound impact that counseling and mentoring programs can have on individuals' lives, transcending academic support to foster personal growth, resilience, and a sense of purpose. They advocate for the continued investment in such programs to create inclusive and supportive higher education environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has been a humble attempt to give voice to the need of integrating counseling and mentoring as integral components of a supportive higher education environment. They go beyond mere academic assistance, serving as catalysts for personal growth, resilience, and the discovery of individual strengths. The testimonials presented have been an attempt to give an overview of the importance of recognizing and addressing diverse needs within the student population. In the context of Nagaland, where cultural nuances, societal expectations, and the diverse backgrounds of students add layers of complexity to their educational journeys, counseling and mentoring stand as pillars of support. This paper makes a call for a continued

commitment to the development and enhancement of counseling and mentoring programs tailored in the higher education of Nagaland.

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