

INTE 2014

## The perceptions of school counselors about the counseling and guidance programs of vocational high schools

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the opinions of school counselors about the Counseling and Guidance Program implemented at vocational high schools in Turkey. The sample group of the study consists of eight school counselors working in five vocational high schools in Kırşehir, Turkey. They were chosen by "Simple Random Sampling" method. The data is collected by a semi structured interview form prepared by researchers. Qualitative research method is used in the study and the data obtained is analyzed through content analysis method. As a result, opinions of school counselors about the positive and negative sides of counseling and guidance program implemented at vocational high schools are revealed and school counselors give suggestions for negative sides of the program. Also school counselors' opinions about a counseling and guidance program specific to vocational high schools are presented.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Sakarya University

*Keywords:* Key Words: Vocational high schools; school counselors; counseling and guidance program

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### 1. Introduction

As the needs and developmental features of preschool education, elementary education, secondary education and university students differ from each other, the counseling and guidance services offered vary accordingly (Yüksel-Şahin, 2012). Considering adolescence, it is a tumultuous stage in human development. As teenagers enter high

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school, they face the emotional changes that come with the challenges and pressures of approaching adulthood (DaGiau, 1997). High school years are full of growth, promise, excitement, frustration, disappointment and hope. It is the time when students begin to discover what the future holds for them (ASCA, 2013). Therefore, the students' academic, vocational, emotional, social and personal development and harmony should be attended to considering their age and developmental tasks (Ersever, 1992).

As students begin separating from parents and exploring and defining their independence, high school is the final transition into adulthood and the world of work. Students are deciding who they are, what they do well, and what they will do when they graduate (ASCA, 2013). In Turkey, secondary education lasts for four years and it is composed of general and vocational and technical high schools. Vocational high schools offer a program to students aiming to prepare them for future life, business spaces and higher education (Alkan, Doğan & Sezgin, 1994). According to the Ministry of Education Statistics in 2011-2012, as vocational and technical, there are totally 5501 high schools and 2.090.220 students attend to these schools (MEB, 2012). These schools need counseling and guidance at most because they are outnumbering and different from the other schools in terms of their structural properties. Their program consists of both general and vocational lessons. In contrast with general high schools, they have to attend to all general lessons as well as vocational lessons. Like the other general high schools, counseling and guidance has a crucial need in vocational high schools.

This study is carried out with school counselors because in high schools counseling and guidance programs coordinators are school counselors. School counselors are individuals with undergraduate or graduate degrees in psychological counseling and guidance (PCG) (Ergene, 2011). They help all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career development, ensuring today's students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow. Secondary school counselors are professional educators with a mental health perspective who understand and respond to the challenges presented by today's diverse student population. They do not work in isolation; rather they are integral to the total educational program (ASCA, 2013). In collaboration with principals, teachers, other school professionals and parents, school counselors share the challenge of preparing students to meet the expectations of higher academic standards and become productive and contributing members of society (Dahir and Stone, 2012). Secondary school counselors enhance the learning process and promote academic achievement.

The study aims for school counselors to assess the counseling and guidance programs they offer at their schools in every respect. It also focuses on the suggestions of counselors about the drawbacks. It is considered important to determine the opinions of implementers about the program of vocational high schools. By this way, it is thought that the difficulties which implementers face can be found out and enhancing the effectiveness of studies can make a contribution to this subject. The results of the study will be guiding for the implementers and preparers of the program and this study will shed light on literature.

The following questions were investigated on the basis of these purposes:

1. What are the positive features of the program you offer at your school?
2. What are the negative features of the program you offer at your school?
3. If you have stated any negative features, what are your suggestions for them?
4. How do you find the program in terms of vocational, personal and educational domains of counseling and guidance?
5. If you have an opportunity of developing a program specific to vocational high schools, how would it be?

## 2. Method

Qualitative research method is used in this study which aims to evaluate guidance program applied at vocational high schools through evaluations of school counselors working at these schools. Qualitative research method is an approach that allows you to examine people's experiences in detail, by using a set of research methods, such as in depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, content analysis, visual methods, life histories and biographies (Hennink & Bailey, 2010). In this sense, in this study, it is aimed to determine whether the guidance program applied at vocational high schools is appropriate for the structure of vocational high schools or not. Within this scope, the study is conducted through taking the opinions of school counselors.

### 2.1. Sample Group

The sample group of this research consists of eight school counselors working at vocational high schools in Kırşehir during 2013-2014 academic year. They are voluntary for the interviews and chosen by purposeful sampling method. When the school counselors' period of services is in question; four counselors have 5-10 years of job experience; three counselors have between 10-20 years of job experience and one counselor has a job experience more than 20 years. When the counselors period of services at vocational high school is considered; three school counselors have 1-5 year of experience; four counselors have 5-10 years of experience; one counselor has more than 15 years of experience at vocational high school. One of the counselors is female and seven of them are males.

### 2.2. Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured interview form is developed by researchers. There are five open-ended questions regarding counseling program applied at vocational high schools in this form. In the process of the preparation of the interview form, questions based on literature are written at first by researchers. These questions are submitted to five academicians from Educational Sciences for their opinions in terms of content validity and appropriateness. Questions are reorganized and put into their final form within the bounds of academicians' feedbacks. Before application, interview form is applied to 3 school counselors and one academician from Department of Turkish Language in order to test comprehensibility and application time of questions. As there are no difficulties faced during the pilot study, the questionnaire is used in its final version in the study.

### 2.3. Procedure

Interview form is prepared and then necessary permissions for application of form are taken from Directorate of National Education in Kırşehir. After permission is received, researchers interviewed with the volunteer school counselors and these interviews with each person took nearly one hour. During interviews school counselors are not voluntary for voice recording so their answers are noted down. Data obtained from interviews are computerized and made ready for analysis.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

In this research content analysis method, which is a type of qualitative research, is used. Content analysis has the aim of getting rid of subjective factors during understanding and evaluating a discourse. The powerful side of this method is to reveal latent and covered content of discourse, rather than what is expressed, captured easily at first glance and exhibited and easily detected content. In this context, the message, it is a "second reading" to determine the factors that affect the individual invisibly. The common side of content analysis techniques is that they are based on the principle of deduction-inference. In all, there is a purpose of making an interpretation with observed and described items in messages. There are generally two different approaches in the process of implementation of the categorization of content analysis. The first approach, which has a specific area of a category system, taking into frames accordingly resorts to grouping. However, in the second approach categories are not determined before.

Categories are determined after discussing and reviewing message items. The first of these approaches is called "close approach" while the second one is called "open approach" (Henry & Moscovici, 1968; Bilgin, 2006). Open approach is used for categorization in this study. The features observed in answers of counselors given to questions of the questionnaire are recorded one by one and by determining their differences and similarities to the other items, the categories are created. Then, criteria are put into final form. Samples about criteria given by participants are used as they stated, no changes are made on them.

### 3. Results

The results of the study are presented in five main categories in line with the research questions.

Table 1. School counselors' opinions about positive sides of counseling and guidance program applied at vocational high schools.

Number	Criterion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Functional guidance activities	5	62,5
2	Program's compatibility with students' development level	3	37,5
3	Sufficiency in three guidance domains	2	25
4	Flexibility of the program	1	12,5
5	Sufficiency for intervention of problems	1	12,5

Opinions of school counselors relating to the positive sides of guidance program are given in table 1. When the school counselors' opinions are analyzed, it is seen that 62,5% of participants stated activities in their programs as functional. When answers relating second criterion are considered, 37,5% of participants stated program is compatible with students' development levels. When the third criterion is evaluated, 25% of school counselors stated programs is sufficient for guidance domains. Flexibility of the program is stated by 12,5% of participants. Also, program's sufficiency for intervention of problems as last criterion in the table is stated by 12,5% of participants again.

Table 2. School counselors' opinions about the negative sides of counseling and guidance program.

Number	Criterion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Inappropriateness of guidance activities for structure of school	4	50
2	Insufficiency of time for implementation	3	37,5
3	Not including personal and vocational guidance enough	2	25
4	Inappropriateness for students' level of development	2	25
5	Difficulty in implementing guidance activities in classrooms	1	12,5
6	No inspection concerning the implementation of the program	1	12,5

Opinions of school counselors relating the drawbacks of their program applied at vocational high school take part in the table 2. When the table is analyzed, it is seen that Inappropriateness of guidance activities for structure of school the first criterion is specified by 50% of school counselors. Second criterion Insufficiency of time for implementation is remarked by 37,5% of school counselors. Both not including personal and vocational guidance enough and inappropriateness for students' level of development are considered by 25% of school

counselors as negative side of program. The next criterion difficulty in implementing guidance activities in classrooms is specified by 12,5% participants. Last criterion in the table no inspection concerning the implementation of the program is remarked by 12, 5 % of school counselors.

Tablo 3. School counselors' suggestions for negative sides of counseling and guidance program.

Number	Criterion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Implementers having full knowledge of program	2	25
2	Increasing programs' application time	3	37,5
3	Increasing number of school counselors	1	12,5
4	Development of a program peculiar to vocational high schools	3	37,5
5	Giving further coverage to vocational guidance	1	12,5

Suggestions of school counselors for drawbacks of their program take part in the table 3. Accordingly, when the table is analyzed, implementers' having full knowledge of program being placed on the first column is seen. This criterion is specified by 25 % of school counselors. Increasing programs' application hour second criterion is remarked by 37,5 % of school counselors. Another criterion increasing number of school counselors is indicated by 12,5 % school counselors. Development of a program peculiar to vocational high schools takes place on the forth column and statements regarding this criterion is indicated by 37,5 % of participants. Statements regarding last criterion giving further coverage to vocational guidance is remarked by 12,5 % of participants.

Table 4. Evaluation of program's adequacy in terms of personal, educational and vocational guidance.

Number	Criterion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Program is inadequate in personal guidance	1	12,5
2	Program is adequate in personal guidance	2	25
3	Program is inadequate in vocational guidance	2	25
4	Program is adequate in educational guidance	2	25
5	Program is adequate in vocational guidance	1	12,5
6	Program is inadequate in educational guidance	1	12,5

School counselors' opinions about program's adequacy in personal, vocational and educational guidance take place in the table 4. Accordingly, it is seen that, program being inadequate in personal guidance is indicated by 12,5% of school counselors and proportion of participants thinking personal guidance as adequate is 25%. School counselors indicating vocational guidance as inadequate is 25%, whereas it is indicated as adequate by 12,5%. When we consider another criterion educational guidance, we see that 25% of school counselors remarked it as adequate, whereas, 12,5% of school counselors remarked it as inadequate.

Table 5: School counselors' opinions about program specific to vocational high schools.

Number	Criterion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Increasing activities application time	1	12,5
2	Giving more place to guidance area	3	37,5
3	Programs offering students opportunity	3	37,5
4	Having a program special to vocational high schools	2	25
5	Providing students' active participation	3	37,5

School counselors are also asked for their suggestions about developing a counseling and guidance program specific to vocational high schools. Accordingly, 12, 5 % of school counselors are indicated necessity of increasing activities' application time. Another criterion giving wide coverage to guidance areas takes place and 37, 5 % of school counselors remarked this criterion. Also, programs' offering students opportunity is indicated by 37, 5% of school counselors. Forth criterion having a program special to vocational high schools is specified by 25 % of school counselors. Lastly, providing students' active participation is indicated by 37, 5 % of school counselors. Examples relating these criteria are as follows:

#### 4. Discussion and Suggestions

The study aims for school counselors to assess the counseling and guidance programs they offer at their schools in every respect. It also focuses on the suggestions of counselors about the drawbacks. On being analyzed with content analysis method, opinions of school counselors on counseling and guidance program is categorized in line with the research questions

As for the positive features of the program, within the scope of opinions of school counselors, it is found that the guidance program activities are functional (62,5 %), the program is compatible with students' development levels (37,5%), it is sufficient in educational, vocational and personal counseling and guidance domains (25%), the program is flexible (12,5 %)and it is sufficient for intervention of problems (12,5%). The planning of guidance activities is based on the student-centered approach and it aims to make students active and individuals able to solve problems (MEB, 2011). Also the comprehensive guidance and counseling program reflects a strong developmental approach, systematically presenting activities appropriate to student developmental levels and including achievable and measurable outcomes in the area of personal, social, educational, and career domains (Gysbers&Henderson, 2000). So guidance activities should encourage students to improve themselves in all domains of guidance. These findings of the study are in common with other studies in literature. For instance Berber (2010) conducted her study on school counselors vocational schools and she stated in her study that the activities of the program is comprehensible and they make students active during lessons and the activities fit for the development levels of students. Similarly, in other studies, activities are assessed to be functional in line with their purposes (Nazlı, 2008). To accomplish the purposes of counseling and guidance program, activities and procedures are necessary to assist students in understanding and periodically monitoring their growth and development. Students must come to terms with their goals, values, abilities, aptitudes, and interests (competencies) so they can continue to progress educationally and occupationally (Gysbers, 1990). Therefore, considering vocational high schools, activities should support students in vocational domain, as well as educational and personal domains. School counselors evaluated the program sufficient in three guidance domains. It is important to enhance the school guidance and counseling program by providing sequential, developmentally planned activities for all students to gain an understanding of their academic, social, cognitive, and emotional development; become knowledgeable about educational and occupational opportunities; and utilize this learning to craft their educational and career plans (Harewood-Jones&Foster, 1998). So these goals can be reached with effective guidance activities including three guidance domains.

When the drawbacks of the program according to the opinions of school counselors are investigated, they stated the guidance activities are inappropriate for the structure of vocational high schools (50%), there is a lack of time for implementation (37,5%), vocational and personal guidance domains are not included enough in the program (25%), the program is inappropriate for students' level of development (25%), guidance activities cannot be applied in classrooms (12, 5%) and there is not any inspection concerning the implementation of the program (12,5%). As vocational high schools train students for professional life, their needs of counseling and guidance may be different from other schools. Half of school counselors states that the guidance activities should be organized in accordance with students' fields and these guidance activities should be different from the activities of the other schools.

One of the main concerns expressed by counselors in the current study was the time required to adequately and effectively implement the program. This finding of the study supports the finding of Lehr (2002) as he states that with more time and resources, more students can be reached, and more guidance and counseling needs met. It should be allocated more time for counselors to implement the program and

Another drawback is that the guidance domains are not included in the program equally. Vocational guidance in secondary education includes services offered students to help them be aware of professions in the changing world and choose a profession in accordance with their abilities and interests and improve themselves in their profession (Yeşilyaprak, 2013; Bakırcıoğlu, 2005; Tan, 2013). By choosing vocational high schools, students also choose their profession. These schools present students the opportunity to choose their profession earlier than the other high schools and the students take mainly career training-oriented education. So their needs of vocational guidance domain are different from the needs of students in general high schools. Therefore, the program should include effective vocational guidance activities and strategies appropriate for vocational high schools.

School counselors find it difficult to carry out in classrooms this problem may derive from several reasons. One of them expresses that some activities are not proper to conduct in classroom environment. Terzi, Tekinalp and Leuwerke (2011) suggest that crowded classrooms make it difficult to conduct guidance activities. Also Nazlı (2003) states that crowded classrooms, having no suitable rooms for guidance activities and lack of necessary materials hinder the implementation of the program. It should be searched for solutions to these problems within the resources of this country.

As classroom guidance activities are implemented by classroom guidance teachers in collaboration with school counselors (MEB, 2001), counselors want an inspection mechanism to control this process. According to the findings of studies in literature on this subject (Nazlı 2003; Terzi, Tekinalp & Leuwerke, 2011) the school counselors stated that teachers neglect performing classroom guidance activities and they do not take proper care and interest in guidance activities and lack the necessary skills to perform guidance practices. So classroom guidance teachers should attend to in service trainings to gain some skills and knowledge about counseling and guidance.

In this study as well as negative sides of guidance program, it is received the suggestions of school counselor to drawbacks of the program they stated. They suggested that as implementers, classroom guidance teachers should have full knowledge about the program (25%), there should be sufficient time for implementation (37,5 %), there should be more school counselors in schools (12,5 %), a program specific to vocational high schools should be developed (37,5 %), vocational guidance domain should be included more in the program (12,5 %). As stated above, insufficient time and teachers' lack of information about counseling and guidance activities are problems school counselors meet during the implementation of the program. They also express the number of counselors at schools is not adequate and this hinders the implementation of the program. Yüksel-Şahin (2012) reveals in her study that the number of school counselors should be sufficient and school counselors should not be employed at schools where they are not permanently staffed. An important reason behind the inadequate level of PCG services offered is the insufficient number of school psychological counselors. This study also aims to determine whether there is a need for a program specific to vocational high schools in terms of opinions of school counselors. In this context, school counselors stated that vocational high schools need a program for specific to their structures and the needs of students attend to them. Preparers of the counseling and guidance programs should take this suggestion into consideration and they should investigate this subject in detail.

School counselors are asked for evaluating the guidance program's adequacy in terms of personal, educational and vocational guidance domains. When the percentages are examined, it can be said that the guidance program is generally sufficient in personal and educational guidance domains but it is not sufficient in vocational guidance domain as stated before. So there is a lack of vocational guidance activities and practices specific to vocational high schools. This problem may be resolved by Guidance Research Centers, they may encourage counselors working in vocational high schools to prepare some activities for students' vocational development.

School counselors also give some suggestions on a guidance program specific to vocational high schools. They said that if they prepare a new program for vocational high schools, they would increase the period of application of activities. They also give more space for personal, educational and vocational guidance fields. The new program would also give more opportunities to students to improve themselves. For this reason, there may be activities that will open up students' horizons.

In conclusion, school counselors who are the implementers of guidance programs of vocational high schools find the program powerful in terms of the guidance program activities, the program's compatibility with students' development levels, educational, vocational and personal counseling and guidance domains, flexibility of the program and its sufficiency for intervention of problems. On the other hand, they find the guidance program weak in terms of inappropriateness of guidance activities for the structure of vocational high schools, insufficiency of time for implementation, not including vocational and personal guidance domains enough, inappropriateness for students' level of development, difficulty in implementing guidance activities in classrooms and no inspection concerning the implementation of the program. One of the important opinions of school counselors on this subject is that vocational high schools have hallmarks in education system of Turkey. For this reason vocational high schools need a program prioritizing their distinctive features. By means of this study, for the first time in Turkey, counseling and guidance program implemented in vocational high schools is investigated so, the findings of the study can be useful for school counselors working at vocational high schools, officials preparing education programs and also in organization of education policies and training of school counselors. Furthermore, different studies can be conducted for investigation and development of counseling and guidance programs implemented at vocational high schools.

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