

Pastoral Care Programme: A University Teachers and Students' Perspective

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Abstract

The definition of the term pastoral care varies. However there is a common thread in it, which is providing a holistic education of a person. In this study, the views of 38 students and teachers, participants of a private university in Thailand, were explored with regard to the pastoral care programme and services. A questionnaire was used to gather the data. The findings indicate that students were happy with the care they received from the university. Peer relationships were paramount and these defined the positive or negative experiences the students had. However, the teachers pointed out that while pastoral care programme existed in the university it still needed to be improved. Many felt that they were working at full capacity and were so busy that it was impossible to implement any pastoral care initiatives if it involved additional demands of their time. In general, both groups of participants acknowledged that there is still room for improvement.

Introduction

The phrase 'pastoral care' is viewed differently by people. For some it means caring for the spiritual needs of the students, while for others, caring for both academic and non academic matters. 'Pastoral care' however, goes beyond just taking care of the spiritual, academic, and non-academic growth of the students. In recent years the role of schools is shifting towards providing a holistic education, thus, pastoral care programme has become a primary concern for many educators (Somerset University, 2008, para. 2).

This study aimed to explore and discover the perceptions and feelings of students and teachers about pastoral care programme in a private university in Thailand. Related literature is also explored to provide information about how pastoral care programme is delivered. The result of this study is expected to give insight to the current pastoral care programme of the university and the areas that need improvement.

What is Pastoral Care?

This is a challenging question particularly when it refers to the educational context. Nevertheless, we will explore some definitions given by schools and educators. A definition of pastoral care as described by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (cited in Lodge & Watkins, 1997, 1) said:

Pastoral care is concerned with promoting pupils' personal and social development and fostering positive attitudes: through the quality of teaching and learning; through the nature of relationships amongst pupils, teachers and adults other than teachers; through arrangements for monitoring pupils' overall progress, academic, personal and social; through specific pastoral structures and support systems; and through extra-curricular activities and the school ethos. Pastoral care, accordingly should help a school to achieve success.

Here, pastoral care is viewed as an approach towards education which not only looked at the students and schools' contribution towards teaching and learning but also the overall school success.

The Somerset University (2008), succinctly defines pastoral care as,

... the summation of the school's endeavor to educate within the academic, social and religious dimensions of the school and the quality of personal relationships that exist within it (paragraph 1).

In other words, pastoral care is referred to as the atmosphere of care that prevails within the school community which covers the holistic dimensions of development of a student.

The holistic approach of pastoral care is also emphasised by Marland (cited in Umali, 1997). He claims that pastoral care includes all aspects of an individual's education other than the direct imparting of knowledge. Additionally, Best, Jaivis and Ribbins (cited in Umali, 1997) refer to pastoral care as the non-instructional aspects of the role of teachers and others in schools, which includes counselling and guidance.

Most of the above definitions have a common thread that runs through them and that is, pastoral care aims at providing education of the whole person, rather than educating merely the cognitive aspect (Best, 2000).

Why Pastoral Care?

There are many reasons why pastoral care programme should be introduced in schools. Doyle (n.d.) states that having a pastoral care will provide basis for development and implementation of related school policies or policies relating to students with special needs.

Pastoral care programme is to support students sympathetically and encourage positive attitudes to learning, school, and life. The child's personal, social, and moral education should be an integral part of each child's education (Greens Norton Primary School, n.d.). They need to have skills to develop socially, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Moreover, Forte, and Schurr (1991) indicate that pastoral care programme 'helps to bridge the gap between the self-contained primary school and the independent world of high school and university' (p. 105). The students will learn to be aware of their self-worth and skills to meet the challenges they will face in the real life situations. Furthermore, they claim that pastoral care programme is to help students feel good about themselves and to be aware of the contributions they can make to their school, community, and society.

Additionally, pastoral care programme will also provide students with creative skills through various activities. It will also help the community to be aware that they have a part in developing a caring attitude towards the children in the school.

How is Pastoral Care Delivered?

Umali (1997) states that pastoral care is presented through various opportunities for contact between teachers and students on a more informal basis and in a non-academic setting. It involves open communication between teacher and student, educational and career guidance, and parental involvement in their children's education. He suggests that pastoral care could also be delivered through campus ministry, student counselling services, and the academic curriculum.

Education practitioners play vital roles in presenting pastoral care. The duty of a care giver should not be just left to the administrators or pastoral care personnel. As Watkins (cited in Marland, 1980) suggests, pastoral care is very much the duty of teachers and others in the schools. In essence, teachers are managers of their classes and classrooms. They manage the development of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities of students (Gardner, n.d., para. 15). McGuiness (cited in Gardner, n.d., para. 6) further emphasises that 'there is "no opting out" of the pastoral dimension in the role of teacher'.

Having viewed the dimension and the importance of pastoral care in the educational settings, the researchers were interested to find out the perspectives of the teachers and students with regards to the pastoral care issues at a private university in Thailand. The main motivation is to discover what is being practised in the university with regard to pastoral care programme.

The Study

Purpose of study

The driving force that led the researchers to conduct this study was to find out whether or not pastoral care programme exists in this private university. Later, the researchers looked at a more detailed information on the services the participants thought were forms of pastoral care programme and their perspectives on whether or not the university delivered the service to the students.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of two groups: students and teachers. The student participants consisted of 28 university students. Most of the participants in this group were between the ages of 18 to 28 years. For the second group, the teachers, there were 10 participants.

Method

A questionnaire was given out to both groups. The student participants, they were asked to fill out the questionnaire. However, the teacher participants were sent questionnaires was through their email address and they were requested to return their responses through email.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used for this study was self developed based on some studies done in the area of pastoral care. The questions were carefully worded and structured. There were five questions developed for the students and another five for the teachers. The questions for the students were designed to generate general ideas about the form of pastoral care the university offers and whether or not the students were aware of the programme. On the other hand, to the teachers, the questions were clearly asking about pastoral care programme and services and whether or not they exist.

The Process

The questionnaire was distributed to the students during the class period and was collected back at the end of the class. Because there were only five questions, it minimised disturbance to the normal class lessons. By sending the questionnaire via email, the teachers were given ample time to answer the questions at their leisure.

Result: Students

The overall picture of the data collected indicates that the students had positive experience at the university and that there are forms of pastoral care available for them. Following are their responses:

Q1: Does this university care about students?

To this question, 80 per cent of the students answered 'yes' while 15 per cent answered 'sometimes'. Moreover, they indicated that their teachers listened to what they had to say and were fair in dealing with them. Also, they seemed to be very comfortable in their relationship with the teachers. They were confident that they could ask their teachers questions if they needed to and the teachers would listen to them.

Q2: If students are upset at this university, would someone notice?

The majority of the students were aware that when they were 'upset at the university, someone would notice'. However, they indicated that their friends would be the first ones to know, not the teachers. Further, when they experience problems 'they have someone to depend on'. They claimed that the teachers would be the last resort for them to talk to.

Q3: Are there teachers in the university who take special interest in you?

Some disagreed with the question. They felt that teachers notice students in the university 'only when they have low GPA' or have 'issues' such as discipline. The response here may seem to contradict what they claimed in Q1. However, there could be other contributing factors to this response.

Q4: Is your university a safe and secure place?

More than 85 per cent of the respondents claimed that they were safe and secure in the university environment. However, some claimed that they experienced some forms of abuse on campus but were able to get by because of the groups of friends they had at the university. In general, they liked the university environment. However, 70 per cent felt they were given too much class work. As a result, they were bored at the university.

Q5: Does the university need to do more to make students feel they are cared for?

To this last question all the students responded 'yes'. There was no doubt that the university was safe, secure, and that the university cared for them. Despite their positive answers however, they felt that the university still needs to do more to improve their services.

The overall result of the student participants clearly pointed out that they were aware of the form of care the university provided and that they showed positive reaction towards the university teaching learning environment. However, they also agreed that there were times when the university could have delivered better services such as in the areas of providing safety and showing more awareness towards the students and their problems and concerns.

Result: Teachers

Following are the responses of the teacher participants.

Q1: What is pastoral care?

To this question 80 per cent of the teachers responded that it involves giving wholesome care for students, which includes social, mental, physical, and spiritual. One teacher respondent said, 'It is care and concern extended outside of the classroom'. Twenty per cent responded that the university is providing spiritual nourishment and care for the students.

Q2: How is pastoral care defined in your university?

There answers varied. Sixty per cent claimed that pastoral care in the university was to provide spiritual needs and counselling for its community members and 20 per cent did not give a straight answer to the question. The others said that the university did not use the term 'pastoral care', but the care was expressed in non-academic ways.

Q3: What do you expect of pastoral care?

Again, the answers varied. However, the common points the teachers had was the 'development of social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of students' life and creating a safe and secure environment' as the core expectations of pastoral care.

All respondents agreed that the university has some kind of a pastoral care in the university such as, 'the university counselling centre', 'social activities', 'the guidance of the residence deans', the 'church services and the worships', 'happy family', and the 'community services done every Sabbath afternoon'. Additionally, some claimed that the 'Sabbath school is the key element of pastoral care in the university'.

It was interesting to note that 30 per cent of the teachers strongly believe that pastoral care is included in the university planning, and that the decisions are made by the various committees under the student administration department. While 70 per cent were not sure who made the decision, they said it may be made at the management level.

Q4: What helps teachers provide good pastoral care? What gets in the way?

To this question, 95 per cent of the teachers agreed that the lack of time, fund, effort, and lack of personal understanding make it difficult to provide effective pastoral care. Some felt that the greatest challenge the university faces in terms of pastoral care was 'lack of interest in spiritual matters' and 'lack of time'.

Q5: In the future what is needed in order to provide a better pastoral care?

The answers to this question were 'time', 'effective counselling department', and 'additional good leadership'.

The teachers' responses were clear in that they knew that pastoral care programme existed in various ways throughout the university. They also agreed that through pastoral care programme the students' holistic development is nurtured. However, the majority have the same opinion with regard to whether or not the teachers' involvement in delivering pastoral care throughout the university is adequate. They claimed that the lack of time, limited resources, clear guidelines, and the heavy teaching load contributed significantly to the inadequacy of pastoral care service.

Conclusion

In today's educational context where there is a growing need towards a holistic approach in education, pastoral care programme is becoming the one option that promises to deliver such an agenda. It is a programme that could work under different names and departments. In its simplest form, it can start from the teachers themselves in the classroom. The basic idea of pastoral care is to provide care for the students in and outside the classroom. Through this care, the university can help develop the student's holistic dimension of education. This programme is not only beneficial to the students but also for the university.

Despite its promises as a programme that could generate success for both students and the university, pastoral care still needs careful and proper planning. To incorporate pastoral care programme at a university level is a decision that needs to be taken by the university administrators and implemented by all education practitioners in order for it to succeed.

As we have seen in the overall students' views of the pastoral care programme of the university, the majority of the students responded positively towards the university care programmes. Most feel safe and secure in the university and find that the teachers are fair and caring. They agreed that the university cares about what they think, even though not all the time. Although, on the other hand, the teachers acknowledged that the term 'pastoral care' is not a widely used term in the university, the care is provided to students in different ways.

The issue raised by teachers that the university did not seem to have clear guidelines of pastoral care should be taken into consideration since they are aware of what pastoral care is and the responsibility everyone has in making the university a caring community.

Perhaps, the fact that the teachers are already working at full capacity and have little or no time to implement any pastoral care initiatives could be the contributing factor for why the students would rather speak to their friends about their situation and problems than to the teachers. This teacher and student relations gap should be bridged in some way through proper pastoral care programme.

In general, both group participants agreed that there is some form of care or pastoral care in the university. However, they also believed that there is still room for improvement. The university needs to look for ways to bridge the gap between the students and the teachers' expectations of the pastoral care programme and services. The researchers agree that pastoral care programme would be an avenue where both perspectives meet.

This study, although small in scale, is expected to open up avenues of research in the area of pastoral care programmes. A larger scale research is needed to have a better understanding of the real situation and how possible solutions could be developed to help assist with the programmes.

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