

Adolescents' Perceptions of School Counselling in Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explored adolescents' perceptions and experiences with school counselling in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria. A total of 48 students between the ages of 14 and 19 years from public and private secondary schools participated in eight focus groups. Using a phenomenological approach, data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants described the role of a school counsellor as an adult support system, and accessed counselling services mostly for academic purposes. Negative beliefs and experiences with the counselling process, and preference for significant others were some barriers to seeking school counselling services. Personal counsellor attributes which facilitate supportive interpersonal relationships were desired. Participants also wanted peer involvement in the counselling process. There is an urgent need for national policies guiding the training and practice of school counsellors to ensure high quality and effective services in schools.

Keywords: school counselling, secondary school, adolescents, perceptions, Nigeria

School counselling has been recognized as an effective means for improving student functioning and long-term outcomes in a variety of domains (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012, as cited in Kiweewa et al., 2018; Harris, 2013; Ohrt et al., 2016). Initially developed in many countries for the professional support of students in educational, vocational, and socio-emotional domains, school counselling has evolved into comprehensive, preventive programs which focus on the needs of the whole child or adolescent by supporting academic, career, social/emotional development, and meeting educational goals (Tang & Erford, 2010). Furthermore, school counsellors are also responsible for addressing issues such as dropout prevention, college and career readiness, and positive student mental health (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019; Martin et al., 2015).

Successful counselling programs are frequently derived and adapted from frameworks from the United States and other non-African nations which emphasize the value of advancing student competencies as well as providing emotionally-focused support (ASCA, 2019; Iowa Department of Education [IDE], 2015). Many of these models are based on the whole-school principles of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program ([CGCP]; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001), and the ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs, (ASCA,

2019). These models have influenced counselling methods in many regions of the world today including Africa, Europe, the Far East, and the Caribbean (Harris, 2013). However, approaches to counselling in these regions have also been driven by specific local concerns, such as HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy, giving rise to a variety of eclectic approaches (Harris, 2013).

In examining the multiple ways through which school counsellors serve students, researchers have identified positive impacts across a number of areas, including college and career readiness, life skills, socio-emotional support, advocacy, and academic achievement (Ohrt et al., 2016). However, studies worldwide show increasingly that more students are aware of and access school counselling solely for academic purposes. In a study among 701 American high school students, Gallant and Zhao (2011) found that while most students were aware of school counselling services, they were more aware of academic and career guidance services than socio-emotional services. In another study among 430 undergraduate college students, Coogan and DeLucia-Waack (2007) found that students contacted their school counsellors more for career and academic issues than for socio-emotional issues and viewed college selection, decision making, and scheduling as school counsellors' most important priorities.

Factors such as ignorance about the counselling process, fear of talking to strangers, doubts about counsellors' competence, lack of trust in the confidentiality of the counselling process, the social stigma of receiving counselling, and preference for informal sources of support such as close family and friends, have all been identified as barriers to accessing school counselling services among students in Asia, other parts of Africa, and Europe (Chen & Kok, 2015; Fox & Butler, 2007; Knettel et al., 2020). At the same time, there is research to show that when counsellors meet students' preferences, students are more likely to engage with services (BigFoot-Sipes et al., 1992), and counsellors' personal attitudes such as being friendly, welcoming, positive, and responsive facilitate the counselling process and leave lasting impacts on students (Gallo et al., 2019)

Nigeria, the most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa has a predominantly youthful population, and an estimated 70% of school-age children attend school regularly (National Population Commission [NPC], 2013). Like several other countries in the sub-region, school counselling was established in the second half of the 20th century (Suliman et al., 2019) to help facilitate the holistic development of students to ensure skills acquisition, mass literacy, and values orientation (Azu, 2010). Using an

adapted form of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019), school counsellors are expected to form supportive close relationships with students, assist them in educational and career choices, orient new students on the school curriculum, provide information on career training and opportunities, refer to other professionals as needed, follow up on the progress of students, and work with parents in the formation and education of their children (Ojeme, 2019; Okocha & Alika, 2012). Nigeria runs a 6-3-3-4 educational system which was launched in 1982. In this system, a child spends six years in primary (elementary school), three years in junior secondary school (middle school), three years in senior secondary school (high school), and four years in a tertiary institution. Basic education in the Nigerian educational system consists of the first nine years, which covers primary and junior secondary education. School-based counselling in principle is mandatory for public secondary schools and usually provided by a teacher-counsellor. Public primary schools on the other hand are not mandated to provide counselling services (Okocha & Alika, 2012). Some private schools employ professional counsellors and psychologists to carry out their school counselling services.

Despite several calls to action, and national policies declaring support for school counselling programs, penetration has been slow in most African nations including Nigeria. This has been attributed to prevailing social and economic challenges, and poor political will (Goss & Adebawale, 2014; Knettel et al., 2020; NPC, 2013). Some recent studies have explored the state of school counselling and stakeholder's perceptions of school counselling in Nigeria (Aluede & Adubale, 2020; Ojeme, 2019; Suleiman et al., 2019). While some of these studies have been positive detailing satisfaction with the current state of services, others have reported fragmentation and under-utilization of services (Kiweewa et al., 2018; Oluwatosin, 2016; Sulaiman et al., 2019). Major challenges to school counselling within the Nigerian and similar contexts include a lack of proper counselling facilities, deployment of counsellors into administrative roles such as teaching and registration of students, high counsellor – student ratios, poorly defined counsellor roles, and non-acceptance of school counsellors by the school leadership (Ojeme, 2011). Others include poor funding and oversight for public education, poor counsellor training, poor supervision, and unclear licensing requirements for practice (Okech & Kimemia, 2012; Okocha & Alika, 2012). To effect the needed changes in school counselling policy and practice, there is a need for continuous evaluation of current school counselling systems in Nigerian schools.

Purpose of the Study

Most Nigerian counselling studies have focused on the perceptions of adult stakeholders such as teachers, parents, school leaders and counsellors themselves. There is a paucity of studies on students' views, particularly using qualitative methods. As we seek to improve the state of school counselling in Nigeria, it is imperative to explore

students' views and experiences with counselling to augment the available data for appropriate reforms in school counselling design and delivery in the Nigerian context. This paper aims to fill this gap by answering the following research questions: (a) how do students perceive the role of the school counsellor; (b) what are the experiences of students with school counselling services; and (c) how can school counselling services be improved?

Method

This study was a qualitative study conducted in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Nigeria has a population of approximately 200 million people, half of whom are below 18 years of age (NPC, 2013). Ibadan, the site of the study is the third most populous city in Nigeria with a population of over five million.

Participants

A total of 48 students from junior secondary 3 (grade 9) to senior secondary 2 classes (grade 11) were recruited to participate in focus groups discussions. Each focus group was made up of six participants, and two focus groups were conducted in each school (one for boys and the other for girls) making a total of eight focus groups. Boys and girls participated in separate groups to ensure comfort with discussing sensitive counselling related issues. A total of 24 boys and 24 girls participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 14 to 19 with a mean age of 16.6 years ($SD = 2.1$). Twelve of the participants (25%) were Muslim and 36 (75%) were Christians.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethical Review Committee, Oyo State Ministry of Health, Ibadan, Nigeria. Official permission was also obtained from the Oyo State Ministry of Education, and the authorities of the selected schools. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants and their parents. The city of Ibadan is made up of 11 districts (five urban and six semi-urban). For this study, one urban and one semi-urban district were randomly selected. Two secondary schools (one public and one private) from each district were then selected, giving a total of four schools.

Participants were in-school adolescents purposively selected by their class teachers to participate in the study, based on their availability and perceived knowledge of the study topic. Participants were given information about the study and their understanding of and experiences with school counselling were explored using a semi-structured focus group discussion guide. Focus group sessions were held in the school premises in a private classroom with no teachers or adults from the school around. All focus group sessions were facilitated by the second author and a research assistant. Focus group sessions were held during the school recess period, lasted an average of one hour, and were audio-recorded.

Measures

A focus group discussion guide was developed for the study by the researchers and pre-tested with a group of students from a school not involved with the study. The guide contained questions and probes to address our research questions such as: “Who is a school counsellor?” “What are the functions of a school counsellor?”; “Tell me about your experiences with the school counsellor”; “What prevents students from accessing school counselling services?”; “What can be done to improve school counselling services in your school?”

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness for this study, we followed the recommendations pertaining to qualitative research strategies (Creswell, 2012). These included discussing preconceived biases about the research study and anticipated findings, and immersing ourselves in the data prior to and following data analysis. Two members of the research team are child and adolescent mental health psychiatrists, and the other two are professional counsellors. As youth mental health advocates who have been involved in school counselling activities as well as training of school counsellors, we wanted to give students a voice on how well the current school counselling system was serving them. We were thus careful to acknowledge our own positionality, and how this might influence the interpretation of the results. Reading all transcripts prior to the start of analysis was also an important step in immersing ourselves in the data, and becoming familiar with the students’ unique personal perspectives. Throughout data analysis, data was reviewed independently by two members of the research team, and discussed until consensus was reached. We also used an internal auditor who reviewed all transcripts with coded segments of text, confirming that the narrative data accurately reflected the resultant codes, and also noting areas of unclear coding for review. For example, under the codes *self-help* and *seeking help from significant others*, the internal auditor suggested reviewing some texts to make sure we were not using them interchangeably.

Data Analysis

Data was transcribed verbatim prior to analysis, and we used an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was guided by the Contextual School Counselling model (CSC) proposed by Baskin and Slaten (2014). The CSC approach provides a theoretical framework which integrates contextual psychotherapy principles with the school environment using four main principles: (a) providing a supportive, confiding relationship; (b) a healing setting; (c) developing a rationale for students/clients’ problems; and (d) active participation of students/clients in the counselling process.

In the first phase of data analysis (familiarization with the data), two members of the research team read and re-read all the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data and jot

down initial thoughts. In phase two (generating initial codes), a subset of the transcripts were read through line by line and assigned initial codes to the data. Codes were a one-word or a short-phrase description of a segment of the data. Manual analysis of the data was done using a coding table, which consisted of four columns: (a) transcript number; (b) verbatim quote(s) within the data selected by the researcher; (c) a code name determined by the researcher; and (d) theme. The last column was not completed during phase two. In the first round of coding, we independently generated initial codes for the transcripts using the coding table template. We then discussed the similarities and differences among our codes and came to a consensus with a list of codes to facilitate trustworthiness and agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the next round of coding, we coded the remaining transcripts independently and then met to discuss new codes that were developed during this round. The new codes were then added to the final code list. During phase three (searching for themes), we searched for themes by grouping similar codes together to begin developing potential themes. First, we reviewed the final list of codes and grouped similar codes. Then, we reread the grouped codes and created a possible theme name in the fourth column of the coding table. During phase four (reviewing themes), we reviewed the codes to ensure that they fit within each theme in a meaningful way. Then, we reviewed all the themes to ensure that each theme was distinct from the others. During this process, we came up with a long list of themes which we relabeled as subthemes, and recategorized them into broader themes. These themes and subthemes were then reviewed and validated with other team members through discussion until consensus was reached. During phase five (defining and naming themes), we examined the final themes and generated clear definitions of each theme. Finally, in phase six, we wrote up the report.

Results

In this section, we provide a descriptive definition of each theme using the most expressive quotes of the study participants to support the themes. Five themes emerged from the data: (a) role of the school counsellor; (b) counselling services provided; (c) barriers to counselling; (d) personal attributes of counsellors; and (e) engagement with the counselling process.

Role of the School Counsellor

Two sub-themes were identified under this broader theme. These include the current role of the school counsellor, and the desired role of the school counsellor. Under the current role of the school counsellor, the most common descriptions were of an adult guide, mentor, problem-solver, and encourager. In the words of one of the participants, “A counsellor is a friend who helps you with the problems of life.” Another participant mentioned, “Someone employed by the school to guide students in making important life decisions.” In addition to the adviser/mentor role, some

students from public schools described the counsellor as one who helps students with financial or material needs, "She gives us financial help sometimes"; "She paid for me to collect my results [...], I was supposed to pay 500 naira (\$1) and I couldn't afford it."

Some participants described administrative duties of a counsellor, "A school counsellor is supposed to be in charge of keeping students' files and registers students"; "She's a member of the exams committee, we only really see her effectiveness during exams." Some students mentioned that the school counsellor's roles were numerous and centered on helping students, "They have many functions, helping with academic problems, keeping our files, helping us choose classes, and also when we have emotional heartache or trauma, [...] giving us advice on how to overcome them."

In terms of the desired role of the school counsellor role, some participants wanted counselling to be used as an alternative to punishments, "When a student does something bad, they should send the student to the guidance counsellor, but here they always resort to flogging." Others wanted the dual role of teacher and counsellor which many schools currently run to be stopped. Reasons given for this were the possibility of breaches in confidence, "I don't trust teachers. They will make me the topic of their staff room discussions." Confusion of roles for a counsellor with dual roles was another problem brought up by participants, "She'll start to confuse her jobs. When she's supposed to be in class, she'll start giving advice, and when she's supposed to be counselling, she'll be teaching." Another participant spoke about teachers being the source of students' problems, "What if I have a problem with her teaching method and I'm failing her subject, how can I go and discuss this with her in counselling."

Counselling Services Provided

Two sub-themes were identified under the broader theme of counselling services provided. These were academic and psychosocial interventions. Most of the participants who had accessed counselling did so for academic reasons, "I went to see her to help me choose which class to go to. It was helpful, I did some tests which showed I was better in the Arts subjects, and I'm doing well in my class now." Another student shared, "If you're having problems in any subject you can see them, and they will give you advice on what to do." Some students mentioned that their schools had mandatory policies for seeing the counsellor for academic placements but seeking psychosocial support was not mandatory. One participant thus suggested, "Besides the mandatory visits for class placement, the school should make students just go to the counsellor to talk. From there, issues may arise that the counsellor can help the student with."

Psychosocial interventions provided by school counsellors included support on how to handle interpersonal relationships, "Yes, I used to get really angry, but it has reduced now because I have been using the tips from the counsellor." Psychosocial support was also sought for issues such as fighting, stress, worry, bullying, and feeling

depressed, "I was angry and I hit a girl, I got into trouble and the counsellor asked me to see her"; "When I'm emotionally stressed, I go to her office and she encourages me."

Barriers to Counselling

Participants mentioned several barriers to accessing school counselling. These included negative beliefs about counselling, previous negative experiences with counselling, fear of not knowing what to expect from the counselling process, and preferences for informal sources of help. Participants had negative beliefs that counselling could not help, "No. I have never walked up to her because I don't think she can help me with anything. It's normal to feel worried; I don't think it's a reason to see the counsellor." Another stated, "Well, maybe for academic problems, but as for emotional problems, no... times have changed. The counsellor doesn't know how to help us with that." A third participant shared, "Sometimes I do feel very sad for very long periods of time, but I don't feel I can talk to the counsellor because I don't think she can help me." More boys than girls in this study expressed the belief that counselling was unhelpful for emotional issues.

Participants also viewed counsellors as judgmental, and could not trust them to keep the counselling process confidential, "I would not go and see the counsellor for emotional or stress-related problems because she might criticize me later"; "We don't want someone who would blow up our issues; someone who would go on to broadcast all our problems to the world." Some of the negative beliefs about counselling pertained to stigmatization by peers, "Some of your mates might be wondering why you're going to see the counsellor, maybe you have mental health problems [...] or you are in trouble [...]." One student who was afraid of the outcome of the counselling process said, "[fear...], the counsellor might be very harsh, and maybe even report you to the principal"

Several participants avoided counselling because they preferred to handle issues on their own, "Some people don't see the point of talking to someone when you can work on it by yourself." Another shared, "Yes I sometimes feel anxious but I talk to myself and get over it soon enough." The theme of self-help came up more often in the boy's focus groups (FGD's) compared to the girls. Other students preferred to get help from significant others such as peers, parents, and religious leaders, "There are many things I can't discuss with an adult. I'll rather discuss it with my mates. If I am feeling sad and I hang around my mates, I become happier after a while." Another participant said, "Even if I'm having mental or emotional issues, I would not go and see her, I would rather go to my pastor or my parents."

Previous negative personal or peer experience with counselling were also mentioned as barriers to accessing counselling: "If the student had gone to see the counsellor before and did not get the help they wanted, or the counsellor reported to the school authorities [...]." Some of the bad experiences were attributed to the poor interpersonal skills of the counsellor, and one participant alluded to being insulted in a previous counselling session: "When I was

choosing my exams subjects, she insulted me because my subjects weren't complete...., no it wasn't helpful at all."

Desirable Attributes of Counsellors

Participants mentioned the desired qualities they wanted to see in their counsellors. These included competence, empathy, understanding, and friendliness, "As long as the person can give me good advice"; "Someone that gets you and genuinely understands what you might be going through [...]"; "They should hire friendly counsellors." Some girls mentioned the importance of gender compatibility, "If you're not comfortable with the counsellor. For instance, if it is a male counsellor and you want to talk about menstruation [...]."

Participants also mentioned other attributes they wanted in their counsellors. Most preferred younger counsellors, but a few wanted older counsellors: "I want a younger person; the older ones are too judgmental, they won't understand us well"; "I want an older person, because they are well experienced." Most participants preferred a counsellor who was of the same gender as them: "It's better if there are two; a male for the boys and a female for the girls." Some boys preferred female counsellors, "I would prefer a female counsellor; women are nicer." A few students wanted access to both genders, "I would like to see both male and female, so I can have the two perspectives." With regards to the religion of their counsellors, most participants were indifferent: "I don't think religion should matter." Some wanted counsellors who were of the same religion as them, "I would like her to be of the same religion as me because I want her to be able to give me advice in line with my religious doctrines." A few participants did not want religion brought into counselling at all, "Please religion should not be a factor in counselling; an atheist counsellor will be best."

Engaging with the Counselling Process

Participants mentioned the need for students to participate actively in the counselling process, such that peers could work with and serve as linkages to counsellors, "We should have prefects who will work with the counsellor and encourage other students to go and see the counsellor." Participants also wanted more awareness in the school about the availability and services provided by counsellors, "They can announce on the assembly that the counsellor can talk with us [...], and help us with anything, not just school-related things."

Discussion

The present study set out to explore Nigerian adolescents' perceptions and experiences with school counselling. The descriptions of the role of the school counsellor were largely that of an adult support system which is similar to previous findings. For example, American high school students have been reported to view the school counsellor as a parent, friend, role model, and mentor (Gallo et al., 2019; Ohrt et al., 2016). In addition to the supportive role of the school

counsellor, participants in the present study also mentioned changes they wanted to see in the functions of the school counsellor. Majority expressed a preference for counsellors who were not teachers. The teacher-counsellor model is not peculiar to the Nigerian educational system, and there are reports that across the world, more teachers are involved in counselling when compared with psychologists, professional counsellors, and social workers (Harris, 2013). Unfortunately, many teachers in our local and similar contexts are not trained in counselling, and are still being trained in the use of authoritarian and evaluative teaching methods which do not allow for the interpersonal connections and relationships needed in counselling (Kiweewa et al., 2018; Slaten & Basken, 2014). It thus becomes harder for them to switch roles, negatively impacting the student-counsellor relationship. This may be why some regions of the world have revised their national policies, such that school counsellors no longer teach, but focus solely on counselling (Chen & Kok, 2015).

Adolescents in this study also gave descriptions of administrative non-counselling roles of their school counsellors. Aluede and Adubale (2020), in a cross-national comparative survey of the importance of the various dimensions of the school counsellor's practice, found that Nigerian counsellors also endorsed administrative duties as important functions of the school counsellor in contrast to peers from nine other countries who felt school administration was an inappropriate task for counsellors. While the ASCA national model discourages administrative clerical and testing duties for school counsellors, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the factors which have shaped school counsellors' roles in our local context (Aluede & Adubale, 2020). Also, studies on the impact of clerical administrative tasks on school counsellors' core counselling duties may be required to effect systemic change. Nigerian counsellors in the Aluede study also gave the lowest ratings among their peers to advocacy and systemic improvement in schools, and this may be why advocacy and systemic improvement were generally lacking in our participants' descriptions of the school counsellor's role.

Our participants engaged with counselling services mainly to receive academic support, followed by support for socio-emotional issues. These findings are similar to what obtains in other parts of the world such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Malaysia (Gallo et al., 2019; Ohrt et al., 2016; Slaten & Basken, 2014). However, academic support received by our participants appeared limited to class placements, improving grades and choosing subject combinations, and there was little on career and college preparation such that one participant said, "I would like them to offer advice on what to do after secondary school, how to cope in university [...]."

Emotional and behavioral challenges affecting school-age children and adolescents are on the rise all over the world, including sub-Saharan Africa (Kieling et al., 2011). Unfortunately, these challenges often go unrecognized by adults, and findings from all over the world show that adolescents themselves often do not seek formal help, preferring to use informal sources, or practice self-help as

we also found in our study (Chai, 2000; Chen & Kok, 2015; Fox & Butler, 2007; Kok et al., 2012). We found more male than female groups endorsing a preference for self-help strategies in the current study in line with existing research which suggests that boys are less likely than girls to seek help for emotional issues because of their masculine ideals of self-reliance and stoicism (Fox & Butler, 2007; Haavik et al., 2017). This reduces their opportunities to access effective early interventions, and prevent long-term disability.

Barriers to accessing counselling services mentioned in our study were similar to those from other regions such as Uganda, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom where fear of the counselling process, issues with counsellors' competence, lack of trust in the confidentiality of the counselling process, social stigma, and perceived support from other sources have all been reported (Chen & Kok, 2015; Fox & Butler, 2007; Knettel et al., 2020). The CSC framework requires that counsellors provide a 'healing space' within the school environment which is facilitated by the supportive relationship. The above barriers make it more difficult to form supportive relationships, and create the much-needed healing spaces for students.

With regards to preferred characteristics of counsellors, participants mentioned qualities which facilitate interpersonal relationships, and are vital for the therapeutic process of counselling. These are in keeping with the findings of Gibson et al. (2016), who found that the ability of the counsellor to be open, friendly, genuine, and help adolescents feel heard was a vital factor for adolescents in a counselling relationship. Our participants also had a wide range of age, and gender preferences for their counsellors. Previous studies have reported female sex, same gender (for females), and younger age as preferred counsellor characteristics (Ang & See Yeo, 2004; Cooper, 2006; Fox & Butler, 2007). Surprisingly, some of our participants preferred 'more experienced' middle aged counsellors and access to both genders. We also probed for preferred counsellors' religious affiliations because Nigerians tend to be very religious, and a lot of religious counselling goes on in the community (Aluede et al., 2005). We found a wide range of religious preferences among our participants with some wanting counsellors of the same faith, and others wanting counselling to be dissociated from faith. We believe that having more counsellors within schools may help to ensure that every student can be matched with a counsellor of their choice.

In terms of improving school counselling services, some participants mentioned ways they wanted to be able to better engage with the counselling process. Student involvement in the counselling process through peers was key, in addition to adequate information about the services available. As young people often prefer to seek help from informal sources such as friends, systems which allow peers to act as gateway providers may be more effective and enhancing of youth access to formal school counselling services.

Implications and Recommendations for Counsellors and Policymakers

There are several implications for school counsellors based on our findings in combination with previous literature. Overall, there appears to be a need for counsellors in this, and similar contexts to broaden the range of services they provide. In addition to delivering effective academic and socio-emotional support services, school counsellors need to effect positive change in the school environment through increased leadership and advocacy activities. These activities should aim to increase engagement with all stakeholders within the school and larger community, as well as support student friendly school policies. Frequent engagement with students in particular may help students recognize the school counsellor as individuals to be approached for help and assistance, and facilitate comfort with the counselling process. Research shows that when school counsellors are available to provide services, foster a relationship, create a trusting environment, and advocate for students, students report more positive results across multiple domains (Ohrt et al., 2016).

Although academic and career concerns remain essential areas for students to receive support, their need for socio-emotional support is growing. The current mental health training of school counsellors in Nigeria is often didactic, and lacks deep practical/clinical content. Considering the rise in mental health concerns among adolescents, and young people's reluctance to seek counselling for emotional issues as mentioned by our participants and from previous studies, school counsellors need to be well trained in mental health counselling, particularly in the skills that foster interpersonal connections. This will help students draw closer to them, and facilitate the counselling process. School counsellors are often the first, and sometimes the only mental health professional students will ever encounter. They should be able to provide adequate support for students in need, and work collaboratively with other mental health care providers to provide care for students in need of long-term mental health support (ASCA, 2019).

Of particular concern is the teacher-counsellor role which occurs commonly in this context, but which most of our study participants found unacceptable. Teachers in this context are often not trained for this role, and training programs continue to emphasize authoritarian traditional teaching models instead of collaborative, learner-centered ones (Kiweewa et al., 2018). While there remains a dearth of trained school counsellors in less resourced countries such as ours, policy makers need to be made aware of the need to push for cooperative and learner-centered methods of teacher training which will produce more sensitive and responsive teachers (Brown, 2013, as cited in Kiweewa et al., 2018). The basics of counselling should also be incorporated into teacher training for greater understanding and insights into the supportive roles of school counsellors. Emphasis should also be placed on teachers working collaboratively with school counsellors, and ways to better support learners in the classroom.

There is also an urgent need for stand-alone national school counselling policies and implementation plans which will ensure the training of more school counsellors, and

guide their practice. These would help to clarify the roles and responsibilities of school counsellors to all stakeholders within the school system, and facilitate the much-needed collaboration between the other school personnel and counsellors. Gradually, the teacher-counsellor role should be phased out, such that teachers do not carry out counselling activities, and counsellors do not teach. School counsellors should also be provided regular opportunities for in-service training and re-training to facilitate skill development and effectiveness. This would ensure sustainability of high-quality counselling services in schools.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides important information which complements the views of adult stakeholders about the state of school counselling services in a less resourced country like Nigeria. The results of the current study should however be interpreted in the light of some key limitations. We utilized convenience sampling relying on the availability and willingness of in-school adolescents from four secondary schools to participate in the study. Our study involved students from only one state out of the 36 states of the country, and the findings may therefore reflect the specific structure of this state's school counselling practices. We also do not know if the counsellors who provided services in these schools were trained counsellors or teacher-counsellors who had been assigned these roles. Future research should seek to differentiate between the experiences of students with trained school counsellors versus teacher-counsellors and the activities with the greatest impact on student educational and socio-emotional wellbeing. The design of the current study could also be expanded to include students from more regions of the country, as well as educational levels (i.e., primary and college levels) for a more comprehensive view of students' needs and perceptions.

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing body of knowledge on the state of school counselling in less resourced regions of the world, and highlights the importance of the voices of youth, who are the users of these services. As school counselling in Nigeria and the African sub-region continues to evolve, sustained political will and collaboration among all concerned stakeholders is needed to ensure that students can access high-quality and effective school counselling services.

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