

Counselling Skills For Improving Academic Performance Of Secondary School Students In Nsukka Education Zone Of Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focuses on counselling skills for improving academic performance of secondary school students. The subjects for the study consisted of 20 counsellors working in seven (7) secondary schools in Nsukka Educational Zone of Enugu State. Three research questions guided the study. Instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. Statistically weighted mean was used to answer the research questions. Results showed that counsellors are endowed with a lot of skills which if properly harnessed will improve academic excellence of students. Also it was observed that school location has a great influence on the performance of students.

Introduction

Secondary education is the form of education children receive after primary education and before the tertiary stage. The broad aims of secondary education within Nigeria's overall objectives are preparation of students for useful living within the society and for higher education (Nigeria High Commission, 2008). Students can be useful when they perform well in their studies. Academic performance in this study is taken as academic excellence. Keathley (2005) defined excellence as the state or quality of excelling. It is superiority or the state of being good to a high degree. Improving academic excellence of students means achieving the objective function which the educational policy stipulates. Thus, the improvement of academic excellence of students has always been the concern of all stakeholders. The stakeholders include: the government, educational and school administrators, school proprietors, teachers, parents, professional counsellors, and students themselves.

Although all stakeholders play active roles towards the improvement of academic excellence of students, the contributions of school personnel (school administrators, professional counsellors, teachers and others) are critical for optimal improvement of academic excellence of students. Government plans that secondary education should be of

six year duration and be given in two stages: the Junior Secondary School (JSS) and the Senior Secondary School (SSS), each stage being of three year duration (Nigeria High Commission, 2008). The junior secondary school is both pre-vocational and academic, while the senior secondary school has a core curriculum designed to broaden students' knowledge and outlook. Secondary education in Nigeria is far from achieving its broad aims and objectives. Evidences abound that Nigerian students' academic achievement in most of the school subjects are poor (Njoku, 1997 and WAEC, 2004). This poor and unimpressive performance of secondary school students is an indication that there are underlying problems with service delivery in the secondary school level (Njoku, 2007). The blame is sometimes apportioned to the teachers, school administrators, learning environment, school curriculum, parents, and students themselves. These inadequacies could be as a result of lack of professional counselling on this crucial issue affecting students, school personnel and the society at large. The unemployed and unemployable youths who have no skills to offer even though they are graduates of secondary schools is an evidence to prove that the Nigerian school system does not seem to produce skill graduates from secondary schools. Location (rural/urban) of a school has its influence on students' academic excellence in so many ways. Students in urban areas seem to do better than those in the rural areas. This could be as a result of abundance of infrastructure, learning facilities, competent teachers and professional counsellors. Thus, counselling is imperative in order to correct the anomaly observed in Nigerian secondary schools.

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica defined counselling as the process of helping an individual discover and develop his educational, vocational and psychological potentialities and thereby achieve an optimal level of personal happiness and social usefulness. According to Anamaeze (2002), counselling is a personal relationship between a counsellor and a counselee in which, the counsellor helps the counselee to learn more satisfying behaviour necessary for solving his problems.

Ifelunni (2003) stated that there are three (3) main areas in which every individual requires counselling. These areas are: vocational counselling, socio-personal counselling and educational counselling. Students can adequately be counseled under these areas. Vocational counselling aims at helping students match their personal attributes and background with suitable jobs and employment opportunities. Personal socio counselling

takes care of problems of students such as boy-girl relationship, manners and etiquettes, personal appearance, home and family relationship. Education counselling addresses issues related to students' academic excellence such as study habit, examination techniques, time management, procrastination, and how to choose subjects. However, the above can be actualized only when the counsellor possesses the right skills and plays a supportive role.

Lister (2008) asserted that the counsellors' repertoire of skills includes those of forming an understanding relationship, as well as interventions, focused on helping clients change specific aspects of their thinking and acting. He further proved that judgement, experience, genuineness and warmth are few of the peculiar qualities of counsellors. Okobiah (1992) posited various professional counselling skills that will help clients understand and solve their daily problems. These skills include: listening, responding, empathizing, probing, questioning, prodding, interpretation, reflection, confronting, restatement, silence, immediacy, encouraging, self-disclosing, summarizing, confidentiality and so on. Listening is a crucial counselling skill. A counsellor who does not listen attentively may not be able to hear and understand what his client's problems are. As communication can be verbal and non-verbal, a counsellor is expected to listen as well by observing the exact body language of his clients (non-verbal communication). Responses can also be verbal and non-verbal. Okobiah (1992) defined responding as counsellors' verbal and non-verbal reactions to the problems presented by the client. This depends on counsellors' attentive and understanding skills. Prompt and adequate responses will definitely help the client understand his problems and equally solutions to his problems. Empathy is a vital skill in counselling. This implies the counsellor putting himself in the shoes of the client as if he is the one experiencing the problems of the client. It can be verbal and non-verbal, and will help the counsellor to communicate his feelings, regards, and concerns to the client. Probing, questioning and prodding are aimed at assisting the counsellor in eliciting facts from the client especially when the client finds it difficult to express himself. A counsellor's response to check the client's awareness and understanding of all aspects of his presentations (behaviour, mannerism, feelings) and confirm his understanding of the client's problem is regarded as interpretation. Once the counsellor knows his client's level of understanding and awareness, he becomes more committed to the client.

Reflection is another important counselling skill a counsellor applies, when he is sure that the client has sufficient resources to solve his own problems, but needs help in mobilizing them. Some clients pose discrepancies between their ideal and real selves, and their verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Confrontation is the best skill to use in resolving these discrepancies. It can as well be used when there is a discrepancy between the counsellor's understanding of the client's world and problems and the client's own understanding of his world and problems. Repetition of the client's statement for clarification purpose is also an important skill in counselling. This repetition is referred to as restatement, and may help the client to explain further if the counsellor did not understand the stated problems. A counsellor should not be in a haste to bring out words. Silence is necessary to help one meditate and reflect on what the partner says. This will enable the counsellor and the counsellee to respond appropriately. Catharsis is the emotional relief given by art, especially tragedy. A client who is loaded with sadness to the point of crying, should be allowed to relieve himself. A counsellor should not be in a haste to stop him, because this will make him more disposed to discuss his problems. Immediacy is another important counselling skill. A client's problems should be attended to without delay. Immediacy involves the counsellor confronting the client with his real (unaware) reactions. This should be done without recognizing the client's attempt to retard the counselling process. A client may need encouragement to help him adjust better. Encouraging clients is another important counselling skill. Disclosing oneself by expressing genuine feelings is an indispensable counselling skill. Self-disclosure is necessary when the counsellor understands the client and when the client has developed trust in the counsellor. The counsellor comforts the counsellee by disclosing himself to the counsellee on a similar issue affecting the client. The counsellee memory on previous discussions needs to be refreshed at the end of the counselling process. This skill is referred to as summarizing and helps the counsellee remember all that was said. Confidentiality in counselling is of paramount importance. Okeke (1997) presented rapport and congruence as few of the many skills at the disposal of counsellors. Rapport implies a close relationship. An atmosphere of friendliness, marked with warm acceptance of the client is pertinent in counselling. Congruence involves the ability of the counsellor to be authentic, sincere, honest, genuine, forthright and frank during counselling.

School counsellors in possession of these skills can bring out the best in students. Thus, school counsellors are professionally strategically placed to understand students' academic problems and counsel them for solutions to the problems. The roles of counsellors in improving academic excellence of students can therefore not be over-emphasized.

School counsellors may use a variety of personality and vocational assessment methods to help students explore vocation needs and interests. This will definitely help students in choosing the right subjects and improving their performance in those subjects. Counsellors play active roles in counselling students on their learning styles, attitudes to schooling and school subjects, subject choices in relation to career aspiration, boosting students' achievement motivation, and helping students in their personality adjustment. Students' learning styles are important determiners of their learning achievement. Students who find it difficult to read their books, hardly perform well in school subjects, even when the subject teachers are very effective and do their jobs well. Some students learn best by cooperating and relating with other students. Those students are regarded as inter-personal learners. Intrapersonal learners are those who learn by working alone without cooperating with others. Many students have negative attitudes to schooling and some school subjects which they believe they do not like. Usually, it is the school counsellor that modifies the attitude of the above students. The counsellor also assists students in choosing the right subjects by diagnosing their aptitudes and matching such with the right subjects. Some students have written themselves off as never-do-wells, probably due to past failures. Such students need proper counselling in order to redirect their belief system. Oftentimes, students are faced with personality adjustment problems in school. The counsellor is in the right position to handle cases of students' maladjustive behaviours, and get them back to desirable behaviours.

The environment has its pronounced effect on students' academic excellence. The location (urban/rural) a student finds himself is the yardstick for judging the acceptability or unacceptability of his behaviour. Factors to be considered in counselling urban and rural students vary in so many aspects. Okeke (1997) observed that counselling is aimed at making the individual adjust realistically and become a functional member of the community. Incompetent teachers, lack of basic learning facilities, lack of infrastructure, proximity to market square, and non-functional guidance and counselling unit characterize

rural secondary schools in Nigeria. Students of such schools are incomparable with urban secondary school students. Udofot (2005) observed that schools in the rural areas lack facilities for instructions in subjects like agriculture, home economics, computer education among others, which should be taught practically. Teachers in the rural areas are incompetent and lack motivation from the government and school administration. Ndu et al (1997) warned that such teachers would either withdraw physically from teaching or remain these to constitute serious danger to school effectiveness. Poor academic excellence of rural secondary school students can be attributed to evasion of school inspection and supervision by officials of the Ministry of Education, lack of adequate professional counselling and attitude of parents towards education. Rural schools are not inspected and supervised probably due to bad road, while professional counselling is not obtainable in most rural schools. Most parents of rural students are ignorant of the importance of education. Some parents turn their children especially girls to baby sitters, send them on unnecessary errands especially on market days. Most rural students engage in hunting, farming, fishing, masquerading and moonlight activities at the expense of their study time. They eventually appear to be habitual late-comers and truants thus perform badly in school. Emphasis is more on rural area, because of the pitiable state of most schools in those areas.

However, great discrepancies exist between urban and rural secondary schools. Students of urban secondary schools are exposed to ICT, going on excursion and field trips, which rural students have never dreamt of experiencing. Most urban students are carried away by city life. Some abandon their studies and embrace watching of late night movies, hanging out with friends, surfing the web (Internet) and engaging in cult activities. Excluding these deviant behaviours, urban students are far better than rural students. Counselling these two categories of students on academic excellence calls for proper understanding of the factors militating against their study habit and attitudes to schooling. Counsellors should be very meticulous in choosing the best skills in counselling these categories of students.

Researchers have shown that counsellors are endowed with a lot of skills, which if properly utilized will bring out the best in students. Njoku (2007) asserted that without the school counsellors' intervention, the good work of subject teachers and school administrators may become compromised and ineffective. The poor and unimpressive performance of

Nigerian secondary school students is an evidence that professional counselling is lacking in most secondary schools. The ideal question to pose here is, to what extent could counselling skills be employed in counselling for improving academic excellence of secondary school students?

The general purpose of the study is to find out the counselling skills for counselling on improving academic excellence of secondary school students. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. find out the counselling skills that enhance academic excellence of students;
2. outline the roles of counsellors in enhancing academic excellence of students;

Research Questions

Two research questions were drawn to guide this study:

1. What counselling skills enhance academic excellence of students?
2. What are counsellors' roles in enhancing academic excellence of students?

Research Method

Design of the Study

The descriptive survey design was used in conducting the study. The choice of the design was because the purpose of the study was descriptive on counselling skills for improving academic excellence of secondary school students.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample of the study was 20 counsellors working at seven (7) secondary schools within Nsukka educational zone of Enugu State through random sampling.

Instrument for Data Collection

Structured questionnaire was constructed by the researcher. The questionnaire contained 30 items on a four-point rating scale (Strongly Agreed, Agreed, Disagreed and Strongly Disagreed).

The questionnaire was face-validated by experts in Educational Foundation Departments of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Guidance and Counselling Unit of

the University of Benin and Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The questionnaire was trial tested on 5 counsellors in Nneoma Secondary School Nibo in Anambra North Local Government Area of Anambra State. The internal consistency of the counselling skills for improving academic excellence of secondary school students was determined using Cronbach alpha. It yielded an alpha value of 0.89, which was considered high enough.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher with three research assistants visited seven (7) secondary schools in Nsukka educational zone to solicit the cooperation of professional school counsellors. The three research assistants were trained purposely to administer and collect data for this study. The researcher and the research assistants established rapport with the respondents for easy administration of the questionnaire.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation for answering the research questions. A mean of 2.5 and above was accepted while any mean less than 2.5 was rejected.

Results

Research Question 1:

What counselling skills enhance academic excellence of students?

Table 1:

Mean Responses on Counselling Skills that Enhance Academic Excellence

S/N	Items	\bar{X} Counsellors	S.D.	Remark
1.	Attentive listening of counsellors enhances academic excellence of students.	3.14	0.97	Accepted
2.	Disclosure of clients' (students') problems	1.15	0.68	Not

3.	enhances academic excellence of students. Expression of empathy to students enhances their academic excellence.	3.06	0.50	accepted Accepted
4.	Silence while counselling is not necessary in enhancing academic excellence of students.	1.83	0.83	Not accepted
5.	Self-disclosure while counselling enhances academic excellence of students.	2.90	0.97	Accepted
6.	Use of confrontation while counselling students elicits truth which enhances their academic excellence.	2.65	1.00	“
7.	Probing taciturn students in order to elicit information discourages academic excellence of students.	1.05	0.67	Not accepted
8.	Creation of rapport while counselling enhances academic excellence of students.	3.00	1.03	Accepted
9.	Creating genuineness in students while counselling enhances their academic excellence.	3.37	0.86	“
10.	Inability to interpret what the student has in mind enhances the student's academic excellence.	2.45	0.98	Not accepted

From the responses on table 1 under item 1, it was observed that a mean value of 3.14 counsellors agreed to the importance of listening as an indispensable counselling skill. A good number of counsellors (mean value of 2.90) agreed to the fact that self-disclosure while counselling enhances academic excellence of students. Most of the counsellors under item 2 disagreed that disclosing clients/students' problems enhances academic excellence of students, while a mean value of 1.45 disagreed that inability to interpret what the student has in mind enhances the student's academic excellence.

Research Question 2:

What are counsellors' roles in enhancing academic excellence of students?

Table 2:

Mean Responses on Counsellors' Roles in Enhancing Academic Excellence of Students

S/N	Items	Mean (\bar{X})	S.D.	Remark
1.	Counsellors' acceptance of students enhances academic excellence of students.	2.90	0.86	Agree
2.	Counselling to ascertain the student's area of interest enhances academic excellence of the student.	3.20	0.98	Strongly agree

3.	Counselling on learning styles is not necessary in enhancing academic excellence.	1.78	0.65	Strongly disagree
4.	Counsellors' inability help students choose the right subjects in relation to their career aspiration enhances academic excellence.	1.09	0.59	“
5.	Counsellors' ability to counsel students with undesirable behaviour to desirable behaviour enhances academic excellence.	3.15	1.05	Agree
6.	Counsellors' inability to counsel government in employing competent teachers enhances academic excellence of students.	1.95	0.75	Disagree
7.	Counsellors' incompetence to correct a careless learner enhances academic excellence of students.	1.07	0.97	Strongly disagree
8.	Counsellors' ability to diagnose students' aptitudes for choices of subjects in relation to their career aspiration academic excellence.	3.20	1.08	Agree
9.	Counsellors' competence in counselling an intra-personal learner to an interpersonal learner enhances academic excellence of students.	2.90	0.99	Agree
10.	Counsellors' inability to counsel school administrators on motivation of students and teachers encourages academic excellence of students.	1.15	0.87	Disagree

From above table, it can be deduced that a sizeable proportion of counsellors with a mean value of 3.20, strongly agreed that ascertaining the students' area of interest enhances academic excellence of the student. Also, counsellors with a mean value of 2.90 agreed that counselling an intra-personal learner to an interpersonal learner enhances academic excellence of students. Under items 6 and 10, it was revealed that counsellors with mean values of 1.95 and 1.55 respectively, disagreed that counsellors' inability to counsel the government and school administrators on employment of competent teachers and motivation of students and teachers enhances academic excellence of students.

Discussion

The findings of the study made it clear that counsellors agreed and as well disagreed in some cases. They agreed that listening is a peculiar counselling skill. They also agreed that creation of rapport with students while counselling promotes their academic excellence. This concurs with the observation of Okeke (1997) which presents creation of an atmosphere of friendliness as an important counselling skill. In table 2, which answers question 3, it was observed that most counsellors are aware of the various learning styles, and disagreed that counselling on learning styles is not necessary in enhancing academic excellence.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined counselling skills for improving academic excellence of secondary school students. It showed that most secondary schools lack adequate professional counselling units.

Thus, it is recommended in this study that competent teachers should be posted to rural schools, and as well be motivated to bring out their best. Also, adequate inspection of teachers and schools is recommended to enhance effective teaching and would increase student academic excellence.

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