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## School-based Counsellors' Role as Perceived by Nigerian Counsellors

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### Abstract

This study assessed the perceptions of Nigerian counsellors regarding the appropriateness of a range of school counsellors' activities and determined how Nigerian school counsellors viewed the appropriateness of the five dimensions of counselling practice. School counsellors from the Association of Professional Counsellors in Nigeria ( $n = 176$ ) completed the International Survey of School-based Counselor Activities. Results were compared to those of counsellors from nine other nations. Findings revealed some commonalities and some potentially important differences. Nigerian counsellors considered the Educational and Career Planning dimension the most important dimension. In contrast to all the other national groups, Nigerian counsellors considered Administrative Activities as role appropriate. Relatedly, Nigerian counsellors considered Advocacy and School Improvement as the least important dimension of practice. Based on the findings, we recommend the continuation of national policy development to clarify the appropriate activities of school-based counsellors in Nigeria to assure the delivery of effective services to students.

*Keywords:* school-based counseling, international comparative research, school-based counselor activities, Nigeria

The activities of counsellors appear to be unclear within the education sector in most African countries, including Nigeria. This lack of clarity can be attributed to the fact that counselling is a relatively new profession in African education systems. Opinions differ on counsellors' roles and responsibilities owing to the fact that counsellors perform a wide range of different activities. In Nigeria, counsellors often perform the regular classroom teachers' work and are assigned administrative functions in addition to guiding students to resolve their personal-social problems. The scope of work of school counsellors according to the American School Counselling Association (ASCA) includes assisting students to develop their educational, social, career, and personal strengths; to help them develop healthy habits, values and positive attitudes; to encourage them to understand themselves and their abilities; to evaluate their academic progress; to assist them

to adjust to school; and increase personal satisfaction (Willys, 2017). Counsellors' functions are crucial as they help to facilitate the holistic development of students and ensure the achievement of educational goals.

Different stakeholders (school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and other interested groups) may have different opinions about the appropriate work of counsellors. Teachers perceive counsellors' roles within the education system based on their encounters with counsellors. Beesley (as cited in Joy, Hesson, & Harris, 2011) asserted that teachers were generally satisfied with counselling services, although their level of satisfaction varied across grade levels and depended on the specific area provided by the school counsellors. Teachers view the school counsellor as someone who provides services and relevant information to students. In addition, Joy et al. (2011) assert that administrators viewed counsellors as being involved in consultation on referrals and other specific administrative duties. Badu (as cited in Awinsong, Dawson, & Gidiglo, 2015) posited that counsellors perceive their roles as creating positive counselling relationships with the different stakeholders. Eremie (2014) and Willys (2017) described counsellors' roles as including academic, career, personal, and social development of students. It is within this context that this paper considers Nigerian counsellors' perceptions of the importance of the five dimensions of school-based counselling practice, using the International Survey of School Counselors' Activities as described in the lead article by Carey, Fan, He, and Jin, (2020). These dimensions are: Counselling Services; Prevention Programs; Advocacy and Systematic Improvement; Administrator Role; and Educational and Career Planning.

A wide range of approaches to school-based counselling exists in at least 90 countries (Harris, 2013). Different school counsellor roles and activities exist across these countries due to cultural factors, national needs, societal movements, models of school counselling, laws and educational policy, and characteristics of the public education system (Martin, Lauterbach, & Carey, 2015). Across these countries, establishing the role and activities of school counsellors is an important professional and policy research issue. Recent research on the role and activities of school counsellors has been conducted, for example, in China (Shi & Leuwerke, 2010), India

(Venkatesan & Shyam, 2015), Israel (Erhard, 2005), Kenya (Wambu & Wickman, 2016), Saudi Arabia (Alghamdi & Riddick, 2011), Singapore (Ko, 2013), Turkey (Korkut-Owen & Owen, 2008), and the United States (Fan, Carey, Martin, & He, 2019).

Results of the lead article (Carey et al., 2020) indicated that there are at least five important dimensions along which school-based counselling practice differs across countries. Countries differ on the salience accorded to: Counselling Services, Advocacy and Systemic Improvement, Prevention Programs, Administrator Role, and Educational and Career Planning. These five dimensions can provide a useful way to describe differences in modes of practice and can consequently be very worthwhile in cross-national comparative research on school-based counselling.

Counselling Services as the first of the five dimensions reflects activities relating to individual and group counselling with students in crisis counselling, consultation and coordination with parents; consultation and counselling with teachers; pre-referral processes; and monitoring effectiveness. It is meant to assist students to cope with challenges pertaining to their psychological development, personal concerns and to facilitate the learning process (Daniels, 2013; Willys, 2017). Hughey, Gysbers, and Starr (as cited in Zabel, 2007) and Joy et al. (2011) revealed that 72.9% and 56% of their respondents (students) respectively perceived counselling services (individual counselling) to be very effective in assisting students to resolve and cope with problems of a personal nature, such as, traumatic events, academic stress/anxiety, financial struggle, problems at home and bullying. Similarly, Willys (2017) and Lasode, Lawal, and Ofodile (2017) revealed that group counselling is effective in assisting students to develop competencies that help them adjust to different situations and make appropriate decisions in life. The study of Ibrahim, Aloba, Wambiya, and Raburu (2014) revealed that counselling services assist to attain spiritual growth, health and marital awareness. Thus, counselling services (group and individual) afford students opportunities to enhance personal growth and improve decision-making regarding values, interpersonal relationships, and other goals within a stressful student academic environment.

The Advocacy and Systemic Improvement dimension reflects activities relating to advocacy for students, effective school policies and practices along with program evaluation and improvement. The counsellors play an advocacy role as they show concern on issues or factors that will enhance the welfare of students and collaborate with school officials to ensure a conducive school climate appropriate for students to learn. They equally conduct evaluation procedures on the different educational programs and offer suggestions with the intent of improving the school system. Thus, promoting and initiating policies which guarantee a safe and positive environment for students. Counsellors in Nigeria may volunteer to work as a school liaison to help ensure “student friendly” policies. Lasode et al. (2017) noted that counsellors act as liaison officers for schools and are

responsible for contacting appropriate agencies as needed and become the link between the school, parents and other institutions. Joy et al. (2011) found that 26% of their participants perceived school counsellors' responsibilities to include mediation and conflict resolution. Similarly, Willys' (2017) findings indicated that school counsellors work as designers of appropriate intervention programs which address students' problems of bullying, social exclusion, scholastic underachievement, and substance abuse. Thus, counsellors' act as agents of change to enhance school programs and activities.

Prevention Programs as one of the five dimensions reflects activities relating to classroom guidance lessons; parent training and education; teacher training; and consultation with administrators to improve educational policies and practices. Preventative counselling is based on proactive planning designed to assist students to resist pressure to engage in destructive and antisocial behavior. It involves counsellors working to prevent crises by organizing seminars and teaching students, parents and teachers skills to cope better in new or unstable situations. Cooper, Hough and Loynd (as cited in Joy et al., 2011) found that this approach to counselling makes a difference in the lives of students by helping them learn strategies and coping skills for use in different situations and to frame their problems in a more positive way. Preventative counselling has an administrative dimension as Joy et al. (2011) indicated. They found that participants perceived counsellors' roles to include the provision of psycho-educational events (e.g., organizing events against bullying and organizing personal well-being days for students), promoting and organizing entrepreneurship, and promoting awareness of issues like suicide awareness.

The Administrator Role dimension reflects activities relating to students' discipline, serving as the acting principal, leadership in data-based school improvement initiatives, and liaison with families. Within the school administration, counsellors have been found involved in non-counselling activities like offering consultation services to staff members and conducting research studies on students' behavior. They are equally involved in marketing the school to the outside world or community, thus offering services that support and promote the school system at large. Madlambayan (2017) found that counsellors have been involved as collaborators with teachers, principals and parents in ensuring students' discipline by helping to maintain order in the school through disciplinary intervention. Mweemba (2016) found that school counsellors assist students to adapt to the school routine and overcome life challenges. Similarly, Mikaye (2012) revealed that counsellors assist in the maintenance of discipline among students for academic gains. Counsellors maintaining students' records and files are also non-counselling functions but fall under the administrative function of schools.

The Educational and Career Planning dimension reflects activities relating to helping students choose courses and a

course of study and engaging in career development. Career counselling is considered an essential part of school counsellors' role as it contributes to the attainment of the students' academic goals. Aspen et al. (2015); Awinsong et al. (2015); and Nweze and Okolie (2014) asserted that counsellors play a crucial role in students' career decisions and can influence the decision making process through the information they provide to students. Without proper career-guidance, young students tend to go through their secondary school education without gaining knowledge of all the career opportunities available to them. This position had earlier been identified by Ondima, Mokogi, Ombaba, and Osoro (2013) in Nyamira district of Kenya and Chireshe (as cited in Lasode et al., 2017) in Zimbabwe. Similarly, Ibrahim et al. (2014) found that students in Kenya perceived counsellors as helping them in dealing with career issues and assisting them to access career information. Thus, counsellors have a positive influence in the formulation of career development goals which is fundamental to skills acquisition, right attitudes and knowledge necessary for the successful transition from school to the world of work.

### **Rationale for this Study**

School counselling appears to be gradually evolving from the initial focus on career guidance into "today's comprehensive, developmental and collaborative" school counselling programs. Teachers, school administrators and students have expressed their opinions on school counsellors' responsibilities (Awinsong, et al., 2015; Eremie, 2014; Uju, 2018). Few have studied the factors affecting students' perception of school counsellors' roles (Aluede & Imonikhe 2002; Willys, 2017). These studies were intended to draw awareness to the importance of the school counsellor in the education sector and to enhance a better service delivery. But, none of them has comprehensively examined counsellors' activities from a nation-wide perspective. The current effort is to examine counsellors' activities on a national scale within the context of the five dimensions of practice identified in the lead article. To that effect, the study assessed the following concerns: how Nigerian school counsellors perceive counsellors' activities, how appropriate counsellors consider each of the five dimensions of practice to be, and how Nigerian counsellors rate the five dimensions of practice relative to counsellors of other countries in the lead article.

Over the years, school counsellors in several schools in Nigeria have been made to perform ancillary responsibilities, especially serving as subject teachers at the detriment of directing and coordinating counselling activities in their schools. This development was possible because of a lack of documentation of the specified roles of school counsellors in Nigeria, which also in many instances resulted in uncertainty and related ambiguities about the actual duties and involvements of school counsellors in Nigerian schools (Aluede, 2000; Aluede, McEachern, &

Kenny, 2005). It is important, however, to observe that the Federal Ministry of Education in recognition of this concern and in the effort to stem it has recently offered clear specifications and deliberate prescriptions on the roles of school counselors in Nigeria's schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018).

## **Method**

### **Participants of the Study**

The study participants consisted of 176 counsellors from the existing chapters across Nigeria of the Association of Professional Counsellors in Nigeria (APROCON). Of the participants, 40 were males and 136 were females. In terms of professional qualifications, 68 hold a Bachelor's degree in guidance and counselling, 77 of them hold a Master's Degree in guidance and counselling, while 31 hold a Ph.D. in counselling. In terms of experience, a total of 39 participants had below 5 years working experience, 45 of them had between 5 and 10 years, 48 had between 11 and 15 years, 23 had between 16 and 20 years and 21 of the participants had more than 20 years working experience.

### **Measures**

The instrument used was the International Survey of School Counselors' Activities (ISSCA; Fan et al., 2019). The instrument was divided into two sections. Section A measured personal information of the respondents, such as sex, qualification, and working experience. Section B was made up of 40 items. The aim was to rate the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the forty specific activities of the role of school counsellors in Nigeria, using the following response format: 1= very inappropriate (VI); 2= Inappropriate (I); 3 = Appropriate (A); and 4 = Very Appropriate (VA). Subscale score for the five dimensions were computed as indicated by Fan et al. (2019).

### **Procedures**

Survey administration was conducted during the Annual Conference of the Association of Professional Counsellors in Nigeria (APROCON), held in Lagos, Nigeria from August 2 – 6, 2017. In Nigeria, since there is no Institutional Research Board for the granting approval to research activities in the behavioral sciences in the same manner as in several advanced countries, current researchers mainly sought the approval and consent of the Executive Council of APROCON to have the intention of the study made known to the conference attendees. Thereafter, the current authors, who are themselves members of the association, were introduced to the conference participants and the intentions of the survey were also clearly explained to them. Interested participants completed the questionnaire. This process was repeated for two days for those who missed the first administration.

## Results

The results of the finding are presented below related to two major research questions.

### **Question 1: In terms of centrality to the role, how do Nigerian school counsellors' rate the five dimensions of counsellors' activities?**

Table 1 contains the mean ratings and standard deviations of Nigerian counsellors for each of the five dimensions of practice. The results indicate that Educational and Career Planning was rated highest of the five ( $M = 3.7$ ) dimensions of counsellors' activities by Nigerian counsellors. Nigerian counsellors rated Counselling Services as the 2nd ranked counsellors' activity ( $M = 3.5$ ). School counsellors' involvement in Prevention Programs ranked 3rd by Nigerian counselors ( $M = 3.4$ ). Counsellors' involvement in the Administrative Role was ranked fourth ( $M = 3.2$ ), while counsellors' involvement in Advocacy and Systemic Change ranked last ( $M = 2.9$ ).

### **Question 2: How do Nigerian counsellors' ratings of the five dimensions of practice compare to the other countries surveyed in the lead article?**

Table 1 reveals that in comparison to the other national groups Nigerian counsellors ( $M = 3.7$ ) and Kenyan counsellors ( $M = 3.7$ ) rated Educational and Career Planning as the most salient of the five dimensions of practice. In terms of Administrator Role, only the Nigerian counsellors considered administrative activities as appropriate for the role of a school-based counsellor ( $M = 3.2$ ). Counsellors from all of the other of nine countries considered administrative activities as inappropriate. Perhaps relatedly, Nigerian counsellors showed the lowest ratings of all the national groups ( $M = 2.9$ ) in terms of the importance of Advocacy and Systemic Improvement as a dimension of the school-based counsellor's role. It is also worthy to note that counsellors in Nigeria, Turkey, India and the United States rated Prevention Programs at the same level of importance ( $M = 3.4$ ) in terms of centrality to the role.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that Nigerian counsellors rated educational and career planning as the most important dimension of the role of counsellors (interestingly at the same level as Kenyan counsellors). Similarly, counsellors in Turkey, the United States, Costa Rica, and Venezuela also rated Educational and Career Planning as very appropriate. This finding reflects Nigeria's national educational policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014), which identifies career and educational counselling as the prime school-based counselling activity. In addition, this finding reflects recent national reforms in the secondary

school curriculum that increase the emphasis on careers in technology in the light of globalization. This reform has created the need for counsellors to assist students to identify emerging career opportunities and the related educational career paths.

The study also revealed that Nigerian counsellors considered Counselling Services as a very appropriate dimension of the role of school-based counsellors. Specifically, these activities include individual and group counseling. Nigerian counsellors' ratings were comparable with counterparts in the United States, Malta, Venezuela, South Korea, Turkey, China, and India. This finding is consistent with Lasode et al. (2017) that documented Nigerian counsellors' use of individual counselling in addressing issues of significant personal growth, decision-making, and other goals within a stressful student, academic environment. Similarly, Oluwatosin (2016), Lasode et al. (2017), and Willys (2017) have documented the widespread use of group counselling in Nigerian schools to help students adjust to problematic different situations and changing attitudes, values and behaviors.

The findings of this study also revealed that Nigerian school counsellors rated counsellors' involvement in providing Prevention Programs as an appropriate counselling activity. This finding corroborates the findings of Willys (2017) that documented the importance of the counsellors' role in the design and delivery of prevention programs for students in Nigerian schools. This finding may also reflect growing recognition of the need for school-based prevention programs to address issues such as bullying, scholastic underachievement, substance abuse and unconventional sectarian groupings (secret cult activities).

Administrator Role was rated an appropriate function and ranked fourth in terms of role centrality. In comparison with other countries in the lead article, only Nigerian counsellors rated administrative activities as appropriate, while others groups rated it as inappropriate. This finding is most probably related to the fact that school counsellors in many schools in Nigeria have been assigned ancillary administrative responsibilities. Many of them are appointed as vice principals and placed in charge of discipline even though this appointment may detract from their ability to effectively coordinate counselling activities in their schools. The widespread assignment of school counsellors in Nigeria to disciplinary roles is related to the historic lack of national educational policy specifying the roles of school counsellors has contributed to the uncertainty and ambiguities about the appropriate duties of school counsellors in Nigerian schools (Aluede, 2000; Aluede et al., 2005).

Similarly, it should be noted that Nigerian counsellors showed the lowest rating of all the national groups for the importance of the role of advocacy and systemic improvement activities. Further research is needed to understand this issue. At this point, we hypothesize that the widespread placement of counsellors in administrator roles that involve discipline, predisposes them to adopt a "pro-institution" perspective rather than a more student-centered

perspective that focuses on changing the institution to accommodate student needs.

In many ways, the practice of Nigerian school-based counsellors resembles that of other counsellors worldwide. The primacy of focus on the Educational and Career Counseling dimension reflects national needs and national educational policy. Both the viewpoint that administrative activities (including discipline) are appropriate for the school-based counsellor role and the relative lack of emphasis on advocacy and systemic improvement, probably reflect the widespread practice in Nigeria of assigning administrative responsibilities. The development of national policy on school-based counsellor role and appropriate activities is needed to assure that counsellors are better positioned to work effectively with students.

#### Author Note

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Table 1.

*Means and standard deviation for items for five dimensions of practice for ten countries*

Country	N	Counseling Services		Advocacy and Systemic Improvement		Prevention Programs		Administrator Role		Educational and Career Planning	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
USA	390	3.5	0.40	3.5	0.42	3.4	0.45	2.0	0.51	3.5	0.58
Malta	37	3.4	0.36	3.3	0.52	3.0	0.65	1.8	0.63	2.0	0.93
Costa Rica	107	3.1	0.47	3.2	0.47	2.7	0.56	1.9	0.50	3.2	0.69
Venezuela	30	3.1	0.45	3.1	0.48	2.8	0.59	2.1	0.52	3.1	0.74
South Korea	1687	3.7	0.32	3.1	0.54	2.9	0.63	2.4	0.72	3.3	0.59
Turkey	185	3.4	0.38	3.2	0.44	3.4	0.42	2.1	0.50	3.4	0.53
China	209	3.2	0.38	3.0	0.42	3.1	0.46	2.4	0.52	3.1	0.55
Kenya	47	3.6	0.47	3.1	0.48	3.1	0.47	2.3	0.62	3.7	0.66
Nigeria	176	3.5	0.34	2.9	1.02	3.4	0.54	3.2	0.51	3.7	0.50
India	45	3.6	0.58	3.4	0.69	3.4	0.72	2.4	0.60	3.3	0.76

*Note.* 1 = Very Inappropriate; 2 = Inappropriate; 3 = Appropriate; 4 =Very Appropriate