



Teachers Understanding and Implementation of Counselling Services in Primary Schools: Evidence from Shibuyunji District, Zambia

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Abstract

Counselling is an important component of learner support in primary education because it contributes to learners' academic, social, emotional and behavioural development. Teachers are often the first point of contact for learners experiencing academic difficulties, peer problems, family challenges, emotional distress and behavioural concerns. However, the effectiveness of school counselling depends considerably on teachers' knowledge, skills, training, institutional support and availability of appropriate resources. This study investigated teachers' understanding of counselling and its implementation in selected primary schools in Shibuyunji District, Zambia. Specifically, the study examined teachers' understanding of counselling, identified counselling services provided in primary schools, assessed how counselling services were implemented, investigated challenges affecting implementation, and proposed strategies for improving counselling provision. A descriptive survey design using a mixed-methods approach was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and observations from teachers, guidance teachers and headteachers. Of the 80 targeted respondents, 77 participated, representing a response rate of 96.3%. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, Pearson correlation and regression analysis, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings showed that respondents generally possessed good knowledge of counselling, with an overall mean score of 4.30. However, 67.5% had not received formal counselling training. Educational counselling (92.2%), behavioural counselling (88.3%) and personal-social counselling (81.8%) were the most commonly provided services. Counselling was mainly conducted monthly (39.0%) or weekly (36.4%), but implementation varied considerably among schools. Major challenges included inadequate training (77.9%), heavy workload (71.4%), inadequate resources (67.5%), limited time (63.6%) and insufficient administrative support (45.5%). A significant positive relationship was found between teachers' understanding of counselling and its implementation ($r = .672$, $p < .001$), while regression analysis indicated that the model explained 52.0%

of the variance in counselling implementation. The study concludes that teachers generally understand the importance of counselling, but inadequate professional preparation and institutional resources constrain effective implementation. The study recommends strengthened in-service training, structured school counselling programmes, provision of counselling facilities and materials, administrative support, and deployment of qualified counsellors.

Keywords: *counselling, teachers' understanding, counselling implementation, primary schools, learner support, Zambia*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Education extends beyond the transmission of academic knowledge. Contemporary schools are increasingly expected to support learners' academic, emotional, social, behavioural and psychological development. Within this broader educational mandate, counselling provides an important mechanism through which learners can receive assistance in understanding themselves, solving problems, making appropriate decisions and developing strategies for coping with challenges.

Counselling is generally understood as a professional helping relationship through which individuals are supported to understand themselves and their circumstances, make informed decisions and promote personal growth. Rogers (1951) emphasised empathy, acceptance and genuineness as essential conditions for effective helping relationships. Gibson and Mitchell (2008) similarly conceptualise counselling as a process that assists individuals in dealing with educational, vocational and personal concerns. In school settings, counselling can therefore support learners experiencing academic difficulties, behavioural

problems, peer pressure, family conflicts, emotional challenges and problems of adjustment.

The importance of counselling is particularly evident at primary school level. Primary school learners are undergoing significant social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. They may experience difficulties related to academic performance, peer relationships, family circumstances, discipline, self-esteem and decision-making. Appropriate counselling can help learners develop positive coping mechanisms, improve interpersonal relationships, enhance self-confidence and address behavioural and academic difficulties.

The Zambian educational context also recognizes the importance of guidance and counselling as part of learner support. Teachers interact with learners on a daily basis and are consequently strategically positioned to identify problems at an early stage. However, the original study notes that many teachers receive limited counselling preparation and may therefore lack the knowledge, skills and confidence required to provide effective counselling services. Schools may also experience shortages of counselling facilities, materials, specialist counsellors, time and institutional support.

These challenges raise an important question: To what extent do teachers understand counselling, and how effectively are counselling services implemented in primary schools? The present study addressed this question in selected primary schools in Shibuyunji District.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although counselling services are intended to support learners' academic, social, emotional and behavioural development, primary schools continue to experience problems such as absenteeism, bullying, poor discipline, emotional distress, low academic achievement and poor social adjustment. Teachers are expected to contribute to counselling provision, yet inadequate understanding of counselling principles, processes and techniques may compromise the quality of support provided to learners.

In addition, inadequate counselling facilities, shortages of counselling materials, limited time and insufficient teacher training may prevent schools from establishing effective counselling programmes. Despite the importance of counselling, limited research has specifically examined teachers' understanding and implementation of counselling in primary schools in Shibuyunji District. This study therefore sought to address this contextual gap.

1.3 Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Examine teachers' understanding of counselling in primary schools.

2. Identify counselling services provided in primary schools.
3. Assess how counselling services are implemented.
4. Investigate challenges affecting counselling implementation.
5. Suggest strategies for improving counselling services.

2. Literature Review

Counselling in schools serves several purposes, including improving academic achievement, supporting personal development, promoting social adjustment, preventing behavioural problems and enhancing emotional well-being. Academic counselling may assist learners with study skills, examination preparation, educational goals and learning strategies. Personal-social counselling addresses issues such as self-esteem, family relationships, peer relationships and behavioural problems. Career counselling can also introduce learners to occupational possibilities and help develop early educational aspirations.

School counselling can be delivered through individual counselling, group counselling, classroom guidance, assemblies, peer counselling and informal teacher-learner interactions. Effective counselling normally involves relationship building, identification of problems, goal setting, intervention and evaluation. The counselling relationship is particularly important because learners are more likely to disclose personal concerns when they feel accepted, respected and safe.

Rogers' (1951) Person-Centred Theory provided

the theoretical foundation for the study. The theory proposes that individuals have the capacity for growth and self-development when provided with supportive interpersonal conditions. Empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness are therefore central to effective helping relationships. The theory is particularly relevant to school counselling because teachers who demonstrate acceptance, understanding and respect can create conditions in which learners feel safe to discuss their concerns.

Empirical literature suggests that teachers often recognise the value of counselling but may lack specialised preparation. The study cites Mutie and Ndambuki (2011), who found that teachers appreciated counselling but lacked adequate professional training. Akinade (2012) similarly reported that teachers assigned counselling responsibilities often possessed limited counselling qualifications. Maree (2013) observed that counselling implementation in African schools is influenced by resources and teacher commitment.

The literature therefore reveals an important distinction between recognising the importance of counselling and possessing the professional competence required to implement counselling effectively. This distinction provides an important basis for interpreting the present findings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey design using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative

methods were used to obtain numerical information concerning teachers' understanding, training, available services and implementation practices, while qualitative methods provided deeper information through interviews and observations. The design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine existing practices and perceptions while also obtaining explanatory information from participants.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study targeted teachers, guidance teachers and headteachers in selected primary schools in Shibuyunji District. A total of 80 respondents were targeted, comprising 60 teachers, 10 guidance teachers and 10 headteachers. Seventy-seven respondents participated, giving an overall response rate of 96.3%. The response rates were 95% for teachers and 100% for both guidance teachers and headteachers.

Among the 77 respondents, 44 (57.1%) were female and 33 (42.9%) were male. The largest age group was 30–39 years (35.1%). Regarding teaching experience, 28.6% had 6–10 years of experience and 27.2% had more than 15 years, indicating that most respondents had substantial professional experience.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires, interview guides and observations were used to collect data. Permission was obtained from the relevant authorities and participating schools, while informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were observed.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and regression analysis. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically.

4. Results

4.1 Teachers' Understanding of Counselling

The findings demonstrated a generally high level of understanding of counselling. Respondents recorded a mean of 4.56 for the statement that counselling helps learners solve problems, 4.48 for promoting emotional well-being, 4.22 for the need for professional skills, 3.64 for the distinction between counselling and advice-giving, and 4.60 for the importance of confidentiality. The overall mean was 4.30.

The findings therefore indicate that teachers generally understood the purpose and principles of counselling. However, the relatively lower score concerning the distinction between counselling and advice-giving suggests an area requiring further professional development.

4.2 Counselling Training

A significant training gap was identified. Only 25 respondents (32.5%) reported having received formal counselling training, while 52 respondents (67.5%) had not received formal counselling training.

This finding is important because counselling requires skills that cannot necessarily be acquired through general teaching experience. Without formal training, teachers may understand the

general purpose of counselling but struggle with specialised techniques, confidentiality, ethical decision-making and referral of complex cases.

4.3 Counselling Services Provided

Educational counselling was the most commonly available service, reported by 92.2% of respondents. Behavioural counselling followed at 88.3%, while personal-social counselling was reported by 81.8%. Career guidance was available according to 57.1% of respondents, while group counselling was reported by 50.6%.

These findings indicate that schools mainly concentrated on immediate educational, behavioural and personal-social needs. Career guidance and group counselling appeared to receive comparatively less attention.

4.4 Implementation of Counselling Services

Counselling activities were conducted daily by 11.7% of respondents, weekly by 36.4%, monthly by 39.0%, and rarely by 13.0%. Thus, monthly and weekly counselling activities were the dominant implementation patterns.

Qualitative findings indicated that counselling was delivered through individual sessions, classroom guidance, assemblies and informal teacher-learner interactions. However, implementation was inconsistent, with some schools lacking structured programmes and relying heavily on individual teacher initiatives.

4.5 Availability of Counselling Resources

The findings revealed substantial resource limitations. Only 38% reported availability of counselling offices, while 62% indicated that counselling offices were unavailable. Counselling materials were available according to 41%, while 59% reported their absence. Counselling records were comparatively more available at 74%, while guidance notice boards were available in 57% of cases.

The absence of private counselling spaces is particularly significant because counselling often requires confidentiality and a safe environment.

4.6 Challenges Affecting Implementation

The most frequently reported challenge was lack of training (77.9%), followed by heavy workload (71.4%), inadequate resources (67.5%), lack of time (63.6%), and limited administrative support (45.5%).

Qualitative findings reinforced these results. Participants described inadequate training, limited counselling facilities and the difficulty of finding time for counselling because of teaching responsibilities. Participants nevertheless expressed positive attitudes towards counselling and believed that it helped learners with behavioural and emotional difficulties.

4.7 Relationship between Understanding and Implementation

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between teachers' understanding of counselling and counselling

implementation ($r = .672, p < .001$).

Regression analysis produced an R^2 of .520, indicating that the model explained 52.0% of the variation in counselling implementation. Teachers' understanding of counselling was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .482, p < .001$), followed by training ($\beta = .321, p = .003$) and resources ($\beta = .287, p = .006$).

5. Discussion

The first major finding was that teachers generally possessed good knowledge of counselling. The overall mean of 4.30 indicates that respondents understood counselling as a process that helps learners solve problems, promotes emotional well-being and requires professional skills. This finding is consistent with Mutie and Ndambuki (2011), who found that teachers generally recognised the importance of counselling.

However, the high level of conceptual understanding must be interpreted alongside the finding that 67.5% of respondents lacked formal counselling training. This indicates that awareness of counselling does not necessarily equate to professional counselling competence. Teachers may understand what counselling is intended to achieve but lack the specialised skills required to conduct counselling ethically and effectively.

This finding is consistent with Akinade (2012), who reported that teachers assigned counselling responsibilities often lacked appropriate professional qualifications. It also has direct relevance to Rogers' Person-Centred Theory.

Effective counselling requires empathy, acceptance and genuineness, but these qualities need to be supported by appropriate knowledge and practical skills.

The second major finding was that educational, behavioural and personal-social counselling were the most commonly provided services. This pattern is understandable in primary schools because learners frequently encounter academic difficulties, discipline problems, peer conflict and family-related challenges. Gibson and Mitchell (2008) emphasise that school counselling should address academic, personal-social and career development needs.

However, the comparatively low provision of career guidance deserves attention. Career development should not necessarily begin only at secondary school. Early exposure to occupational possibilities can contribute to learners' aspirations and educational motivation. Primary schools could therefore incorporate age-appropriate career awareness activities without turning them into formal vocational counselling.

The third finding concerned the frequency and structure of implementation. Although counselling occurred weekly or monthly in many schools, implementation was not fully institutionalised. Some schools relied on individual teachers rather than systematic school-wide programmes. This finding supports Maree's (2013) observation that counselling implementation in African educational contexts is influenced by teacher commitment and available resources.

The implication is that counselling should not depend solely on individual teacher initiative. Schools require structured programmes with designated responsibilities, schedules, referral procedures, documentation systems and monitoring mechanisms.

The fourth major finding concerned resource constraints. The lack of counselling offices and materials may seriously affect the quality of services. Counselling often involves sensitive personal information, and the absence of private spaces can discourage learners from disclosing their concerns. The lack of appropriate materials may also limit teachers' ability to conduct systematic counselling activities.

The fifth major finding was the strong relationship between teachers' understanding and implementation. The correlation coefficient of .672 indicates that teachers with stronger counselling knowledge were more likely to implement counselling effectively. The regression analysis further demonstrated that understanding was the strongest predictor of implementation.

This finding is theoretically consistent with Rogers' Person-Centred Theory. Teachers who understand the principles of empathy, acceptance, confidentiality and supportive relationships may be better positioned to establish meaningful counselling relationships with learners. The result also demonstrates that teacher training should be viewed as an investment in the quality of learner support rather than simply an additional professional requirement.

The qualitative findings strengthen this interpretation. Participants reported that counselling was valuable for reducing behavioural problems and helping learners feel supported when teachers listened to them. At the same time, participants emphasised that many teachers relied on personal experience rather than formal counselling knowledge.

Overall, the findings suggest a paradox: schools recognise the value of counselling and provide several counselling services, yet the systems required to deliver professional and consistent counselling remain underdeveloped.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The study has important implications for primary education in Zambia.

First, counselling should be treated as an integral component of learner support rather than an informal activity added to teachers' existing responsibilities. Schools should establish clear counselling structures and allocate appropriate time within school programmes.

Second, teacher education programmes need to strengthen counselling preparation. The fact that two-thirds of respondents had no formal counselling training demonstrates the need for systematic professional development. Pre-service teachers should receive theoretical and practical preparation in counselling, while practising teachers should have access to continuous professional development.

Third, schools require appropriate counselling infrastructure. At minimum, primary schools should have private spaces where confidential counselling conversations can take place. Counselling records, manuals and referral guidelines should also be available.

Fourth, schools should develop referral systems for cases that exceed teachers' competence. Teachers should not be expected to manage every learner problem independently. Complex cases should be referred to qualified counsellors or other appropriate professionals.

Finally, parents and communities should be involved. Learner problems often extend beyond the school environment, and effective support requires collaboration between schools, families and relevant community services.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that teachers in selected primary schools in Shibuyunji District generally possess a good understanding of counselling and appreciate its importance in supporting learners' academic, social and emotional development. However, this understanding is not matched by adequate professional preparation. The majority of respondents had not received formal counselling training.

Primary schools provide educational, behavioural and personal-social counselling, while career and group counselling are less commonly implemented. Although counselling activities occur weekly or monthly in many schools, implementation is

inconsistent and often depends on individual teacher initiative.

The major barriers are inadequate training, heavy workload, insufficient resources, limited time and inadequate administrative support. Most importantly, the study established a significant positive relationship between teachers' understanding of counselling and its implementation, with understanding emerging as the strongest predictor in the regression model.

Consequently, strengthening counselling in primary schools requires a systemic approach involving teacher preparation, institutional structures, adequate resources, administrative support and collaboration with parents and communities.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **The Ministry of Education should strengthen guidance and counselling policies** and provide clear implementation guidelines for primary schools.
2. **Regular in-service counselling training should be provided to teachers**, with emphasis on counselling techniques, confidentiality, ethics, referral procedures and child-centred counselling.
3. **Teacher training institutions should**

strengthen counselling components in pre-service teacher education and provide practical counselling experiences.

4. **Qualified school counsellors should be deployed to primary schools**, particularly where learner needs exceed the competencies of classroom teachers.
5. **School administrators should establish structured counselling programmes**, including counselling committees, scheduled counselling periods and systematic monitoring.
6. **Schools should provide private counselling offices and appropriate materials** to protect confidentiality and improve service quality.
7. **Teachers should participate in continuing professional development** and develop counselling competencies while recognising the boundaries of their professional role.
8. **Teachers should maintain confidentiality** and refer complex cases to appropriately qualified professionals.
9. **Parents and communities should collaborate with schools** in addressing learners' academic, behavioural, social and emotional needs.
1. **Further research should examine learners' perspectives** on counselling services, peer counselling, rural–urban differences, and the effect of counselling on academic performance.

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