

Evaluation of Students' Perception of School Counseling and Their Attitudes toward its Programs

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between perception and attitudes of 640 students toward school counseling and the distribution along sex, class, school location and socio-economic levels using the Students Perception and Attitude Questionnaire (SPAQ) as well as simple percentage, Pearson product moment and t-test techniques. Results showed that a significant relationship exists between perception and attitudes to school counseling. While there was a general low perception which reflected on attitudes, all the variables in the study except sex were found to be significant factors that influence perception as well as attitudes towards counseling.

Keywords: Evaluation; Perception; Counseling; Attitude

Introduction

Over the years, students' perception of school counseling and their attitudes to its programs has increasingly generated a great deal of concern among school counselors in many parts of the world [1-3]. The effectiveness of any counseling service has been attributed largely to the prevailing climate of opinion towards such a service [4]. Counselor's attitudes which reflect this opinion are indices of their willingness or otherwise to accept, patronize or utilize counseling services. Evidence from related literature reveals two basic attitudinal response patterns, those students whose attitudes are positive [4,5] and those whose attitudes are negative [6,7]. Although attitudes generally have cognitive, affective and behavioral characteristics, in this paper, it has been found convenient to conceptualize counselees' attitudes as a function of individual perception. In his study of some students in the USA, Harman [3] found that clients' attitudes to counseling relate to a range of factors, chief among them being individual perception. Burke and Bryan [5] add that if the perception of counseling is low or poor it is likely to elicit negative attitudinal response and result in a rejection of its programs. The opposite holds if their perception is high or good.

Theoretically guidance and counseling [8] has emerged as the third estate of the Nigerian School system [9]. It was adopted over a decade ago within the context of the 6-3-3-4 system of education because its comprehensive nature and overall philosophy encompass appreciation of the worth and dignity of the individual, realization of the individual differences among men and recognition of man's inherent rights to self-direction and choice. The introduction of any idea or programme as we are aware is bound to elicit some form of attitudinal response especially from the main recipients Form [4] has argued that the measurement of such attitudes is a key to the success of the programme. To my knowledge, not much research has been done on the subject of students' perception and their attitude, towards this special educational service despite the fact that its importance for individual and national development has long been recognized [10]. In this era of student extremism, activism and cultism in our schools and campuses there is increasing pressure on school counselors to justify

their relevance by designing appropriate and proven programs to meet the challenges posed by these negative tendencies. Violent and revolutionary student behavior gives birth to social problems that culminate in rape, murder, extortion, destruction of property, insecurity and general breakdown of law and order. Many people argue that counseling when properly adapted has a potential capacity to mediate students' excesses seen largely as a manifestation of lack of self-awareness, confused identity and personality maladjustment [11]. Their argument is predicated on the humane assumption that well-adjusted students are more likely to create positive and conducive environment for teaching and learning.

However, it must be acknowledged that school counseling as a strategy for moderating students' behavior, depends largely on the perception of students and the reaction it elicits. In other words, counseling in itself cannot effect any positive change without being accepted, patronized and utilized by students. And the school counselor whose success, according to Form [4], critically depends on the level of awareness of the counselees cannot expect to reap much from his endeavors without the knowledge of the prevailing, sentiments and prejudices that students have towards him and his programs. This perspective has greatly influenced the motivation to conduct this study. The burden of the present paper therefore is to report on an attempt to gain an insight into the nature of school counseling through the responses of selected secondary school students to questions related to school counseling programs. This is with a view to identifying some strengths and weaknesses in school counseling programs and provides some suggestions for improvement. Specifically, this study is directed at finding answers to the following questions.

How do students perceive school counseling and its programs?

To what extent does their perception shape their response?

How are the perception and its influence on student's reaction distributed across grades, sex, school location and socio-economic backgrounds?

Method

Subjects

The subjects for the study were Senior Secondary school students (SS I and SS II) selected from eight secondary schools in Cross River State 640 students (346 boys and 294 girls; 340 low and 300 high socio-economic levels. 350 urban and 290 rural; 360 senior and 280 juniors) were chosen from these schools through a stratified random sampling method to ensure that the selection was as representative of the various elements in the population area as possible. This category of students were used because it was reasonable to presume that given their levels in the schools they should have a fair knowledge of the happening in the school which may elude a casual observer or a new comer.

Procedure

The instrument for data collection was Students' Perception and Attitude Questionnaire (SPAQ) which was adopted and modified from the original one used by Uba [10]. The questionnaire made up of sixty-six items on the whole comprised three sections. Section A comprising six question was designed to elicit personal details or demographic data and sought intimation on age, sex, class, school location and parents occupational and educational attainment (use to determine Socio-economic status). Section B which dealt with perception, consists of thirty Likert type items (15 positive and 15 negative) focusing on several aspects of educational, personal-social and career guidance and counseling services. The last section, C made of thirty items (15 positive and 15 negative) concerned students attitudes towards some facets of school counseling programmes [12].

The questionnaire items which were rated on a five (5) point liker type scale that ranged from "strongly agree to strongly disagree were administered personally by the researcher and through the help of teachers within an interval of three months Scoring for sub scales B and C were in terms of awarding 5 points for strongly agree and 1 point for strongly disagree. Scores on agree and strongly agree were merged to give a single positive score for each student while the rest were merged to give a negative score. Thus the minimum score for a student for each sub scale was 30 points while the maximum score was 150 points. Any students who scored 75 or below was considered as being low with respect to perceptions or negative with regards to attitudes. While any student who obtained more than 75 was regarded as having high perception in sub scale B or positive attitudes in sub scale C.

Results

The main variables of the study were analyzed using simple percentage and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis while mean score for sex, class, school location and socioeconomic status were analyzed using t-test technique. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Groups	r	n	s	SD	t
Undifferentiated	rg. 36	346	143.15	16.48	1.71
Male	rm. 26	294	141.15	13.32	2.30
Female	rf. 31	300	181.55	19.72	10.08
High SES	rh. 44	340	178.31	17.63	12.18
Low SES	rl. 42	350	129.12	16.3	

Urban	ru. 43	290	119.12	9.54	
Rural	rr. 37	280	146.85	17.88	
Junior	rj. 42	360	162.43	14.43	
Senior	rs. 39				
r=p 0.05; df 638: 0.164					
r=p 0.05; df 6.38: 1.96					

Table 1: Correlation coefficients on perception of and attitude to counseling and t-test of significance of differences between scores for sex, class, school location and socio-economic status.

Variables	Perception		Attitudes	
Counseling programme	Low %	High %	Negative %	Positive %
EDUCATIONAL	87	13	79	21
Study skills/habit	80	20	81	19
Course choice/further studies	75	25	83	17
Under achievement	40	60	54	46
Scholastic failure	72	28	78	22
Registration Attendance	88	22	70	30
PERSONAL SOCIAL	73	27	81	19
Apathy needing motivation	84	16	80	20
Discipline	66	234	70	30
Emotional	80	20	76	24
Social conflicts	70	30	66	34
Home/Adult relationship	71	29	73	27
VOCATIONAL	84	16	79	21
Self-understanding in relation to job	54	46	60	40
Career information	60	40	58	42
Relating academics to career reparation				
Planning and placement				
Career choice				
Summary	71.8	28.2	72.5	27.5

Table 2: Response Pattern analysis of students' perception and attitude to school counseling programs rated in percentage (No. 640).

Discussion

According to the data presented in Table I, there is a significant relationship between perception and attitudes with regard to school counseling. This result agrees with the findings of Mclover [6]. Gibson [13], Form [4], Burk and Bryan [5], Herman [3] and Carney et al. [1]. These scholars in their respective studies discovered that clients perception of school Counseling influences their attitudes and subsequent willingness or otherwise to utilize its services.

While this result may not be regarded as conclusive evidence, the indication that clients' perception has impact on their attitudes is remarkable because it supports related theoretical views and the results of previous empirical studies on the variables. In particular, this serves to emphasize the importance of interrelationship between affective and cognitive functioning. It is logical to expect that a client will place

high premium on the type of service that meets his basic needs. Therefore, he must be affectively prepared or ready to accept the service and thus be willing to patronize it. Underlying this affective preparation is the knowledge and understating of the nature and meaning of such a service. The implication is that Counselees would certainly patronize Counseling services that they are aware of. Their attitudes to its programs would critically depend on the meaning they attach to such programs.

The response patterns analysis of students' perception and attitudes with regard to Counseling, after applying percentage rating are shown in Table II. The percentage rating indicates that 71.8% of the respondents have low perception of Counseling while 28.2% have high perception. Similarly, 72.5% of respondent have unfavourahie attitudes towards Counseling while 27.5% have favorable attitudes. This revelation is quite discouraging. This may imply that the level of awareness of most secondary school students in Cross River State with regard to Counseling is very low. The students did not exhibit characteristics that are indicative of youths actively thinking and handling their academic, personal, social and career-related needs with the aid of trained professionals. If the data is anything to go by it implies that a lot has to be done to raise the status of counseling in our schools so as to improve student's perception and attitudes to it. This is particularly necessary now that the Nigerian school system is being threatened by a plethora of social problems such as Secret cults, gangsterism and insecurity. Currently in Cross River State, some schools do not have full time professional counselors. In others where such staff exists they are saddled with duties outside their primary area of service. This means that on the one hand, students are unable to see the Counselor as desired and on the other hand, the counselor fails to function fully to provide the services required of him. Consequently, students' perception of Counseling is continually inhibited thereby giving rise to negative attitudes. In the same vein, some school Counselors lack self-assertiveness and motivation and so fail to establish the force of their presence by initiating relevant student-oriented programs to meet the basic needs of the students hence limiting the exposure of students to counseling.

While the finding as regard sex, shows a positive relationship between perception and attitudes of Counseling (boys $r=26$, girls $r=31$) it still suggests that there was no difference between male and female students when their mean scores were compared ($t=1.71$). This finding was at variance with the findings of earlier investigators [11,14,15] where boys significantly showed more favorable attitudes to Counseling than girls.

One plausible explanation could be that these authors dealt with only one variable (attitudes) while the present study examined the impact of perception on attitude. Even then if their perception was high definitely their attitude could have reflected it. There was a significant relationship between attitudes and perception of respondents from both low and high socio-economic backgrounds. However, when their mean scores were compared, respondents from high socio-economic background displayed a higher perception and more positive attitude towards Counseling than their Counterparts from low socio-economic backgrounds. This finding corroborates that of Cordry [16] but contrasts with that of Uba [15]. This finding may be attributed to the fact that the enhance backgrounds of respondents of high socio economic level have offered them more opportunities for interaction to enable them recognize and appreciate Counseling than their counterparts from low socio-economic backgrounds. In today, there is no gainsaying that parents from high socio-economic

backgrounds would want their children to maintain the status quo or even go higher. Such parents are prepared to invest their resources to ensure that their children have access to everything that would enhance their progress. If such parents know that counseling is a key to aiding their children maximize their chances in life they will go out for it. It is logical to assume that parents from low Socio-economic backgrounds also strive to see their children grow but the bottom line is the economic resources available at their disposal which determines their level of interaction with the environment and the contacts they make.

The significant difference between senior and junior students ($t=12.176$) on the one hand and between rural and urban ($t=10.08$) on the other is not unexpected. The mean score distribution for urban and senior students respectively are higher than those for rural and junior students. In other words, the location of the school (rural or urban) and class (Junior or Senior) are factors that affect perception an attitude to Counseling. The higher perception and favorable attitudes of students in schools in urban as compared to those in rural areas may be attributed to the fact that in Nigeria urban schools have more amenities and facilities compared to rural schools Many schools in the rural areas do not have professional school Counselors posted to them. Because of this, students are denied the opportunity of making contact with counseling which would have enabled them form opinions that would condition their attitudes. For senior students, the number of years in school compared to juniors vis-à-vis the pressure especially along the line of academic and career planning could have disposed them to seek for help from many sources including that of the school counselor. This is particularly pertinent since in Nigeria more attention is paid to the certificate year and the class immediately below it than other years in a school life. If this holds, it could have been responsible for their relative high perception and positive attitude compared to their junior counterparts.

Conclusion

Generally, a significant relationship was found to exist between secondary school students perception of school Counseling and their attitudes to its programs in Cross River State though a higher percentage of them were found to have low perception with the resultant negative attitudes. Factors such as location, number of years spent in school and socio-economic status were found to significantly influenced perception and attitudes to counseling. The Sex of the student was found to be insignificant with regard to perception of and attitudes towards counseling.

Recommendations

The relationship of students perception of Counseling and subsequent attitudes to this service are well established in this study. Therefore, it is necessary that efforts be made to raise the status of guidance and Counseling in our schools by posting full time Counselors to all schools. Apart from creating an enabling environment for such personnel to function properly, efforts should be made to inform students, principals, teachers and parents about the availability of this service. Essentially programs and activities may be organized to create awareness and encourage the use of counseling facilities. At present, a lack of awareness of Counseling and its potentials for students is prevalent in our schools but this trend could be reversed. Activities along this line should include talks on guidance services, displays of guidance materials, posters, and letters to parents, use of bulletin boards, private interviews, seminars, workshops and

conferences. This it is hoped would raise the level of perception and thus influence students attitudes to Counseling, an invaluable resources and facilitator of every child's progress.

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