

# Students' perception of the role of school counselling

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## Abstract

*School counselling is an important aspect in education. This paper evaluates students' perception of school counselling in Cameroon using a quantitative research design (Z test) with a purposive probability sample of 150 high school students from Bamenda Sub-division. Results reveal that school counselling is an integral part of the school programme, remains vital in the education of students, and students have an opinion of what the role of counselling should be. However, the analyses also reveal that school counselling does not influence students' educational and career choices; and that it offers little help in solving students' psychological problems. The findings of this study reveal fundamental structural and functional limitations of school counselling in Cameroon, and highlight the necessity of re-evaluating its methods, objectives, and quality of interaction with students.*

## Introduction

The roles of school counsellors have changed dramatically over time. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, school counsellors did not exist; rather teachers were using a few minutes of their day to provide students with vocational guidance (Bowers & Hatch, 2002, p. 6). In the early 1900s, an influx of various types of students in the public schools occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution, initiating the development of the school guidance movement. At this time, the purpose of the guidance counsellor was to avoid problem behaviours, relate vocational interests to curriculum subjects, and develop character. In the 1940s and 1950s, a popular model of school guidance that focused on directive counselling was being used in the schools. This model, developed by E.G. Williamson emphasized teaching skills and using information to solve problems. Albeit popular, Carl Rogers' nondirective approach to counselling gained recognition in the 1960s for its focus away from the problem and its emphasis on the relationship between counsellors and clients (Muro & Kottman, 1995). Today, school counsellors serve as leaders, effective team members, and an integral part of a student's educational program. School counsellors have "switched their emphasis from service-centred for some of the students to program-centred for every student" (Bowers & Hatch, 2002, p. 8). School counsellors address the needs of students through individual and group counselling, large group guidance, consultation, and coordination (ASCA, 1999). They help students to resolve or cope with developmental concerns. Employed in elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools, a school counsellor's work differentiates according to the developmental stages of their student population.

In high school, students are evaluating their skills, strengths, and abilities as they begin to plan for their future. High school is a time of both excitement and frustration. School counsellors help to ease students' decision-making process with regards to their future by providing them with support, encouragement, and career guidance. Counsellors at the high school level network with post-secondary schools and maintain a library of career and post-secondary options. It is important that students receive accurate information as well as concrete experiences in order to be productive and successful (ASCA, 1997).

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Since the 1960s, professional school counsellors have been taught the three “Cs” (Counseling, Coordination, and Consultation) as a way to define their role in the schools. The three Cs: counselling, coordination, and consultation, enable the school counsellor to provide a comprehensive guidance program (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994). In addition to the three Cs, (Gysbers and Henderson, 1994) introduced the roles of guidance, assessment, program management, and professionalism. However, these roles are now too limiting for they “no longer provide enough breadth and depth of scope for professional school counsellors to be effective” (Erford, 2003). The new vision encourages school counsellors to work as leaders, advocates, collaborators, counsellors and coordinators, and data utilizers (Erford, 2003).

According to a study carried out by Wells and Ritter (1979) in the United States on high school students, controversy surrounds the relationship between students and school counselling. More than four-fifths of the 550 students sampled would go to a school counsellor if they wanted to change class or determine graduation requirements. Only 4 percent of that number would go to a school counsellor with a personal problem. Furthermore, Shertzer and Stone (1981), point out that:

*Because the few reports on this issue are conflicting, it is difficult to determine how students view school counsellors. Most of the studies carried out to determine the opinion of American high school students conclude that students do not view school counselling as an effective source of help except in the area of education-vocational decision making. The painful, but more profitable view might be that students are willing to see others risk themselves to this service, but that they are reluctant to place themselves in a similar situation. This is so perhaps because school counselling programmes have failed to convey to students feelings of acceptance and understanding.*

School counselling in Cameroon focuses mainly on “guidance” of students, that is, Assessment, Information and Advice. Furthermore school counsellors in Cameroon perform very little of their authentic traditional roles, and practically none of their modern assignments. The purpose of this study is to evaluate high school students’ perceptions of the role of school counselling. This will help school counsellors better understand how to address students’ changing academic, vocational, and psychological needs. Secondly, the findings of this work will be instrumental in facilitating an in-depth transformation of the school counselling services in Cameroon, in order to make them become an integral and efficient partner of the educational system.

### **Methodology**

The research design adopted for this study is the evaluative survey method, which seeks to discover the perception students have of the role of school counselling. The population for this study includes all Cameroonian high school students. The sample is made up of 150 high school students from the Bamenda Sub-Division of Cameroon. The purposive sampling technique is used for this study for the following reasons:

1. Bamenda is one of the towns in Cameroon having many high schools;
2. Colleges in Bamenda have a long history of interaction between counselling services and students.

The instrument for data collection is a questionnaire made up of five main questions, some of which were close-ended to facilitate answering and scoring, and others open-ended to enable provision of supplementary information. The items in the questionnaire included personal data, educational, vocational and psychological counselling, and personal opinions of students in relation to school counselling. Data analysis was through the Z test at a 5% level of significance.

## **Analysis and Findings**

This section presents the response to the questions in the questionnaire distributed to the students, and then analyses the responses.

The first question was to know if school counselling is an integral part of the school programme. To this question, 72.8% of the students affirm that school counselling is an integral part of the school programme, with 27.2% disagreeing to this assertion. Why should slightly more than a third of the respondents say school counselling is not an integral part of the school programme, especially since the government of Cameroon has instituted a policy of allocating at least one counsellor per government school? I think two factors could account for this situation:

Firstly, School counsellors cannot be fully effective when they are taken away from vital counselling tasks to perform non-counselling functions. For instance, in many schools in Cameroon, the school counsellor is assigned to fulltime teaching of courses based on his/her academic background. This time consuming responsibility makes students perceive the counsellor as any other “teacher”.

Secondly, many students who are repeating GCE Advanced Level exams in the schools under study came from either lay or mission schools which do not have counselling services. It is therefore most likely that the 27.2% of respondents who say counselling is not an integral part of the school programme come largely from this group of students who have never been exposed to counselling services before.

The second question sought to know if school counselling influences students' choice of high school programmes. To this question, 76.9% of the respondents said school counselling does not influence their choice of programmes, while only 3.1% of the respondents choose academic programmes based on the school counsellors' decision. This can be explained by the following factors:

Firstly, since counselling services in Cameroon do not assist students in choosing GCE Ordinary Level subjects, it is most likely that students will choose high school courses based on their own without any professional opinion. The students mostly rely on non-professional advice or personal intuition. This is justified by the fact that 87.6% and 7.8% of the respondents count respectively on personal and parental influence in making choices for academic courses.

Secondly, school counselling in Cameroon is only a few decades old and thus there is need for modernization of its services, methods, objectives, and training of its personnel in modern school counselling approaches.

Thirdly, information sessions on high school series are carried out periodically, and not in all levels at secondary school, leading to the fact that students do not have a “sustained culture” of academic orientation. They thus have a “spurious and hazy” perception of the role of school counselling in the latter perspective. Students therefore make decisions at this level that are based more on self-prestige, peer pressure, subjective family positions, and performance in class tests and exams, than on advice from professional counsellors.

When asked if school counselling influences students' career choices, about three quarters of the respondents said they decide for themselves what career to pursue; 15.5% said they are influenced by their parents, and only 9.3% said they choose careers based on professional advice from the school counsellor. The aforementioned scenario can be accounted for by the following reasons:

To begin with, the school counselling services in Cameroon cover mostly government secondary and high schools, with their scope being limited to schools in and around major cities. This therefore limits the number of students who are exposed to the counselling services.

Again, children in Cameroon grow up with a “triple career stereotype” namely “medical doctor, engineer, and lawyer”, which are professions traditionally associated with social prestige. The influence of the latter still persists even against the objective evidence of students' real aptitudes, innate intelligences, and academic performance.

Furthermore, school counselling assessment tests are hardly accompanied by placement, follow up of high school students. This, in addition to the lapses by school counsellors in mastery of contemporary labour market demands, can account for why most students are self-motivated in making their career choices.

Finally, family and peer pressures also play an important role in determining the career choices that high school students make. The non-negligible strength of the former on individual decision making in Cameroon cannot be underestimated. In other words, to be conformist and avoid a sense of moral anxiety, students give in to the idealized career choices imposed on them by elder siblings and parents, who are generally thought to be more knowledgeable about career issues.

Question four was to find out if school counselling offers the necessary assistance in solving students' emotional problems. The statistics of the study project the fact that school counsellors do not really provide the assistance needed by students when dealing with emotional issues. Nearly all the students (93.7%) say they consult discipline masters, priests, their class teachers, friends, and relatives when they experience emotional problems, while only 6.3% of the respondents contact the school counsellor in such cases. This can be justified by certain factors:

Firstly, Cameroonian school counsellors usually engage in non-counselling tasks, like that of acting as administrators or classroom teachers. This change of role alters students' perception of the school counsellor's role. Rather than seeing the school counsellor as someone who should provide supportive services, students view the school counsellor as a disciplinarian or a teacher as any other.

Secondly, students are not really aware of whom a school counsellor is, and the role they play in schools. They need to be convinced that school counsellors are professionally trained personnel who are more skilled than friends, discipline masters, and relatives in addressing students' emotional problems.

Thirdly, school counsellors in Cameroon usually do not have spacious offices to carry out the sensitive task of managing students' emotional problems. In this respect, school counsellors need substantial logistic support from school administration, in order to operate according to their professional deontology which prescribes absolute confidentiality in respecting the rights of student clients.

When asked if they have an opinion of what school counselling should be, 89.2% of the respondents effectively said they have an opinion whilst 10.8% have no idea of what school counselling should be. The 89.2% who have an opinion concerning school counselling role in educational, vocational and psychological counselling of students, expressed the following views:

82.2% of the 89.2% state that the role of school counselling in this domain is to permit them select the right series based on their past performances in conjunction with psychological test results. This population strongly approves of the role of school counselling in determining students' choice of high school programmes. School counselling should also advice students on how to study, provide them with information on high school entry requirements, while laying emphasis on key subjects. It should be noted that in Cameroon, the latter include mathematics, physics, English language, biology, and geography.

81.4% of the respondents expressed an opinion concerning the role of school counselling in career choices. To them, the role of school counselling in the latter domain should be to provide students with updated information concerning the requirements, advantages, and constraints related to particular professions. The school counsellors should be able to make forecasts about contemporary labour market trends, and not impose short term perspectives on students. Furthermore, according to the students, school counselling should be a medium for sensitizing parents, friends, relatives, and the general public on the specificity of the role of school counsellors. Finally, students expressed the point of view that school counselling should advise them on career choices, based on their total performance, and not solely from the results of isolated tests.

In the sphere of psychological counselling, 66.7% of the students expressed the opinion that school counselling could effectively help in managing student's emotional issues. According to them, the ideal counsellor should be gentle, caring, and capable of putting students at their ease. The school counsellor, they say, should act as an impartial mediator between students, the administration, and parent teacher association.

## **Discussion**

At this juncture, I will like to ask what accounts for the fact that, on the one hand students generally have a positive perception of the ideal roles of school counselling (as seen in the responses to question five) while on the other hand they do think counselling is not an integral part of the school programme, and that it offers little assistance in the academic, vocational and psychological counselling of students (as the responses to the first four questions clearly indicate). Responding to this concern, I will assume that the limitations of school counselling highlighted by this study are incumbent on its objectives, methods, structure, and personnel. The way forward for school counselling in Cameroon can be envisaged by primarily highlighting currents limitations, and then projecting recommendations.

The present study reveals the following limitations of the school counselling services:

1. The functional autonomy of school counselling services is compromised since they are dependent on provincial delegations of national education, with subsequent inertia generated by bureaucratic complexities. For example, a running budget is allocated to the school counselling services by the provincial delegation, according to the priorities and timing of the latter. This fact limits the creativity, degree of initiative, and possibilities for innovation that can be displayed by school counselling in the discharge of its academic, vocational and psychological counselling of students.
2. Logistic limitations are chronic, in that school counsellors do not usually have the privacy of spacious, individual offices. In most cases they are forced to share space with other colleagues who are non-counsellors. School counsellors lack updated tests, stationery, and transport. The latter is a vital fact, in that it effectively limits the scope of school counselling to secondary and high schools in and around major cities.

3. School counsellors have neither a specific public status nor career evolution profile. They are fused with teachers for convenience, and this indefinitely. This latter fact has far-reaching consequences in relation to how stakeholders of school counselling perceive and treat school counsellors. An example of this is the fact that school counsellors sent to secondary and high schools are usually given courses to teach full time by principals, thereby suppressing the fundamental role of the former. The paradox that arises from this situation is that in issues of students' discipline, the opinion of school counsellors is hardly sought. This also goes to explain why school counsellors transformed into "teachers-administrators" can hardly be perceived by students as sources for professional advice in their academic, vocational and psychological issues.
4. In the area of vocational counselling, students are generally oriented in relation to short term national socioeconomic priorities. The natural aptitudes, intelligences of students are hardly taken into consideration, since job security and stability as against opportunity, growth, and self-fulfilment is emphasized.

This study highlights certain areas in which there should be fundamental changes in the Cameroonian school counselling system, for the latter to be a sustainable, positively perceived and efficient medium for creative academic, vocational and psychological orientation of students in general, and high school students in particular. These are listed below.

- There is the fundamental need for the revision of the status of school counsellors by the ministry of public service and state reforms. This implies that this category of professionals should be recognized as a distinct and unique corps, with its specific career profile and institutionalized terms of reference.
- School counselling in Cameroon has to literally make a "quantum leap" in terms of redefinition of its intrinsic roles. The latter have to "jump" from traditional "assessment-information-advice" to the contemporary vision which encourages school counsellors to work as leaders, advocates, collaborators, counsellors and coordinators, and data utilizers (Erford, 2003).
- In educational counselling, it is ideal to assign counselling services at all levels of the educational system, with their own offices, equipment and trained staff. School counsellors as leaders should help all students gain access to rigorous academic preparation that will lead to increased academic achievement, and ultimately, greater opportunities. Additionally, they should work to close the existing achievement gap between poor or underachieving students, and their more advantaged peers (Bowers & Hatch, 2002). School counsellors should strive to remove the barriers that may be hindering students from succeeding, by providing students with organisational skills, study skills, and test-taking skills.
- At the level of vocational counselling, school counselling should be a talent searching service from primary school level. The service should constantly keep abreast changing socioeconomic conditions, whilst having at the same time a projective vision of future labour market trends. The purely materialistic approach to career orientation motivated solely by a breadwinning ideology, should be transcended into a more holistic and creative vocational counselling perspective.
- In psychological counselling, the school counsellor by virtue of his academic and professional background is the most appropriate person to handle cases of motivational, emotional and adjustment difficulties, which affect students' academic output and social integration.
- In order for school counselling to be positively perceived by students, and to efficiently carry out its academic, vocational and psychological functions, it is important that this service works with all stakeholders, inside and outside of the

school system. This attitude will encourage collaboration, mutual respect, and thus develop a team effort to work. Administrators, teachers, and parents are three of the primary stakeholders vital to supporting the school counsellor. These stakeholders influence the roles that school counsellors fulfil. For instance, most often the school counsellor is supervised by the principal. If the counsellor's principal does not have a complete understanding of the school counsellor's role, the school counsellor may be expected to perform non-counselling functions. In this case, it is the school counsellor's responsibility to educate the principal. Likewise, teachers can be hesitant to invite the school counsellor into their classroom for guidance lessons. By encouraging team work and collaboration, school counsellors will develop a sense of unity among students, staff, parents, and community members. Overall, effective working relationships with stakeholders will enhance the perception the latter have of school counselling.

## **Conclusion**

For school counselling in Cameroon to be positively perceived by students, it should become an integral part of school programmes. The irregular model of school counselling should be substituted with the "career model" as advocated by D.E. Super in his theory of professional development. This theory emphasizes that jobs and people evolve, and society is dynamic, with constant interaction of all its elements. School counselling can no longer be a unique occurrence, as much as a lifelong process. It cannot be reduced to a system of mechanical collection and dissemination of information, but as a creative enterprise that takes into consideration the total personality of students. This implies a collaborative, harmonious interaction between all stakeholders of the educational system, in the elaboration, execution, and constant re-evaluation of the school counselling process.

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