

Experiences of Untrained School Counsellors in Practicing Sub Skills of Counselling on their Pupil-Clients Zambia.

Prof. Daniel Ndhlovu, Judith T.H. Zimba

University of Zambia-IDE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the experiences of untrained school counselors in Zambia as they navigated the practice of essential counseling sub-skills with their pupil-clients. Through interviews with 12 untrained school counselors, this study uncovered the intricacies of practicing sub-skills such as sitting squarely, maintaining open posture, appropriate leaning, cultural sensitivity in maintaining eye contact, and achieving a relaxed posture. The findings illuminated the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, highlighting the critical need for comprehensive training programs that encompass both the theoretical underpinnings and practical execution of counseling skills. The study further explored practical strategies to overcome these challenges, including the use of adjustable furniture, visual reminders, role-playing exercises, the 'three-second rule' for eye contact, and pre-session relaxation techniques. Recommendations from the study emphasized the importance of implementing comprehensive training programs, promoting continuous professional development, enhancing counseling environments, fostering a support network among counselors, and regularly evaluating and adapting counseling practices. This research contributed to the discourse on the vital role of school counselors in supporting student well-being and underscored the need for structured professional development to equip counselors with the necessary skills for effective practice.

Keywords: guidance, counseling, sub-skills, untrained counselors.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

School counselling in Zambia is relatively new, having started in the 1980s. It was mainly practiced in special schools, such as those for the visually impaired and hearing impaired. Later, the law and the school curriculum incorporated guidance and counselling as a subject and school activity, respectively, in 1992. Counselling in educational settings is essential for the well-being and success of students. It involves addressing the holistic development of pupils, encompassing not only their academic needs but also their socio-emotional challenges (Whiston and Quinby, 2019). Counselling in educational settings is crucial for student well-being and success. The holistic development of pupils addressing not only their academic needs but also their socio-emotional challenges (Whiston and Quinby, 2019). Hence, school counsellors plays an important role in providing this support. The quality and effectiveness of counselling are significantly influenced by the training and expertise of the counsellors (ASCA, 2012). In many parts of the world, including Zambia, there has been a raise in the demand for school counsellors to address the increasing socio-emotional and psychological challenges among pupils (Chireshe and Shumba, 2011). However, not all school counsellors have formal training in counselling sub-skills, raising concerns about the quality and effectiveness of counselling offered (Jordaan and Fourie, 2018).

Historically, the role of school counsellors, especially in African countries like Zambia, was largely based to academic and career guidance (Bisika et al., 2009). It was only in the late 20th and early 21st century that the need for comprehensive socio-emotional support became increasingly recognized (Geldard et al., 2011). As

societal challenges evolved, including factors like poverty, increasing mental health issues, and societal changes, the importance of well-rounded counselling in schools became more evident (Chireshe, 2011). However, as the need for counselling expanded, so did the gap between the required professional support and available trained counsellors.

Zambia, like many other nations, experienced this widening gap. Initiatives to provide formal training in counselling to educational professionals were slow to develop, resulting in many schools relying on untrained or inadequately trained staff to fulfill counselling roles (Chireshe and Shumba, 2011). The experiences of these untrained school counsellors, especially in regions like Lundazi District, provide important insights into the challenges faced by schools and the potential risks to student well-being.

Studies have shown the importance of trained school counsellors in improving student well-being, academic achievements, and overall socio-emotional development (Whiston and Quinby, 2019; ASCA, 2012). Methodologies in these studies often comprised mixed methods, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, to know both the breadth and depth of counselling impacts. In African contexts, studies like those by Chireshe (2011) and Nweze and Okolie (2013) shed light on the challenges faced by counsellors, many of whom may lack formal training, in addressing different issues moving from societal changes to personal traumas. These studies usually utilized qualitative methodologies, employing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to capture rich, significant experiences.

However, a limitation exists in literature as the lack of specific focus on the experiences and strategies of the untrained school counsellors themselves (Jordaan and Fourie, 2018). Many studies have either broadened their scope to include all school counsellors or narrowed it to assess the effectiveness of counselling sessions, often overlooking the unique struggles and triumphs of those without formal training. The Zambian Ministry of Education highlights the importance of guidance and counselling services in schools (Ministry of Education, 2013), the implementation on the ground, particularly in remote areas like Lundazi, is less than ideal. The practice of counselling is different and consists of various sub-skills such as active listening, empathy, connection building, and problem-solving, among others (Egan, 2013). These skills are developed and based through serious training and practice. However, untrained school counsellors might find it challenging to employ these sub-skills effectively, possibly compromising the quality of counselling provided (Ng'andu, 2010).

Understanding the experiences of untrained school counsellors in Lundazi District could offer important insights into their challenges, coping strategies, and support needs. This research was crucial for designing interventions and policies that can bridge the training gap and ensure that pupils receive the best possible guidance and support. In the absence of proper training, untrained counsellors might unknowingly employ techniques that are not productive or even harmful. For instance, Rogers (2016) showed the role of unconditional positive regard and empathy as fundamental to therapeutic relationships. Without understanding these, counsellors might misguide pupils, leading to potential harm.

Several more areas of concern arise when considering untrained school counsellors: considering untrained school counselors, several more areas of concern emerge beyond the challenges related to practicing sub-skills. One significant concern revolves around the lack of formal training, which may leave counselors unaware of the ethical guidelines that govern the profession. Situations involving confidentiality breaches, navigating dual relationships, or managing potential harm to pupils can present profound ethical dilemmas for untrained practitioners.

The absence of formal training puts untrained counselors at risk of misinterpreting or misunderstanding ethical standards, leading to unintended breaches or violations. Furthermore, without adequate training, counselors may struggle to recognize and address cultural differences sensitively, inadvertently causing harm or offense to pupils from diverse backgrounds.

Remley and Herlihy (2016) underscore the critical importance of formal training in ethical decision-making and cultural competence within the counseling profession. Without proper training, counselors may lack the

necessary knowledge and skills to navigate complex ethical scenarios effectively, leading to potential legal repercussions and emotional distress for both counselors and their clients. The absence of formal training poses significant risks for untrained school counselors, including ethical breaches, cultural insensitivity, and legal liabilities. Addressing these concerns requires a comprehensive approach to counselor education, encompassing not only technical skills but also ethical principles and cultural competence training to ensure the well-being of both counselors and their clients.

Looking into the experiences of these counsellors, the study aimed to unearth both the challenges faced by them. The ultimate goal was to show the path forward, ensuring that every student has access to effective and empathetic counselling, regardless of where they are studying.

Objectives of the Study

1. To Describe experiences of untrained school counsellor in practicing sub skills of counselling on their pupil-clients
2. To Establish how to address challenges faced by untrained school counsellor in practicing subskills of counselling on their pupil-clients

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For a study focused on the experiences of untrained school counselors in Zambia and their practice of counseling subskills with pupil-clients, a singular theoretical framework that can provide profound insights and guide the investigation is Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory, specifically the concept of person-centered therapy. This theory is chosen for its emphasis on the counselor-client relationship, and its foundational belief in the importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence in facilitating personal growth and healing.

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory illuminates the foundational aspects of the counseling relationship, emphasizing the significance of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence as pivotal conditions for fostering therapeutic change. This theory provides an essential framework for analyzing the challenges and dynamics encountered by untrained school counselors in Zambia, offering insights into the impact of their practices on pupil-clients.

Empathy within this context is understood as the counselor's ability to deeply understand and reflect the feelings and thoughts of the pupil, seeing the world from the pupil's perspective. This empathetic engagement is not merely an act of listening but involves a profound connection that conveys to the pupil a sense of being truly heard and understood. For untrained counselors, achieving this level of empathy without formal guidance or education can be challenging. The study would explore how these individuals navigate the complexities of empathetic engagement, identifying the nuances and potential gaps in their ability to connect with pupils on this profound level.

Unconditional Positive Regard is another cornerstone of Rogers' theory, emphasizing the importance of accepting and valuing the pupil without judgment. This condition promotes a therapeutic environment of safety and trust, encouraging pupils to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of rejection or condemnation. The absence of training may affect counselors' capacity to consistently maintain this nonjudgmental stance, particularly when confronted with behaviors or attitudes that challenge their personal values or beliefs. The study aims to uncover how untrained counselors manage to uphold unconditional positive regard and the effects of any inconsistencies on the counseling relationship and pupil outcomes.

Congruence, or authenticity, in the counselor's interactions is vital for establishing trust and rapport with the pupil. It involves the counselor being genuine and transparent, aligning their external expressions with their internal feelings and thoughts. This authenticity helps to model honest communication and encourages pupils to engage in the counseling process with openness and trust. For untrained counselors, embodying

congruence can be complicated by insecurities regarding their counseling abilities or uncertainty about their role, potentially leading to a less effective counseling dynamic. The investigation will delve into how these counselors navigate the challenge of being congruent and the implications for their effectiveness and the therapeutic alliance.

By applying Rogers' Humanistic Theory as a lens to examine the experiences of untrained school counselors in Zambia, the study not only highlights the importance of these core conditions in creating a conducive counseling environment but also brings to light the specific challenges faced by counselors lacking formal training. This analysis will provide a detailed understanding of the ways in which empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence manifest in the practices of untrained counselors, offering valuable insights into the potential areas for intervention and support. Ultimately, this approach underscores the critical need for comprehensive training programs that equip counselors with the necessary skills and knowledge to foster therapeutic relationships that support the well-being and personal growth of their pupil-clients.

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory will help the study by providing a structured framework to assess the critical elements of effective counseling that may be compromised due to a lack of training. It will enable an in-depth analysis of how untrained counselors attempt to navigate the complexities of the counseling relationship without the foundational skills that are essential for promoting positive outcomes in pupil-clients. Furthermore, by identifying the gaps and challenges in providing empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence, the study can recommend targeted interventions and training programs. These programs would aim to equip untrained counselors with the necessary skills and knowledge to improve their counseling practices, thereby enhancing the support provided to Zambian students.

In summary, applying Humanistic Theory to this study on untrained school counselors in Zambia offers a focused approach to understanding the nuances of counseling relationships in educational settings. It underscores the vital role of counselor training in ensuring the effectiveness of counseling interventions and supports the development of strategies to address training deficiencies, ultimately contributing to the betterment of pupil welfare and counseling services in schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Only qualitative was collected hence a case study design was used.

Population, Sample and Sampling techniques

A total of 12 participants were involved in the study, which included only 12 untrained counselors. Only purposive sampling were used in the study to select the 12 untrained counselors.

Data Collection Instruments

Interview guides were used to collect qualitative data while questionnaire were used to gather quantitative data respectively.

Data Analysis

In this study only thematic analyses was used.

FINDINGS

Experiences of untrained school counsellor in practicing sub skills of counselling on their pupil-clients

The first research question sought to find out the Experiences of untrained school counsellor in practicing sub skills of counselling on their pupil-clients. When the question was asked, the following themes emerged;

challenges in practicing sitting squarely, struggles with open posture, the natural move to lean towards the client, cultural sensitivity in maintaining eye contact, the impact of posture and ways on counseling effectiveness.

Experiences in practicing Sitting Squarely

The experiences of Practicing Sitting Squarely came to light during a thought-provoking discussion, where counselors openly shared their important experiences and insights. One of the counselors stated: "The concept of sitting squarely has been touched upon in various workshops, but I often find it challenging to maintain this posture consistently. There are moments when I naturally incline away from direct alignment with the student".

Experience in practicing open posture

The experiences of counselors regarding open posture was a direct outcome of the open discussions held within the session. One of the counselors openly acknowledged, "I have to admit, there are times when I find myself crossing my arms unintentionally. It's not a deliberate choice, but rather a comfort habit that occasionally takes over" Counselors shared a common recognition that while they possessed the knowledge of open posture's importance, translating it into practical application posed a considerable challenge.

Experience in natural inclination to lean towards the client

During the discussion, the experiences regarding inclination to lean towards the client emerged as counselors shared their experiences and insights. One counselor noted: "I've noticed that I tend to lean in when a student is really opening up about something. It's like a natural reaction."

Experience in cultural sensitivity in maintaining eye contact

The experiences regarding of cultural sensitivity in maintaining eye contact emerged from the discussions. One counselor shared: "I try to make eye contact, but I'm always mindful of cultural backgrounds. Some pupils may find it uncomfortable, so I adjust accordingly".

Experience in posture and development on counseling

During the discussion, the experiences on posture emerged as counselors shared their experiences and reflections. One counselor recounted, "I had this one session where I was really stressed, and it showed in my posture and tone. I could tell the student was uncomfortable." Another counselor responded, "I had a similar experience. It's amazing how the ways can affect the pupils. It's a reminder that the researcher need to work on ourselves too."

How to address challenges faced by untrained school counsellor in practicing subskills of counselling on their pupil-clients

The third research question sought to find out the how to address challenges faced by untrained school counsellor in practicing subskills of counselling on their pupil-clients. It was found that certain practical strategies can be used to overcome challenges these included: implementing adjustable furniture, using visual reminders, engaging in role-playing, applying the 'three-second rule' for eye contact, and conducting pre-session relaxation exercises.

Effective sitting arrangements

During the discussion, the counselors acknowledged that effective sitting arrangements were essential in creating a conducive counseling environment. One counselor clearly pointed out, "Sometimes I feel like we're not on the same level, literally. Finding the right chair is a small thing that makes a big difference."

The counselor's observation reflects the need of the physical environment in counseling. When counselors and pupils are not seated at the same level, it has potential to make pupils feel uncomfortable.

Developing an open posture

In the discussion, counselors openly acknowledged the challenge they faced in maintaining an open posture during counseling sessions. One counselor reflected on their efforts, stating, "I've started using reminders around the room to uncross my arms. It's about becoming self-aware." However the discussion produced a promising solution to the challenge of developing an open posture.

Appropriate leaning

The discussion led to a positive solution for addressing the challenge of appropriate leaning. The counselors recognized the effectiveness of mirroring body language but emphasized the need for guidance and training to refine this skill. A counselor also suggested that: "Through role-playing and practical exercises, we can enhance the ability to naturally and effectively mirror the clients' body language. This can contribute to a more empathetic and engaged counseling experience".

Balanced eye contact

In the discussion, several counselors opened up about their struggle with maintaining appropriate eye contact during counseling sessions. One counselor shared a specific technique, saying, "I use the 'three-second rule' — look, hold for a moment, then look away. It's less intense." This statement shows the counselors' awareness of the challenge and their proactive efforts to address it. The 'three-second rule' reflects their attempt to strike a balance between making eye contact and preventing it from becoming too intense or uncomfortable for the pupil-client.

Achieving a relaxed posture

In the discussion, counselors shared their challenges in maintaining a relaxed posture during counseling sessions. One counselor described their approach, saying, "Breathing exercises before sessions help me relax, so my posture is more natural and less forced." This insightful statement highlights the counselor's personal strategy to address the issue. They recognize the importance of relaxation in achieving a natural and approachable posture. By sharing this experience, the counselor contributes to an important discussion on managing a relaxed posture.

DISCUSSION

Experiences of untrained school counsellor in practicing sub skills of counselling on their pupil-clients

The experience in practicing sitting squarely emerged during the discussion with untrained counselors, shedding light on their experiences and difficulties in applying this particular sub-skill. The challenges faced by untrained counselors in consistently practicing sitting squarely echo findings from previous research. Anderson and Jackson (2020) delved into the phenomenon of inconsistent counselor behavior and its repercussions on the client's experience. Their study shed light on instances where counselors encountered difficulties in adhering to the ideal practice of sitting squarely during counseling sessions, leading to potential implications for the perceived level of engagement and attentiveness in counseling interactions.

However, their findings suggest that counselors may encounter challenges in consistently embodying these practices, potentially hindering the establishment of a supportive and conducive counseling environment. The parallels between the challenges identified in the current observations and Anderson and Jackson's research highlight the universality of certain issues encountered by counselors across different contexts. The struggle to maintain sitting squarely can be attributed to various factors, including individual habits, cultural norms, and levels of awareness regarding non-verbal communication.

Drawing attention to these challenges, both studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in counselor-client interactions and underscore the importance of ongoing training and professional development initiatives to support counselors in honing their non-verbal communication skills. Additionally, they emphasize the need for counselors to cultivate self-awareness and mindfulness in their practice, enabling them to consciously embody behaviors that promote rapport, trust, and engagement in counseling sessions. In a similar vein, research conducted by Smith and Brown (2021) delved into the challenges encountered by untrained counselors and explored potential solutions within the realm of school counselor training. Their findings shed light on the common struggle faced by untrained counselors in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application in counseling settings. One notable area where this difficulty becomes apparent is in the practice of sitting squarely during counseling sessions.

Addressing challenges faced by untrained school counsellor in practicing subskills of counselling on their pupil-clients

The theme of effective sitting arrangements uncovered during the discussion underscores the counselors' awareness of the significant role the physical environment plays in shaping the counseling experience. Finding the right chair is a small thing that makes a big difference, knowing the different impact of seating arrangements on the set up of the counselor-pupil relationship. This finding resonates with the research conducted by Garcia and Martinez (2021) in Spain, which underscores the significance of a conducive physical setting for facilitating effective counseling sessions. The Spanish study specifically emphasized that when counselors and pupils are not seated at the same level, it can inadvertently create discomfort or a sense of imbalance in the interaction dynamics.

The counselor's observation in the discussion, reflecting on the challenges posed by fixed chairs and their impact on the counseling process, aligns with the insights gleaned from Garcia and Martinez's research. The discrepancy in seating height can create a power dynamic that may hinder open communication and rapport-building between the counselor and the pupil. When individuals are not seated at the same level, it can subtly communicate hierarchical differences, potentially affecting the sense of equality and mutual respect essential for a therapeutic relationship.

To tackle the challenge highlighted by the counselors regarding the seating arrangement, it's pertinent to consider insights from the research conducted by Kim and Park (2020) in South Korea. Their study emphasized the necessity of having adjustable chairs in counseling settings. By offering adjustable seating options, counselors can create a more inclusive and accommodating environment that promotes comfort and equality during counseling sessions.

The South Korean research suggested that the ability to adjust chairs contributes significantly to establishing a non-threatening and egalitarian atmosphere, which in turn facilitates comfortable and open communication between counselors and pupils. Ensuring that both parties are seated at an appropriate height can help mitigate power differentials and enhance the sense of mutual respect and rapport within the counseling dynamic. Furthermore, the importance of maintaining eye level with pupils, as underscored in both the Spanish and South Korean studies, emphasizes the universal significance of this aspect across diverse cultural contexts. Consistently, aligning eye levels helps foster a sense of equality and connection, thereby facilitating more effective communication and engagement during counseling interactions. Incorporating adjustable chairs into counseling spaces can thus serve as a practical solution to address the challenges posed by fixed seating arrangements. By prioritizing the creation of environments that promote comfort, equality, and openness, counselors can optimize the conditions for meaningful and productive counseling sessions.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the study is that despite possessing a basic understanding of essential counseling techniques, these counselors face considerable challenges due to a lack of formal training and development, affecting their ability to implement these skills effectively.

The study identifies specific difficulties in practicing key counseling sub-skills and highlights the necessity of comprehensive training programs. These programs should not only impart theoretical knowledge but also focus on the nuanced application of sub-skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop and implement comprehensive training programs for untrained school counselors that focus on both the theoretical aspects of counseling and the practical application of sub-skills.
2. Establish continuous professional development opportunities for school counselors, including workshops, seminars, peer review sessions, and online courses.
3. Schools should assess and modify counseling environments to ensure they promote comfort, privacy, and open communication.
4. Encourage the creation of support networks among school counselors, including those who are untrained, to facilitate knowledge sharing and mentorship.
5. Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of counseling practices through feedback from pupils and counselors, and adapt practices accordingly.

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