

Lived Experiences of Counsellors Assisting Form One Boarding Learners Experiencing Separation Anxiety from Selected Private Schools in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of counsellors supporting Form One learners with separation anxiety in selected Zimbabwean boarding schools. Using in-depth interviews with ten counsellors from selected private schools, the study examines counsellors' perceptions of the causes, manifestations, and effects of separation anxiety on Form One learners' emotional wellbeing and academic performance. Findings reveal that counsellors face challenges in addressing learners' diverse needs, highlighting the need for tailored interventions, improved mental health resources, and stronger guidance and counselling services. The study emphasises the importance of counsellor–learner relationships, parental involvement, and teacher training in fostering resilience and effective coping strategies. Guided by Attachment Theory (Bowlby), which explains the emotional effects of separation, and Client-Centred Theory (Rogers, which promotes empathy and unconditional positive regard, the research recommends prioritising comprehensive mental health support in boarding schools to enhance learners' holistic development, emotional wellbeing, and academic success. Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data. These include: Perceived causes of separation anxiety; manifestation and impacts of separation anxiety disorder on learners, intervention strategies; and Challenges faced by counsellors. Counsellors have learned that they may not use a one-size-fits-all approach since the learners with separation anxiety come from diverse backgrounds. The study recommends preparing and orienting the learners before going to boarding school, collaboration of all stakeholders, counsellors, school administrators, parents, teachers, and fellow students as peer counsellors.

Keywords: Boarding school; School Counsellors; Form One Learners, Mental health; Separation anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Mental health concerns among adolescents in boarding school contexts have attracted increasing attention because of their potential to disrupt emotional development, social adjustment, and academic progress. Separation anxiety, an intense fear or distress associated with separation from primary caregivers, can be particularly pronounced among early secondary school entrants (Form One) who face abrupt transitions to residential education (Bowlby, 1969). In Zimbabwe, private boarding schools enrol learners from diverse socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, including children from remote rural areas and those whose parents have migrated abroad. These contextual factors can amplify feelings of isolation, abandonment, and uncertainty during the initial months of boarding school life (Dreby, 2011; Ansong & Gyamfi-Asiedu, 2019).

School counsellors occupy a frontline role in identifying, supporting, and advocating for learners with adjustment issues, especially separation anxiety. Counsellors' professional responses, informed by theoretical frameworks such as Attachment Theory and Client-Centred Therapy, shape interventions that promote secure attachments, emotional regulation and resilience (Rogers, 1951; Sroufe et al., 2005). Yet counsellors working in boarding schools frequently report systemic constraints (limited resources, heavy caseloads, insufficient training) that impede sustained, individualized support (Cooper & Tikly, 2019). This study therefore examines the counsellors'

lived experiences within selected private boarding schools in Zimbabwe, providing contextually grounded evidence to inform policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is a lot written about adolescent mental health, there is very little written about separation anxiety and its impact on the mental health of Form One learners as they transition from Primary school to secondary school. This section discusses scholarly views about separation anxiety from peer-reviewed articles.

INTRODUCTION

Separation anxiety among adolescents attending boarding schools is a significant mental health concern that can negatively affect learners' emotional well-being, academic progress, and social adjustment. Transitioning from Primary school to Secondary school (Form One) is an especially sensitive developmental period, characterised by major educational and environmental changes. This is exacerbated by the physiological changes associated with early adolescence. For learners entering boarding schools, separation from caregivers is intensified by the physical distance from home, which may trigger anxiety symptoms. This study reviews relevant theoretical perspectives, empirical research on separation anxiety, the role of school counsellors, and contextual factors that shape Zimbabwean boarding school environments.

Separation anxiety involves excessive fear or distress related to separation from attachment figures (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Although it is often linked to childhood, it can also continue into adolescence, especially during transitional moments such as entry into boarding school. Compas et al. (2001) explain that adolescents' responses to stress depend on both developmental factors and environmental conditions; when coping mechanisms are inadequate, anxiety may emerge. Studies (Dabkowska et al, 2014; Last et al. 1999) found that anxiety disorders in childhood may persist into adulthood when early support is not provided, highlighting the value of timely intervention. In boarding school contexts, separation anxiety commonly appears through homesickness, withdrawal, sleep-related difficulties, and reduced participation in academic activities. Thurber and Walton (2012) describe homesickness as a frequent emotional response among students living away from home, with potential impacts on adjustment and overall well-being. If left untreated early, a significant percentage of childhood cases persist into adolescence and adulthood. Hence, finding preventive measures or solutions to this issue is of great significance.

Boarding School Context and Learner Adjustment

Boarding schools offer organised structures that can support academic development, but they also create emotional challenges due to separation from family. Martin et al. (2014) found that boarding school learners may show strong academic motivation while simultaneously experiencing psychological stress linked to adjustment. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Ansong and Gyamfi Asiedu (2019) emphasise that boarding school experiences are shaped by socio-cultural and economic realities. Learners whose families are affected by migration or financial strain may experience greater emotional distress. Dreby (2011) further suggests that separation from parents due to migration may deepen feelings of abandonment and anxiety. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015) stresses the importance of holistic learner development, including emotional well-being. However, boarding schools—particularly private ones—often enrol learners from diverse backgrounds, which can make it difficult to respond effectively to individual emotional needs.

Role of School Counsellors

School counsellors play a key role in promoting learners' emotional and psychological well-being. The American School Counselor Association (2019) outlines comprehensive counselling programmes aimed at supporting learners' academic, career, and social-emotional development. Counsellors may use different strategies, including individual counselling, group counselling, psychoeducation, and collaboration with families (Sink, 2019). Epstein (2018) also highlights that school–family partnerships are important for improving learner

adjustment. Despite this, counsellors often face major challenges. Cooper and Tikly (2019) note that in low-resource settings counsellors may work with high caseloads, limited training, and inadequate institutional support. Lambie and Williamson (2004) further observe that the responsibilities and expectations of professional school counselling continue to expand over time.

Resilience is essential for learners' ability to adapt to separation and stress. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) describe resilience as positive adaptation despite adversity, while Masten (2014) stresses the role of supportive relationships in strengthening resilience. Pianta and Walsh (1996) argue that strong relationships within school environments can reduce the impact of risk factors such as separation anxiety. Therefore, counsellors contribute not only through direct support to learners, but also by helping to build supportive relationships and promote emotional stability.

Gaps in Literature

Although research on separation anxiety and school counselling exists, there is limited literature specifically exploring counsellors' lived experiences in Zimbabwean boarding schools. Many studies are conducted in Western contexts, which may limit how well findings apply to African educational settings. In addition, there is a shortage of phenomenological studies that examine how counsellors respond to and navigate systemic challenges while supporting learners with separation anxiety. This study aims to address these gaps by offering context-specific insights. Ethical practice is fundamental in school counselling. The American Counseling Association (2014) outlines principles such as confidentiality, informed consent, and prioritising clients' welfare. These ethical principles are particularly important when working with adolescents experiencing anxiety. In addition, global guidance from the World Health Organization (2013; 2014) emphasises the integration of mental health services into educational systems to support adolescent well-being.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, introduced by Bowlby (1969), explains how early emotional bonds between children and caregivers influence later psychological functioning. Learners with secure attachments are more likely to show resilience and use effective coping strategies, while those with insecure attachments may experience greater distress when separation occurs. Sroufe et al. (2005) also argue that interruptions in attachment relationships during important developmental stages can contribute to emotional and behavioural difficulties, including anxiety. In boarding school settings, Form One learners may therefore struggle emotionally when their attachment relationships are insecure, particularly because of the separation from primary caregivers.

Client-Centred Theory

Client-Centred Theory, developed by Rogers (1951, 1957), focuses on the therapeutic relationship and highlights the importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. These qualities are particularly relevant to school counselling, as they help create a safe environment where learners feel free to express their emotions. Corey (2021) further notes that client-centred therapy can be effective in addressing anxiety because it supports self-awareness, encourages emotional expression, and promotes personal growth.

The literature explored separation anxiety, theoretical perspectives, the boarding school context, and the role of school counsellors. Overall, the review shows that separation anxiety is a serious concern for adolescents in boarding schools and counsellors are essential in supporting affected learners. However, systemic and contextual constraints may reduce the effectiveness of interventions. This section also identified specific gaps in the literature, providing justification for conducting the present study within the Zimbabwean context.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is commonly used to explore individuals' lived experiences in counselling. Creswell and Poth (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that qualitative approaches help researchers gain deep

understanding of participants' perspectives. Phenomenological research, as described by Moustakas (1994), is particularly suited for studying lived experiences. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) also stress the value of interviews in generating rich and detailed data. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Saldana (2016), provides an organised approach for analysing qualitative data and identifying meaningful themes and patterns.

This study adopted an interpretivist or constructivist approach, focusing on understanding counsellors' subjective experiences and meanings related to separation anxiety in Form One boarding learners (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative phenomenological case-study approach explored counsellors' lived experiences assisting Form One learners with separation anxiety in selected private boarding schools, enabling detailed analysis of counsellors' perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The population included professional school counsellors working in selected private boarding schools in Zimbabwe, with direct experience supporting Form One learners with separation anxiety. Purposive sampling identified counsellors, with rich experience, and ten counsellors were interviewed until data saturation was reached. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews used an interview guide aligned to research questions and theoretical frameworks (Attachment Theory and Client-Centered Theory). Thematic analysis identified patterns, themes, and categories within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), providing a deeper understanding of counsellors' experiences and perceptions. The study protected participants' rights, privacy, dignity, and confidentiality, using pseudonyms (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C7, C8, C9 and C10) to safeguard identities. Participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymised.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the data collected was guided by the research questions. The following 4 themes emerged:

Theme One: Perceived causes of separation anxiety;

Theme Two: manifestation and impacts of separation anxiety disorder on learners,

Theme Three: intervention strategies,

Theme Four: Challenges faced by counsellors

Theme: Perceived causes of separation anxiety

Counsellors identified multiple antecedents: abrupt transitions from rural homes to boarding schools, parental migration or long-term absence, family disruption (e.g., divorce), and limited pre-boarding preparation. These factors intensified learners' fear of abandonment and homesickness.

Some children have never been away from parents or guardians for more than a week or even a day. In such cases, both child and parent feel the pain of separation, and both parent and child may break down at the time of saying goodbye. Hence, it is important to prepare the child before coming to boarding school.

"The sudden shift from a rural home to a boarding school can be overwhelming for these learners" (Counsellor 1).

"Lack of preparation for boarding school life is a major contributor to separation anxiety" (Counsellor 6).

Some parents go abroad in search of greener pastures. Initially, their children may not feel the pinch when they are promised to receive lots of cash pocket money. But reality dawns on them when they miss the sense of belonging, especially when their classmates get frequent visits from their parents based within the country.

"When parents leave for work abroad, it leaves a huge gap in these learners' lives" (Counsellor 2).

"Family conflicts and divorce can make learners feel insecure and anxious about being away from home" (Counsellor 5).

Theme: Manifestations and impacts on learners

The manifestations of Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) are varied. Some have a positive impact, but most of these have a negative impact on the adolescent student. Some emotional signs included persistent crying, clinginess, sleep disturbances, and somatic complaints. Behavioural and academic impacts included withdrawal, declining concentration, classroom acting out, and reduced academic performance.

"Some of these children cry themselves to sleep every night, and it is heartbreaking" (Counsellor 4).

"I have seen learners struggle to focus in class, and their grades suffer as a result" (Counsellor 3).

"Learners with separation anxiety often exhibit behavioural problems, such as being withdrawn, uncooperative, acting out or being disruptive" (Counsellor 7).

"Low self-esteem creeps in; it may hit them so hard that some start to doubt their abilities and their academic performance drops drastically. (Counsellor 8).

On the other hand, sometimes separation anxiety throws the learner to such a deep end of the pool that they learn to swim; it will be a "do-or-die" situation so some develop resilience. Some counsellors described many learners adapting over time, developing coping strategies (problem-solving, emotional regulation), and engaging in extracurricular activities that buffered loneliness.

"Some of these learners are incredibly resilient" (Counsellor 2).

"When they find their niche, they thrive" (Counsellor 3).

With appropriate support from school counsellors, administrators, dedicated teachers, and peer counsellors, some learners manage to break through, adapt, and become resilient, ready to help newcomers as peer counsellors.

"With time and support, learners can develop healthy coping mechanisms and adjust to boarding school life", highlighting benefits like more time to study, independence, self-reliance, self-development, budgeting, and meeting new friends". (Counsellor 9).

"It is amazing to see learners grow and flourish when given the appropriate support" (Counsellor 10)

Theme: 3. Counsellor Intervention Strategies

Counsellors used a mix of individual counselling (client-centred techniques), group activities, peer support systems, parental engagement, and referral to external mental health resources where available. Practical steps included gradual separation routines, buddy systems, problem-solving skill training, and facilitating communication with families.

"We use a buddy system to help new learners adjust and feel more comfortable" (Counsellor 1).

"I encourage learners to express their feelings and work through their challenges" (Counsellor 2).

"Group activities help learners build relationships and feel more connected" (Counsellor 9).

"We involve parents in the counselling process to ensure consistency and support" (Counsellor 10).

Strong counsellor-learner rapport, active parental collaboration, and teacher sensitisation emerged as central to effective support. Where schools fostered collaborative practices and trained teachers in basic psychological first aid, learners' adjustment improved more rapidly.

"Building trust with the learners is key" (Counsellor 1).

"We work closely with parents to ensure we are on the same page"(Counsellor 4).

"Teacher support and understanding are crucial in helping learners feel comfortable and supported" (Counsellor 7).

“It is also important to work with other professionals, like psychologists and social workers, and connecting learners with prefects and senior teachers for comprehensive support” (Counsellor 8)

Theme Four: Challenges faced by counsellors

Participants reported high caseloads, limited specialised training in childhood anxiety disorders, inadequate referral networks, and insufficient institutional prioritisation of mental health. These constraints limited sustained one-to-one interventions.

“We have too many learners and not enough counsellors” (Counsellor 1).

“We need more training on childhood anxiety disorders” (Counsellor 2).

Limited resources and funding make it tough to provide adequate support” (Counsellor 5).

“The school administration needs to prioritize mental health and allocate more resources” (Counsellor 6).

DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that counsellors receive learners from diverse backgrounds; thus they face significant challenges meeting learners' individual needs. They do not use the “one-size-fits-all” principle. Early attachments to parents and other caregivers have a lasting impression on adolescents' mental health. Young people who attended boarding school are greatly affected by separation from parents and guardians, and they experience a fear of abandonment, the development of two different identities, and difficulty expressing feelings and forming close relationships (Yassin, 2024). Form One learners experience separation anxiety characterized by stress, trauma, leading to low academic performance and poor socioemotional adjustments. This underscores the importance of tailored support strategies and better mental health resources. This is aligned with global guidance from the World Health Organization (2014) emphasises the integration of mental health services into educational systems to support adolescent well-being. School counsellors may assist by promoting mindfulness and providing learners with emotional regulation skills and improved awareness. These strategies equip them to cope with separation anxiety challenges. Studies show that learners who employ adaptive emotion regulation strategies to cope with anxiety can decrease their susceptibility to internalizing and externalizing disorders (Kholghi et al, 2025). Although most young learners in boarding schools may experience the negative impacts of separation anxiety, others develop resilience. Resilience is essential for learners' ability to adapt to separation and stress. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) describe resilience as positive adaptation despite adversity, while Masten (2014) stresses the role of supportive relationships in strengthening resilience. Although some Form One learners initially struggle to find their feet during the first term of Form One, Counsellors use appropriate strategies to help them cope with change. Pivotal to their effectiveness are the centrality of counsellor-learner relationships, active parental involvement, and collaboration with teachers in managing separation anxiety. Parental involvement buttresses the counsellors' efforts to help the learner to adjust and develop resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that counsellors in Zimbabwean private boarding schools confront complex, multifaceted challenges when supporting Form One learners with separation anxiety. Counsellors employ a range of strategies rooted in empathic, client-centred practice and attachment-informed understanding, yet their effectiveness is constrained by systemic limitations, including resource shortages and insufficient training. Policy implications include the need for targeted counsellor training in childhood anxiety; improved referral pathways, structured parental engagement protocols, and school policies that prioritise mental health (for instance reduced counsellor caseloads, dedicated induction programmes for new boarders). Future research should examine intervention efficacy, include learners' and parents' perspectives, and explore differences across public and private and urban and rural school contexts.

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