

The Quality of Secondary School-based Counselling Services in Contemporary Digitalised Learning Environment in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

School-based counselling is a noble practical guide that shapes and corrects the behaviour of learners. Counselling in schools is one of the most important services provided by facilitators in public schools. Children in schools are helped to adjust meaningfully and to develop the ability to set realistic learning goals. In Zimbabwe, teachers have the responsibility of providing counselling services in schools. The Zimbabwe education system has adopted the use of information and communications technology (ICT) devices popularly known as digitalised learning. With the integration of technology in classrooms and in every aspect of modern life, it is impossible to ignore the risks for learners. As students learn today, they are exposed to social media influence and this determines their behaviour. Social media syndrome is a technological fashion that has defeated the expected ubuntu behaviour amongst learners. Learners are influenced and motivated to exhibit complex behaviours that warrant complex counselling skills. Educational facilitators and pupils are aware of guidance and counselling services although much is needed to serve the intended purpose. The objective of this article is to establish the efficacy of para-professional counselling services provided by teachers and to gauge the credence of services in the peak of digitalised learning environment. The study used the transformative paradigm (TP) and critical emancipatory research (CER) as the research method and design, respectively. Such research method and design enabled the researcher and the researched to jointly get into the problem and collaboratively find solutions by interrogating the existing social media addiction. The purposive and convenience sampling was used in the study. The study found that the use of technological devices such as phones and computers have caused complex deviant behaviours in schools. The results reveal that teachers are compelled to provide counselling services without the necessary counselling skills. The research recommends that there ought to be professional counsellors at each school. There is a need to devise a deliberate training programme that has its bedrock on Afrocentric culture and to ensure that all school counsellors receive adequate contemporary skills.

Keywords: Secondary school, school counselling, digitalised, learning, teachers, *ubuntu*, behaviour

Introduction

Globally, the introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools has caused complex developmental harm than good among the learners. ICT has been taken as a compulsory learning area in Zimbabwe (Isaacs, 2007). Social media has triggered learners to learn and experience, unwarranted behaviours such as sexual acts, criminal tendencies, drug and

substance abuse. These weird behaviours have shown the importance of guidance and counselling services in schools. Counselling is a universal behavioural remedial strategy (Shimbili, 2019). The educational counselling has been used as a cross-cutting theme with no independent timetable and was a reactive special learning area established to solve study-related and non-related problems of students. Secondary school-based counselling helps students' to harmonise their abilities, interests and to reduce some illicit behavioural activities. The study found a gap in counselling skills of educational facilitators.

Background of the study

Education in Zimbabwe is rated as one of the best in Africa. According to Dzingirayi and Musemburi (2021), the education system in Zimbabwe is divided into primary education spanning nine years, as well as four years secondary education and another two high education. The education in Zimbabwe is guided by the education blueprint called the national curriculum. The curriculum is a national policy with all guidelines, which ensures quality education. This equips learners with necessary skills for a changing world today and tomorrow. ICT is now the bedrock of the updated curriculum in which learners use technology devices such as computers and mobile phones. These devices are now being abused by most secondary learners who mostly adolescents. In schools, peer pressure is the leading behavioural influence among adolescents as they try to understand themselves.

The behaviour of learners is now influenced by social media in which they are subjected to anti-social behaviour, which is against the learning ethos. Instead of using the technology devices for e-learning, they rather spend their time on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Pinterest, ShareChat, Twitter and many more. Educational facilitators have resorted to guidance and counselling as a behavioural correctional approach to learners. Secondary school facilitators have para-professional counselling skills that they acquire from in-service workshops. It is arguable that these para-professional counsellors have effective skills for rehabilitating the complex behaviours learnt from the social media. The most common social evils in schools are drug abuse and delinquency which trigger indiscipline in schools.

Counselling is an effective method of dealing with indiscipline because it addresses the problem and its root cause. It has also been observed that counselling has become a remedial strategy for disruptive behaviour in British schools (Nyaegah, 2011). Studies conducted in Zambia by Shimbili

(2019) recognised the importance of using guidance and counselling in schools to change the unwanted behaviours. Counselling is, therefore, a process of helping an individual to deal with difficulties experienced in life, using his/her strength to settle the weaknesses so as to make informed decisions that would lead to a more satisfying life (Mbabazi & Bagaya, 2013). In the same vein, Makumba (2013) asserts that counselling is a psychological process by which a professional counsellor helps the client to explore, understand and accept the current state of life. According to Dryden (2010), the counselling process has regional, professional and cultural variations. This reflects that counselling skills and processes are a complex aspect.

Counselling in Africa

Counselling has been a tradition African societies since time immemorial. Traditional African societies used the wisdom of uncles, aunties, grandparents and other influential people such as counsellors. Therefore, the practice of counselling is not a new phenomenon to the African community. Mkhize (2016) argues that the African way of counselling is based on the collective principle of humanity which is coiled around *ubuntu* philosophy's basic tenet that "I am, and therefore we are." Counselling in Africa was rooted in the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and sociocultural values, customs and practices (Chiboola, 2019). Traditional elders, being custodians and administrators of culture, offer counselling in the form of storytelling and role-modelling. Dzingirayi and Musemburi (2022) indicated that counselling in the traditional indigenous system were applied through various traditional, initiation, ritual, marriage, social, and religious ceremonies. These avenues of counselling were for sustainable social integration and perpetuation of cultural identity for the common good of society and individual wellbeing. These forms of counselling were passed on orally to the next generation. This gradually led to their extinction during the colonial and post-colonial eras. The collective wisdom of Africans generally is that elderly people are regarded as a valuable resource in the community. They are the repositories of traditional knowledge, the embodiment of cultural competences, the experts in social skills and the cherished models for emulation at the family and community levels (Josephine, 2017) This view is supported by Ampim (2003) who states that an elder is given the highest status in African culture because he/she has a lived experience and is a model to emulate in society.

The African form of counselling applies indigenous ways of helping people experiencing various difficult situations such as initiation at puberty, death, illness and marriage. These forms of African counselling refer to the various methods or approaches used by traditional counsellors as remedies to life challenges. This indicates that counselling process is an art as well as a science. This is supported by Kabir (2017) who describes counselling as an interpersonal relationship, helping developmental process, in which a counsellor offers guidance to the client. However, the term “counselling” is used to describe a variety of activities; and different people have different views on what counselling is and its context of application. Some people believe that it is a means of giving good advice, teaching morality, guidance on marriage and social issues. All these views are uncontested. Taking from a conventional perspective, counselling is a process that involves a special type of helping relationship between a counsellor and client that is purposively interactive and ameliorative (Mugumbate et al., 2022).

Counselling in Zimbabwe secondary schools

Counselling in Zimbabwean secondary schools falls under the institutionalised curricular known as ‘guidance and counselling’. The Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture in Zimbabwe, through the Department of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education (SPS & SNE), introduced policy circular number 23 of 2005 with the intention of meeting the educational needs of students who face various problems that interfere with their learning (Mawire, 2011). This circular was a follow up of the Secretary’s policy circular number 14 of 2004. Both circulars are based on the recommendations of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (Nziramasanga Commission, 1999). School-based guidance and counselling programmes have been introduced to assist students overcome challenges they experience at home and at school. The guidance and counselling document intends to play an important role in promoting educational success among the learners. Today, the Zimbabwean school syllabus encompasses the following broad areas: personal and social guidance, educational guidance, career/vocational guidance, HIV/AIDS education and individual counselling (Murwira, 1998; Ngara, 1999). With the introduction of Education 5.0, known as the New Curriculum/Competence Based Curriculum in 2016, guidance and counselling became a mandatory subject (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology, 2016). That means guidance and counselling is now an examinable learning area just like other subjects such as mathematics and science.

Quality of secondary school-based counselling services in Zimbabwe

Adolescence is a transitional period when pupils try to sort out all the conflicting demands and expectations of the family, community, friends and school. Most learners in secondary education are adolescents. At this stage, an individual begins to search for identity. According to Davidoff (1987), one wants to answer such identity questions as: Who am I? What do I believe in? Where do I belong? What sort of occupation will I pursue? The overall objectives of guidance and counselling in Zimbabwean secondary schools, according to Mawire (2011) are: preparing learners to live in a changing environment; developing positive decision-making skills; facilitating the development of multiple intelligences, essential life skills, self-esteem and confidence; promoting healthy life skills; providing opportunities for psychosocial counselling for learners in times of need; laying a foundation for informed career choices; enhancing positive learning outcomes for all; and developing conflict transformation skills among learners. According to Pecku (1991), the guidance and counselling approach is not only limited to formal subjects offered in secondary school, but also included in and out of school activities, work, vocation experiences, and part-time work programmes. The responsibility of the teacher counsellors is to unlock opportunities for students to help nurture their character and behaviour to adjust to society norms and to be mentally and physically healthy. The teacher-counsellor prepares learners' to face the current situations and make developmental adjustments in society.

Teacher-counsellors in secondary schools need to understand the practice of counselling in schools to offer effective counselling services to learners. Counselling is a scientific discipline that provides guidance to learners on various issues such as social, emotional, academic, drug education, vocational and personal development. Counselling in schools has restricted time.

Counselling in schools is not just a process but also part of a 'continuum of helping strategies' (Hornby, 2003). However, most of the teachers conducting counselling in schools are not competent counsellors. Some have little or no training in counselling. These range from information giving, advising, directing, consultation and supporting. In addition, the priorities in schools override the themes of guidance and counselling.

Digitization of Zimbabwean education

The provision of ICT resources to the education sector in Zimbabwe has been growing in leaps and bounds since 2002. The Zimbabwean government developed a national ICT policy in 2005. According to Isaacs (2007), the policy was informed by the Harvard University-guided e-readiness survey, the Nziramasanga Education Commission Report of 1999, the National Science and Technology Policy of 2002 and Vision 2020. In particular, the Nziramasanga Commission recommended the use of computers for teaching and learning in educational institutions. The National ICT policy that was adopted in 2005 makes significant references to the promotion of ICTs in education, including their pedagogical use in educational institutions (Isaacs, 2007).

The introduction of ICT in school allowed learners access to smartphones, tablets, Wi-Fi, 5G technologies, social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and many more. However, the potential risks associated with being a digitalised individual need counsellors to advise learners accordingly. Learners have increased their presence on social media which triggers experimentation, curiosity and impulsive behaviour. It is therefore important for teacher-counsellors who interact with the learners to make them understand the potential benefits or risks of consuming social media.

Children and young people can be susceptible to consuming pernicious social media behaviours such as internet-initiated grooming for purposes of on and offline sexual abuse; the possession, production and distribution of sexual content; and the use of internet-based content to bully (and sometimes blackmail) a person. These internet-related activities can directly or indirectly result in offline abuse directed towards children or to other children by their peers (Ospina et al., 2010). Children and young people have also been found to be perpetrators of online grooming and online sexual offences (Choo, 2009). These include sex-texting and catfishing. Sexting can result in adverse outcomes such as “embarrassment, mental health problems, public dissemination of sexual photos and legal consequences” (Benotsch et al., 2013). It has been estimated that 12% of young people aged 11-16 in the UK, have seen or received sexual messages online, with 2% reporting that they have seen them more than once a week. Mkhize et al., (2017) insist that children at school are exposed to indecent images before they reach 18 years. This is against the teachings of *ubuntu/hunhu* according to the African culture.

The use of ICTs also exposes children to publication and presentation of highly explicit imagery such as cyberporn. The challenge that cyberporn or online pornography brings is that it is freely accessible to anyone with access to an internet connection without the appropriate filters such as a parental block. This is being incorporated into mainstream education unintentionally and some argue that it has altered social values and behaviour of children by sexualising them prematurely; hence, placing them at risk of a variety of harms (Gill, 2009). Cyberbullying, as a conduct risk associated with young people, has been linked to school mates whereby those affected by cyberbullying end up in depression, isolation, self-harm and, in severe cases, suicide (Parris et al., 2012).

Methodology and setting

Research design and paradigm

The transformative paradigm (TP) was used as the methodological plan of this research article. This paradigm raises the issue of transformative social network through engagement and changing the existing situation for better (Mertens, 2007). Omodan (2020a) argues that TP tends to change the existing status of the participants for better. The study also adopted the critical emancipatory research (CER) as a research design. The CER enabled the researcher and the researched to jointly get into the problem and address the challenges through interrogating the existing deviant behavioural development. This design was relevant to guide the study because it aims at reforming, transforming and emancipating people from conspiracy, scientific and ideological enslavement (Dube & Hlalele, 2018; Omodan & Dube, 2020). The design also enabled the researcher to engage in a transformative and participatory process of inquiry on the quality of secondary school-based counselling services.

Participants and selection of participants

The educational facilitators and secondary school learners were selected as research participants. The research selected secondary learners in public secondary schools in Mbare and Dzivarasekwa high-density suburbs of Harare. The participants were active in the WhatsApp groups of the selected schools. A convenient and purposive sampling technique was used in the study. These techniques are relevant to identify counselling skills and the complex behaviour precipitated by technology which warrants counselling. The purposive selection method is used when dealing with social issues, where the expected participants' deviant behaviours are not recognisable

(Brady, 2019). This means that the groups are either regimented, vulnerable; possess hidden characteristics, among others (Mason, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants using social media platforms such as WhatsApp, e-mails, Facebook and phone calls. This was due to COVID-19 restrictive measures that limited movements of people to contain the pandemic. Age and sex of the participants was not captured in this study since it was time of Covid-19 restrictive lockdowns. The researcher personally posted the interview questions in the school learners' social media groups.

Data analysis and ethical considerations

The study used socio-thematic analysis to interpret the data collected through interviews. The socio-thematic analysis is a way of generating data by integrating the social environment of the participants in themes (Omodan, 2019). The data was coded into themes and each theme was subjected to conversational interpretation in a way to understand the sociality of the participants since the problem under study was centred on *ubuntu* kind of social space. Ethical issues of protection from harm, confidentiality, and request for permission from the gatekeepers were honoured during the study. The researcher followed all protocols of seeking permission.

Results and discussion

From the responses of the participants, the following themes emerged:

- i) Complex behaviours exhibited by secondary school learners*
- ii) Para-professional counselling skills*

Complex behaviours exhibited by secondary school learners

The findings established some of the contemporary behaviours that disrupt the teaching and learning environment in the selected secondary schools. Some participants indicated that they were stressed by the general behaviours common in their learning environment. These findings are illustrated in the following excerpts:

Participate 1: “Am stressed by the behaviours of my colleagues, some of us are no longer respecting teachers”

Participate 2: “I can't be sanctioned at school for misbehaving, anyone who intend to sanction by behaviour will be abusing my rights. I had the right to take drugs at any given time.”

Participant 3: “Due to the current economic situation faced by the teachers, we are the one who support their day to day living. Myself I used to brought grocery for my teachers and the teachers harass us will not come for extra lessons”

The education facilitators were asked if they had adequate skills to counsel learners who showed some deviant behaviours. The following extracts show some of the responses from the teachers:

Participant 4: “I don’t have the skills of counselling a child who proposed love to me... their behaviours is precipitated by drugs and substance abuse. I have noted that the professional counsellors do the opposite of what we do as teachers and will worsen the learners to misbehave. After the learner engaged with professional counsellors, they start to label teachers as useless hence discouraging our para-professional skills”.

Participant 7: “As teachers we are being forced to teaching guidance and counselling, yet I know nothing about it. There are certain behaviours which require professional counsellors to offer assistance.

Participant 8: “The complex behaviours exhibited by learners ... are from the social media. Some of the notable behaviours include bullying, sexual abuse, attempted suicides, complex planned crimes, drug abuse, vending and many more. The list is endless.

The study noted that there were many unexpected behaviours being exhibited by the current crop of learners in the selected secondary schools. These behaviours could precipitated by the influence of social media. The most notable behaviours were suicidal cases, drug substance abuse, bullying and planned criminal cases such as rape, theft, among others. The study established that, as the common age group found in secondary schools, adolescents exhibited behaviours informed by peer pressure and experimentation. Adolescence is a transitional stage in which an individual needs to fully understand oneself. A drive for invention and discovery is a common character of this age group. For instance, the research found that learners used their learning gadgets to find chemical reactions of mosquito repellents and then turn them to use as drugs. Apparently, teachers and school authorities could not find easy answers to such complex tensions. This solution could be professional counselling approaches. Teachers in the selected schools were para-professional counsellors who tried to offer help but could not cope due to lack of sufficient skills. This sometimes worsened the behaviour of the learners. The research also revealed that teachers who offered counselling had scanty knowledge of professional counselling. The most notable challenge found was of ethical considerations which resulted in ethical dilemma. Professional ethical issues were found to discourage learners to seek counselling services from their counselling teachers hence worsening the deviant behavioural activities.

Para-professional counselling skills

The teachers in the selected secondary schools offered para-professional counselling skills which were not adequate and suitable to address complex behaviours influenced by technological advancement.

The study noted that the gaps of teacher-counselling skills were centred on lack of ethical principles and referral skills. This is against the Afrocentric philosophy which insists that the African way of counselling is based on the collective principle of humanity which is coiled around the basic tenet of *ubuntu* philosophy, “I am, and therefore we are” (Mkhize, 2016). The complex behaviours exhibited by learners had not been noticed because of cultural issues, meaning that the African culture has been seriously eroded. The study found out that most behaviours were copy-cats of foreign cultures, especially the imitation of Western culture mimicked from social media and then infused into the African culture.

Some of the complex behaviours

The study identified the following as some of the complex behaviours exhibited by learners in schools:

- Bullying
- Drug and substance abuse
- Suicidal experimentation
- Complex planned criminal activities
- Robbery
- Murdering parents
- Sexual acts motivated by social media

The above complex behaviours can best be addressed by professional counsellors with adequate counselling skills and guided by professional ethics. Some of the learners need constant monitoring from their guardians because of the complexity of their behaviours. However, teacher-counsellors seemed to be unaware of such ethical guideline. Participants indicated the displeasure of addressing the complex behaviours from learners under the harsh economic environment.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following to be included in the education system to help remedy the behaviours of adolescents in secondary schools in Zimbabwe:

- i) There is a need to hire professional counsellors at every secondary school in Zimbabwe.
- ii) There is a need to have a collaborative approach to advise adolescents.
- iii) The basic tenets of African culture should be used as a pillar when offering counselling services to learners. This would ensure that learners know their identity.
- iv) The counselling body should prohibit the use of para-professional counselling in schools and empower education facilitators with professional counselling skills.

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