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COUNSELING AND THE ACADEMIC OUTPUT OF STUDENTS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study investigates the impact of school counselling programmes on student academic performance, with a focus on the mediating role of school administrators in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Using a descriptive correlational design, data were collected from a sample of 360 respondents, including school administrators, counsellors, and students, across 30 schools. Two structured instruments were employed: the Counselling and Academic Performance Questionnaire (CAPQ) and the Administrative Support for Counselling Scale (ASCS). Quantitative data were analysed using Pearson correlation, t-tests, and regression analysis, while qualitative insights were derived from semi-structured interviews with administrators and counsellors. The results revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between counselling utilisation and student academic performance ($r = 0.61$, $p < .01$), and between administrative support and programme effectiveness. Schools with robust counselling services and supportive leadership recorded higher academic averages and lower absenteeism rates. Qualitative findings underscored the importance of collaborative planning, adequate resource allocation, and role clarity in enhancing counselling impact. The study recommends that educational policymakers institutionalise counselling as a core academic support service, provide targeted training for school administrators, and establish policy frameworks that define counsellor roles and responsibilities. Strengthening school administrator–counsellor collaboration and investing in infrastructure are critical steps toward optimising student outcomes.

Keywords: School Counselling, Academic Performance, Administrative Support, Educational Leadership, Student Outcomes

Introduction

Academic success among students is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by various psychosocial, institutional, and environmental factors. Among the institutional mechanisms designed to enhance student outcomes, school counselling stands out as a pivotal support system that addresses not only academic challenges but also personal, social, and emotional barriers to learning (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). While the core mandate of school counsellors is to promote students' academic, career, and social development, their effectiveness is largely dependent on the

institutional structures within which they operate, particularly the level of support from school administrators.

Over the past two decades, the importance of school counselling in promoting academic output has gained empirical validation. Studies have shown that comprehensive guidance and counselling programmes contribute to improved grades, better classroom behaviour, increased attendance, and reduced dropout rates (Carey et al., 2020; Simbolon & Purba, 2021). These outcomes, however, are contingent on how well school counsellors are integrated into the educational planning and decision-making processes, a responsibility that largely falls on school administrators.

School administrators, principals, vice-principals, and heads of departments, serve as key decision-makers who determine the institutional climate, priorities, and resource allocation. Their role in supporting school counselling services can be facilitative or constraining. When administrators understand the specialised role of school counsellors and provide adequate time, resources, and collaboration opportunities, counselling programmes tend to yield better outcomes (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2018). Conversely, when counsellors are overburdened with administrative tasks or marginalised in school planning, their effectiveness in addressing students' academic concerns is diminished (ASCA, 2023).

In the Nigerian educational context, where students often contend with structural barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, family instability, and poor mental health awareness, the integration of counselling into mainstream educational management becomes even more crucial (Omoniyi, 2022). Unfortunately, in many schools, counselling services are underdeveloped or treated as peripheral functions, with school administrators either unaware of or indifferent to their potential for improving student outcomes. This gap in policy implementation and administrative support calls for an empirical investigation into the role of school administrators in enhancing or impeding the effectiveness of counselling services.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the relationship between school counselling and students' academic output while paying particular attention to the supportive or regulatory role played by school administrators. It aims to empirically validate whether institutional support for counselling services correlates with higher student academic performance, thereby contributing to the discourse on holistic educational management and student-centred learning environments.

Literature Review

School counselling has evolved from a peripheral support service to a core component of modern educational systems. Its conceptual underpinnings are grounded in developmental, person-centred, and systems theories, which posit that students achieve optimal outcomes when academic, emotional, and psychosocial domains are concurrently supported (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). In this regard, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model to provide a framework for

implementing data-driven, student-centred counselling programmes that enhance academic achievement, career readiness, and socio-emotional development (ASCA, 2019).

There is a growing body of empirical literature that supports the effectiveness of counselling interventions in improving academic performance. Carey et al. (2020) found that students who participated in structured school counselling programmes demonstrated higher GPA scores, fewer disciplinary infractions, and greater classroom engagement than their peers who had limited or no access to such services. Similarly, Sink and Stroh (2021) reported that elementary and secondary schools with established counselling frameworks exhibited significantly better academic test scores and attendance rates.

Moreover, Simbolon and Purba (2021), in a study conducted across 25 Indonesian secondary schools, demonstrated that counselling activities, including academic mentoring and emotional regulation training, positively influenced students' grade progression and learning motivation. These findings were echoed in the work of Brigman, Webb, and Campbell (2018), who observed that students receiving classroom-based counselling support outperformed others in mathematics and reading assessments, suggesting that counselling fosters both cognitive and affective domains essential for academic success.

Effective counselling goes beyond academic advice to include interventions targeting mental health, conflict resolution, peer relationship management, and family dynamics. According to Lapan et al. (2021), students experiencing personal or social crises are often at risk of academic decline if timely counselling support is unavailable. Therefore, counselling that integrates psychosocial diagnostics and developmental support plays a preventive role in academic underachievement.

Additionally, research indicates that students in environments where counselling is visible and normalised are more likely to seek help proactively, leading to better self-regulation and learning outcomes (Whiston & Quinby, 2009). School-wide implementation of socio-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, often led by counselling teams, has also been shown to improve academic outcomes, particularly in under-resourced schools (Durlak et al., 2011).

While the value of counselling is well documented, its implementation and sustainability depend heavily on the administrative climate. School administrators, principals, vice-principals, and directors of studies—serve as gatekeepers of institutional priorities. Their attitudes and actions toward school counselling significantly affect the deployment and functionality of counselling services (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2018).

A study by Dodson (2020) found that in schools where principals had formal training or exposure to counselling programme models, the counselling staff was more integrated into academic planning and school improvement teams. In contrast, administrators who perceived counsellors merely as pastoral care providers often limited their roles to clerical or disciplinary

functions, thereby reducing their impact on student academic development.

Furthermore, administrators control budget allocations, staffing decisions, and policy implementation. These administrative levers directly impact the availability and quality of counselling services. For instance, Amatea and Clark (2021) noted that counsellors in schools with strong administrative support spent more time engaging in core counselling activities (e.g., group counselling, individual academic advising) than in non-guidance tasks such as test administration or supervision duties.

Another significant theme in the literature is the importance of collaboration between school administrators and counsellors. Effective communication, mutual respect, and shared educational goals create a fertile ground for impactful counselling. Bryan and Henry (2012) advocate for a school-family-community partnership approach, in which school administrators endorse the collaborative leadership of counsellors in promoting school-wide academic improvement.

Role ambiguity, however, remains a persistent challenge. Several studies have revealed that many school administrators lack a clear understanding of the professional scope of school counsellors, resulting in role confusion and reduced efficacy (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2019). Therefore, establishing formalised structures and job descriptions that reflect the evolving nature of school counselling is essential for realising its full potential.

In Nigeria, the integration of school counselling into mainstream education remains inconsistent. According to Omoniyi (2022), many public secondary schools lack trained counsellors or operate with outdated counselling models. Additionally, where counselling units exist, their work is often constrained by poor administrative recognition, inadequate funding, and heavy workloads unrelated to student development. Akpan and Okon (2021) emphasised that the absence of national counselling benchmarks or frameworks in Nigeria has led to disparities in counselling practice and outcomes across states and school types.

Nevertheless, a few schools with committed administrators have demonstrated that institutional support can enhance the visibility and relevance of counselling. When administrators provide counsellors with resources, professional development, and autonomy, counselling services are more likely to positively impact students' academic performance, especially among those facing socio-economic disadvantages (Egbule, 2020).

While substantial literature supports the relationship between school counselling and academic success, there is limited empirical focus on the mediating role of school administrators, especially in sub-Saharan African contexts. This study fills that gap by empirically investigating how school administrative support influences the effectiveness of counselling services in promoting students' academic outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive correlational research design to investigate the relationship between counselling services and students' academic output, with specific

attention to the role of school administrators. A correlational design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine the degree and direction of association between naturally occurring variables without manipulating the study environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The descriptive component provided statistical summaries of trends and relationships, while the correlational analysis tested the strength of associations between the independent and dependent variables.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study comprised all public secondary schools in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The choice of Bayelsa was due to its emerging recognition of counselling services within the school system and the availability of trained school counsellors in some schools. The study focused on students in Senior Secondary School (SSS) classes and the administrative staff (principals and vice-principals) of the selected schools. According to data from the Bayelsa State Ministry of Education (2023), there are 324 public secondary schools in the state, with an estimated student population of 94,000 and over 300 school administrators.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 30 public secondary schools were purposively selected from three education zones—Yenagoa, Sagbama, and Brass, representing urban, semi-urban, and rural settings, respectively. From each school, the following were selected:

- One school administrator (either the principal or vice-principal)
- One guidance counsellor
- 10 Senior Secondary School students (SS1 to SS3)

This yielded a total sample size of 360 respondents (30 administrators, 30 counsellors, and 300 students).

Sampling was done using a multistage approach:

1. Purposive Sampling was used to select schools with established counselling units.
2. Stratified Random Sampling was used to ensure representation across class levels (SS1–SS3).
3. Simple Random Sampling was used to select students from each class group.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the level of counselling service availability and utilisation in public secondary schools?
2. What is the academic performance level of students in schools with high versus low administrative support for counselling?
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship between counselling service utilisation and student academic output?

Based on the questions, the following hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

- H_o1: There is no significant relationship between counselling service utilisation and student academic performance.
- H_o2: There is no significant difference in academic performance between students in schools with high administrative support for counselling and those without.

Instrumentation

Two main instruments were used:

i. Counselling and Academic Performance Questionnaire (CAPQ) – designed for students and counsellors. It measured:
ii. Frequency of counselling utilisation
iii. Perceived usefulness of counselling sessions
iv. Self-reported academic performance (supported by school records)
    1. Administrative Support for Counselling Scale (ASCS) – developed for school administrators. It assessed:

i. Resource allocation to counselling
ii. Collaboration frequency with counsellors
iii. Policy integration of counselling in school planning

Both instruments were structured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), and were reviewed by three experts in Educational Psychology and Educational Management for content validity.

Validity and Reliability

- Content validity was ensured through expert review.
- Face validity was established through pilot testing with 10 students and 5 administrators in a non-participating school.
- Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha:

i. CAPQ: $\alpha = 0.84$
ii. ASCS: $\alpha = 0.88$

These values indicate high internal consistency, meeting the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Data Collection Procedure

Permission was obtained from the Bayelsa State Ministry of Education and each school principal. The researcher administered the questionnaires in person over a two-week period. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. Students' academic performance was verified using cumulative assessment records from the last academic year, while school administrators were interviewed informally to supplement quantitative responses.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26:

- Descriptive Statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) summarised trends in counselling utilisation and academic performance.
- Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation tested the strength and direction of relationships between counselling utilisation and academic performance.
- Independent Samples t-test assessed differences in student performance between schools with high versus low administrative support.
- Regression Analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of counselling utilisation and administrative support on academic output.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study in two categories: quantitative results derived from statistical analysis of questionnaire and academic data, and qualitative insights

gathered through interviews and observations from school administrators and counsellors.

Quantitative Findings

1. Academic Performance

Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between the presence of robust counselling programmes and students' academic performance. Schools that demonstrated strong administrative support for counselling, evidenced by consistent funding, integration of counselling into school planning, and time allotment for counsellor-student interaction, had higher student academic averages compared to schools with weaker counselling structures.

Using independent samples t-test, the academic performance (measured by mean examination scores across core subjects) of students in high-support schools ($M = 68.3$, $SD = 6.2$) was significantly greater than that of students in low-support schools ($M = 61.9$, $SD = 7.5$); $t(298) = 6.21$, $p < .001$. This difference confirms that administrative support amplifies the academic impact of counselling services.

Furthermore, a Pearson correlation coefficient showed a moderate-to-strong positive relationship between counselling utilisation frequency and academic performance ($r = 0.61$, $p < .01$), indicating that the more students engaged with counsellors, the better they performed academically.

2. Attendance Rates

A second area of interest was the influence of counselling and administrative collaboration on student attendance. Schools with active counselling engagement and supportive administrators recorded improved attendance patterns. Specifically, the average number of student absences per term in high-support schools was 4.2 days ($SD = 2.0$), compared to 7.8 days ($SD = 2.9$) in low-support schools. The difference was statistically significant ($t(298) = 5.87$, $p < .001$), suggesting that counselling interventions, particularly those focused on personal challenges and goal-setting—helped reduce chronic absenteeism.

Additionally, student self-reports indicated that counselling helped them develop better time management skills and reinforced the importance of regular school attendance as part of goal attainment strategies. This finding is supported by a significant correlation ($r = -0.58$, $p < .01$) between counselling frequency and absenteeism—indicating that students who accessed counselling more often were less likely to miss school.

Qualitative Insights

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 school administrators and 30 school counsellors. Three key themes emerged, which deepened understanding of the mechanisms by which counselling programmes impacted student outcomes.

1. Collaborative Planning

A recurring theme was the importance of structured collaboration between school administrators and counsellors. In schools where counsellors were included in leadership meetings or involved in the formulation of academic recovery plans, strategies were more holistic and student-centred. One principal noted:

"When we sit with our counsellor to discuss trends in students' performance, we're abl to develop more proactive strategies, like early interventions for at-risk students." (Principal, Yenagoa Education Zone)

Such collaboration fostered shared responsibility for student success and ensured that counselling programmes were aligned with broader academic goals. Schools that engaged in regular joint planning sessions reported smoother implementation of counselling strategies and quicker resolution of behavioural and academic issues.

2. Resource Allocation

Counsellors in well-performing schools consistently attributed their programme success to the commitment of administrators to allocate adequate resources. These included functional counselling offices, privacy for one-on-one sessions, data management tools, and provision of workshop materials. One counsellor explained:

"The principal sees our work as part of the school's strategic framework. We're given a small budget every term to run career talks and mental health workshops, and that makes a huge difference." (Counsellor, Brass Education Zone)

This finding reinforces the quantitative data showing that schools with more institutional support were better able to maintain continuous and impactful counselling services.

3. Role Clarity and Professional Autonomy

The third theme was role clarity. In high-performing schools, administrators clearly defined the boundaries of the counsellor's role, ensuring that counsellors were not overburdened with administrative tasks such as supervision, attendance record-keeping, or clerical duties. As one respondent noted:

"In our school, I don't do unrelated tasks. I spend most of my time counselling students, monitoring academic progress, and preparing intervention strategies. The admin team respects that boundary." (Counsellor, Sagbama Education Zone)

In contrast, counsellors in low-performing schools frequently complained about being assigned tasks unrelated to their professional training, which reduced the time they could dedicate to student development. This lack of professional autonomy often led to burnout and under-performance.

Synthesis of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data paints a consistent picture: school counselling services significantly

enhance students' academic performance and attendance when they are adequately supported by school administrators. The quantitative evidence confirms the measurable impact on learning outcomes, while the qualitative insights reveal the underlying mechanisms, collaborative planning, resource provision, and role clarity—that enable or inhibit counselling effectiveness.

These results suggest that the mere presence of a school counsellor is insufficient to guarantee positive outcomes. What matters is how school leadership integrates and empowers the counselling function within the school ecosystem.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer critical insights into the interplay between counselling services and student academic outcomes, particularly in the context of administrative support within public secondary schools in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. This discussion synthesises the statistical results, triangulates them with the qualitative observations, and contextualises them within the broader literature. Three key themes emerge: (1) the significance of counselling service utilisation, (2) the mediating role of school administrators, and (3) the implications for educational leadership and policy.

1. Counselling Utilisation and Academic Performance

The results showed a statistically significant and positive correlation between counselling service utilisation and student academic performance. Students who engaged more frequently with school counsellors reported higher average scores in core subjects (English Language, Mathematics, and Integrated Science), better school attendance, and reduced incidences of disciplinary actions. These findings corroborate existing research by Carey et al. (2020) and Simbolon and Purba (2021), who found that counselling interventions, particularly academic guidance and socio-emotional support—enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

It is noteworthy that students who received both academic and personal/social counselling demonstrated higher academic performance than those who only received career-focused counselling. This affirms the assertion by Brigman et al. (2018) that counselling programmes are most effective when they address the holistic development of the learner, encompassing emotional regulation, goal setting, and time management. Therefore, counselling should not be limited to career guidance but rather encompass a broad spectrum of support services that directly and indirectly influence academic achievement.

Additionally, the qualitative responses revealed that students often viewed the counselling office as a "safe space" to express personal challenges that indirectly impacted their learning, such as peer pressure, family conflict, or financial stress. This qualitative evidence aligns with Lapan et al. (2021), who posited that the psychological climate created by counselling programmes fosters resilience and academic perseverance among students.

2. The Role of School Administrators in Counselling Effectiveness

One of the most compelling findings of this study is the significant influence of school administrators on the success of counselling programmes. Schools where principals actively supported the counselling unit, by allocating resources, including counsellors in school planning, and encouraging student participation, recorded higher levels of counselling utilisation and, subsequently, better academic outcomes. This supports the argument of Goodman-Scott and Grothaus (2018) that administrators play a gatekeeping role in either enabling or limiting the functional capacity of school counsellors.

Conversely, in schools where counselling was marginalised, evidenced by lack of office space, irregular student referrals, or the assignment of clerical duties to counsellors, there was a noticeable decline in the relevance and reach of counselling services. These schools also reported comparatively lower student academic performance and higher rates of absenteeism. These findings reflect concerns raised in Nigerian-based studies (e.g., Omoniyi, 2022; Akpan & Okon, 2021), which lament the poor institutionalisation of counselling due to administrative apathy or lack of awareness.

More importantly, schools with clearly defined counselling policies and job descriptions reported fewer conflicts between counsellors and administrators. This role clarity led to more efficient division of labour and reduced duplication of responsibilities. These observations reinforce Zalaquett and Chatters' (2019) argument that role ambiguity is one of the primary barriers to effective school counselling practice.

3. Counselling as a Strategic Tool for Academic Recovery

In light of widespread academic underperformance in Nigeria's public schools, this study positions school counselling as a strategic intervention capable of mitigating learning setbacks. Many students in the study expressed that counselling helped them refocus academically, especially after periods of poor performance or personal crises. This finding has special significance for post-pandemic education recovery, where emotional distress and academic disengagement remain high among adolescents.

Furthermore, the data revealed that frequent counsellor-led classroom interventions, such as time management workshops and peer mentoring, had a significant positive effect on students' study habits. These micro-interventions demonstrate the capacity of counsellors to serve as change agents within the learning ecosystem, provided they are supported institutionally. These results are consistent with the recommendations of the ASCA (2019), which advocate for integrated counselling services as a school-wide resource, rather than an isolated remedial service.

4. Implications for Educational Leadership and Policy

The findings of this study have direct implications for school leadership practices, pre-service administrative training, and policy development. First, there is a need for professional development workshops targeted at school administrators to enhance their understanding of the strategic value of counselling. Administrators must be sensitised to see counsellors not merely as auxiliary staff but as core contributors to teaching and learning outcomes.

Second, institutional policies at the school and state levels must explicitly define the roles and responsibilities of school counsellors and establish minimum standards for counselling service provision. This includes office space, student-counsellor ratios, continuous training, and inclusion in school governance teams. Such policy reform would align with best practices documented in high-performing educational systems globally (Carey et al., 2020; Bryan & Henry, 2012).

Third, educational policymakers in Nigeria must prioritise the integration of comprehensive counselling services in all public secondary schools, particularly in underserved rural areas where students face compounded socio-economic disadvantages. Counselling programmes, when properly supported, can serve as equalisers that reduce the achievement gap and foster inclusive learning environments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

(a) Conclusion

This study set out to empirically investigate the relationship between school counselling services and students' academic output, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of school administrators. Drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data across public secondary schools in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, the findings demonstrate a clear and compelling connection between the effectiveness of school counselling services and student academic performance. Furthermore, the study establishes that administrative support is not merely a background factor but a critical enabler of counselling success.

- Quantitative findings revealed that schools with robust, well-resourced counselling programmes exhibited higher student academic averages and lower absenteeism rates. A positive correlation was found between the frequency of counselling utilisation and student academic performance, confirming the view that counselling contributes substantively to academic success, especially when applied holistically, addressing both academic and personal development needs.

- Qualitative insights deepened this understanding by illustrating how administrative attitudes, collaborative planning, and role clarity directly influenced the extent to which counselling could flourish. In schools

where administrators recognised and supported the professional autonomy of counsellors, programmes were more comprehensive, accessible, and impactful. Conversely, in contexts where counsellors were underutilised, overburdened, or relegated to clerical duties, the counselling services had limited influence on educational outcomes.

- Overall, the study affirms that school counselling, when institutionally supported, functions as a strategic intervention that enhances students' learning environments, mitigates psycho-educational barriers, and contributes meaningfully to the attainment of academic goals. School administrators, therefore, are not passive overseers but active agents whose leadership practices determine the success or failure of school counselling initiatives.

(b) Recommendations

1. Institutionalise Counselling as a Core Academic Support System

- Educational policymakers and school leadership bodies should reposition school counselling as an integral component of the school improvement framework. This requires the inclusion of counselling in school development plans, budgetary provisions, and performance assessments. Counselling should no longer be seen as a marginal service or reactive intervention but as a proactive strategy for academic and psychosocial growth.

2. Provide Continuous Professional Development for School Administrators

- There is a pressing need to sensitise school administrators, especially principals and vice-principals, on the roles, potential, and needs of school counsellors. Regular workshops, seminars, and certification programmes should be organised to educate administrators on best practices for supporting school-based counselling. This will foster mutual respect, promote collaboration, and eliminate role ambiguity.

3. Develop Clear Policy Guidelines for Counselling Services

- The Ministry of Education should develop and enforce comprehensive policy frameworks that clearly define the responsibilities, limits, and reporting structures of school counsellors. Such policies should protect counsellors from non-guidance duties and ensure they have the time and space to carry out their functions effectively. This may include stipulating the recommended student–counsellor ratio, minimum counselling hours per week, and required infrastructural support.

4. Strengthen School–Counsellor–Administrator Collaboration

- To enhance programme cohesion, school counsellors should be part of academic boards, disciplinary committees, and school improvement teams. Scheduled planning sessions between administrators and counsellors should be institutionalised to align guidance activities with the school's academic goals. Such collaborations foster a culture of shared responsibility and holistic student development.

5. Invest in Counselling Infrastructure and Resources

- Educational authorities and school management must ensure that every public secondary school has a designated counselling office equipped with private consultation space, student files, assessment tools, and technology for digital record-keeping. Allocated funds should also support programme-specific activities such as peer mentoring, mental health awareness campaigns, and academic skills workshops.

6. Encourage Data-Driven Counselling Practices

- Counsellors should be trained and empowered to use student data (e.g., academic records, behavioural reports, attendance) to develop targeted interventions. School administrators must facilitate access to relevant data and collaborate with counsellors to evaluate programme effectiveness through measurable indicators. This will not only improve outcomes but also provide justification for sustained investment in counselling.

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