

**E-COUNSELLING AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL GUIDANCE SERVICE: A POST
COVID-19 RESPONSE IN EDUCATION**

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Abstract

The study looked at E-counselling as a tool for effective school counselling during any kind of pandemic especially that which may affect communal and social existence of man and school activities. Attention was focused on concepts like: E-counselling; COVID-19 crisis and E-counselling; COVID-19 and technology; the therapeutic relationship in E-counselling; E-counselling as the best option; skills, characteristics and other considerations for E- counselling; role of stakeholders in effective implementation of E-counselling. All these were discussed in order to enrich the content of this work. it was, however, concluded among others that, this pandemic has broadened our ways of doing things, new ways of working which practitioners might not have tried out, tending to rely on traditional methods. And recommended among others that, Government, federal and state ministries of education and school heads should as a matter of policy have annual allocation of fund that will be sufficient to manage E-counselling in critical time like this, and Government should make available E-counselling facilities that could enhance counselling activities both in school and non-school setting.

Key words: COVID-19, E-counselling, School guidance, Post covid-19 Response

Introduction

Counselling is said to be a helping relationship which for so many reasons relating to effective communication encourages physical presence of both the counselor and the client. COVID-19 on the other hand is a pandemic characterized by so many negative factors among which are physical and social distancing, isolation etc. all of which are counterproductive to effective counselling, especially in the school system. Teaching and learning share similar attribute as counselling is also a learning process, so if e-learning is possible so is E-counselling. In the submission of Oboh (2020), as schools move to distance learning provision, so does guidance in education and training. The availability of ICT infrastructure, previous use of ICT, as well as the attitude of the guidance practitioners and clients towards digital forms of delivery, plays a major role. For all countries who closed their schools, this meant that guidance could only be provided using digital technologies and other tools and channels that can be used for communication at a distance. Beside personal issues, students are also provided with support concerning: curricular difficulties, study difficulties, issues relating to choice of subjects, changes in the postsecondary course requirements due to COVID-19, Issues related to exams and transition to post-secondary education, etc. are of interest (Cedefop, 2019).

The lockdown appeared to have triggered the use of web-based interactive guidance tools and services (e.g. video-communication with counsellors, YouTube-live or webinars with chat function, and facilitation), even in countries where these technologies were not previously common in guidance delivery. On the other hand, the telephone appears to feature as a practical tool for one-to-one communication, despite the other channels available. In some cases, the telephone is preferred for making personal contact with students, such as to support those at risk of early school leaving from education and training.

Guidance professionals have been under pressure to adapt to the sudden change to providing guidance and support at a distance, including using multichannel digital technologies, without contact support and face-to-face teaching. Mindsets of

practitioners appear to be changing, for now, to rapidly fit into a new way of working, and, likewise, at organisational level, systems were implemented to ensure continuity of service. Participation in online further training among guidance practitioners appears to be on the increase during the crisis. Participation in specific types of training are mentioned that are associated with the shift to online support and the need for digital skills relevant to guidance delivery, such as use of video-calling or one-to-one chat facility. Increases in participation in general courses designed to increase other types of practitioner knowledge and competencies are also observed. Where online practitioner training is not available/less accessible, there are calls for further training opportunities and more information online, targeted to practitioners.

There appear to be differences in the education & training and employment sectors, in how the pandemic and ensuring government precautionary measures such as school and office closures, have had an impact on lifelong guidance service delivery and careers learning. There is, of course, a general disruption of guidance delivery and activities requiring physical face to-face contact (including individual guidance appointments, group visits to career centres, workplace visits and work experience school programmes, group counselling in schools, universities or for unemployed or mass events such job fairs).

E-counselling is a counselling method, through the medium of telecommunication technologies such as telephone, internet and teleconferencing. E-counselling or Digital counselling is gradually emerging as an effective tool to leverage students into holistic self-management and development (Bada, 2013). However, mimicking students' life challenges into digital counselling and its related platforms is unconventional in the Nigeria context, and this is undoubtedly a new dimension of rendering counselling services to students during the Covid-19 crisis. Counselling in the Nigeria Senior Secondary Schools has existed for years until the outbreak of Covid-19 when the Ministry of Education re-emphasise the need to resource the centres with state-of-the-art facilities in order to augment the counselling services (NERIC 2007). Conversely, the first researcher's prior experience as a teacher confirms that some educational counsellors in Nigeria are reluctant to adapt to the emerging counselling technologies, and this is mainly due to their incapacity to use technology. E-counselling

seems to be a phenomenon within the counselling parlance. It is a modern means of communication between counsellor(s) and client(s) in sessions via internet within a stipulated period of at least once a week in a year or six months with a singular purpose of assisting clients in discovering themselves and making useful choices in relation to their educational, vocational and personal-social needs.

E-counselling is an extension of information and communication technology which Ivowi (2005) prescribed as generic term employed in describing the generation, storage, dissemination and eliciting of relevant information for therapeutic encounter. Most counsellors seem to be regressive in relation to familiarisation and use of information technology. Their lack of competency in the use of electronic services such as email, Google, twitter instagram etc. could deter them from relating effectively with clients who are not within their immediate reach. Electronic communication involves the use of e-mails, internet and communication aided strategies in counselling clients (Adika, 2011). He further added that counsellors are not left out in this all-important phenomenon which has potential to transform not only counselling practices but education as well. Counsellors who lack basic skills in electronic services may not be able to email and make internet contact with distant clients that need such help. This may have been necessitated by lack of access to the electronic gadgets or lack of training in their usage. An assortment of modalities has been recognized as E-counselling, including but not restricted to instant messaging, synchronous chat, text messaging, video-conferencing, and asynchronous email (Barak, Hen, et al., 2009; Barnett, 2005; Dowling & Rickwood, 2013). Counsellors or psychologists who have adequate technical ability can progressively communicate with their client through the online medium and/or undertake the whole progress online (Mallen & Vogel, 2005). The benefits of E-counselling incorporate more noteworthy availability; reaching populaces that would not immediately look for face-to-face counselling; reasonableness; and ease of record keeping (Leibert et al., 2006; McCrickard & Butler, 2005; Rochlen et al., 2004). Moreover, Suler (2002) and Partala (2011) expressed that clients taking part in E-counselling are less likely to feel powerless for revealing their individual data and also feel less ashamed about their issues, due to the anonymity related to E-counselling.

In any case, experts of E-counselling have raised concerns with respect to the

reducing of visual prompts, failure to intercede in an emergency, and need of restorative control (Leibert et al., 2006; Richards, 2009; Rochlen et al., 2004). Numerous experts within the field have expressed concerns regarding moral issues of E-counselling, including things such as competence, informed consent, privacy, and security (Barnett, 2005; McAdams & Wyatt, 2010; National Board for Certified Counsellors, 2012). In addition, E-counselling cannot be utilized by those who do not have satisfactory innovation or do not have the essential innovation aptitudes (West & Hanley, 2006).

Covid-19 Crisis and E-counselling

Guidance professionals are already organised as a network within Secondary Schools. They work in a complementary way with class-teachers in order to keep information on guidance procedures up to date and to support and accompany the guidance of students who are in a problematic situation. Continuity has been established with the teachers through telephone interviews and emails. This also seems to be the case in Nigeria, where the teaching staff of the educational unit collaborates with the school counsellors and speech therapists. In Nigeria, career practitioners are actively sharing their expertise in working at a distance using their internal communication channels. The companies who are developing online learning solutions have unify their forces to give free access to their materials (including career education) and help the teachers discover how new educational tools can be used or how to complement their traditional way of working. In addition local initiatives from different NGOs appeared in this period, dedicated to E-counselling. The service includes guidance related to choice of subjects, career-related issues, employability skills, course information and adult participation in lifelong learning. This service was promoted on the Association's Facebook page and website and was shared by various members. More so, the Association has updated its website and included a dedicated area related to COVID-19 issues in terms of employment and education. The page consolidates information issued from various government entities such as those in education, government assistance and job searching services (Oboh, 2020).

After an initial shock and discontinuance of academic activity, countries have necessarily built on existing tools and infrastructures, rapidly adapting their services to the new circumstances. Countries in which digital forms of guidance provision are

established, as well as countries that have existing multichannel capacity (different channels to provide guidance: phone, on-line services, face-to-face) seem to have been faster and more effective in transitioning to the new reality where all support services and careers learning are provided remotely. The lockdown appears to have triggered the use of web-based interactive guidance tools and services (e.g. video communication with counsellors, YouTube-live or webinars including a chat function and facilitation) in countries where this was previously not common, such as in Nigeria.

With the temporary discontinuation of face-to-face and other guidance services, existing WebPages have been the first and most obvious response to reach the public, mainly as vehicles of information provision and dissemination of example practices and to provide support for career-related teaching and learning. WebPages have been updated and enhanced with targeted information for user groups, both for those who wish to benefit from guidance and for career guidance professionals and practitioners. Websites have also been used to host digital self-help services and information on further training of practitioners, both short-term or modular, and full degree programmes for up skilling, but also to inform guidance counsellors of offers for their beneficiaries/users.

E-counselling Tools During Pandemic

Zamani (2009) identified email, chat, video-conferencing and text messaging or short message system (SMS) as widely used in counselling sessions during pandemics. Future based simulation with role-playing in which learners' imaginations are engaged is one of the most effective strategies of learning and developing a career and life management. The following tools may further be considered effective:

Counselling Games: Game is a competition among players or against oneself. Bada (2013) describes games as a set of activities that involves one or more players who has goals, constraints, payoffs and consequence. The motivational aspect of a game is to win or play for fun (Bada, 2013). The thrilling part is the failure to attain the desired winning points. This, intention drives people to continue playing. Students may have perceived winning as the motivational factor, but games are usually meant to carry a message or to educate. Digitizing a real life situation in the form of game is currently an important tool to sensitise and expose students to the realities of life.

Email. Electronic mail, widely known as email, is a form of communication transmitted electronically using computers and/or phone. It is tremendously faster than all previous means of communication, for instance sending letters using the traditional postal system (NIPOST). It is therefore not surprising that email has been widely adopted by a large section of the world's population as their preferred means of communication. Sending email is free, except the cost of paying for the infrastructure such as a computer and Internet connection. Zamani (2009) pointed out that email is an ideal platform or medium for people with different time schedules, providing an opportunity for introspective responses. Nevertheless, sending email is associated with security issues which make it difficult for a counsellor to guarantee a water-tight confidentiality. Ralls (2011) worries about the confidentiality issues associated with the use of email in counselling, and cautions that email conversations are not secured without any means to protect it. However, he advocated that confidential information on the internet can be shared over a secured server; otherwise, only general information could be requested and provided. Indeed, emails can also be encrypted over the internet for secure confidential materials.

Instant Messaging and Chat. Instant messaging and chat are communication technologies which use text based communication (Jennings et al. 2006). The communication often involves two or more people over the Internet or other related networks. Instant messaging (IM) is a private network communication between two users, whereas a chat session is the network communication between two or more users (Jennings et al. 2006). Chat provides virtual group session for chatting, and permits more than one person for information sharing or counselling services. Counsellors could virtually engage students into counselling with the intent of providing group or individual counselling. Zamani (2009) described chat and IM as synchronous (happens in real-time), and noted that participants have to be logged on at the same time for chatting or messaging. In this regard, time and scheduling become vital since parties have to be on the platform at the same time. Chat or IM sessions can either be private, where each user is invited to join the session, or public, where users also join the session on their own initiative (Jennings et al. 2006). In addition, some IM systems allow file transfers, webcam usage, using privacy controls, maintaining buddy lists,

voice chat sessions, and other options (Jennings et al., 2006). Grohol (2003) also identified chat as one of the widely use forums for online counselling in the world. Chats and IM platforms virtually run on portable device, ranging from standard mobile phones to smart phones.

Video Conferencing. Down (2009) described video-conferencing as a method of conferencing between two or more locations where both sound and vision are transmitted and received. The platform allows simultaneous interactive communication between users. Suler (2000) describes video conferencing as synchronous and provides participants with the visual and spoken communication. According to Down (2009), a basic video conference requires a television camera to capture images of the participants, a microphone to pick up their speech and a means of transferring sound and vision information to the remote location. Video Conferencing requires the participants to sit in front of a camera and are indeed expected to have compatible video equipment (Zamani 2009). Suler (2000) discussed the importance of video conferencing in psychotherapy in cyberspace for which he discovered that video conferencing provides multiple sensory cues, such as visual appearance, body language and vocal expression that can provide valuable information for understanding the client. Zamani (2009) also argued that video conferencing may be less ambiguous than typed text, which may lead to fewer misunderstandings. As much as speaking is faster than typing, video conferencing conveys information more quickly, and readily has a consequential benefit to those who express themselves better through speaking than writing.

The Therapeutic Relationship in E-counselling

There is no proof that the relationships between client and counsellor or psychologist are exceptionally diverse when counselling treatments are given over the Internet. The foremost self-evident contrast is the need for non-verbal signals (Abney & Cleborne, 2004; Liess et al., 2008). Whereas this clearly unfavorably influences the strategies utilised in conventional counselling, a few have contended that such disadvantages are, at the least, mostly counterbalanced by the favorable characteristics of text-based communication (Suler, 2004). For example, a few have contended that clients unveil at a faster rate when making contact via email (Barnett, 2005; Rochlen et

al., 2004), which the back bunches may have a “disinhibiting effect” (Allerman, 2002; Barak et al., 2008). Clearly, clients are more likely to get straight to the point instead of steadily easing into an articulation of the issue (Hennigan& Goss, 2014; Rochlen et al., 2004; Suler, 2004). This divulgence may be candidly noteworthy in spite of being text-based (Bar-Lev, 2008; Centore&Milacci, 2008). The revelation of their problems may be increased by the sense of privacy that clients may experience by not being physically seen or by not having to disclose their character (Cartreine et al., 2010). Revelation may be advanced and encouraged by the orderly introduction of web-based methods (Joinson et al., 2008; Jones, 2013).

Moreover, certainly requiring the client to verbalise their concerns in a written format may create a more intelligent position on the part of the client (Hennigan & Goss, 2014; Rochlen et al., 2004). Composed communication permits clients to consider what they are “actually saying” and to change their explanations without worrying that it will come across incorrectly the first time. This could be more than just the original communication made by a counsellor.

Skills, Characteristics, and other Considerations for E-counselling

According to Dominikus (2020), counsellors must consider a few variables when committing to E-counselling. In this case, the counsellor must be able to understand the complex characteristics of each client (Kanani&Regehr, 2003). At the same time, they must have suitable specialised information and have a certain level of familiarity with errors, miscommunication, and working with different societies (ACA, 2014).

Counsellors ought to screen out potential clients requiring high levels of contact and those with serious pathology, hazardous behaviors, and troubles with reality testing (Rochlen et al., 2004; Suler, 2001). They must also evaluate the client’s familiarity with technology and their expressive abilities in the E-counselling process. Barnett (2005) and Fenichel et al. (2002) recommended that clients with high levels of inspiration, excellent reading and writing abilities, and the capacity to recognise and clarify miscommunications may be most appropriate for E-counselling.

Moreover, counselors utilising e-media ought to have the capacity to sort rapidly, compose expressively, and be proficient at online communication, encryption, and Web-browser administration. Analysts have proposed utilizing more unequivocal methods of

communication when composing is the most important modality (Allerman, 2002; Barak, Klein, et al., 2009; Suler, 2004), including capitalisation, emoticons (utilizing written images such as smiley faces for specific feelings), bold, italic, or colored type, and other methods of complex accentuation. Portraying sentiments and body language may also help towards more viable communication (Abney & Cleborne, 2004). Cook and Doyle (2002) and Wang et al. (2014) found that virtual meeting facilitators needed to be knowledgeable about the stage being utilised and be able to multitask between technical/logistical components and helping aptitudes. The capacity to move rapidly between separate modalities and face-to-face counselling has, moreover, become well known (Dowling & Rickwood, 2013; Fenichel et al., 2002).

Roles of Stakeholders in Effective Implementation of E-counselling

What is needed to improve the system and ultimately benefit individuals, especially those in need. These ideas are grouped according to categories listed below:

- i. Implementation of the recommendations of the national review would create an overarching national guidance strategy, to include an interim plan for the current responses needed, to involve all relevant stakeholders; formal coordinated, considered plan for guidance policy across government departments and for guidance delivery now and into the future; funding allocated specifically to ICT developments to include a national/regional/local approach to online career guidance information and service provision.
- ii. Locate guidance mechanisms or policy strategies that will provide an appropriate response to the problems countries are facing. Address the key issues in guidance stemming from the crisis: how to respond to early school leaving from education and training (VET and apprenticeships); how to manage professional transitions; how to reduce the digital divide and inequalities that the pandemic threw into relief.
- iii. Other issues for adults and youths may include: change of professions for those facing health risks; dropout from apprenticeships loss of company funding; unemployment, social digital gap increases - those who have digital tools and those who do not; higher dropout rate in VET; geographical disparities; decreased student mobility towards metropolitan France; increased anxiety or psychological

- disorders Funding for career guidance should be part of a packages of measures.
- iv. Implement and support digitalization of guidance services; Support digitalisation and e-governance in guidance at Nigeria level including a conceptual discussion for which cases and for which target groups physical face-to-face services are needed and in which cases the future will be focusing on interactive online career counselling sessions; Digitalise interventions and services due to the social-distancing measures. Telephone, digital interviews, web chats are attractive. Long-term professional integration and individual empowerment in the use of digital technologies is vital.
 - v. Greater investment in technical infrastructures and workforce development is often needed at national level in order to support more effective use of ICT during and after the pandemic.

Updating the Counsellor Education Curriculum

E-counselling has been around for decades and is not a new phenomenon. In truth, mental health services have been available since 1982 through the utilisation of e-self-help groups (Holmes & Foster, 2012; Kanani & Regehr, 2003). The forerunner to E-counselling was established over a decade ago, in 1995, when primary fee-based treatment was set up on the Internet (Mallen & Vogel, 2005). Although innovation is progressing and new techniques such as video chat are utilized, the concept of online treatment is not new (McCrickard & Butler, 2005). Since this kind of treatment is not a new phenomenon, why are our graduate students not learning about it? Why is this not included within education modules?

In the opinion of Dominiku (2020), the ultimate suggestion for curriculum designers is that there is clearly a need for instructive material within current counselling education courses. In a standard program there is no focus on E-counselling within the dialogs, courses, or materials. This also confirms research findings, since less than 1% of dynamic counsellors report having had data displayed to them about E-counselling (Abney & Cleborne, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Wells et al., 2007). It appears that a clear shortage has been identified, since this more youthful generation of upcoming counselor shows itself to be enthusiastic about memorising

more, whereas their educators show themselves to be lagging behind in providing them with the required and wanted instruction, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Supporting/Updating of Skills, Knowledge and Competences of Counsellors

Ensure the evolution of career development and career management skills in education and training. Supporting individuals to review their skills and competences to identify upskilling needs to support career progression and opportunities (Nigeria).

- a. Career guidance practices should give more emphasis to the issues of flexibility, adaptability and resilience, in responding to challenges faced. This applies to everyday practices of career guidance professionals as well as the beneficiaries they serve (Nigeria).
- b. Job search procedures and skills development during the pandemic should be explored in relation to lessons learned from the employment and digital transformation (e.g. 3D printing in health products) (Nigeria). Hooley, T., Sultana R.S. and Thomsen, R. (2020) in 'Why a social justice informed approach to career guidance matters in the time of coronavirus' state that "career guidance needs to radically and quickly reform its messages". This has great implications as to how we are going to help our clients approach building their careers after the COVID-19 pandemic – we need to work on helping them have the knowledge, competences and abilities which will allow them to explore a range of different solutions, to think critically which solution best serves them – empowering them to seek approaches that they are entitled to. To survive in such turbulent water, clients need specific employability skills - flexibility, self-confidence, adaptability and resilience, amongst others.

Conclusions

This pandemic may introduce new ways and new mentalities of reaching and working with individuals. There are skills that need to be prioritised in guidance interventions during the pandemic. The important thing is to help others become more resilient. The counsellors are in a good position to help explore feelings of their clients in order to support their general well-being. This crisis has jump-started the process of improving online services and it is providing all of us the necessary experience to be

able to fine tune such online services. Many mentioned that in future entities will be in a better position to use technology to enhance their service. This pandemic has broadened our way of doing things, new ways of working which practitioners might not have tried out, tending to rely on traditional methods. Many colleagues who work in the education and employment sector are emphasising the importance of reaching out to their students/jobseekers through telephone, emails, chat, Facebook, Zoom, video conferencing, etc. However, since we are dealing with video conferencing/sessions quite frequently – some aspects are to be re-examined such as GDPR, online recording issues and rights and obligations for both the clients and the career guidance practitioner. There is a need now to reflect on the role that digital technology should have in the future of education and career guidance, e.g. for personalization of learning/career guidance. A powered system could have helped teachers, students and parents, employers and unemployed people navigate the range of digital learning resources out there if they were more available and ready to use. Furthermore, counselling education students right now have had no formal instructive material on this subject in their counsellor education program.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Managing Challenges of E-counselling during the Covid-19 deepen Crisis in Nigeria. Educational reform and sustainability is attainable if only the following recommendations that will allow for effective E-counselling in times like this are enforced.

- i. Government, federal and state ministries of education and school heads should as a matter of policy have annual allocation of fund that will be sufficient to manage E-counselling in critical time like this.
- ii. Government should make available E-counselling facilities that could enhance counselling activities both in school and non-school setting.
- iii. Organizations and schools with E-counselling facilities should imbibe maintenance culture that will enable equipment such as computer, office furniture, tapes and others serve for a long period of time.
- iv. Scholarship and subventions should be made available for e-counsellors by government and NGOs in order to give themselves to adequate training.

- v. More effort should be made by the government to train and retrain counsellors in E-communication. It gives room for a wider range of counselling activities. Individuals will have opportunity to relate with counsellors online as it is in developed countries.
- vi. Government and NGO's should establish more E-counselling centers in every field of organizations in government custody. There should be at least three counsellor to a school from nursery to tertiary institutions depending on the population strength. It creates an atmosphere for early introduction of children to E-counselling practice which is intended to foster quality education.

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