MENTAL HEALTH AS A PREDICTOR OF ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG COUNSELLORS IN DEPRESSED ECONOMY IN NSUKKA EDUCATION ZONE OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study investigated mental health as a predictor of academic stress among counsellors in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State, Nigeria. One research question and one corresponding null hypothesis guided the study. A correlational survey research design was adopted. The population of the study consists of 270 counsellors in public secondary schools in the study area. The entire population were used as sample. In this case, there was no sample because the number can be managed. Data were collected using two instruments: Counsellors Academic Stress Questionnaire (CASQ)" and "Mental Health Questionnaire (MHQ)".The instruments were face validated by three experts in the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of CASQ and MHQ were determined using Cronbach alpha and reliability estimate values of 0.76 and 0.78 were obtained for CASQ and MHQ respectively. The data collected were analyzed using coefficient of determination (R^2) for research question, while linear regression was used in testing the hypothesis at $p<0.05$ level of significance. The result of the study indicated that mental health positively predicts academic stress of counsellors. The result also revealed that there is significant predictive power between mental health and academic stress of counsellors. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that secondary school Guidance Counsellors should organize workshops on mental health and academic stress to help improve their life.

Keywords: Mental health and academic stress

Introduction

Academic stress among secondary school counsellors are on the increase. This could be based on the current challenges facing Nigerians as their economy depressed. Corruption, weak administrators, lack of motivation, inadequate infrastructural facilities, poor salary, insecurity among others have exposed a lot of challenges to counsellors. This situation has led so many counsellors especially those in secondary schools to exhibit stress behaviour. These secondary school counsellors encounter a lot of problems and situations that make them vulnerable to stress. Counsellors in secondary school provide an opportunity for primary school leavers to acquire more knowledge, develop skills and prepare them to live effectively in our changing society (Hose, 2019). Counsellors are professionally trained to handle students' interpersonal, academic and vocational challenges (Bangalore, 2021). Counsellors equip students to live effectively in our modern age of science and technology (Afudoh, 2020). Secondary school counsellors, according to Bangalore (2021) significantly contribute to personal development by enhancing self-awareness and fostering personal growth. Through guided conversations and reflective exercises, counsellors help students to gain deeper insights into their thoughts, behaviours and emotions (Bangalore, 2021). A secondary school counsellor provides students with the opportunity to learn about themselves and gain a greater understanding into their

personality, values and beliefs (Pin, 2022). The author also noted that it allows students to increase self-awareness and insight into their own role in the problems that they may be facing and awareness is key to change.

A counsellor plays critical role in wellbeing of individuals. Jones (2022) emphasized that counsellors act as change agents within the school system, advocate for policies and practices that enhance students' and teachers' wellbeing. The author further noted that counsellors engage in professional development to stay informed about best practices and emerging trends in counselling, ensuring they can effectively address the diverse needs of the students. Counsellors are defined as professionals who provide guidance and support to individuals facing personal, social or psychological challenges (American School Counsellor Association, 2023). In a study by Huang (2023) counsellors are described as essential figures in educational settings, particularly in addressing the metal heath needs of students. They are often the first line of defense against issues such as anxiety, depression and stress.

However, despite all these significance of secondary school counsellors, motivation to achieve on their duty is lacking and as such is stressed up due to depressed economy. The effect of this situation is usual failed society. According to Ibe (2021), secondary school counsellors are stressed due to inadequate facilities to respond to students' problems. According to Udobe (2020) academic stress among secondary school counsellors have led to poor performance of students. In Enugu State, specifically, Nsukka Education Zone, the researchers' observation from the early practicum supervision exercise in public secondary schools indicate that academic stress among counsellors are on the increase and it is becoming increasingly stressful on their clients and the society at large. For example, counsellors in secondary schools complain of irregular promotion as at when due, irregular salaries, no facilities to effectively carryout school guidance programme, absence of in-service training, lack of motivation among others. On the other hand, principals in the study areas do not accept counsellors posted to their schools, and as such usually assign teaching subjects to them. This has led to serious ugly situations that counsellors are teaching instead of counselling in secondary schools. There is no doubt that these ugly situations led to academic stress coupled with the depressed economy. The counsellors expect to get their salaries and other benefits as at when due, at least to satisfy their physiological needs. When these are lacking, stress usually do not allow the persons to work as expected and it results to a failed society. In support of the above claim, Kohu (2021) found out that counsellors in secondary schools take teaching sub jects and as such are not happy. Ezeodo (2021) noted that counsellors in Enugu State are not recognized by principals where they are posted. These rejections from principals lead to academic stress among counsellors which eventually lead to failed society.

Academic stress affects not only the students, teachers and counsellors but equally the entire society. According to Jamison (2019), stress affects all areas of an individual's wellbeing including physical health, self-esteem, sleep, diet, social interactions among others. Burns (2020) also posits that students who are stressed are at risk of suffering from mental and physical health problems, resistance to anything school related and poor academic performance. Stress is common among secondary school counsellors, but often goes unrecognized. In a study on effects of stress on counsellors' job performance, for instance, Shuma (2021) found out that a negative effect of stress exists on counsellors' job performance and a significance different between the job performance of the counsellors having low, medium and high level stress. Stress is a common mental disorder (Burns, 2021). According to Kerr (2021), stress is a mental health

disorder characterized by persistently stress mood or loss of interest in activities causing significant impairment in daily life. The author further noted that possible causes of stress include a combination of biological, psychological and social sources of distress. Stress according to Nole (2023) is a mood or emotional state that is marked by feelings of low self-worth or guilt and a reduced ability to enjoy life, often accompanied by other symptoms such as loss of interest or pleasure among others. This implies that stressed counsellors especially in this depressed economy are vulnerable to anti-social behaviours which usually lead them astray.

Academic stress perhaps has effect on counsellors' personality traits and their leering. Verma (2021) showed that academic stress is what indicates the moods and feelings of school counsellors. Failure and dissatisfaction with himself and thinking of suicide, fatigue and loss of appetite which harms the extent to which it is necessary to provide psychological support to this group of counsellors by employing religious therapeutic programmes that reduce the level of feeling of stress (World Health Organization, (WHO), 2022). Academic stress can equally lead to guilt, decreased confidence and eventually resulting in numerous diseases (Burns, 2022). The negative consequences of academic stress on secondary school counsellors and physical wellbeing reveal the need for intervention studies on stress (Burns, 2022). Such interventions include mental health among others.

Mental health is a factor that may predict stress of secondary school counsellors. In other words, mental health is a variable that may be associated with stress of secondary school counsellors. According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2015), mental health was defined as a state of wellbeing in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities when coping with the normal stresses of life. Previous studies have posited that mental health has both direct and indirect effects on daily life, school completion, education attainment, and reduction of stress and depression (Maynard, 2025; Ramsdal, 2018). Similarly, mental health associated factors such as drug addition, depression, health related issues, mental illness have been attributed to academic stress and depression (Borges, 2018). Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing (King & Bernstin, 2019). The authors further noted that mental health affects how we think, feel and act. It also helps to determine how we handles stress, relate to others and make healthy choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescent through adulthood. Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to his or her community (Ramsdal, 2018). This implies that it has to do with stability of a person.

Academic stress among secondary school Counsellors in Enugu State, Nigeria, specifically Nsukka Education Zone is assuming an alarming rate (Verma, 2021). Teachers, principals, students, parents among others have often wondered and worried that the academic stress of counsellors in secondary schools would lead to unproductivity especially in the depressed economy. In spite of efforts made to reduce this ugly situation, it is still on the increase. It is based on this background that the researchers sought to investigate mental health as a predictor of academic stress among secondary school counsellors in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate mental health as a predictor of academic stress among secondary school counsellors in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine the predictive power of mental health on academic stress of counsellors.

Research Question

The following research question posed guided the study.

1. What is the predictive power of mental health on academic stress of counsellors?

Hypothesis

Ho$_1$: There is no significant predictive power of mental health on academic stress of counsellors.

Methods

The research design used for the study was a correlational survey design. The population of the study consisted of all 270 Guidance Counsellors in public secondary schools in the study area. The entire population of 270 counsellors were used as sample. In this case, there was no sampling. The instrument for data collection was two sets of questionnaire titled "Counsellors Academic Stress Questionnaire (CASQ)" and "Mental Health Questionnaire (MHQ)". The instruments were developed by the researchers with much insight from literature reviewed and was validated by three experts in Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The internal consistency reliability coefficients of CASQ and MHQ were determined using Cronbach Alpha Statistics and reliability estimate values of 0.76 and 0.78 were obtained for CASQ and MHQ respectively. The data collected was analyzed using coefficient of determination (R^2) for research question while linear regression was used for testing the hypothesis at $p<0.05$ level of significance.

Results

Table 1: Regression analysis on the predictive power of mental health on academic stress of counsellors

Variable	R	R^2
Mental Health and Academic Stress of Counsellors	0.67	0.82

(R^2) = Coefficient of determination

The result on Table 1 shows that the coefficient between mental health and academic stress of Counsellors was 0.67. This implies that there exists a high positive prediction between mental health and academic stress of Counsellors. Table 1 also revealed that the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient of 0.67 was 0.82. This coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates that 67% of variation in academic stress of Counsellors is attributed to mental health. Thus, mental health predicts Counsellors' academic stress positively.

Discussion

The result shows that the correlation coefficient between mental health and academic stress of counsellors was high. This means that there exists a high positive prediction between mental health and academic stress of counsellors. By implication, it means that the coefficient of determination with a high percentage variation in the academic stress of counsellors can be attributed to mental health. It also shows that increase in mental health predicts high academic stress of counsellors. Further analysis of the prediction between mental health on academic stress

of counsellors revealed that at the associated probability for the calculated value of F; is less than the level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is a significant prediction between mental health and academic stress of counsellors.

The findings of this study is in agreement with the study of Maynard (2015), which posits that mental health has both direct and indirect effects on daily life, and reduce stress and depression. Similarly, mental health according to Borges (2018) associated factors such as drug addiction, depression, health related issues, mental illness have been attributed to academic stress and depression. Equally, Verna (2021) found out that academic stress is what indicates the moods and feelings of school counsellors. This usually leads to failure and dissatisfaction with themselves and thinking of fatigue and loss of appetite which harms the extent to which it is necessary to provide counselling to students.

Educational Implication of the Findings

The findings of this study revealed that mental health significantly predicts academic stress among secondary school counsellors. By implication, this underscores the importance of integrating mental health practices into the professional responsibilities of counsellors. If properly applied, mental health interventions can serve as a protective factor, helping counsellors to manage work-related stress more effectively, maintain psychological balance, and enhance their professional performance. Furthermore, the result implies that school administrators and policymakers need to recognize the role of counsellors' mental health in sustaining the overall quality of educational service delivery. Strengthening mental health support systems, promoting awareness campaigns, and creating enabling environments for counsellors to practice stress-management strategies will not only reduce their stress levels but also improve their ability to provide quality guidance and support to students.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study was conducted to address the urgent need to reduce academic stress among secondary school counsellors in a depressed economy. Findings revealed that mental health has a strong positive predictive effect on academic stress, indicating that counsellors who actively apply mental health strategies are better equipped to manage stress effectively. In view of this, it is recommended that school guidance counsellors should regularly organize workshops and training sessions focused on mental health and stress management. Such initiatives will encourage the consistent application of mental health practices, which have been shown to significantly reduce academic stress among counsellors.

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