




The Role of School Guidance and Counselling in Promoting Mental well-being and Critical Thinking among junior Secondary School Students in Anambra State

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Abstract: *Guidance and counselling at school is critical in improving the mental health and critical thinking skills of junior secondary school students. The current research involved a descriptive survey design, which included all of the teachers in the public secondary schools. A sample size of 118 teachers was used. This information was collected using a structured questionnaire administered using the Google Forms platform, and the results were rated in a 4-point Likert scale. The reliability of the instruments was determined by a pilot study, which produced a Cronbach alpha of 0.85. Findings show that guidance and counselling services play a key role in promoting the mental health of students through the emotional support they offer, stress management techniques, and coping. Besides, organised counselling programmes encourage building of critical-thinking capabilities, which help pupils to develop logical thinking, decision-making abilities, and problem-solving skills. This research suggests that more finance should be allocated, more parents should be involved, and policy solutions should be implemented to strengthen school counselling programmes in the State of Anambra.*

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INTRODUCTION

The role of guidance and counselling in educational institutions is critical in assisting learners in ensuring that their mental health is good and that they become better thinkers. Since junior secondary students are faced with both academic and personal demands, the structured counselling services are a source of much-needed support in dealing with stress, developing problem solving skills, and learning to be resilient (Abeshi, 2025). Academic performance and general development of students are inseparable with mental health. Guidance and counselling services, therefore, are essential in solving psychological stressors, emotional disturbances, and social problems that pupils face (Lacson et al., 2024). Counsellors establish a conducive environment to emotional stability by enabling coping strategies towards anxiety, depression, and peer-associated difficulties.

Empirical data show that school-based counselling interventions are effective methods of preventing depressive and anxious symptoms in adolescents (Hines et al., 2020). Pupils can also be helped to reorganize maladaptive cognitions and, instead, learn positive coping mechanisms through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques (Falloon et al., 2023). Guidance programmers are thus essential to facilitating psychosocial wellbeing through formal group counselling fostering collective stories, social support and reduced isolation (Kofoworola & Rofiu, 2024). These programs strengthen self-esteem, affective intelligence and adaptive coping skills which are the basic blocks of mental-health resilience. These results are consistent with more general literature on social and environmental determinants highlighting the need of institutional support systems to reduce vulnerability, inequality, and stress (Okemgbo et al., 2002). Similar studies on climate adaptation, education and sustainable development support the need to support human resilience and performance through supportive frameworks (Akanwa et al., 2024; Munonye et al., 2022; Odimegwu and Ikeotuonye, 2023). Taken all together, these investigations emphasize the importance of guidance counselling as an essential part of the comprehensive educational and social well-being.

Critical thinking is one of the basic skills that learners need to have so that they can develop their ability to analyze, evaluate and synthesize information. Guidance and counselling programmers play an important role in supporting these skills by providing the pupils with problem-solving skills and decision-making skills (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2023). To develop cognitively, counsellors combine various cognitive-developmental strategies to create a thinking-capable and independent mind. The studies suggest that guidance interventions that focus on metacognitive strategies help students to be mindful of their thinking processes, thus becoming better at solving complex problems (Onu et al., 2025). Additionally, inquiry-based learning and ethical-reasoning discussions are integrated in these programmers, provoking cognitive abilities and enhancing rational decision-making (Akgun & Araz, 2014). Career counselling inclusion also introduces students to a range of job opportunities and promotes the review of strengths, weaknesses, and goals (Fris et al., 2022). The process does not only facilitate goal-setting but also the ability of students to make informed decisions in the future.

Good school guidance programmers incorporate the mental-health-support component with cognitive-development strategies in a bid to achieve holistic development of learners. A holistic counselling framework includes individual and group counselling, peer counselling, and teacher consultation, which foster an optimal environment in learning (Shanta and Wells, 2022). Early-intervention programs focusing on resilience training and stress-management

strategies have a significant beneficial impact on the mental health of students and their academic success in the long term (Arfasa and Weldmeskel, 2020). Educational institutions that focus on guidance and counselling services report high academic performance, social competencies, and learning motivation (Agustin et al., 2020). Therefore, investment in properly designed counselling programmes is an inevitable means of improving the mental wellness and critical-thinking abilities of students.

The increasing rate of mental-health problems among junior secondary students in the Anambra State highlights the urgency of the effective guidance and counselling programmes. Research shows that the adolescents in Nigeria face significant stressors, such as academic pressure, peer pressure, and socioeconomic misfortune, which often trigger anxiety and emotional discomfort (Wambu and Fisher, 2015). The scarcity of professional counselling services in schools also makes the problems worse since many pupils lack sufficient psychological support (Rasmussen et al., 2022). Moreover, despite the critical-thinking skills being vital in academic and personal development, studies show that a high number of secondary school students in Nigeria do not get enough training on how to use analytical thinking and problem-solving (Zolkoski et al., 2016). The available literature is generally focused on cognitive development in higher education and little has been done that examines how school guidance and counselling can affect critical thinking in junior secondary (Falloon et al., 2023). This research will attempt to fill these gaps by assessing the effectiveness of school counselling services in Anambra State in strengthening the mental well-being and critical-thinking abilities of students to influence the education policy changes and improve the academic performance of students.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do school guidance and counseling services contribute to the mental well-being of junior secondary school students based on gender?
2. What is the role of guidance and counseling programs in promoting critical thinking skills among junior secondary school students based on gender?
3. What challenges do school counselors face in promoting mental well-being and critical thinking among junior secondary school students based on gender?

Hypotheses

1. School guidance and counseling services do not significantly contribute to the mental well-being of junior secondary school students based on gender.
2. Guidance and counseling programs do not play a significant role in promoting critical thinking skills among junior secondary school students based on gender.
3. School counselors do not face significant challenges in promoting mental well-being and critical thinking among junior secondary school students based on gender.

Literature Review

Guidance and counselling in schools is an important way of fostering the mental health and critical thinking in students. According to recent studies, counselling services considerably lessen academic stress and improve students with cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, in secondary school (Enwere & Iloakasia, 2025). Counsellors also focus on emotional and social

skills that develop resilience, coping skills, and a positive learning environment that support the psychic well-being (Bako et al., 2025). Additionally, guidance programmers assist students in making sound judgments and solving problems by assisting them to consider options and instill self-confidence (Okechukwu, 2026). The inclusion of these services at schools will therefore promote the comprehensive development of students and their psychological well-being.

The teacher-student relationship promoted through effective counselling services is the basis of open dialogue and building analytical study habits (Ngozi & Eke, 2023). Guidance programmers help students challenge assumptions, cope with academic difficulties, and be more deeply involved with learning activities. Furthermore, critical thinking is enhanced when the counselling process is exposed to curriculum-based programs that encourage reason, conflict analysis and moral judgment like peace education (Eke, 2023). In the same vein, social science education has been cited as a route to the formation of analytical and employability-related skills, the results of which are mediated by guidance counsellors and internalised and applied by the students (Morah et al., 2022).

Critical thinking is also developed by environmental and contextual awareness. The literature of neighborhood traits and neighborhood climate change education emphasizes the importance of learners analyzing real-life issues, which can be facilitated by counselling interventions that enable them to connect classroom knowledge with real experiences (Okafor et al., 2022; Odimegwu and Ikeotuonye, 2023). Even the study on noise pollution emphasizes the significance of environmental analysis skills applicable to critical thinking (Onwuka et al., 2017). School guidance/counselling is a catalyst to developing critical thinking in students with the support of relationships, contextual learning, and reflective practices.

Recent education literature has also highlighted that exposure of learners to digital tools, blended learning, and instruction based on ICT puts a new psychological strain on learners that require the support of structured counselling (Enemuo & Muogbo, 2023). Counsellors assist students to deal with technology-related stress, anxiety, and distraction that are proved to influence academic performance in a negative way when unregulated (Muogbo and Nnoli, 2025). Experiential and blended learning strategies can be effective to increase engagement and interest among students, but they also need guide services to overcome the gender differences, learning anxieties, and self-efficacy issues (Okafor et al., 2023; Muogbo et al., 2025a). Guidance and counselling also enrich the ICT integration by encouraging responsible use of technology and emotional strength, particularly where the digital divide and ethical issues still exist (Enemuo and Muogbo, n.d). Psychological empowerment and problem-solving abilities of students are also associated with entrepreneurial and service-learning programs, which have been reinforced with effective counselling interventions (Muogbo et al., 2025b; Anakpua et al., 2025). All in all, school guidance and counselling are critical psychosocial assistance that improves mental health, adaptability, and overall development of students in increasingly technological-based learning conditions.

METHODOLOGY

The proposed research assumed a descriptive survey research design to investigate how school guidance and counselling influence mental wellbeing and critical thinking among junior secondary school students in Anambra State. It was deemed to be a suitable design because it

would enable gathering of information about a large sample of teacher counsellors. The study population was all the teachers in the public secondary schools of Anambra State since they are the direct gate to the provision of guidance and counselling services to the students at the junior secondary level of school. The study involved a sample of 118 teachers. The purposive sampling technique was used to make sure that only certified teachers took part, whereas the stratified random sampling technique was utilized so as to have equitable representation of the three senatorial zones of Anambra State, including Anambra North, Anambra Central and Anambra South.

In order to streamline the data gathering, a survey questionnaire was prepared and filled in using Google Forms, which allowed the respondent to access it with ease. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: demographic factors, evaluation of the influence of counselling on the mental health of students, and measurement of the effect on the improvement of the ability to think critically. The perception of teachers about the effectiveness of their programmes was measured using a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4), Strongly Disagree (1). Experts in educational psychology and guidance counselling were involved to review the questionnaire on the content and face validity to ensure validity and reliability of the instrument. A pilot study was employed on 20 teachers working in a public secondary school in an out of the study area and a reliability test via Cronbachs alpha resulted in a coefficient of 0.85 which is considered strong internal consistency.

The data were collected electronically by sending the questionnaire through Google Forms, and inviting the teachers to complete it through emails and social media channels. Response time was allowed and follow-up made in order to achieve a good response rate. After data collection, the results were analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics to summarize them: mean, frequency, and percentages. Further, the inferential statistics, that is, t-test, was employed to ascertain any significant differences in the responses according to demographic variables, namely, the school location and experience in the years. To improve accuracy and reliability, SPSS software version 25 was used to perform a statistical analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Figure 1 showed that the majority of respondents were female (102, 86.4%), while males accounted for a smaller proportion (16, 13.6%). The valid percent and cumulative percent confirm that females dominated the study population. This indicates a gender imbalance in the sample, with females making up a significantly larger share. The total number of respondents was (118), with females contributing to the complete cumulative percentage (100.0%).

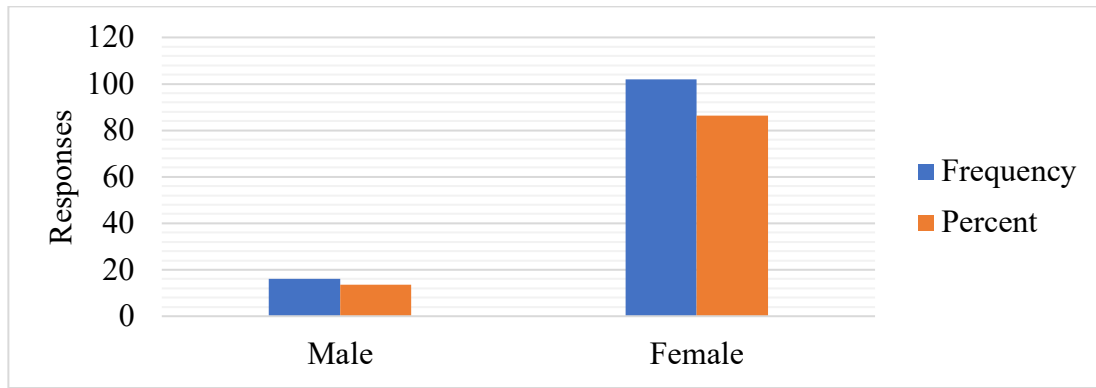


Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Respondents

Figure 2 showed that the majority of respondents (46, 39.0%) have 5-10 years of work experience, followed by those with 15-20 years (28, 23.7%). A smaller portion has less than 5 years (22, 18.6%) and 20-35 years (12, 10.2%). The least represented group has 10-15 years (10, 8.5%). This suggests a workforce with a balanced mix of mid-career and experienced professionals.

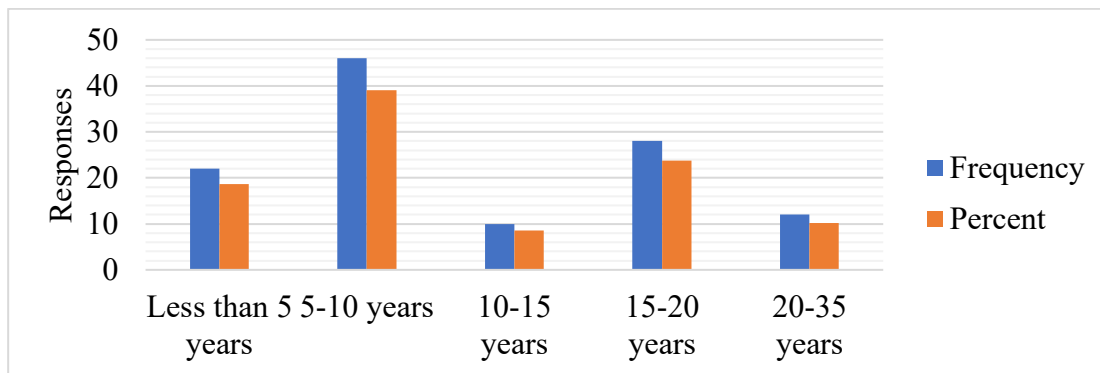


Figure 2. Distribution of Work Experience Among Respondents

Figure 2 showed that the largest age group among respondents is 31–41 years (46, 39.0%), followed by 42–52 years (28, 23.7%) and 53–65 years (28, 23.7%). The youngest group, 18–30 years, makes up the smallest portion (16, 13.6%). This indicates that the majority of respondents are in their prime working years (31–52 years), with a significant presence of older professionals as well.

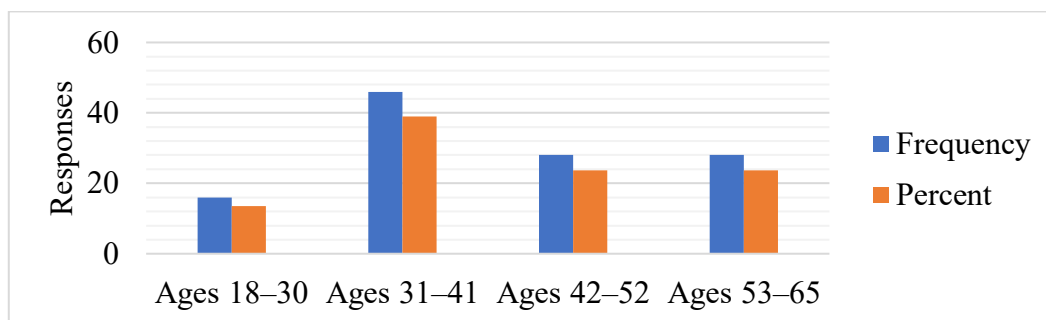


Figure 3. Age Distribution of Respondents

Research Question 1: To what extent do school guidance and counseling services contribute to the mental well-being of junior secondary school students based on gender?

Table 1.
Group Statistics on Impact of School Guidance and Counseling Services on Students' Mental Well-being by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Counselors provide emotional support, improving students' overall mental well-being.	Male	16	1.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	3.51	1.041	.103
Early intervention through counseling prevents severe mental health challenges later.	Male	16	3.63	1.025	.256
	Female	102	3.12	1.315	.130
Guidance programs teach students problem-solving while promoting conflict resolution strategies	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	3.16	1.311	.130
Career counseling alleviates future uncertainty, enhancing students' mental stability.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.16	1.264	.125
Group counseling sessions create supportive peer networks for emotional growth.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	3.82	.552	.055

The data in Table 1 highlights gender differences in perceptions of counseling services. Males (16) strongly agreed that counselors provide emotional support (Mean = 1.00), while females (102) rated it moderately (Mean = 3.51). Males also rated problem-solving programs (Mean = 4.00) and career counseling (Mean = 4.00) higher than females (Mean = 3.16 and 2.16, respectively). However, both groups acknowledged the benefits of group counseling (Male Mean = 4.00, Female Mean = 3.82). These findings suggest that while males view counseling services more favorably, females experience varied perceptions, indicating a need for gender-sensitive counseling approaches in junior secondary schools.

Research Question 2: What is the role of guidance and counseling programs in promoting critical thinking skills among junior secondary school students based on gender?

Table 2.
Group Statistics on the Role of Guidance and Counseling Programs in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Guidance and counseling programs help students develop strong critical thinking skills.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	3.04	1.334	.132
Effective counseling promotes independent reasoning and logical problem-solving abilities.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.90	1.324	.131
Critical thinking improves when students receive structured guidance on decision-making.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	3.22	1.114	.110
Counselors teach students how to question assumptions and think critically.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.63	1.349	.134
Structured guidance sessions help students develop reflective and analytical thinking.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.76	.835	.083

The group statistics in Table 2 indicate that male students (N=16) consistently rated the role of guidance and counseling programs in enhancing critical thinking skills higher (Mean=4.00, SD=.000) compared to female students (N=102). In contrast, female students reported lower mean scores across all aspects, with values ranging from 2.63 to 3.22, alongside higher standard deviations, indicating greater variability in their responses.

Research Question 3: What challenges do school counselors face in promoting mental well-being and critical thinking among junior secondary school students based on gender?

Table 3.
Group Statistics on the challenges Faced by School Counselors in Promoting Mental Well-being and Critical Thinking by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
School counselors face resistance from parents regarding mental health interventions.	Male	16	3.63	.500	.125
	Female	102	1.08	.336	.033
Limited funding restricts access to essential counseling resources and programs.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.71	1.309	.130
High student-to-counselor ratios hinder personalized support for students' needs.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.80	.912	.090
Lack of private counseling spaces affects student confidentiality and comfort.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.73	.632	.063
Limited parental involvement weakens counseling efforts in promoting critical thinking.	Male	16	4.00	.000	.000
	Female	102	2.98	.832	.082

The group statistics in Table 3 reveal gender-based differences in the perceived challenges faced by school counselors in promoting mental well-being and critical thinking. Male respondents (N=16) consistently rated challenges higher, with mean scores of 3.63 to 4.00 and minimal standard deviation, indicating strong agreement on issues such as parental resistance (Mean=3.63) and limited funding (Mean=4.00). In contrast, female respondents (N=102) reported significantly lower mean scores (1.08 to 2.98) with greater variability. Notably, female respondents perceived parental resistance (Mean=1.08, SD=.336) as less of a challenge.

Hypothesis 1: School guidance and counseling services do not significantly contribute to the mental well-being of junior secondary school students based on their gender.

Table 4.
Independent Samples t-Test on Contribution of School Guidance and Counseling Services to Students' Mental Well-being Based on Gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Extent that school guidance and counseling services contribute to the mental well-being of junior secondary school students based on gender	Equal variances assumed	17.140	.000	1.135	116	.259	.86029	.75813	-.64127	2.36186
	Equal variances not assumed			2.195	64.864	.032	.86029	.39192	.07754	1.64305

The independent samples t-test in Table 4 shows that under equal variances assumed, the p-value (.259) > 0.05, indicating no statistically significant difference in how males and females perceive counseling's impact on mental well-being. However, under equal variances not assumed, the p-value (.032) < 0.05, suggesting a significant difference. Since variance equality is not assumed due to Levene's test result (p = .000), we rely on the second t-test. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis, concluding that school counseling services significantly contribute to mental well-being.

Hypothesis 2: Guidance and counseling programs do not play a significant role in promoting critical thinking skills among junior secondary school students based on their gender.

Table 5.
Independent Samples t-Test on Role of Guidance and Counseling in Promoting Critical Thinking Skills by Gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Role of guidance and counseling programs in promoting critical thinking skills among junior secondary school students based on gender	Equal variances assumed	45.254	.000	5.208	116	.000	5.45098	1.04657	3.37811	7.52385
	Equal variances not assumed			13.198	101.000	.000	5.45098	.41301	4.63169	6.27027

The independent samples t-test in Table 5 reveals a significant difference in how males and females perceive the role of guidance and counseling in promoting critical thinking skills. Levene's test ($p = .000$) indicates unequal variances, so we rely on the second t-test ($t = 13.198$, $p = .000$), which is well below 0.05. This confirms that the difference in perception is statistically significant. Since the p-value is significant, we reject the null hypothesis, concluding that guidance and counseling programs do play a significant role in promoting critical thinking, but their perceived impact varies by gender, with males rating them more positively

Hypothesis 3: School counselors do not face significant challenges in promoting mental well-being and critical thinking among junior secondary school students based on their gender.

Table 6.
Independent Samples t-Test on Challenges Faced by School Counselors in Promoting Mental Well-being and Critical Thinking by Gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Challenges that school counselors face in promoting mental well-being and critical thinking among junior secondary school students based on gender	Equal variances assumed	18.877	.000	8.931	116	.000	7.33088	.82082	5.70514	8.95663
	Equal variances not assumed			21.146	115.96	.000	7.33088	.34668	6.64424	8.01752

The independent samples t-test in Table 6 proves the statistical significance of the difference between the perceptions of the male and female sex regarding the issues school counselors have to deal with. The unequal variances are confirmed by Levene test ($p=0.000$), and therefore, we use the second t-test ($t=21.146$, $p=0.000$), which is much lower than the traditional value of 0.05. The large p-value allows us to reject the null hypothesis and to conclude that school counselors do face considerable challenges in facilitating mental well-being and critical thinking, and that there are differences in such perceptions between genders. Such results highlight the importance of more focused interventions to meet gender-specific issues in counseling.

Discussion

School guidance and counseling services play a critical role in improving the mental health of junior secondary school students through emotional and academic as well as career-related issues. Based on the results, counselors offer emotional support which improves the resilience of students and decreases anxiety, as demonstrated in the study by Kofoworola and

Rofiu (2024) where students receiving counseling services rated themselves as less stressed. Conversely, Agyapong-Opoku et al. (2023) discovered that schools with poor counseling services had elevated cases of depression and anxiety because of the lack of emotional support. The intervention of counselling at an early stage helps to avoid serious mental health problems in the future; this finding is compatible with Onu et al. (2025), who have identified that students who received early counselling support were less prone to developing psychological distress in the long term. Similar research by Akgun and Araz (2014) pointed out that instruction in guidance programmes which offered problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies resulted in better emotional control in students. Moreover, career counselling reduces future uncertainty thus improving the mental stability of the students. On the other hand, Fris et al. (2022) found that students who lacked career guidance tended to have increased stress. Besides, group counselling builds peer support networks that bolster the emotional health of students.

Guidance and counseling programmes are significant in enhancing the development of a critical thinking skill in junior secondary school students through reinforced ability to reason independently and solve logical problems. The findings showed that the levels of independent reasoning among students in schools that had well organized counselling programmes were higher. The present observation aligns with that of Shanta and Wells (2022) who discovered that students who received regular advice on decision-making had better problem-solving abilities. Conversely, Arfasa and Weldmeskel (2020) found that in schools where weak counselling facilities existed, students had problems in logical reasoning and tended to depend on the memorization of information. Thought The ability to think critically is enhanced when students are provided with systematic instructions on decision making. In a similar study, Agustin et al. (2020) observed that students who had regular counselling sessions had stronger skills in analytical thinking compared to those who were not supported through such services. In a like manner students who were taught to challenge assumptions with structured counselling acquired a more reflective way of problem-solving. Nevertheless, Wambu and Fisher (2015) have found that students who attend schools that did not have sufficient counselling services did not have the skill of critical analysis, which makes them more prone to poor decision-making. Therefore, guided learning sessions are essential to developing critical thinking and problem decision-making in students.

School counsellors have a range of challenges in ensuring the mental well-being and critical thinking among junior secondary school students. Parental resistance to mental health interventions is one of the biggest problems. Rasmussen et al. (2022) describe this as the perception of some parents that counselling is not essential or stigmatizing, thus reducing access to mental health services by students. This finding is consistent with Zolkoski et al. (2016), who observed that students who had parental active support on counselling programmes at their school exhibited more emotional resilience. Conversely, Falloon et al. (2023) discovered that in places where parents opposed counselling, students experienced increasingly more stress and poor skills to solve problems. There is also a lack of access to vital counselling resources due to limited funding. Similar research was conducted by Hines et al. (2020), who found that in underfunded schools, there was difficulty in offering professional training of counsellors, which diminished the effectiveness of the programmer. Moreover, student-high ratios to counselors do not contribute to individualized support. Lacson et al.

(2024) discovered that when counsellor-to-student ratio in schools was low, students were better guided individually, resulting in better critical thinking. On the other hand, Nkosi and Maweni (2020) found that superficial support was realized through overcrowded counselling offices. Furthermore, insufficient private counselling areas impair confidentiality, and a lack of parental engagement undermines the process of attaining critical thinking abilities in the students.

CONCLUSION

This research paper brings to the fore the importance of school guidance and counselling in ensuring that junior secondary school students in Anambra State have a positive mental well-being and are able to think critically. The results show that well-delivered counselling services lead to student emotional resilience, avoid serious mental health crises, and problem solving and decision making. Moreover, structured guidance programmes help students to develop independent reasoning and critical thinking and make sound decisions in questioning assumptions. However, the research also reveals critical issues that hinder the performance of counselling programmes such as resistance of mental health interventions by parents, insufficient funding, excessive student-to-counselor ratio, and insufficient private counselling rooms. Nevertheless, schools that have properly developed guidance programmes have higher student results in emotional stability and critical thinking.

Recommendations

Stakeholders such as school administrators, policymakers and parents should promote the growth and financing of counselling programmes to maximize the impact of school counselling. Increased parental engagement and investment to train the counsellors will also enhance the mental well-being and critical thinking skills in students. In conclusion, it is recommended that the development of students be holistic and that they are integrated with complete counselling services that will lead them to student-acquired academic success and life challenges.

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