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Psychosocial Counselling and its Influence on Student Discipline in Public Secondary Schools in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon

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Abstract
The study sought to examine the influence of psychosocial counselling on student discipline in public secondary schools in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. The study specifically intended: To explore the extent to which mental health support influences student discipline. The researcher used mixed methods with specifically the sequential explanatory research design. A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide were used to gather the data. The researcher used multi-stage sampling procedure to select 330 students. The purposive and expert sampling techniques were used to select 27 guidance counselors for the interview. The instruments were validated with content validity index (CVI) of 0.75 and reliability checks through split-half technique with a Cronbach's coefficient of 0.805. Data from questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive statistics of observed frequencies, percentages, sum, mean scores and standard deviations to answer the research questions. Data from the interview were interpreted through thematic, narrative and direct quotes to corroborate the findings from the questionnaire. Hypotheses were analyzed using the t-test to further test the level of significance of the influence between the variables. The study revealed that: Mental health support (mean difference = +0.297; Cohen's d = 0.701, indicating a medium-to-large effect size) is perceived as a foundational pedagogical tool for student discipline. It was recommended that: Adoption and innovation in psychosocial counselling (mental health support) should stay abreast with new knowledge and trends in methods, strategies and technologies to accommodate student diverse disciplinary issues.

Keywords: Mental Health Support, Student Discipline, North-West and South-West Regions, Cameroon

Introduction

Student discipline is a rudimentary ingredient that plays a crucial role in school system and insists on upholding the moral values. It can be the administration of punishment to correct an undesired behavior (Schoonver, 2009) [20]. It is intended to suppress, control and redirect behavior. In line with the understanding that discipline is a learned behavior, Latzman and Latzman (2015) [13] propined that a student can either be termed disciplined or undisciplined, depending on how they react towards school rules and regulations. Psychosocial counseling is a therapeutic method which focuses on the encounter between an individual and the environment in which he/she operates. This approach is concerned with creating and uncovering resources within the individual, with the goal of helping them to reach a functioning level that is more satisfactory and complete (Heltne *et al*., 2020) [8]. Psychosocial counseling is an essential element in discipline management of people in all societies. Society itself could not function without the exercise of discipline.

Schools are expected to create psychosocial counseling especially, mental health support environments that actively promote student discipline and this can be done with the help of guidance counselors who are professionally trained and certified to assist students to cope with the stresses they face in and out of school. It is probably through psychosocial counseling that schools can manage the discipline of students. In a school system all students must be aware of the rules before disciplinary action can be administered (Kajubi, 2007) [9]. Using Psychosocial counseling to enhance discipline, must be continuously practiced if people are to work harmoniously for the achievement of common purpose (Salgong *et al*., 2016) [19]. This study

therefore intends to examine the influence of psychosocial counselling specifically, mental health support on student discipline in public secondary schools in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.

Background

In Cameroon, the government and the society pay a lot of attention to ensure that schools run smoothly by establishing guidance and counseling units. However, there are cases of notorious indiscipline in schools around the country. These include disrespect toward authorities, promiscuity, drug abuse, addictive behavior and instances of students killing their schoolmates and teachers. Corporal punishment was the most common form of disciplinary measures used in schools. Teachers used switches, birch, rulers and sticks as tools for discipline. Teachers were able to hit students when they were not paying attention in class, had discipline problems, and academic issues. The role of the teacher shifted to parent direction and the teacher became the disciplinarian at school (Murry, 2021) [15]. Teachers had to shape their discipline and curriculum around stepping into a more parental role. Due to the high enrollment in public schools, they had to hire a principal that oversaw them. This created a new hierarchy at the school; teachers were no longer the source of the discipline and could focus on their curriculum and teaching practices more (Collaboration for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning, 2018) [5]. Teachers could refer students to the principal's office and even to the counselors. The goal is to get the child helped so that they can come back to class later on and be successful (Meador, 2018). Zero tolerance policies are still used today. Presently, zero tolerance includes bringing any type of weapon to school, having alcohol or drugs on campus, fighting, and threatening students or teachers (Gjelten, 2015) [7]. Schools started using police officers to monitor halls during the school day. Zero tolerance policies were supported by key education stakeholders (Katz, 2016) [10].

The current prevailing discipline procedures in schools have come a long way to include preventative discipline – where teachers establish expectations and rules for behavior during the first few days of class. They create a safe, non-confrontational classroom (Lambert, 2018) [12]. Positive reinforcement – where teachers use a type of replacement technique as a student is rewarded whenever he/she does a positive behavior. Teachers can add positive reinforcements to their teaching methods and curriculum to decrease chances of behavior issues than the zero tolerance and referral procedure which are currently prevailing in most school settings. Nevertheless, research is starting to prove that not every form of discipline works on every single child. It is essential for the teacher to get to know their students and find out what works for them individually before deciding how to discipline a student (Roter, 2015) [18].

The prevailing situation of student discipline affects all secondary schools negatively according to Azizi (2006) [3]. This interfered a lot with the teaching and learning process. Azizi adds that whether local or international, reasons for student decline of discipline cut across races, gender, social class, religion and region of the existing schools. Student discipline needs a combined effort of parents, teachers and stakeholders because children could become vulnerable in discipline records if their behaviors are not checked.

Guidance and counseling have been instituted mandatorily in secondary schools in Cameroon especially state institutions. This includes psychosocial counselling, which is considered as a type of intervention or support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing, or to prevent or treat mental disorders, often focusing on human capacity and an enabling environment (Heltne *et al*., 2020) [8]. According to the Collaboration for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2018) [5], school psychosocial counseling was concerned with preparing students for a vocation. The first school psychosocial counselors were primarily vocational counselors who focused on getting students on the path towards work. Vocational counselors' responsibilities typically included: Identifying students who were failing, implementing strategies to prevent students from failing, ensuring students obtained work cards, urging students to stay in school, and preparing students to work (Collaboration for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning - CASEL, 2018) [5].

Review of Literature

According to Fusar-Poli *et al*. (2019) [6], good mental health can be defined as a state of well-being that allows individuals to cope with the normal stresses of life and function productively. Mental health is fundamental and affects everyone at different point in time. Universal and selective interventions are suitable to promote mental health. Core domains that define good mental health encompass: Mental health literacy, attitude towards mental disorders, self-perceptions and values, cognitive skills, academic/occupational performance, emotions, behaviors, self-management strategies, social skills, family and significant relationships physical health, sexual health, meaning of life, and quality of life.

Psychosocial counseling support is a continuum of love, care and protection that enhances the cognitive, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of a person and strengthens their social and cultural connectedness (Lephoto & Hlalele, 2021) [14]. In schools, it is regarded as the day-to-day support needed by all learners for them to grow and develop. According to the Psychosocial Interventions (2009) [17], psychosocial counseling support refers to the actions that address both the social and psychological needs of individuals, families and communities. Various researchers generally believe that positioning counseling as a core component of psychosocial support is another approach to respond to student discipline and social needs (for instance, Heltne *et al*., 2020; Mushandjaa., 2014; UNICEF, 2009) [8, 16, 21] cited by (Lephoto & Hlalele, 2021) [14].

According to Brophy and Cockreham (2004) [4], psychosocial counseling entails observing and interviewing students to determine the awareness of their troublesome behavior and the meaning that it holds for them. Providing information and instruction where necessary, setting needed limits and encouraging students to take personal responsibility for their behavior and its consequences. Kariuki (2002) [11] and Atieno (2006) [2] added that psychosocial counseling enables students to achieve better personal adjustment, growth and maturity. Psychosocial counseling boosts the ability of students to take rational control of their feelings, and then aim at fulfilling their potential and achieve an assimilation of past and conflicting parts of themselves; unhappiness, annoyance, anger, anxiety and hyper-activity in young people.

The study was supported by Albert Bandura's social cognitive learning theory (1986) of behavioral change, in

relation to creating mental health support to curb indiscipline in schools. Bandura stipulated that individuals are not born with an innate ability to act violently. It was suggested that, in contrast, violence and aggression are learned through a process of behavior modeling. In other words, it is the observation of children through which they learn violence. Aggressive acts are analyzed by three primary sources: *Family interaction*, *environmental experiences*, and *the mass media*. Children with aggressive parents or aggressive care takers tend to be more aggressive. He emphasized that social interactions, including observing and imitating those around you, especially romantic partners, enhance change in behavior. According to the notion, maladaptive behaviors are those that are a result of the intricate process of socialization. According to Albert *et al*. (2003), learners in secondary schools' manifest drop in discipline when they become incapable of completing tasks assigned to them and could not connect well with teachers and fellow classmates.

Statement of the Problem

There is a global understanding that student discipline is one of the components necessary to enhance the achievement of schools stated objectives. Teachers as well as other school stakeholders are expected to establish and maintain well-disciplined schools. Despite the effort made by the Ministry of Secondary Education in Cameroon, to manage student discipline in schools as evidenced by the establishment of disciplinary, guidance and counseling departments, indiscipline continues on daily bases. Not only, are the students violent and destructive but they premeditate, plan and cause maximum harm to human life in schools, ranging from boycotting of lessons, watching and practicing pornography, lies telling, dishonesty and disobedient to teachers, prefects, and school administration, raping school/classmates, alcohol consumption, confronting and stabbing teachers in schools, vandalism, lateness to school, drug abuse, smoking, insulting/assaulting, stealing and rioting among others. Students show open student rebellion in schools, lack of concern, disobeying of school rules and regulations. Student indiscipline is a threat to schooling nowadays. There seems to be a lack of effective strategies to contain student discipline as observed by the fact that the whole country has been experiencing student violence and the public secondary schools in the North-West and South-West Regions are not exempted. The school stakeholders like, school administrators, teachers, guidance counsellors, and parents have made numerous efforts to curb indiscipline in schools yet student disciplinary problem is still on the rise.

There is actually an atmosphere of insecurity, frustration and instability in most secondary schools due to these student disciplinary problems and it is presumed that inadequate psychosocial counseling with respect to student mental health support may be one of the factors. It is on this backdrop that the researcher decided to carry out a study to examine the influence of psychosocial counseling on student discipline in public secondary schools in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to examine the influence of psychosocial counselling on student discipline in public secondary schools in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.

The specific objective of the study was to explore the extent to which mental health support influences student discipline in public secondary schools.

Research Questions

The main research question was: How does psychosocial counselling influence student discipline in public secondary schools in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon?

The specific research question was: What is the extent to which mental health support influences student discipline in public secondary schools?

Statistical Hypothesis

Ho_1: Mental health support has no significant influence on student discipline in public secondary schools.

Methodology

The study used the sequential explanatory mixed method research design. The qualitative approach employed enabled the researcher to gather qualitative data using the interview guide. Meanwhile, the quantitative approach enabled the researcher to gather information (quantitative data) from a large group of respondents using a questionnaire. The content validity for the questionnaire was estimated at 0.75. The total Cronbach coefficient was estimated at .729 reliability. The quantitative analysis was descriptive/inferential testing and thematic for the qualitative analysis.

Findings

Table 1: Item by item results on student discipline

S. No	Item Statement: student discipline concerns with:	%SD	%D	%A	%SA	%Agree (3-4)	Mean	Std. Dev
1	ensuring that students do not bring dangerous tools to school	3.37	6.13	27.61	62.88	90.49	3.5	0.76
2	ensuring that students obey school rules	3.07	4.91	43.56	48.47	92.03	3.37	0.72
3	enabling them to come early to school (punctual to school)	4.29	6.75	40.49	48.47	88.96	3.33	0.78
4	enabling that students do not dodge from school	4.6	6.75	41.72	46.93	88.65	3.31	0.79
5	not cheating during examinations	4.29	7.06	42.64	46.01	88.65	3.3	0.78
6	students having a study timetable	3.68	5.21	43.25	47.85	91.1	3.35	0.75
7	students not disrespecting their teachers	4.91	4.29	42.33	48.47	90.8	3.34	0.78
8	helping students not to fight in school	3.07	6.13	41.41	49.39	90.8	3.37	0.74
9	helping students to stay away from drugs	2.76	7.67	41.1	48.47	89.57	3.35	0.74
10	enabling them not to steal in school	5.83	6.13	43.87	44.17	88.04	3.26	0.82

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026)

Table 1 shows an overwhelmingly positive trend in respondents' self-reported compliance with school discipline, with all ten items yielding mean scores well above the previously indicated cut-off point of 2.50. The cumulative agreement percentages (combining Agree and Strongly Agree) consistently exceeded 88% across all items. This signals a strong normative consensus among the respondents regarding the adherence to institutional regulations.

Table 2: Item by item results on mental health support

S. No	Item Statement: Guidance counsellor helps me to cope with	%SD	%D	%A	%SA	%Agree (3-4)	Mean	Std. Dev
1	the fear of the future about my education	3.1	7.1	25.8	64.1	89.9	3.51	0.76
2	judgment about my confidentiality in school	4.6	6.4	43.9	45.1	89.0	3.29	0.78
3	thinking carefully about risky situations	0.9	5.2	38.3	55.5	93.9	3.48	0.64
4	academic problems that affect my readiness to learn	4.3	5.2	45.4	45.1	90.5	3.31	0.76
5	personal problems that are not dealt with accordingly	5.2	12.6	45.7	36.5	82.2	3.13	0.83
6	fulfilment of learning endeavours	2.8	7.4	42.6	47.2	89.9	3.34	0.73
7	not dropping out of school	4.3	7.1	39.0	49.7	88.7	3.34	0.79
8	the control of freedom while in school	4.9	12.6	45.7	36.8	82.5	3.14	0.82
9	harmonizing my learning pursuit with my wellbeing	4.0	8.6	46.3	41.1	87.4	3.25	0.77
10	carrying out adequate plans for my school career	2.8	8.3	46.9	42.0	89.0	3.28	0.73

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026)

Table 2 presents a robust consensus among respondents regarding the role of mental health support in fostering student discipline. The aggregate agreement (Agree and Strongly Agree) across all indicators remains consistently high, ranging from 82.2% to 93.9%. This suggests that students perceive the guidance counsellor not merely as an academic advisor, but as a critical agent in their behavioral and emotional regulation.

Table 3: Analysis results of the significant influence of mental health support on student discipline

Group Level	Mean (M)	Mean Diff.	95% Confidence Interval	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
High MH Support	3.524	+0.297	[0.209, 0.385]	6.637	< .001	0.701
Low MH Support	3.227					

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026)

A few things stand out from those results on Table 3. The 95% confidence interval (0.209 to 0.385) is positive and does not cross zero. This provides additional certainty that the high mental health support group consistently outperforms the low mental health support group in the wider population, not just within the specific sample. Secondly, the mean difference (+0.297) is positive indicating that the variable being measured (mental health support) increased the outcome (student discipline) on average, rather than decreasing it. In other words, mental health support had a positive influence on student discipline on average. In addition, the p-value (<0.001) suggests that there is less than a 1% chance that these observed differences are random. This already provides strong evidence against the null hypothesis.

Qualitative Findings

When the guidance counselors were interviewed on the influence of mental health support on student discipline, the findings were captured as shown on Table 4.

Table 4: The influence of mental health support on student discipline

S. No	Themes	Relevant Quotes	Analytical Comment
1	Cognitive & Emotional Regulation	"Mental health support is helping students to think critically, make decisions and take responsibility of their actions"	Support is viewed as a tool for developing internal accountability, which naturally reduces impulsive or undisciplined behavior.
2	Trauma & Stress Management	"It is the help given to someone to overcome trauma... identifying, addressing, and preventing psychological distress like stress and anxiety" Mental health support within psychosocial counseling is about helping students navigate the emotional and social pressures of school life. It is the help given to someone to overcome trauma.	By addressing underlying stressors and trauma, counselors remove the psychological triggers that often manifest as "acting out" or disciplinary issues.
3	Preventative Orientation	"Mental health support... guides them not to go astray in school activities... identifying, addressing, and preventing psychological distress"	Rather than just punishing behavior, mental health support acts as a preventative measure by keeping students mentally healthy enough to follow school norms.

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026)

The findings on Table 4 suggest that mental health support is perceived not merely as clinical intervention but as a foundational pedagogical tool for discipline. Counselors define mental health support as a mechanism for "cognitive restructuring", moving beyond surface-level behaviour to address the "root causes" of indiscipline.

Discussion

The study found out that students in the South-West and North-West Regions of Cameroon perceive the guidance counsellor not merely as an academic advisor, but as a critical agent in their behavioral and emotional regulation. It was further recorded that the counsellor's role is in helping students think carefully about risky situations. This is a pivotal finding, as cognitive reflection is a cornerstone of

self-discipline; it indicates that mental health support directly strengthens students' impulse control. This implies that reducing anxiety is foundational to maintaining a disciplined focus on educational goals. Even the items with relatively lower mean scores – such as dealing with personal problems and control of freedom, still sit comfortably above the scale's criterion mean. This indicates that while these areas may be more complex to navigate, the perceived influence of the counsellors remains significantly positive.

This aligns with Heltine *et al*. (2020) [8] where he states that inconsistency in enforcement can lead to confusion in discipline. Over-reliance on punitive measures can erode trust and cultural mismatches between societal norms and individuals' backgrounds can be challenging to discipline. Effective practices to enhance discipline include: co-creating clear rules and regulations with the concern (collaborative rule-setting) for example confidentiality and punctuality - this builds ownership and reduces power struggle. Using tiered interventions to match response to severity - logical consequences where a boundary is crossed, the counselor applies a consequence that relates directly to the action, for instance, pausing a session if one raises his/her voice, then discussing what triggered it, can improve discipline. Providing timely feedback and opportunities for repair and building strong relationships; Providing reinforcement through acknowledging one's progress either by verbal praise, noting milestones and strengthening desired behaviors, are some of the strategies to achieve discipline.

The findings also align with Fusa-Polietal *et al*. (2019) [6] where they stated that discipline works best when it balances structure with support, helping individuals to develop the internal controls that they will need both within and beyond. Discipline is aimed at personal growth not compliance with institutional rules and to increase insight rather than merely enforce order. In discipline, an individual is encouraged to repair any harm done such as, apologizing, making amends, fostering empathy and accountability. Individuals track their own behaviors between sessions using journals or apps which promotes self-awareness and self-regulation.

These findings are also in line with Salgong *et al*. (2016) [19] who considered mental health support as a lifelong process that enables a person to identify and handle problems early enough. Mental health support involves helping; it is personalized and seeks to promote self-understanding. Therefore, it can be looked at as a process of helping learners to develop self-understanding, capabilities for making realistic careers decision, overcome personality deficit and make optimal academic progress. He defines mental health support counseling as the processes of assisting someone explore and resolve difficulties they encounter. It is the intention to clarify conflicting issues and helping that person discover alternative ways of managing themselves and situations so that they decide what kind of action or behavior is helpful to them.

The researcher found out that, mental health support is perceived not merely as clinical intervention but as a foundational pedagogical tool for student discipline. Counsellors define mental health support as a mechanism for cognitive restructuring, moving beyond surface-level behaviour to address the root causes of indiscipline as one of the counsellors said that mental health support is helping students to think critically, make decisions and take responsibility for their actions.

Lambert (2018) [12] added as confirmation to the findings above that the basic role of mental health support counseling includes helping student gain insight into origin and the development of management of mental difficulties, leading to an increased capacity to take rational control over their thinking, feelings and actions hence increasing the holding (retention) power in school and making realistic plans and goals. Individual students are assisted to make proper choice and improve their problem-solving skills (Lambert, 2018) [12]. Mental health support of students is also characterized by the development of emotional and social competences. Emotional competence relates to the ability to manage emotions, whereas social competence focuses on one's ability to relate effectively with others. During this process, students become more aware of being able to identify and label their own feelings and the feelings of others (Meader, 2018) added.

Recommendations

The adoption and innovation in psychosocial counselling in efforts to stay abreast with new knowledge and trends in guidance counselling methods, strategies and technologies and to accommodate students' diverse disciplinary issues when using mental health support should be revisited by the guidance counsellors through intensive seminars and workshops. This can enable the guidance counsellors to ensure the existence of students' well-being; letting students to cope with normal stresses in life, to function productively; have excellent academic performance and think carefully about risky situations in life among others.

Conclusions

Conclusively, the study established that the influence of psychosocial counselling on student discipline in public secondary schools in the South-West and North-West Regions of Cameroon, is statistically and observationally significant. This is in confirmation with Lephoto and Hlalele (2021) [14] who stipulated that psychosocial counseling support in schools is a continuum of love, care and protection that enhances the cognitive, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of students and strengthens their social and cultural connectedness. With these, student discipline in school is being enhanced. There is a great mental health support influence on student discipline in the public secondary schools, indicating a large effect size.

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