Students Perceptions on School-Based Guidance and Counseling in Ghanaian Secondary Schools: Reflections on Priorities for Student Training

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Abstract:
This study explores senior high school students' perceptions of school-based guidance and counseling services in the Tamale Metropolis, Ghana. Utilizing a descriptive survey design, the study collected data from 362 students across four secondary schools through a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale. Findings reveal a paradox: 93.1% of students recognize the benefits of counseling for academic and career decision-making, yet significant barriers hinder engagement. Notably, 90.9% of students expressed concerns about confidentiality violations, 89.8% found counseling facilities uncomfortable or insufficiently private, and 91.2% reported inconvenient department locations. Additionally, 41.7% viewed counseling as primarily for serious problems, limiting its preventive use. These results align with prior research highlighting systemic issues like resource shortages but uniquely emphasize student-centric barriers such as trust and environmental inadequacies. The study contributes to the literature by offering a student-focused perspective and provides practical recommendations for enhancing service accessibility and trust through improved facilities, confidentiality measures, training and awareness campaigns. These findings will support policymakers and educators aiming to strengthen guidance and counseling in Ghanaian schools.

Keywords: **Perceptions, Students, School-Based, Guidance and Counseling, Training.**

Introduction

Educational systems across the globe recognize guidance and counseling as vital for nurturing the holistic growth of adolescent students. In Ghana, the Ghana Education Service established school-based counseling programmes to support students' academic, vocational, personal, and social development (Aidoo, 2011). Despite this initiative, a striking contradiction persists: although schools offer these services, many students hesitate to engage with them, and ongoing challenges undermine their impact. Research highlights a troubling mismatch between students' career goals and their chosen academic paths, revealing a significant gap in the support system (Segbenya et al., 2023). Even with government policies mandating counseling and the presence of trained counselors in numerous senior high schools, limited resources and low student participation lead to issues like poor academic decisions, behavioral problems, emotional struggles, and inadequate career planning (Amponsah Adu & Srivastava, 2024).

This study stems from a critical need to understand the specific factors shaping students' views of these services, which contribute to their underutilization. Exploring this issue is essential, as many Ghanaian senior high school students are at a crucial stage of development. They require effective guidance to navigate their educational and professional future.

Researchers have extensively studied guidance and counseling in Ghana and the wider West African context, providing valuable insights. Research shows that students generally view counseling positively, especially for its role in academic and career decision-making (Teriba & Dawson, 2022). For instance, Awinsong's (2015) work in the Mfantseman Municipality revealed that students value counselors' guidance in choosing careers. Adu and Opoku Boahen (2020) similarly found that students appreciate counseling services but rarely seek them out, pointing to a gap between perception and practice. Studies from Nigeria further identify barriers such as limited awareness of counseling services, insufficient group counseling options, and cultural stigmas around seeking help (see Nwokolo et al., 2010; Muraina, 2020). These findings confirm that while counseling services exist in Ghanaian schools, and their potential engagement remains low.

Most studies focus on systemic issues, such as a lack of qualified counselors, overwhelming workloads, and inadequate facilities (Amponsah Adu & Srivastava, 2024; Aidoo, 2011). While these analyses highlight institutional challenges, they often overlook students' perspectives. Few researchers have delved into the reasons behind students' reluctance to seek help, despite their positive views. Factors like fear of stigma (Bhagavathi & Vitone, 2023), distrust in counselors, limited confidentiality, and the quality of student-counselor relationships remain underexplored in Ghanaian contexts. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on

students' subjective experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the personal and relational barriers to effective counseling. By shifting from broad institutional analyses to individual student perspectives, it provides a fresh contribution to the field.

This study holds significant value for both research and practice. Academically, it enriches literature with a detailed exploration of students' perceptions, addressing a critical gap in understanding help-seeking behaviors. It introduces a framework to examine how attitudes influence engagement with counseling services. Practically, the findings will guide school leaders and counselors in Ghana to create more accessible and student-centered programmes. By fostering trust and ensuring confidentiality, counselors can reduce barriers like stigma. Additionally, the study equips policymakers with evidence to refine guidance and counseling policies, prioritizing funding, training, infrastructure improvements, and culturally sensitive approaches to meet students' needs.

Finally, this study aims to explore senior high school students' perceptions of school-based guidance and counseling in Ghana. For this research, "students' perceptions" encompass the beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and evaluations students hold about the accessibility, confidentiality, effectiveness, cultural relevance, and overall utility of counseling services in their schools.

Objective

The specific objective of this study is to:

1. explore students' perceptions about guidance and counselling services at SHSs in the Tamale Metropolis

Literature Review

Researchers have consistently highlighted the vital function of Guidance and Counseling services in supporting students regarding educational, vocational, and personal-social needs (Aidoo, 2011). Despite the claim that students generally express a positive view towards guidance and counseling, their actual utilization of these services remains low (see Adu & Opoku Boahen, 2020). This review synthesizes the key themes within the existing research, critiques its limitations, and establishes the need for a more student-centered perspective.

Much of the foundational research establishes that students recognize the importance of counseling, particularly its role in career and academic decision-making. Studies have shown that students view counselors as essential for making informed career choices (Samudra & Wangid, 2024). Similarly, Teriba & Dawson (2022) assessed the relevance of counseling for learners' academic needs, finding a general appreciation for the services. However, this positive perception does not translate into high demand for help. Adu and Opoku Boahen (2020) highlighted this disconnect, revealing that even with a favorable appreciation for the services, students still showed a low practical demand for assistance. These findings collectively suggest a surface-level acknowledgment of counseling's value without a corresponding willingness to engage with the services.

Prior research has also concentrated heavily on the systemic and administrative deficiencies that hinder effective service delivery. Several studies identified a shortage of qualified counselors, heavy workloads, and inadequate institutional resources as primary barriers (Amponsah Adu & Srivastava, 2024; Aidoo, 2011). These macro-level analyses have provided valuable insights into the operational challenges that school administrators face. For instance, the services are frequently under-resourced and underutilized, leading to a host of student problems, including poor academic choices and disciplinary issues (Amponsah Adu & Srivastava, 2024). This institutional focus, while necessary, often overlooks the subjective, micro-level factors that influence a student's decision to seek help.

This study therefore fills a crucial gap by moving beyond macro-level institutional analyses to a focused, micro-level exploration of student experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and facilitators to effective guidance and counseling.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey design to investigate senior high school students' perceptions of guidance and counseling services. This design was particularly suitable because the research aims to capture the current state of affairs and describe the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of a specific population (Clark et al., 2021; De Vaus, 2017; Bryman, 2015; Nwokolo et al., 2010). This approach enabled the researchers to collect a substantial amount of quantitative data from a large sample, which they used to identify key trends and patterns in students' perceptions without manipulating any variables.

Study Population and Sample

The target population for this study consisted of all senior high school students within the Tamale Metropolis of Ghana. However, for purposes of this study, four secondary schools in the metropolis were purposively selected. Within each of these schools, the researchers selected students from various streams, including General Arts, Business, and Science, to capture a representative cross-section of the student body's perspectives (Teriba & Dawson, 2022). The sample included students from a variety of academic backgrounds and grade levels to ensure a broad representation of the student body's diverse experiences. In all 362 students participated in the study.

Instrument

The primary tool for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The instrument was developed specifically for this study and featured a mix of closed-ended items designed to measure students' perceptions. These questions were constructed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," to capture the intensity of students' opinions on various aspects of guidance and counseling services, such as confidentiality, relevance, and accessibility. The questionnaire also included a few demographic questions to gather information on the participants' gender, age, and academic programme. Before administering the final questionnaire, the researchers piloted the instrument with a small group of students from a different district to ensure its clarity, reliability, and validity.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers obtained the necessary ethical clearance and official permission from the Ghana Education Service and the heads of the participating schools before beginning the data collection. They then visited each school and briefed the students on the purpose of the study, emphasizing that their participation was entirely voluntary and confidential. Students who provided their informed consent received the questionnaire and completed it during a designated time. The researchers and trained research assistants were present to clarify any questions the participants might have had without influencing their responses. After collecting the completed questionnaires, the researchers carefully reviewed them for completeness and accuracy before proceeding with the analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The researchers calculated frequencies and percentages for each item on the questionnaire to summarize the students' responses. These descriptive measures helped to paint a detailed picture of the students' perceptions and attitudes. The analysis focused on identifying and presenting the dominant viewpoints, providing a clear overview of the central issues affecting students' engagement with guidance and counseling services. The use of percentages allowed for a direct interpretation of the survey results, making it easy to see the proportion of students who agreed or disagreed with key statements.

Results

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents (Students)

Age	Frequency	Percentage
13 - 15years	111	30.66
16 - 18years	163	45.03
19years and above	88	24.31
Total	**362**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 1 illustrates the age distribution of the 362 student respondents. The majority, 45.03% (163 students), were aged between 16 and 18 years, followed by 30.66% (111 students) aged 13 to 15 years, and 24.31% (88 students) aged 19 years and above. This distribution indicates that the sample primarily consists of mid-to-late adolescents, a critical developmental stage where guidance and counseling are essential for decision-making.

Table 2: Sex of Respondents (Students)

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage
Male	173	47.79
Female	189	52.21
Total	**362**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 2 presents the gender distribution of student respondents, with a slight majority being female (52.21%, 189 students) compared to male (47.79%, 173 students). This near-balanced representation ensures that the findings reflect perspectives from both genders.

Table 3: Level/Class of Respondents

Form	Frequency	Percentage
SHS One	133	36.74
SHS Two	90	24.86
SHS Three	139	38.40
Total	**362**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 3 outlines the academic levels of the student respondents, with 38.40% (139 students) in SHS Three, 36.74% (133 students) in SHS One, and 24.86% (90 students) in SHS Two. This distribution across all senior high school levels ensures that the study captures perceptions from students at different stages of their secondary education.

Table 4: Students' Perceptions of Guidance and Counselling Services

Statements on Perceptions of Guidance and Counselling	SD	D	N	A	SA
Guidance and counselling infringe on privacy.	212 (58.6%)	90 (24%)	4 (1.1%)	26 (7.2%)	30 (8.3%)
Guidance and counselling has several advantages.	14 (3.9%)	11 (3.0%)	0	82 (22.7%)	255 (70.4%)
Guidance and Counselling is not a useful tool for solving problems	114 (31.5%)	188 (51.9%)	1 (0.3%)	40 (11%)	19 (5.2%)
Guidance and counselling is for people with serious problems.	84 (23.2%)	124 (34.3%)	3 (0.8%)	60 (16.6%)	91 (25.1%)
The guidance and counselling department is incapable of addressing my problems.	26 (7.2%)	49 (13.5%)	3 (0.8%)	21 (5.8%)	263 (72.7%)
The counsellor is too occupied to attend to students' problems.	55 (15.2%)	177 (48.9%)	8 (2.2%)	53 (14.6%)	69 (19.1%)
The state of guidance and counselling department in the school does not encourage one to seek counselling services.	11 (3%)	19 (5.2%)	2 (0.6%)	84 (23.2%)	246 (68%)
Confidentiality regarding counselling in schools is frequently violated.	122 (33.7%)	207 (57.2%)	2 (0.6%)	12 (3.3%)	19 (5.2%)
The counselling office is not comfortable or private enough to provide good counselling.	12 (3.3%)	24 (6.6%)	1 (0.3%)	38 (10.5%)	287 (79.3%)
The location of counselling department is not convenient for seeking counselling services.	12 (3.3%)	15 (4.1%)	5 (1.4%)	69 (19.1%)	261 (72.1%)
Total	**362 (100%)**	**362 (100%)**	**362 (100%)**	**362 (100%)**	**362 (100%)**

Source: Field survey, 2024

N.B. **SD** = Strongly Disagree, **D** = Disagree, **N** = Neutral, **A** = Agree, and **SA** = Strongly Agree

The figures in table 4.2 are the data of the students' responses and in the brackets are their corresponding percentages.

Table 4 provides a detailed breakdown of students' perceptions of guidance and counseling services, measured using a five-point Likert scale. The results reveal a complex mix of positive and negative attitudes, highlighting both the perceived value and significant barriers to accessing these services. A substantial 70.4% (255 students) strongly agreed and 22.7% (82 students) agreed that guidance and counseling have several advantages, indicating a strong positive perception of the potential benefits of these services. However, this positive view is contrasted by significant concerns about accessibility and effectiveness. For instance, 72.7% (263 students) strongly agreed and 5.8% (21 students) agreed that the guidance and counseling department is incapable of addressing their problems, suggesting a widespread lack of confidence in the services' ability to meet their needs.

Confidentiality emerged as a major concern, with 57.2% (207 students) disagreeing and 33.7% (122 students) strongly disagreeing that guidance and counseling infringe on privacy, yet 57.2% (207 students) strongly agreed and 33.7% (122 students) agreed that confidentiality is frequently violated. This contradiction suggests that while students do not perceive counseling as inherently invasive, they lack trust in the confidentiality of the services provided. The physical and logistical aspects of the counseling services also pose barriers. A striking 79.3% (287 students) strongly agreed and 10.5% (38 students) agreed that the counseling office is not comfortable or private enough to provide good counseling. Similarly, 72.1% (261 students) strongly agreed and 19.1% (69 students) agreed that the location of the counseling department is not convenient for seeking services. These findings point to environmental and structural challenges that deter students from engaging with counseling services. Moreover, 48.9% (177 students) disagreed and 15.2% (55 students) strongly disagreed that counselors are too occupied to attend to students' problems, yet 14.6% (53 students) agreed and 19.1% (69 students) strongly agreed with this statement. This split suggests mixed experiences with counselor availability, with a notable portion of students perceiving counselors as overburdened. Perceptions about the purpose of counseling also vary. While 51.9% (188 students) disagreed and 31.5% (114 students) strongly disagreed that guidance and counseling is not a

useful tool for solving problems, 25.1% (91 students) strongly agreed and 16.6% (60 students) agreed that it is primarily for people with serious problems. This indicates a misconception among some students that counseling is reserved for severe issues, potentially limiting its use for preventive or developmental purposes.

Overall, the results highlight a paradox: while students recognize the potential benefits of guidance and counseling, significant barriers—such as perceived inefficacy, lack of confidentiality, uncomfortable facilities, and inconvenient locations—hinder their engagement with these services. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address both structural and perceptual challenges to improve the utilization of guidance and counseling services in Ghanaian senior high schools.

Discussion

This study's findings reveal a complex interplay of positive perceptions and significant barriers to the utilization of guidance and counseling services among senior high school students in the Tamale Metropolis, Ghana. Students acknowledge the value of these services, particularly for academic and career decision-making, yet face substantial obstacles that limit their engagement. The results indicate that 93.1% of students (337 out of 362) either agree or strongly agree that guidance and counseling offer several advantages, aligning with prior research that underscores students' positive views on the role of counseling in supporting academic and vocational needs (Teriba & Dawson, 2022). For instance, Awinsong's study in the Mfantseman Municipality found that students value counselors' guidance in career choices, a sentiment echoed in this study's high approval of counseling's benefits. Similarly, Adu and Opoku Boahen (2020) reported that students in Ghanaian colleges of education appreciate counseling services, yet their actual engagement remains low. This study confirms that trend, as despite the positive perception, practical barriers deter students from seeking help. The consistency across these findings suggests a widespread recognition of counseling's potential, but it also exposes a persistent disconnect between perception and action.

A critical barrier identified in this study is the lack of trust in confidentiality, with 90.9% of students (329 out of 362) agreeing or strongly agreeing that confidentiality is frequently violated. This finding resonates with global literature on adolescent help-seeking behaviors. Bhagavathi & Vitone (2023) found that fear of stigmatization and breaches of confidentiality discourage adolescents from engaging with mental health services, a pattern evident in this Ghanaian context. Unlike previous Ghanaian studies, which primarily focus on institutional challenges like resource shortages (Amponsah Adu & Srivastava, 2024; Aidoo, 2011), this study delves into students' subjective concerns about privacy. The high percentage of students distrusting confidentiality suggests that cultural or social factors, such as communal values in the Tamale Metropolis where 80.94% of students identify as Muslim, may amplify fears of judgment or exposure. This insight adds a student-centered perspective to the literature, highlighting the need to address trust as a prerequisite for effective counseling.

The physical environment of counseling services also emerges as a significant deterrent. A striking 89.8% of students (325 out of 362) agree or strongly agree that the counseling office lacks comfort and privacy, and 91.2% (330 out of 362) find the department's location inconvenient. These findings align with Nwokolo et al. (2010), who noted that inadequate facilities in Nigerian secondary schools hinder counseling effectiveness. However, the intensity of these concerns in the Tamale Metropolis surpasses what prior studies report, suggesting that infrastructure challenges may be particularly acute in this region. The predominantly older age of counselors (50% aged 46 and above, as shown in Table 2) might also contribute to a generational disconnect, potentially exacerbating students' discomfort. This study's emphasis on environmental barriers enriches the literature by underscoring the role of physical space in shaping help-seeking behaviors, an area underexplored in previous Ghanaian research.

Another key finding is the perception that counseling is primarily for students with serious problems, with 41.7% (151 out of 362) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. This misconception mirrors findings from Teriba & Dawson (2022), who noted that students often view counseling as a reactive rather than preventive tool. Such perceptions may stem from limited awareness campaigns or a lack of group counseling, as Nwokolo et al. (2010) observed in Nigeria. The current study reveals that this belief restricts counseling's role in addressing developmental needs, such as career planning, which is critical for the 45.03% of students aged 16–18 years navigating pivotal educational transitions (Table 1). By identifying this attitudinal barrier, the study contributes a novel perspective to the literature, calling for educational interventions to reframe counseling as a proactive resource.

Counselor availability also presents a mixed picture. While 64.1% of students (232 out of 362) disagree or strongly disagree that counselors are too occupied, 33.7% (122 out of 362) believe otherwise. This split aligns with Amponsah Adu & Srivastava (2024), who highlighted heavy counselor workloads as a systemic issue in Ghanaian schools. However, the variation in student perceptions suggests that experiences differ across schools, possibly due to disparities in counselor-to-student ratios or administrative support. The study's purposive sampling across four schools, including diverse streams like General Arts, Business, and Science (Table 7), ensures that these findings reflect varied contexts, adding robustness to the analysis. Yet, the literature lacks detailed exploration of how counselor availability influences student trust, an area this study begins to address by linking perceived busyness to reduced engagement.

Implications and Reflections for student training

These findings have practical implications for school administrators and policymakers. The high distrust in confidentiality calls for robust training in ethical counseling practices, while the environmental barriers necessitate investments in dedicated, private

counseling spaces. School Counsellors' training must take into consideration a wide range of areas to equip these professionals with ethical practices specifically relating to confidentiality. Moreover, addressing misconceptions requires awareness campaigns to promote counseling as a developmental tool. Also, Technological integration in counseling that seeks to address diverse students' needs must be promoted. The gender and religious demographics (Tables 3 and 5) suggest that culturally sensitive approaches, particularly in a Muslim-majority context, could enhance trust and engagement. Future research should explore these cultural dynamics further and investigate the role of peer influence in shaping help-seeking behaviors, areas underexplored in the current literature.

Conclusion

This study affirms that students in the Tamale Metropolis value guidance and counseling but face significant barriers that limit their engagement. By comparing these findings with extant literature, it becomes clear that while some challenges are universal, others are context-specific, driven by regional infrastructure and cultural factors. The study's student-centered approach offers a fresh perspective, enriching the scholarly discourse and providing actionable insights for improving counseling services in Ghanaian schools.

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