GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING AS A TOOL FOR ADVANCING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of guidance and counselling in fostering diversity and inclusion within school settings. The paper adopts a narrative literature review approach by synthesizing scholarly works on guidance and counselling, multicultural education, and inclusive education. The paper highlights the contributions of school counsellors in promoting cultural awareness, reducing discrimination and prejudice, supporting marginalized learners, facilitating conflict resolution, encouraging equitable participation, and providing inclusive career guidance. It also identifies major barriers to effective implementation, including inadequate professional training, cultural resistance, limited resources, and the stigmatization of counselling services. Furthermore, the paper proposes strategies for strengthening inclusive counselling practices through continuous professional development, supportive educational policies, curriculum integration, community engagement, and the use of technology. The paper concludes that Guidance and counselling constitute important mechanisms for supporting equity and inclusion within broader institutional and policy frameworks. It recommends increased investment in counsellor training, institutional support, and policy reforms to enhance the effectiveness of counselling services in achieving inclusive education.

Keywords: Guidance and counselling, diversity, inclusion, multicultural education, school counselling, equity, social justice, inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly multicultural and globalized society, promoting diversity and inclusion within educational institutions has become an important educational and social responsibility. Schools are microcosms of society, comprising learners from different ethnic, religious, socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, gender, and ability backgrounds. Inclusive education therefore requires educational institutions to identify and remove barriers that prevent learners from participating fully and benefiting equally from educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2020). Guidance and counselling services are particularly important in this regard because they provide academic, personal, social, and emotional support to learners who may experience exclusion, discrimination, prejudice, or other forms of marginalization.

The Nigerian educational system provides a particularly important context for examining diversity and inclusion because Nigeria is characterized by considerable ethnic, religious,

linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. Learners may come from different ethnic groups and cultural traditions, while Christianity, Islam, and traditional religious beliefs influence family and community life in different parts of the country. Ethnic and religious differences can enrich the educational experience, but they may also generate stereotypes, prejudice, social distance, and, in some circumstances, tensions that affect students' sense of belonging and participation in school. UNESCO identifies ethnicity, language, religion, gender, disability, poverty, and location among the factors that can contribute to educational exclusion. Consequently, Nigerian schools require deliberate strategies for creating environments in which differences are respected and learners are treated equitably irrespective of their ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds.

Gender disparities constitute another important dimension of diversity and inclusion in Nigeria. Although progress has been made toward gender parity in education, girls in some parts of the country continue to face barriers associated with poverty, socio-cultural expectations, early marriage, household responsibilities, insecurity, and other gender-related factors. UNICEF reports that gender, geography, and poverty significantly influence patterns of educational marginalization in Nigeria, with particularly serious challenges affecting girls in parts of northern Nigeria. These realities demonstrate that inclusion cannot be understood simply as providing equal access to schooling; it must also involve addressing the social and cultural conditions that influence learners' participation, experiences, achievement, and sense of belonging.

Disability inclusion is equally significant within the Nigerian educational context. Learners with physical, sensory, intellectual, communication, and other functional difficulties may encounter inaccessible school facilities, inadequate learning materials, limited assistive technologies, stigma, discrimination, and insufficiently trained personnel. Although Nigeria has adopted policies aimed at promoting inclusive education, implementation remains uneven because of inadequate resources and differences in institutional capacity. Recent evidence indicates that children with disabilities experience substantially greater barriers to school attendance, particularly in rural areas. Thus, school counsellors have an important role in advocating for learners with disabilities, challenging discriminatory attitudes, facilitating social adjustment, supporting families, and connecting learners with appropriate educational and psychosocial resources.

Language diversity further complicates the provision of inclusive education in Nigeria. With English serving as the major language of formal education alongside numerous indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin, learners may enter school with considerably different linguistic backgrounds and levels of proficiency in the language used for instruction. Language differences can affect classroom participation, comprehension, peer relationships, and students' ability to access counselling services effectively. Evidence from Nigeria illustrates how children from minority-language communities can experience educational barriers when the language of instruction differs substantially from the language they use at home. Consequently, inclusive guidance and counselling should be sensitive to learners' linguistic backgrounds and should avoid treating language differences as evidence of low ability or poor academic potential.

Furthermore, rural-urban and socio-economic inequalities constitute major dimensions of educational exclusion in Nigeria. Differences in school infrastructure, availability of qualified teachers and counsellors, learning resources, digital facilities, transportation, household income, and access to social services can produce substantially different educational experiences for learners depending on where they live. UNICEF identifies geographical and socio-economic

disparities, particularly those between rural and urban communities, as significant dimensions of inequality in Nigeria. Rural and disadvantaged learners may therefore require additional counselling and educational support to overcome barriers associated with poverty, distance, inadequate facilities, insecurity, and limited access to educational resources.

Against this background, guidance and counselling services assume a critical role in promoting diversity and inclusion within Nigerian schools. School counsellors are strategically positioned to identify learners who experience exclusion, provide culturally responsive counselling, promote interpersonal understanding, challenge stereotypes and discriminatory practices, facilitate conflict resolution, support learners with disabilities and other special needs, and advocate for equitable access to educational opportunities. Through individual counselling, group guidance, career guidance, consultation with teachers and parents, and school-wide intervention programmes, counsellors can contribute to the development of school environments in which diversity is recognized as a strength rather than a barrier.

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education, considerable gaps remain in understanding how school counsellors specifically operationalize diversity and inclusion practices within Nigeria's culturally and socio-economically heterogeneous educational system. Existing literature has extensively addressed inclusive education and the general principles of diversity, equity, and participation, but comparatively less attention has been devoted to the specific counselling practices through which these principles are translated into everyday school experiences. This gap is particularly important in Nigeria, where ethnic and religious diversity, gender disparities, disability-related barriers, linguistic differences, and rural-urban inequalities intersect to shape learners' educational experiences. Therefore, examining the role of school guidance and counselling services in promoting diversity and inclusion is essential for developing educational practices that are culturally responsive, equitable, accessible, and relevant to the Nigerian context.

Concept of Guidance and Counselling

Guidance encompasses developmental services that assist learners in academic, personal, social, and career decision-making, while counselling involves professional helping relationships aimed at facilitating self-understanding, adjustment, and personal growth. (Makinde, 1983). In the context of diversity and inclusion, counselling helps students from diverse backgrounds feel understood, safe, and supported regardless of their identity or challenges. According to Okobiah and Okorodudu (2004), guidance and counselling services assist students in adjusting to school life and resolving personal and interpersonal issues. They also promote positive attitudes toward learning and interaction with peers from varied backgrounds.

Concept of Diversity

Diversity refers to the presence and recognition of differences among individuals and groups within a society or institution. These differences may include ethnicity, religion, language, gender, age, socio-economic status, physical and intellectual abilities, cultural background, learning needs, and other characteristics that shape individuals' experiences and perspectives (Banks, 2013). In educational settings, diversity recognizes that learners do not constitute a homogeneous group; rather, they enter schools with different identities, cultural experiences, abilities, family backgrounds, values, languages, and educational needs.

In the Nigerian educational context, diversity is particularly significant because schools bring together learners from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic

backgrounds. Differences may also exist between learners from rural and urban communities and between learners with and without disabilities. Such diversity can enrich the educational environment by exposing learners to different perspectives, experiences, values, and ways of understanding the world. However, diversity can also create challenges when differences are associated with stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, or unequal access to educational opportunities.

Diversity should therefore not merely mean the presence of different groups within a school. It requires recognition and appreciation of differences as valuable components of the educational community. School guidance and counselling services can contribute to this process by helping learners understand and respect differences, challenging discriminatory attitudes, facilitating positive interpersonal relationships, and supporting students who experience marginalization.

Concept of Equality

Equality refers to the provision of the same rights, opportunities, treatment, and access to resources to individuals or groups, regardless of their personal or social characteristics. In education, equality implies that learners should have equal opportunities to enrol, participate, learn, and progress within the educational system. It is based on the principle that no learner should be denied educational opportunities because of ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, socio-economic background, language, or other characteristics.

However, treating every learner in exactly the same way does not necessarily produce fair educational outcomes. Learners may begin their educational experiences from different social, economic, linguistic, or physical circumstances. For example, providing identical learning materials to all students may constitute equality, but a learner with a visual impairment may require materials in an accessible format to participate effectively. Consequently, equality provides an important foundation for inclusive education, but it needs to be complemented by equity.

Concept of Equity

Equity refers to fairness in the distribution of educational opportunities, resources, support, and services according to the different needs and circumstances of learners. Unlike equality, which emphasizes the same treatment, equity recognizes that learners may require different forms or levels of support to achieve meaningful participation and comparable educational opportunities. In the school environment, equity may involve providing additional academic support to disadvantaged learners, assistive devices and accessible facilities for learners with disabilities, language support for learners experiencing linguistic barriers, counselling interventions for marginalized students, and targeted programmes for learners affected by poverty or other forms of disadvantage. Equity therefore seeks to identify and remove structural and contextual barriers that prevent some learners from benefiting from education on an equal basis.

The distinction between equality and equity is particularly relevant to Nigerian schools because learners experience different levels of disadvantage arising from poverty, geographical location, gender, disability, language, insecurity, and socio-cultural circumstances. An equitable educational system therefore does not simply give every learner the same resources; rather, it provides appropriate support based on identified needs. Guidance counsellors can contribute to

equity by identifying barriers affecting individual learners and advocating for interventions and resources that enable them to participate effectively in school life.

Concept of Inclusion

Inclusion refers to the deliberate process of creating educational environments in which all learners are welcomed, respected, supported, and enabled to participate fully in academic and social life, irrespective of their differences or circumstances (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusion therefore goes beyond the physical presence or enrolment of students in schools. It involves creating conditions in which learners experience acceptance, participation, recognition, belonging, and meaningful opportunities to learn and succeed. Ainscow and Miles (2009) emphasize that educational inclusion involves identifying and removing barriers to participation and learning. From this perspective, a school cannot be considered genuinely inclusive simply because students from diverse backgrounds attend the same institution. Inclusion requires continuous examination and modification of the structures, policies, practices, and attitudes that may prevent particular groups of learners from participating fully.

Importantly, inclusion extends beyond students' acceptance of one another. It encompasses the adaptation of curriculum and instructional practices to accommodate diverse learning needs, the development of positive teacher attitudes toward differences, the establishment of an institutional culture that values diversity, the adoption of fair and flexible assessment practices, and the commitment of school leadership to equity and participation. Inclusive schools therefore examine how curriculum content, teaching methods, classroom interaction, assessment procedures, school policies, disciplinary practices, physical facilities, and leadership decisions may either facilitate or restrict participation.

Curriculum adaptation is an important dimension of inclusion because learners differ in their abilities, cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning needs. An inclusive curriculum should reflect diverse experiences and provide opportunities for learners to see their identities and cultures represented positively in the educational process. Similarly, teachers' attitudes are critical because negative assumptions about learners' abilities, backgrounds, gender, religion, or disability can reproduce exclusion even where inclusive policies exist.

Institutional culture also determines whether diversity is genuinely valued within a school. A school culture characterized by respect, cooperation, fairness, safety, and acceptance can promote students' sense of belonging, whereas discriminatory practices, bullying, stereotyping, and social exclusion can undermine inclusion. Assessment practices should likewise recognize learner diversity and avoid unnecessarily creating barriers to demonstrating knowledge and competence. Appropriate flexibility in assessment can provide disadvantaged learners with fair opportunities to demonstrate their learning. School leadership provides the institutional direction necessary for sustaining inclusion. School leaders influence policies, allocation of resources, teacher development, disciplinary procedures, staff attitudes, and the overall culture of the school. Effective leadership can therefore transform inclusion from a policy statement into everyday institutional practice.

Guidance and counselling services are integral to these processes. Counsellors can assess students' academic, emotional, social, and personal needs; identify experiences of discrimination and exclusion; facilitate individual and group counselling; promote positive attitudes toward diversity; support teachers and parents; and advocate for appropriate institutional responses. They can also contribute to school-wide programmes aimed at developing empathy, conflict

resolution, respect for differences, disability awareness, gender sensitivity, and positive intergroup relationships.

Conceptual Distinction among Diversity, Equality, Equity and Inclusion

Although the concepts are closely related, they should not be used interchangeably. Diversity concerns difference; equality concerns the provision of the same rights and opportunities; equity concerns fairness through differentiated support according to need; and inclusion concerns meaningful participation, acceptance, and belonging. Thus, a school may be diverse without being inclusive, may provide equal treatment without achieving equity, and may have inclusive policies without achieving meaningful participation if institutional practices remain discriminatory.

The relationship among the four concepts can therefore be understood as follows: diversity provides the recognition of differences; equality establishes the principle of equal rights and opportunities; equity addresses unequal circumstances and removes barriers; while inclusion ensures that all learners can participate, belong, and contribute meaningfully to school life. In this sense, diversity is the starting point, equality establishes a common entitlement, equity provides the differentiated support necessary for fairness, and inclusion represents the desired educational condition in which differences are respected and all learners are enabled to participate and succeed.

For the purpose of this paper, diversity and inclusion should consequently be understood as complementary but distinct concepts. Diversity describes the characteristics and differences present among learners, whereas inclusion represents the institutional and interpersonal processes through which those differences are recognized, respected, accommodated, and integrated into meaningful participation in education. Equality and equity provide important principles for achieving this inclusion by ensuring that learners are not denied opportunities and that additional support is provided where different circumstances create barriers to participation.

Theoretical Support

Multicultural Counselling Theory

Multicultural Counselling Theory (Sue et al., 1996) posits that cultural identity is a crucial factor in counselling effectiveness. It emphasizes that Counsellors require cultural self-awareness, knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, and culturally responsive intervention strategies. This theory supports the idea that promoting diversity and inclusion in schools requires counsellors who are aware of their own cultural biases and actively address cultural dynamics in the counselling process, hence its relevance to this paper.

Social Justice Theory

Social Justice Theory advocates for equitable treatment and access to resources for all individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups (Rawls, 1971). In school counselling, this theory drives interventions that seek to dismantle barriers to participation, advocate for students' rights, and create policies that support underrepresented groups. Counsellors move beyond individual assistance to advocacy by challenging institutional barriers affecting marginalized learners.

Role of Guidance and Counselling in Promoting Diversity and Inclusion

1. **Raising Awareness and Sensitization:** One of the primary functions of guidance and counselling in promoting diversity is creating awareness among the school community, students, teachers, and parents about diversity-related issues. Through sensitization programs, counsellors address topics such as cultural competence, gender equality, and the acceptance of differences in abilities and beliefs. Workshops, peer education programmes, open forums, and school-wide campaigns help dismantle ignorance and foster empathy. Okobiah and Okorodudu (2004) emphasize that when counsellors engage in proactive awareness strategies, they help students appreciate their peers' unique identities and reduce fear of the unfamiliar. These programmes are instrumental in cultivating an inclusive mindset and preparing students to thrive in multicultural environments.
2. **Reducing Discrimination and Prejudice:** Prejudice and discrimination in schools can manifest in forms such as bullying, name-calling, exclusion, and stereotype-based aggression. Guidance counsellors are pivotal in addressing these issues by creating safe environments where students can confront and unlearn prejudices. Sue et al. (2007) argue that counselling fosters reflection and helps students examine how their beliefs and actions may perpetuate inequality. Group counselling and discussions allow students to engage in dialogue, challenge internalized stereotypes, and build values of fairness, respect, and tolerance. These processes help dismantle systemic biases in the school community and promote equitable treatment.
3. **Supporting Marginalized and At-Risk Students:** Guidance and counselling provide a crucial support system for marginalized groups such as students with disabilities, ethnic minorities and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These students often face barriers to learning, social acceptance, and emotional well-being. Counsellors offer individual therapy, referral services, support groups, and safe spaces where these students can discuss their concerns without fear of judgment. Mutie and Ndambuki (1999) note that school counsellors empower marginalized students by helping them build self-esteem, navigate stigma, and develop coping strategies for adverse experiences. These support systems are essential to ensuring equity and inclusion in the school setting.
4. **Conflict Resolution and Mediation:** In diverse educational settings, cultural misunderstandings and identity-based differences may lead to conflicts. Counsellors act as mediators, helping students resolve disputes constructively and learn peaceful interaction techniques. Corey (2016) highlights the importance of conflict resolution as part of counsellors' training. They teach communication and problem-solving skills, run peer mediation programmes, and guide students toward appreciating perspectives different from their own. This proactive approach strengthens social cohesion and reduces violence or tension in diverse school populations.
5. **Encouraging Equitable Participation:** Ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to participate in classroom activities, leadership roles, and extracurricular engagements is key to inclusion. Counsellors advocate for fair representation and help teachers design inclusive classroom practices such as differentiated instruction and culturally responsive teaching. Obiunu (2008) posits that counsellors must collaborate with school management to identify and eliminate barriers to student involvement. They

may also provide targeted support for students who are typically underrepresented, thereby promoting fairness in participation and learning outcomes.

6. **Promoting Inclusive Career Guidance:** Career guidance plays a critical role in shaping students' future paths. However, students from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds may have limited exposure to certain career opportunities or face societal expectations that restrict their choices. Inclusive career counselling broadens students' career horizons, counters gender stereotyping, and helps students make informed decisions regardless of their background. Nwankwo (2015) suggests that counsellors should actively promote underrepresented fields to students such as encouraging girls in STEM or boys in caregiving careers and assist students in navigating cultural or structural barriers to success.

Challenges to Effective Guidance and Counselling in Promoting Inclusion

Guidance and counselling services have considerable potential to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within educational institutions by addressing learners' academic, social, emotional, and personal needs. However, the effectiveness of these services is constrained by a combination of institutional, professional, cultural, economic, and systemic challenges. These challenges are particularly significant in Nigeria, where schools vary considerably in their availability of trained counsellors, counselling facilities, financial resources, and capacity to implement inclusive educational practices.

1. **Lack of Trained Personnel:** One of the major challenges to effective guidance and counselling in promoting inclusion is the inadequate availability of professionally trained guidance counsellors. In some schools, particularly rural and underserved communities, counselling responsibilities may be assigned to teachers who have limited or no specialized training in professional counselling. This situation can reduce the quality of counselling services available to learners with diverse academic, emotional, social, cultural, and disability-related needs. Effective inclusive counselling requires counsellors to possess competencies in multicultural counselling, disability awareness, conflict resolution, gender sensitivity, career development, psychosocial support, and culturally responsive interventions. Where such competencies are lacking, counsellors may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or fail to recognize the particular barriers experienced by marginalized learners. Continuous professional development is therefore necessary to equip counsellors with the knowledge and skills required to respond effectively to increasingly diverse school populations.
2. **High Counsellor-Student Ratio:** An additional challenge is the high counsellor-student ratio in many Nigerian schools. Where one counsellor is responsible for a very large number of students, it becomes difficult to provide regular individual counselling, group counselling, career guidance, psychosocial support, crisis intervention, and follow-up services. The problem becomes more serious when counsellors are expected to address the needs of students experiencing discrimination, bullying, disability-related barriers, family difficulties, academic problems, and other forms of exclusion. A high workload can also result in counsellors adopting a reactive rather than preventive approach, attending to students only when serious problems arise instead of implementing school-wide programmes designed to promote inclusion. Adequate staffing and reasonable counsellor-

student ratios are therefore essential for ensuring that counselling services are accessible, responsive, and sufficiently individualized.

3. **Poor Professional Recognition of School Counsellors:** The effectiveness of school counselling is also undermined by inadequate professional recognition within some educational institutions. Although school counsellors are trained to provide specialized psychological, educational, vocational, and developmental services, they may sometimes be assigned administrative, clerical, disciplinary, or other duties that are unrelated to their professional responsibilities. Such practices can reduce the time available for counselling and create misconceptions about the role of the counsellor. When counsellors are primarily perceived as disciplinary officers or administrative personnel, students may be reluctant to approach them for personal and sensitive concerns. This weakens the therapeutic relationship necessary for effective counselling and undermines the counsellor's contribution to diversity and inclusion. School administrators therefore need to recognize counselling as a professional service and protect counsellors' time and responsibilities for counselling-related activities.
4. **Cultural and Religious Resistance:** Cultural and religious beliefs can influence how students, parents, teachers, and school administrators understand issues relating to diversity and inclusion. In some communities, discussions concerning disability, gender equality, mental health, family problems, or other sensitive issues may be influenced by traditional beliefs, religious interpretations, or social expectations. While cultural and religious values are important components of Nigerian society, resistance to certain forms of inclusion can sometimes create barriers to counselling interventions. For example, deeply established expectations concerning gender roles may affect the educational choices, participation, or career aspirations of some learners. Similarly, misconceptions about disability or psychological difficulties may discourage individuals from seeking professional assistance. Counsellors therefore need culturally responsive approaches that respect legitimate cultural and religious values while addressing practices and attitudes that contribute to exclusion, discrimination, or unequal educational opportunities.
5. **Limited Financial and Material Resources:** Effective guidance and counselling programmes require adequate financial, human, and material resources. However, some schools operate counselling units with inadequate funding, limited office space, insufficient assessment materials, inadequate educational resources, and poor access to relevant technology. The absence of private and appropriately equipped counselling offices can be particularly problematic because counselling requires an environment that promotes confidentiality, comfort, and trust. Limited resources may also prevent schools from organizing awareness programmes, training teachers, providing assistive resources, conducting outreach activities, or employing additional counsellors. Consequently, resource limitations can significantly restrict the ability of counselling services to respond to the diverse needs of learners.
6. **Stigmatization of Counselling:** Stigma surrounding counselling represents another significant barrier. In some communities, seeking counselling may be associated with weakness, abnormality, mental illness, or an inability to solve one's own problems. Students may consequently avoid counselling even when they are experiencing bullying, discrimination, academic difficulties, family problems, emotional distress, or social exclusion. Stigma can be particularly damaging to inclusion because students who are already vulnerable may be the least willing to seek assistance. Counsellors therefore need

to promote school-wide awareness of counselling as a normal developmental and educational service rather than as an intervention exclusively for students with serious problems. Integrating preventive guidance, group counselling, classroom guidance, and psychoeducational programmes can help normalize the use of counselling services.

7. **Confidentiality and Trust Concerns:** Confidentiality is a particularly important issue in school counselling. Students are more likely to disclose sensitive personal information when they believe that their conversations will be treated with appropriate privacy and professional discretion. However, concerns about information leakage can discourage students from seeking counselling. Students may fear that information disclosed to a counsellor could reach teachers, school administrators, parents, peers, or other members of the school community without their consent. Such concerns can be especially significant when students are discussing family problems, discrimination, bullying, gender-related concerns, disability, academic difficulties, or interpersonal conflicts. When students do not trust the confidentiality of counselling services, the counselling relationship may be weakened and important problems may remain undisclosed. Counsellors should therefore clearly explain the principles and limits of confidentiality to students at the beginning of counselling relationships and comply with relevant professional and institutional ethical requirements. Schools should also provide private counselling spaces and establish clear procedures for handling confidential information. Building trust is fundamental to making counselling accessible to students from diverse and potentially marginalized backgrounds.
8. **Weak Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies:** Nigeria has developed policies and legal frameworks intended to promote inclusive and equitable education, but the existence of policies does not automatically guarantee effective implementation. A major challenge is the gap between policy formulation and practice at the school level. Some schools may lack the resources, trained personnel, infrastructure, monitoring mechanisms, or institutional commitment required to translate inclusive education policies into everyday practices. Weak implementation may manifest in inaccessible school facilities, inadequate support for learners with disabilities, insufficient teacher training, limited counselling services, discriminatory practices, or inadequate mechanisms for identifying and supporting vulnerable learners. Guidance counsellors can contribute to policy implementation by identifying barriers, advocating for learners, supporting teachers and parents, and participating in school-based inclusion programmes. However, counsellors cannot independently resolve structural problems that require institutional and governmental intervention.
9. **Inadequate Collaboration among Stakeholders:** Effective inclusion requires collaboration among counsellors, teachers, school administrators, parents, learners, health professionals, community organizations, and relevant government agencies. However, poor communication and weak coordination among these stakeholders can limit the effectiveness of counselling interventions. Counsellors may identify a student's need for additional support but lack the authority or resources to obtain the necessary educational, medical, psychological, or social services. A collaborative approach is therefore necessary to ensure that counselling interventions are connected to broader school and community support systems. Regular consultation among counsellors, teachers, parents, and administrators can facilitate early identification of barriers and coordinated responses to students' needs.

10. **Rural-Urban and Socio-Economic Disparities:** Differences between rural and urban schools further affect the availability and quality of counselling services. Urban schools may have relatively better access to trained professionals, infrastructure, technology, and specialized support services, whereas schools in rural and disadvantaged communities may experience shortages of counsellors, inadequate facilities, limited funding, and poor access to referral services. These disparities can reinforce existing inequalities because learners who experience greater socio-economic and geographical disadvantages may simultaneously have less access to professional counselling support. Inclusive counselling programmes should therefore give particular attention to underserved schools and communities.

Strategies for Enhancing the Role of Counselling in Inclusion

Creating inclusive learning environments requires deliberate and sustained efforts from school counsellors, educators, policymakers, and communities. The following strategies can enhance the effectiveness of guidance and counselling in promoting diversity and inclusion in schools.

1. **Professional Development:** One of the most critical steps is to provide ongoing professional development for school counsellors. Counsellors should receive periodic training in multicultural counselling competencies, disability inclusion, trauma-informed counselling, and culturally responsive career guidance. Professional development should include workshops, seminars, peer mentoring, and exposure to inclusive models of counselling.
2. **Policy Support:** Institutional and governmental policies play a significant role in fostering inclusive education. When inclusive counselling practices are mandated by policy, schools are more likely to allocate resources and prioritize training. National education frameworks should embed inclusion-focused goals and require schools to adopt non-discriminatory counselling practices.
3. **Curriculum Integration:** Inclusion and diversity should not be isolated subjects but integrated across the school curriculum and guidance programmes. Counsellors should work collaboratively with teachers to infuse lessons on empathy, respect, gender equity, disability awareness, and human rights into everyday classroom activities. This helps normalize diversity and reinforce inclusive values throughout the school environment.
4. **Community Engagement:** Efforts to promote inclusion must go beyond the school environment. Counsellors should engage with parents, traditional leaders, and faith-based organizations to address cultural barriers that hinder acceptance of diversity. Community involvement helps reinforce the inclusive messages students receive in school and creates broader societal support for inclusion efforts.
5. **Use of Technology:** Digital technology can expand the reach of counselling services, especially for marginalized students who may fear stigma or lack physical access. Online counselling platforms, mobile apps, and virtual support groups can provide anonymous, flexible, and confidential support**.** Technology also enables counsellors to deliver educational content on diversity and inclusion through digital media.

Effective guidance and counselling play a pivotal role in building inclusive schools where every student feels valued and supported. However, this role must be strengthened through targeted strategies such as professional development, supportive policies, curriculum redesign, community collaboration, and technology adoption. When these strategies are implemented

holistically, they help counsellors break down barriers to inclusion and promote equity in education.

CONCLUSION

Guidance and counselling constitute an important institutional mechanism for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in Nigerian schools. Effective inclusion extends beyond equal treatment to ensuring that learners from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, disability, socio-economic, and geographical backgrounds experience equitable support, meaningful participation, and a sense of belonging. School counsellors contribute to this process through culturally responsive counselling, advocacy, psychosocial support, conflict resolution, and collaboration with key stakeholders.

However, their effectiveness is constrained by high counsellor-student ratios, inadequate professional recognition, limited training and resources, stigma, confidentiality concerns, cultural resistance, and weak policy implementation. Policymakers should therefore strengthen counselling services through adequate staffing, professional development, funding, confidential facilities, effective policy implementation, and institutional accountability, with particular attention to rural and disadvantaged schools.

Future research should empirically examine the effectiveness of counselling interventions in improving students' participation, belonging, wellbeing, and experiences of discrimination across diverse Nigerian educational contexts. Overall, strengthening guidance and counselling can help translate inclusive education policies into sustainable school practices that respect diversity and provide equitable opportunities for all learners.

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