AJEMATES
African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies
VOL.9 (2), May-September, 2023 https://ajemates.org

COUNSELLORS' PERCEPTION OF STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING EXAMINATION ANXIETY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AWKA EDUCATION ZONE OF ANAMBRA STATE

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ABSTRACT

The study determined counsellors' perception of strategies for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State. Three research questions guided the study. The descriptive survey research design was utilized for the study. The population of study comprised 61 guidance counsellors in the 61 public schools in Awka Education Zone. A validated questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Test of the instrument reliability using Cronbach Alpha method yielded co-efficient values of .82, 0.85 and 0.88 for clusters B1, B2 and B3 respectively with an overall reliability score of 0.85. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. The findings of the study revealed that guidance counsellors opined that that rational-emotive therapy, systematic desensitization, and study skill training are strategies for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone to a high extent. Based on these findings, it was recommended among others that the administrators of secondary schools should provide training and resources to counselors and educators to enable them to effectively implement rational-emotive therapy techniques in their interactions with students. It was also recommended that school counselors should be trained in systematic desensitization techniques and be equipped with the necessary tools to guide students through the process.

Keywords: Counsellors, Examination Anxiety, Study Training Skills, Rational Emotive Behaviour, Systematic Desensitization

Introduction

Education is the purposeful transmission of information, skills, and values from one generation to the next within a community. It is widely acknowledged as a potent instrument for battling poverty, decreasing inequality, boosting health, encouraging technical developments, and producing and spreading information. Education is a useful life preparation and is necessary for personal and social advancement. Education is a transforming process that helps individuals to gain information and critical skills for their personal growth (Balogun et al. 2017). The Nigerian educational system consists of pre-primary, primary, secondary, and university levels of education (FRN, 2013). This research focuses on secondary education. The secondary

level of education serves as a link between the elementary and tertiary levels of education. According to the FRN, secondary school education is the type of education children get following elementary school but before entering the tertiary institutions.

The broad aims of secondary education in Nigeria are to prepare people for productive lives in society and for further education. To attain these goals, students must be examined and evaluated on a regular basis through tests and examinations to determine their level of knowledge and competency in the many areas taught. According to Oladipo et al. (2015), tests and examinations are not only common at all levels of education, but are also seen as critical decision-making instruments. In essence, examinations are essential in the academic lives of students. The overriding importance of examination in the lives of students has made the examination period in a school year a highly tense period for some students. This is reflected in the high level of examination anxiety among some students.

Olatoye and Afuwape (2013) described examination anxiety as a candidate's psychological state of mind towards an examination as evidenced by the amount of fear, dread, uncertainty, concern, and helplessness displayed before, during, or even after an examination. Examination anxiety is described as the reaction that students have before, during, and after taking a test. Examination anxiety can have both adaptive and maladaptive roles, depending on the level of anxiety experienced by the student (Mavilidi et al., 2014). Examination anxiety is characterised as a mix of physiological over-arousal, emotions of fear and dread, self-deprecating thoughts, tension, and bodily symptoms that arise in response to test settings.

Examination anxiety, according to Anyaneme et al. (2016), is a stressful condition characterised by feelings of tension and uneasiness, as well as worrying thoughts and physiological reactions in the autonomic nervous system. Individuals frequently experience this condition when presented with evaluative settings requiring high levels of accomplishment, such as taking tests. In the context of this study, examination anxiety was defined as a psychological condition in which students experience excessive fear, worry, and concern during examinations. Examination anxiety has been blamed as one of the factors affecting students' academic success (Syokwaa et al., 2014). According to Chukwuorji and Nwonyi (2015), students with severe anxiety experience panic with common physical symptoms such as headache, upset stomach, fear, shortness of breath, sweating, pacing or fidgeting, crying, racing thoughts, and blanking out, which negatively affects their academic achievement. This appears to be the case among students in secondary schools in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State. This is obvious in the circumstance where students frequently develop ill during examination times, becoming restless and irritated. According to Anyaneme et al. (2016), most students suffer exam anxiety. According to Anyaneme et al, most pupils on the approach of taking school examinations display anxiety, restlessness, shaking, fidgeting, or panicking. It is therefore imperative to determine counselling strategies for reducing examination anxiety.

Authors such as Anyaneme et al. (2016) and Chukwuorji and Nwonyi (2015) have argued for the implementation of counselling measures to assist minimise examination anxiety among secondary school students. According to Anyaneme et al., various counselling strategies have been developed or applied to test anxiety, including: behavioural approaches incorporating systematic desensitisation, relaxation training, biofeedback, modelling, anxiety reduction technique, anxiety management training, and other behavioural techniques; cognitive approaches incorporating rational emotive

therapy, cognitive restructuring, and other cognitive techniques, as we have seen. The researcher will concentrate on focus on rational-emotive therapy, systematic desensitization and study skills training.

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is an improvement on Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy (RET). According to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, the improvement and term change were done to emphasise the fact that it has always been cognitive, emotional, and behavioural (Jibrin, 2017). Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy seeks to assist people in achieving their core objectives or values (Misdeni et al., 2019). It is a strategy for assisting clients in maximising their self-actualizing inclinations and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own lives in order to become sensibly self-interested and self-directing. REBT (Rational Emotive Behaviour treatment) is a genuinely eclectic approach to treatment that incorporates a wide range of cognitive, behavioural, and emotional techniques. According to Jibrin (2017), the underlying idea of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is that many individuals make illogical or erroneous assumptions about themselves and the environment, which leads to emotional and behavioural disruption.

Systematic desensitisation, on the other hand, is a behavioural strategy for lowering anxiety. A methodologically sound experiment-controlled study was required to answer general issues concerning the effectiveness of this test anxiety reduction strategy. Balogun et al. (2017) urged counsellors and other related professions to explore developing programming that would help people, particularly minorities, see themselves positively. Similarly, study is another form of counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety.

According to Karfe and Ntasin (2018), study skills are the process through which each student starts to concentrate, assimilate, and recall demanding content. To increase his ability to remember knowledge and analyse critically, a student may study in a variety of ways. Some of the categories include mnemonics, effective note taking, effective time management, summarising, and the use of key phrases. Memorization, communication skills, flashcard training, condensing material, summarising, using keywords, acronyms, and mnemonics, exam tactics, effective time management, organisation, and lifestyle adjustments are all examples of additional ways to learn. Exam anxiety has been successfully treated with study skills training in teenagers (Ngwoke et al., 2013). These assertions are, for the most part, theoretical and have not been empirically proven to be effective in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Anambra State's Awka Education zone. It is against this backdrop that the researcher intends to determine the counsellors' perception of strategies for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State.

Statement of the Problem

Examinations are very important in the academic lives of secondary school pupils. They are seen as an important indicator of a student's commitment to academic endeavours and future success. As a result, examination times at secondary schools within the Awka Education Zone can be quite stressful for certain pupils. During these times, students frequently display signs of test anxiety. According to the researcher's field findings, more pupils become unwell during the examination time than during the pre-examination period. Many researchers believe that because of the dread and anxiety involved with tests, many students resort to various sorts of examination misconduct in order to achieve higher scores. Many scholars have hinted that in order to cheat on exams and improve their results, a large number of students

have turned to various kinds of unethical behaviour.

The researcher is concerned that, if left unchecked, this condition portends danger for the attainment of secondary education targets in the Awka Education zone of Anambra State. Exam anxiety, which manifests itself in subpar academic performance, has allegedly led to a large number of students quitting their scholastic pursuits. The researcher set out to identify the strategies for reducing test anxiety among secondary school students in the Awka Education zone of Anambra State in an effort to address this ugly situation.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent is rational-emotive therapy a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State?
2. To what extent is systematic desensitization a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State?
3. To what extent is study skill training a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State?

Research Method

This research used a descriptive survey design. In order to provide a somewhat comprehensive overview of what is occurring at a specific period and time, a descriptive survey is a means of gathering information from diverse groups or individuals, mostly using questionnaires or personal interviews. Nworgu (2015) defines a descriptive survey as a research that tries to gather information about and describe in a methodical way the traits, traits, or facts about a certain group. The study was conducted in Anambra State's Awka Education Zone. Five Local Government Areas in the state of Anambra make up the Education Zone: Anaocha, Awka-North, Awka-South, Dunukofia, and Njikoka. In the education zone, there are 61 public secondary schools. The population of the study comprised 61 guidance counselors in the 61 public secondary schools in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State. The instrument used for data collection is a questionnaire developed by the researchers from the reviewed literature. The instrument was titled "Questionnaire on Counseling Strategies for Reducing Examination Anxiety among Secondary School Students (QCSREAASS)". The instrument contains 22 items spread in three Sections A, B and C. Section A contains 8 items on rational-emotive therapy as a counseling strategy. Section B contains 7 items on systematic desensitization as a counseling strategy. Section C contains 7 items on study skill training as a counseling strategy. The instrument is structured on a 4-point rating scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Low Extent and Very Low Extent. The instrument was validated by three experts. One from the measurement and evaluation unit of the Department of Educational Foundations and two others were from Department of Guidance and Counselling, all in the Faculty of Education, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus. The reliability of the instrument was established through pilot test. The instrument was administered on 10 guidance and counsellors in secondary schools in Nnewi Education Zone who are not included in the population of the study. Cronbach alpha method was

used to ascertain the internal consistency of the instrument. The test yielded reliability co-efficient values of 0.82, 0.85 and 0.88 for clusters B1, B2 and B3 respectively with an overall reliability score of 0.85. This indicates that the instrument is reliable for the study. Data was collected by the researcher in secondary schools. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher on the spot to the guidance counsellors in their offices or classrooms. Out of the 61 questionnaires distributed, 56 were retrieved in good condition. This amounted 91.80 percent questionnaire return rate. To get an answer to the research question, the study's data was analysed using a mean score and standard deviation. The respondents considered any item with a weighted mean above 2.50 to be of high extent, and any item with a mean score below 2.50 to be of low extent. The point 2.50 was used as the cutoff.

Presentation of Results

Research Question 1: To what extent is rational-emotive therapy a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State?

Table 1: Respondents' Mean Ratings on the Extent Rational-Emotive Therapy is a Counselling Strategy for Reducing Examination Anxiety among Secondary School Students

S/NO	Items on Rational-emotive therapy	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Identifying students cognitive errors	3.22	.82	High Extent
2.	Challenging students irrational believes	3.44	.80	High Extent
3.	Negative self-talks in relation to poor self-concept/self-efficacy.	3.38	.77	High Extent
4.	Developing appropriate skills in relation to test anxiety	3.40	.81	High Extent
5.	Time management to include examination-skills	3.55	.70	High Extent
6.	Making positive self-statements	3.59	.94	High Extent
7.	Understanding the irrationality of negative self-talk in relation to examination anxiety	3.22	.84	High Extent
8.	Understanding the nature of test anxiety.	3.32	.65	High Extent
	Cluster Mean	**3.39**		**High Extent**

Data in Table 1 reveal that the respondents rated to a high extent, items1-8, as the extent rational-emotive therapy is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State with mean ratings ranging between 3.22 and 3.59. The standard deviation scores ranging between .65 and .94 showed that the respondents' opinion were close. The cluster mean of 3.39 indicate that guidance counsellors opined that rational-emotive therapy is a strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State to a high extent.

Research Question 2: To what extent is systematic desensitization a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State?

Table 2: Respondents' Mean Ratings on the Extent Systematic Desensitization is a Counselling Strategy for Reducing Examination Anxiety among Secondary School Students

S/NO	Items on systematic desensitization	Mean	SD	Decision
9.	Introducing self-understanding in order to establish a relaxed atmosphere among students.	3.16	.80	High Extent
10.	Discussing on what a test hierarchy means and how to built one,	3.37	.77	High Extent
11.	Ensuring good time management to avoid laziness and procrastination.	3.28	.83	High Extent
12.	Ensuring that the examination environment is conducive	3.44	.85	High Extent
13.	Encouraging students to focus during examination	3.40	.68	High Extent
14.	Teaching students relaxation techniques of slow deep breath	3.56	.78	High Extent
15.	Teaching students relaxation techniques of visualization	3.33	.74	High Extent
	Cluster Mean	**3.36**		**High Extent**

Data in Table 2 reveal that the respondents rated to a high extent items 9-15, as the extent systematic desensitization is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State with mean ratings ranging between 3.16 and 3.56. The standard deviation scores ranging between .68 and .90 showed that the respondents' opinions were related. The cluster mean of 3.36 indicate guidance counsellors opined that systematic desensitization is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State to a high extent.

Research Question 3: To what extent is study skill training a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State?

Table 3: Respondents' Mean Ratings on the Extent Study Skill Training is a Counselling Strategy for Reducing Examination Anxiety among Secondary School Students

S/NO	Items on study skill training	Mean	SD	Decision
16.	Finding best study method for students	3.67	.71	High Extent
17.	Ensuring that students prioritize assignments by due date	3.51	.75	High Extent
18.	Encouraging students to use slow diaphragmatic breathing techniques to calm themselves	3.29	.84	High Extent
19.	Counseling students to avoid the expectation that they know all the answers	3.43	.82	High Extent
20.	Encouraging students to Use mild exercise instead to stay alert	3.40	.90	High Extent
21.	Counseling students to skim material so as to help find main ideas before actually reading	3.33	.85	High Extent
22	Encouraging students to flag major **points** in study materials to avoid re-reading	3.42	.76	High Extent
	Cluster Mean	**3.43**		**High Extent**

Data in Table 3 reveal that the respondents rated to a high extent items 16-22, as the extent study skill training is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State with mean ratings ranging between 3.29 and 3.67. The standard deviation scores ranging between .71 and .90 showed that the respondents' opinions were related. The cluster mean of 3.43 indicate guidance counsellors opined that study skill training is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State to a high extent.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that guidance counsellors opined that rational-emotive therapy is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State to a high extent. This finding is in agreement with Misdeni, Syahniar and Marjohan (2019) who revealed that the group activities using the REBT approach affected the anxiety scores of students facing exams. This implies that using rational emotive behaviour therapy has a significant positive influence on examination anxiety among students. Similarly, Jibrin (2017) revealed that rational-emotive behaviour therapy was more effective in reducing students test anxiety. This lends credence to the idea that applying REBT approaches can be quite helpful in treating and reducing anxiety, particularly anxiety associated to exams. These findings suggest that rational-emotive therapy, which places a strong focus on recognising and refuting illogical beliefs and encouraging rational thought processes, has the potential to be an effective technique in assisting students in reducing test anxiety. Exam-related cognitive distortions and negative thinking patterns may be addressed with REBT, which can help students better control their anxiety.

The findings of the study indicate that guidance counselors in the Awka Education Zone of Anambra State hold the belief that systematic desensitization is an effective counseling strategy for significantly reducing examination anxiety among secondary

school students. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Jibrin (2017), who also suggested that systematic desensitization could be employed by counselors as a means of controlling examination anxiety among students. Similarly, Otta and Ogazie (2014) discovered that systematic desensitization is a valuable strategy for managing examination anxiety in secondary school students. Systematic desensitization is a therapeutic technique that aims to alleviate anxiety and phobias by gradually exposing individuals to fear-inducing stimuli while providing relaxation techniques. In the context of examination anxiety, it involves helping students develop a relaxed state of mind and gradually exposing them to test-related situations or stimuli that trigger anxiety. Exposing students to these anxiety-provoking situations in a controlled and supportive environment, the intensity of their fear and anxiety can decrease over time. The consensus among guidance counselors and previous studies suggests that systematic desensitization can be an effective approach in addressing examination anxiety among secondary school students. By utilizing this technique, counselors can help students build resilience and develop coping mechanisms to better manage their anxiety during exams. It offers a structured and gradual process that allows students to confront their fears in a controlled manner, gradually reducing the anxiety associated with examinations. Implementing systematic desensitization as a counseling strategy requires skilled guidance counselors who can create a supportive environment and tailor the approach to the specific needs of each student. By addressing examination anxiety, counselors can potentially contribute to the overall well-being and academic success of secondary school students in the Awka Education Zone.

Findings of the study revealed that study skills training is a counselling strategy for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education zone of Anambra State to a high extent. This finding is in disagreement with Ngwoke et al. (2013) who reported that study skills had no significant influence on students' test-anxiety levels. However, Otta and Ogazie (2014) stated that study skills training therapy have significant influence on students' text anxiety level. The study suggests that providing study skills training to secondary school students can be an effective approach to help them manage and cope with anxiety specifically related to examinations. The training may focus on various aspects, such as organization, note-taking, memory techniques, exam preparation, and test-taking strategies. The contrasting findings between the current study and the study conducted by Ngwoke et al. (2013) might be attributed to differences in the sample population, research design, or methodology employed. It is important to note that multiple factors can influence the effectiveness of study skills training on examination anxiety, including individual differences, the quality of the intervention, and the specific context in which it is implemented.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude based on the findings of the study that rational-emotive therapy, systematic desensitization and study skill training are strategies for reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone to a high extent. Integrating these strategies into educational programmes and support systems, educators and counselors can play a vital role in promoting student well-being and facilitating academic success by reducing

examination anxiety among secondary school students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers proffer the following recommendations:

1. Administrators of secondary schools should provide training and resources to counselors and educators to enable them to effectively implement Rational-Emotive Therapy techniques in their interactions with students. This can help create a more supportive environment for students facing examination anxiety and promote their overall well-being.
2. School counselors should be trained in systematic desensitization techniques and be equipped with the necessary tools to guide students through the process. This can be achieved by gradually exposing students to the source of their anxiety and helping them build resilience, systematic desensitization can contribute significantly to reducing examination anxiety.
3. Administrators of secondary schools should prioritize the inclusion of study skill training programmes in their curriculum. Teachers and counselors should collaborate to provide students with practical study strategies and techniques that can enhance their learning and improve their confidence in examination settings.

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