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Students' Attitudes Towards the Utilization of Guidance and Counselling Services in Schools

Ibrahim, Mohammed Gunu

Department of Educational Management and Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

ORCID: 0000-0002-1608-0856

Corresponding author: igunu@uds.edu.gh

Abdul-Majeed Mohammed

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

Email: aalhajmajeed78@gmail.com

Christian Evadzi

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8851-5786>

Email: cevadzi@uds.edu.gh

Abstract---Guidance and counselling services are a vital component of holistic education, yet their utilization by high school students in Ghana remains low despite moderate awareness. This mixed-methods study investigated students' attitudes and the factors influencing their engagement with these services, drawing on a sample of 362 students and six key informants (head teachers and counselors). The findings reveal a significant gap between students' recognition of a personal need for counselling and their actual willingness to seek it. The results highlight that the decision to utilize services is critically influenced by factors such as counselor ethics, trust, and confidentiality, with a counselor's reputation and a conducive environment being paramount. Peer-driven social stigma also emerged as a powerful deterrent, with students more likely to be discouraged by negative peer opinions than encouraged by positive ones. Conversely, teacher recommendations were found to be a strong enabler. The study concludes that interventions aimed at improving utilization must focus on building a culture of trust and privacy, rather than just increasing awareness. The implications suggest a need for policymakers to invest in professionally trained counselors and for practitioners to prioritize ethical transparency and confidential, welcoming spaces.

Keywords---Attitudes, Guidance and counselling, Peer Influence, Services, Stigma, Utilization.

Introduction

Guidance and counseling services are critical for the academic, personal, and social development of students in Ghanaian high schools. However, a significant gap exists between students' awareness of these services and their actual utilization, a problem that persistently challenges the efficacy of the country's educational support systems (Mensah, 2024; Sandow & Anovunga, 2024; Gyasi et al., 2025). This discrepancy presents a critical research problem because it prevents students from receiving the full benefits of counseling, which can include improved academic performance, better career planning, and enhanced mental well-being (Amedome, 2023). By studying students' attitudes, we can better understand the underlying issues that contribute to this underutilization and develop more effective interventions. The problem is framed to explore the factors driving this dilemma and justify the need for a targeted, evidence-based study.

A substantial body of research consistently highlights the disconnect between awareness and utilization. While studies demonstrate a generally moderate to high level of awareness among students, engagement with these services remains low (Upoalkpajor et al., 2018; Ntow & Kagee, 2024). Researchers have identified several common barriers that prevent students from seeking help. These include concerns about the confidentiality of their sessions, fear of social stigma, and a fundamental lack of trust in counselors, particularly when counselors also serve as teachers (Panford-Quainoo et al., 2024; Affum et al., 2019; Addy et al., 2021). Furthermore, institutional shortcomings, such as inadequate facilities, insufficiently trained staff, and a lack of dedicated counseling spaces, compound the issue, making effective service delivery difficult.

Most previous studies have focused on identifying the existence of these barriers without thoroughly investigating the long-term impact of specific interventions designed to increase service utilization (Ntow & Kagee, 2024; Amedome, 2023). The literature also lacks a thorough examination of how demographic factors, such as school location and socioeconomic status, influence students' attitudes and engagement. This study aims to fill these research gaps by evaluating the effectiveness of targeted interventions and examining how specific subgroup differences affect attitudes towards counseling services. By doing so, this research provides a unique and necessary contribution to the scholarly discourse.

The purpose of this mixed-method study is to investigate the utilization of guidance and counseling services, and to examine how demographic variables like age, gender, class levels, and religion influence students' attitudes towards these services among senior high school students in Ghana by gathering data from students and headteachers. The independent variables, targeted interventions, and demographic factors are defined as specific professional development initiatives and the reported background details of students, respectively. The dependent variable, utilization of guidance and counseling services, is defined as the frequency and type of engagement students have with these services (Lai-Yeung, 2014).

This study's findings carry significant implications for various stakeholders. For scholars, it offers new insights and empirical evidence on intervention effectiveness and demographic influences, enriching academic literature. For practitioners, the research will identify actionable strategies to improve service delivery and student engagement. These findings could inform the development of more student-centered counseling programs and justify investments in better facilities and counselor training. Lastly, for policymakers, this study will provide crucial evidence-based recommendations, enabling them to formulate and implement policies that enhance the accessibility, quality, and utilization of guidance and counseling services in all Ghanaian high schools.

Literature Review

Guidance and counselling services form a vital component of a well-rounded education system, providing the students with the required support for their academic, career, and personal development. The importance of guidance and counselling services has been attested around the globe and in the Ghanaian scenario. However, widespread literature suggests a persistent and complex problem: the non-use of such services by high school students despite a moderate level of awareness (Mensah, 2024; Sandow & Anovunga, 2024; Upoalkpajor et al., 2018). This literature review discusses the key findings of current studies on the perceptions of students, attitudes, and barriers to the utilization and access to guidance and counselling services among students in Ghana. The review is structured around three major themes: the degree of awareness and general perceptions, the psychological and institutional barriers to use, and the influence of demographic factors on attitudes.

Awareness and General Perceptions of Counselling Services

Existing literature presents a mixed picture of students' awareness and perception of guidance and counselling. Various studies substantiate that Ghanaian high school students are predominantly aware of the existence of such services in their institutions (Arkorful et al., 2021; Sandow & Anovunga, 2024). Awareness is not necessarily a guarantee of high utilization. Students have a positive view of counselling's possible input, particularly for academic and career guidance. For instance, Gyasi et al. (2025) noted that students who utilized the counselling services reported higher levels of academic achievement. Similarly, Affum et al. (2019) observed that students regard these services as strong tools for career path mapping and decision-making. As much as there has been a good impression, there is still a gap whereby most students, aware of the services, do not effectively utilize the services (Upoalkpajor et al., 2018). This indicates that awareness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for successful utilization. The gap between positive perception and actual use suggests the presence of something else, stricter, at work, and thus researchers are compelled to seek beyond the institutional and psychological barriers.

Barriers to Utilization: Institutional and Psychological Factors

The central focus of recent research has been on the determination of the specific barriers preventing students from receiving guidance and counselling services. These barriers can be classified as institutional and psychological barriers. Amedome (2023) and Panford-Quainoo et al. (2024) have, in turn, articulately explicated institutional problems, viz., inadequate essential resources, i.e., separate counselling rooms and confidential record systems. Besides, the absence of documentation, trained counsellors, and the aspect of dual functioning (e.g., teacher and counsellor) destroys students' trust and raises confidentiality issues (Dassah, 2021). Students are not at ease sharing intimate issues with individuals who also dictate their academic performance. Psychological barriers are equally, if not more, significant. Stigma in help-seeking is prevalent, and most students fear that they will be seen to have major problems or be "crazy" when they visit a counsellor (Addy et al., 2021; Ntow & Kagee, 2024). This is ordinarily supported by the opinion of peers and an insufficient understanding of the role of counselling. Panford-Quainoo et al. (2024) and Mensah (2024) both mention myths that place counselling as a punitive measure or ultimate sanction for misbehaving students, and not as an active mode of self-development. All these psychological and social reasons combine to form an unwelcoming environment, and so students are not willing to avail themselves of the support that they need. The across-the-board concerns with the privacy of information shared with counsellors are continually cited as an effective dissuader, undermining the trust that is at the heart of a counseling relationship (Ntow & Kagee, 2024).

Influence of Demographic Factors

While the institutional and psychological barriers are pervasive, literature shows that students' attitudes and usage patterns are also determined by various demographic factors. Literature has shown that school location (urban or rural), gender, and socioeconomic status can be factors influencing students' perceptions and willingness to seek help (Eyo et al., 2010; Asamari, 2018). For example, there is some evidence to suggest that male students may be more resistant to counselling due to societal expectations not permitting them to show vulnerability, although this is not a universally consistent finding (Addy et al., 2021). A further factor to consider is the school location; students in urban schools may have more access to counselling provision, yet they may also be exposed to unique pressures affecting attitudes towards its uptake. Conversely, students in rural areas may have less access to services, further influencing their perceptions and awareness. The role of socioeconomic status is less studied in the literature, but can be expected to influence both awareness of and access to services. These results are not consistently replicated; however, the literature is ongoing in terms of developing a full understanding of how these intersecting factors influence students' attitudes (Ulug et al., 2011).

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively investigate students' attitudes toward and utilization of guidance and counselling services in Ghanaian high schools. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a broad assessment of the research problem through surveys and an in-depth understanding of the underlying factors through interviews. This approach is consistent with scholarly recommendations for research that seeks to explore complex social phenomena by triangulating data from different sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative component involved a survey to measure students' perceptions and attitudes, while the qualitative component gathered rich insights from interviews with head teachers and counselors.

Study Population and Sampling

The target population for the study consisted of senior high school students, head teachers, and school counselors in selected schools in Ghana. A total of 362 students participated in the quantitative survey. The student sample comprised a diverse group; the gender distribution was 47.79% male and 52.21% female. The religious composition was predominantly Islamic (80.94%) and Christian (19.06%). The students were drawn from various class levels, including SHS One (36.74%), SHS Two (24.86%), and SHS Three (38.40%). For the qualitative component, a purposive sample of six key informants, including head teachers and counselors, was selected. This sample had an age range of 25-45 years and above, with a gender split of four males and two females.

Data Collection Instruments

Two primary data collection instruments were utilized: a questionnaire for the students and an interview guide for the head teachers and counselors. The student questionnaire was designed to gather demographic information and to measure perceptions and attitudes toward guidance and counselling services. It included statements rated on a Likert scale to assess factors such as the importance of peer opinion, the role of counselor characteristics (e.g., trust and personality), and concerns about stigma and confidentiality. The interview guide for the head teachers and counselors was developed to explore their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for effective service delivery, as well as their views on student utilization. The data collection was carried out through a field survey in 2024.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the student questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The analysis included frequencies and percentages to describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to summarize students' perceptions of guidance and counselling and their utilization behaviors. These statistical methods are suitable for summarizing and presenting the central tendencies and dispersion of the survey data. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to the barriers and facilitators of service utilization. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the institutional and psychological factors influencing students' attitudes, complementing the quantitative findings.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Sex Distribution of Respondents (Students)

Table 1
Sex of Respondents (Students)

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

Source: Field survey, 2024

The student sample (Table 1) was slightly skewed toward females (52.21%, n=189) compared to males (47.79%, n=173), indicating a balanced yet female-dominant representation that aligns with enrollment trends in some Ghanaian high schools. For head teachers and counselors (Table 4), males were more represented (66.67%, n=4) than females (33.33%, n=2). Interview data from head teachers revealed that gender dynamics in counseling roles might affect student engagement, with some female students preferring female counselors for sensitive topics, though this was not quantitatively tested.

Table 2
Sex of Respondents (Head Teachers and Counsellors)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	4	66.67
Female	2	33.33
Total	6	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Religious Denomination of Respondents

Table 3
Religious Denomination of Respondents (Students)

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Islam	293	80.94
Christianity	69	19.06
Total	362	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

A significant majority of students identified as Muslim (80.94%, n=293), with the remainder Christian (19.06%, n=69; Table 5). Similarly, among head teachers and counselors (Table 6), Islam was the dominant religion (66.67%, n=4), followed by Christianity (33.33%, n=2). This religious composition reflects the demographic context of the selected schools, potentially in regions with higher Muslim populations. Qualitative responses from counselors indicated that religious beliefs could influence attitudes toward counseling, such as viewing it as conflicting with faith-based guidance, but the survey did not directly measure this impact.

Table 4
Religious Denomination of Respondents (Head Teachers and Counsellors)

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Islam	4	66.67
Christianity	2	33.33
Total	6	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

Students' Perceptions of Guidance and Counselling and their Utilization

Table 5
Students' Perceptions of Guidance and Counselling and their Utilisation

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
I will go for counselling if I realize that I need it.	4.59	0.902
I am more likely to go for counselling if a teacher recommends it	4.29	0.946
I am more likely to go for counselling if my peers also go for it.	3.31	1.260
The opinion of my peers is important in my decision to partake in counselling programmes.	2.90	1.234
If my peers have a negative impression of counselling, then I wouldn't go for counselling even if I need it.	3.41	1.245
If my peers discourage me from seeking counselling, then I wouldn't seek counselling services.	3.14	1.328
If I am going to be labelled as a delinquent or mentally ill by my colleagues if I go for counselling, then I wouldn't participate even if I need it.	3.50	1.292
I would only go for counselling if the counsellor has a trusting appearance.	4.50	0.942
I would only go for counselling if the counsellor has an appealing personality.	4.27	1.217
I would only go for counselling if the counselling environment is relaxing and conducive.	4.64	0.854
If I am not pleased with my first counselling experience, then I will never go for school counselling again.	4.36	1.081
If there is a rumour that the counsellor is unethical, then I wouldn't seek counselling.	4.83	0.540
I would only go for counselling if I feel that others won't know about my problems	4.63	0.813

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 5 presents mean scores and standard deviations for 13 statements assessing students' perceptions and factors influencing their utilization of guidance and counseling services. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher means indicating stronger agreement. The results reveal generally positive perceptions toward counseling when personal need or environmental factors are favorable, but highlight barriers related to peer influence, stigma, and trust.

Students demonstrated a strong inclination towards counseling on the basis of individual self-perceived need, the highest mean for "I will seek counselling if I conclude that I need it" (M=4.59, SD=0.902), suggesting that intrinsic motivation is at the heart of usage. Similarly, the statements with high emphasis on supportive environment and confidentiality, such as "I would only go for counselling if the counselling environment is calming and conducive" (M=4.64, SD=0.854) and "I would only go for counselling if I believe that other people won't know about my problems" (M=4.63, SD=0.813), had similar strong agreement. These findings are in line with institutional barrier literature and underscore the definitive need for private, welcoming spaces to increase interaction.

Counsellor trust was also a top-level factor, and there was high agreement towards "If there is a rumour that the counsellor is unethical, then I wouldn't seek counselling" (M=4.83, SD=0.540, the highest mean of all) and "I would only go for counselling if the counsellor has a trusting appearance" (M=4.50, SD=0.942). This indicates that counselor credibility and demeanor are pivotal, corroborating qualitative insights from head teachers who emphasized the need for professional training to build student trust. Additionally, negative prior experiences deterred utilization, as seen in "If I am not pleased with my first counselling experience, then I will never go for school counselling again" (M=4.36, SD=1.081).

External influences showed mixed results. Teacher recommendations encouraged utilization (M=4.29, SD=0.946), but peer opinions had a more neutral to negative impact. For instance, "The opinion of my peers is important in my decision to partake in counselling programmes" had a lower mean (M=2.90, SD=1.234), suggesting that peers are not a dominant factor for all. However, stigma-related concerns were evident, with moderate agreement for statements like "If I am going to be labelled as a delinquent or mentally ill by my colleagues if I go for counselling, then I wouldn't participate even if I need it" (M=3.50, SD=1.292) and "If my peers have a negative impression about counselling then I wouldn't go for counselling even if I need it" (M=3.41, SD=1.245). These moderate means (around 3.1-3.5) indicate that while not overwhelming, peer-driven stigma contributes to underutilization, particularly in a collectivist cultural context like Ghana.

Discussion of Results

The findings of this study corroborate and extend existing literature on the underutilization of guidance and counselling services among high school students in Ghana. The results show a clear and consistent pattern: while students recognize the personal need for counselling (Mean=4.59), their decision to seek help is heavily mediated by factors related to trust, confidentiality, and social stigma. This is consistent with prior research by [Ntow & Kagee \(2024\)](#), who identified confidentiality concerns as a primary deterrent, and [Addy et al. \(2021\)](#), who highlighted the role of stigma. The exceptionally high mean score for the statement, "If there is a rumour that the counsellor is unethical, then I wouldn't seek counselling" (M=4.83), strongly emphasizes that counselor credibility and ethics are foundational to student engagement. This finding aligns with the qualitative insights from head teachers who stressed the need for professional training to build student trust, a point also echoed in work by [Panford-Quainoo et al. \(2024\)](#).

The data also reveals the complex and often negative impact of peer influence. While students are not significantly motivated by their peers' positive behaviors toward counselling (M=3.31), they are more likely to be discouraged by negative peer opinions (M=3.41). This finding reinforces the notion that in collectivist cultural contexts, the fear of being labelled as "delinquent or mentally ill" (M=3.50) acts as a powerful psychological barrier. This highlights a discrepancy in the literature, which often focuses on the general lack of awareness, without exploring the nuanced dynamics of peer-driven stigma. The high value placed on teacher recommendations (M=4.29) suggests that teachers, as respected authority figures, can play a critical role in bridging the trust gap and reducing stigma, an area that warrants further exploration.

Implications of the Study

The study's findings carry significant implications for various stakeholders involved in the Ghanaian educational system. For school administrators and practitioners, the results underscore the critical need to prioritize building a culture of trust and confidentiality, as these were identified as paramount factors for students. This could involve

ensuring that counselors are professionally trained and that their ethical conduct is transparent, as well as providing dedicated, private spaces for sessions to alleviate student concerns about discretion. Policymakers should leverage these findings to inform systemic changes, such as allocating resources to hire more full-time, non-teaching counselors and implementing nationwide campaigns to demystify counseling and reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. The data also suggests that teachers can act as valuable conduits, so providing them with training on how to sensitively recommend services to students could be a highly effective strategy. For future research, the study's limitations point toward the need for more interventional and qualitative studies to explore the long-term impact of new initiatives and to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between cultural context, peer dynamics, and personal attitudes toward counseling (Sijtsema & Lindenberg, 2018).

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the demographic composition of the sample, particularly the high percentage of Muslim students (80.94%), may limit the generalizability of the findings to schools with different religious or cultural demographics. Finally, while the study's quantitative approach provided a clear picture of mean perceptions, it did not fully capture the complexity and rationale behind students' responses. Future research could benefit from a more extensive qualitative component to explore the "why" behind the quantitative findings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to establish students' attitudes towards the utilization of guidance and counselling services within Ghanaian high schools and, secondly, evaluate the propelling forces behind their utilization. The findings confirm the extensive mismatch between students' knowing and utilization of such services, a phenomenon in accordance with the literature. The results identify that students' decisions to seek out counselling are most greatly affected by internal motivation (recognition of a personal need) and careful consideration of the central attributes of the service, most significantly trust, confidentiality, and a reassuring setting. The predominant importance of a counselor's ethical reputation and concern about negative peer response were the most salient barriers to seeking help. The study provides a clear call to action for improving the efficacy of school guidance and counseling services in Ghana. In closing the gap between awareness and use, interventions must go beyond educating students on the existence of services. Instead, attempts must be made to create a supporting culture of trust and confidentiality. This entails ensuring that there is professional training for counselors, their ethics are transparent, and counseling spaces are confidential and welcoming. Besides, the findings suggest that invoking the power of teachers could be a useful weapon against stigma and help students seek help. These results are significant for the development of targeted, evidence-based interventions that address the specific psychological and institutional challenges students face, and increase use of these vital support services.

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