

# **STUDENT-COUNSELORS' PERCEPTION OF PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE: A CASE OF MOI UNIVERSITY BACHELOR OF EDUCATION GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING STUDENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated student-counsellors' perceptions of practicum experience and the ways to improve Guidance and Counselling programme in Moi University, Kenya. The sample comprised of six teen respondents who had participated in practicum exercise. A questionnaire made up of both closed and open-ended items was used to collect data. This study revealed that student-counsellor received a lot of support from the school management where they practiced. The main challenges that these trainees faced were dual role of counselling, and lack of time for

counselling. The main stressors revealed were dual role of counseling and teaching, expectations of teachers and students, and to a lesser extent from assessors and principals. Recommendations made were that guidance and counselling be made more practical oriented, practicum period be delinked from teaching practice, workshops, and seminars be organized to sensitize the teaching staff about the importance of teaching practice.

**Key Words:** *perception, experience, student counselors, practicum, Moi University, Kenya*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Practicum is a very important aspect of Guidance and Counselling Education Programme. According to the Board of counsellors (2003), practicum is a supervised practical experience that enables the student counsellor to develop counseling skills and integrate professional knowledge. Geside (1991) noted that practicum period enables the trainees to understand the interrelationship among courses and the need to synthesize them in order to make a meaningful use of them. Practicum is normally carried out after students have completed most of their course work in the counsellor preparation programme (Neufeldt, 1994). Since various courses are taught by different instructors, the practicum period enables the trainees an opportunity to integrate or synthesize all the fragmented courses they have been exposed to in the programme.

Much of the research in counselling practicum students focus on counsellor supervisors' perception of practicum (Peace & Sprinthall, (1998); Peterson & Deuschle, (2006); Luke Elis & Bernard, (2011)) and very little on student counsellors' perception of their practicum experiences. Researchers have reported that practicum experiences vary across counselor education programmes. According to collision (1994), and Pate (1994, 2010) practicum provides the most conducive setting that facilitates student-counsellor development. Bernard and Goodyear (2004) noted that students continue to gain proficiency even after completing practicum. This proficiency continues to improve in all aspects after a masters programme.

Robinwitz, Heppner and Roehlke (1986) found out that during practicum, students experience a general trend of shifting from dependence to independence. Sometimes students feel confident and in control, while at other times they feel completely lost. Robinwitz .etal noted that at the end of training, trainees make more autonomous interventions and show greater conceptual understanding. Harper and Ritchie (2009) observed that school based settings allowed students to

develop professionally and build their professional identities. Borders (1990) revealed that at the end of practicum period students felt less dependent on supervisors, more aware of their motivation in therapy and less anxious or worried about performance in therapy. According to Borders students felt as though they were applying their skills and knowledge on consistent basis implying that by the end of practicum, students can be expected to have increased in all structures.

On the other hand, others researchers report that applying theory to practice during practicum period can be a daunting task Rebekah and Bradley (2013). Rebbecah and Bradley noted that there is a disconnect between the theories taught in the classroom and the application of these theories in the school setting. They observed that student counsellors' practicum experiences are not enough to gain a sense of theoretical grounding, making it difficult to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Burant and Kirby (2002) noted that unless structures are in place to promote reflection and evaluation, practicum can become an experience of uncritical practice that can work against the quality of training. According to a supervision report (2011) in Malaysia, students are unable to master the aspect of counselling while undergoing practicum. This report noted that if this condition persisted the students would not be effective in their job market after graduation.

In Kenya, the situation is also similar to the one in Malaysian. It is interesting to note that after graduating most school counsellors are confronted with new cases daily and sometimes feel at loss about how to proceed, and handle problems presented to them by their clients (Kamau, 2013). Student- counsellors in Kenyan universities and colleges only apply classroom-derived knowledge and skills to field-based experiences during practicum period. The application of these knowledge and skills in real life situation remains a serious challenge for trainees and newly qualified counsellors. They face the challenge of understanding how to apply different approaches of counselling when dealing with a variety of issues presented to them by their clients. These counsellors often feel inadequate in their roles, because their training did not equip them for their current practice. A qualified teacher counsellor said, "the actual application of knowledge learned to practice was not well done and proved to be the weakest part of the course. This has forced many of my colleagues to seek further counselling training to enhance their work and skills" (Masita, 2013). She argued that more time and attention be given to the area of practice during training.

Bachelor of Education in Guidance and counselling students in Kenyan universities proceed for practicum in schools during the teaching practice period. This exercise normally takes duration of 3months. During this period, these students are required to combine teaching practice as well as practice counselling concurrently. This combination normally pose a daunting task to the counsellor trainees. For instance, student-counsellors find themselves struggling to teach in the schools as well as meet with students for counselling within the required learning period. They are challenged to find time and offer counselling services in the midst of a pressured situation.

Quite often student counsellors are faced with extremely heavy teaching workloads, school responsibilities and pressure to prepare for both teaching and counselling.

Despite literature on supervisors' perceptions of students practicum experiences, there is little study particularly in Kenya about students' lived experience during practicum. Woodside, Zeiglar and Paulus (2009) stressed the need for research to inform school counselor educators about the needs of their students. This study was therefore, prompted by the desire to better understand the experience of student counsellors in translating theory to practice during practicum period.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to understand how student counselor perceived the practicum experiences in school settings. The objective of this study was to find out student counselors' experiences during counseling practicum, the challenges they faced and the ways they think the programme could be improved.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are your perceptions of practicum experiences with regard to your counselling role?
2. What challenges did you experience during the counselling aspect of your role?
3. What is your opinion about what needs to be improved with regard to guidance and counselling programme?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a mixed methods research approach where by both quantitative data were collected. Cresswell (1997) suggested that a mixed method approach is useful when trying to describe a phenomenon, so both qualitative (writing) open-ended items and quantitative (questionnaire) methods were employed. The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire containing 8 items that required a response on a five point likert scale. For the qualitative data, participants were required to respond to writing prompts through short narratives.

### **Participants**

Sixteen student counsellors were involved in this study. This sample was made up of all education guidance and counselling student counsellors who had been on teaching practice-cum counselling practicum from January to April 2014, and had returned to the university to complete their course work. This study used the whole-group sampling approach where by everyone who had been on counselling practicum from January to April 2014 was requested to participate in it. The reason for including all these students was that they were better placed to respond to

questions about their experience and answer questions regarding challenges they faced during their practicum accurately.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Sixteen student counsellors in the School of Education Moi University were requested to participate in the study. These students volunteered to complete the questionnaires. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the student- counsellors who assembled in one classroom for this purpose. This study used a questionnaire which contained both closed ended items on a five-point likert scale, and open-ended items. The questionnaire solicited students' perception of their counselling experiences with regard to: (i) making counselling available to all students, (ii) support from the school with regard to their counselling roles, (iii) stress related issues such as expectations from students, teacher colleagues, principals and assessors, and the dual role of being a teacher as well as a counsellor. The open ended items included questions about what they considered to be the most challenging aspects in the counselling role during practicum and suggestions for improving the guidance and counselling programme in the university. It took about 30 minutes for the participants to complete the questionnaire.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. Verbal consent was obtained from them and they were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires to ensure confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. Whereas qualitative data which involved written comments to the open ended questions were analyzed using content analysis which is consistent with the examination of written text as a main source of data.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The results of this study were represented in two sections. In the first section the quantitative results were presented in a table form categorized in terms of frequencies and percentages. The second sections included the qualitative findings were organized into themes that emerged from the data illustrate the commonalities among the participants. These findings were reported verbatim to capture the strong feelings of participants.

### **Quantitative Results**

Student-counsellors were asked to indicate on a five-point scale (from “not at all” to “a great deal”) the extent to which they believed that course work in guidance and counselling prepared them for the counselling aspect of practicum. Findings revealed that student-counsellors

reported that they had been adequately prepared during training for the counselling aspect of their role. When asked the extent to which their training prepared them for their counseling aspect of, 94% reported that they were prepared a lot or “a great deal”, and only 6% said a little.

### **Support for the Student Counsellors**

Participants were asked about the perceived support they got from their principals regarding: “having a counselling service for all students who sought it”, and the role of counselling in the work of a counsellor. It is evident from these findings that the level of support from the school principals with respect to each of these was quite good.

### **Stress Levels**

Participants were asked to indicate how stressful they perceived the various aspects of their counseling roles and the expectations of others on a five point scale from “not at all to a great deal”. The table shows the percentages of those who said these aspects caused either “a lot” or “a great deal of stress” as indicated. The overall level of stress experienced during practicum was relatively not so high. Interestingly, the expectations of teacher colleagues were an important source of stress, in contrast to the expectations of the students, school principals and the assessors. The single most cause of stress was the dual role of teaching and counseling which was experienced by majority of the students (81%).

### **Qualitative Results**

This study used content analysis approach to analyze participants written comments regarding challenges participants faced during practicum and their opinion about the improvement of guidance and counseling education programme, three distinct themes: (a) dual role of counseling, (b) limited time, and (c) lack of support from teachers emerged as challenges faced by these student-counselors. Whereas, more practice than theory theme emerged for area of improvement of the programme. Each group had a dominant theme that was consistent among the written comments.

#### **Theme One: Dual role of counseling and teaching**

Majority of the participants perceived the dual role of counselling and teaching to be the most challenging aspect of their practicum experience. These participants offered a rich description of the challenge in their written comments. One of them wrote:

*It was challenging to handle class work and counselling clients. Many clients could come but time would not be enough to have counseling sessions alongside teaching.*

Another comment alongside the same line was:

*Teaching at the same time counselling was very challenging in the sense that the school timetable does not have a scheduled time for carrying out counselling.*

### **Theme Two: Limited time for counseling**

Another dominant challenge that emerged in the participants written comments was scarcity of counselling time. Participants consistently stated that they lacked enough time for counselling. A respondent remarked that:

*Time was limited, students had to attend classes and co-curricular activities, making it difficult for the counsellor to meet with them especially in group counselling.*

Another one said that:

*The most challenging issue was time. Most activities were done during the day. Counselling was scheduled for late evening and weekends and teachers were not supportive.*

### **Theme Four: Lack of support from teacher -colleagues**

The fourth dominant theme that emerged with regard to the challenges that student-counselors faced was lack of support from teacher-colleagues. Participants reported that teachers worked against their counselling roles. Some of them revealed confidential information concerning clients. One participant wrote:

*A student with a problem could be brought to you, but after counselling teachers continued to point fingers at the student during lessons reminding them of their misdeeds. A case in point was a girl who had a relationship with a mortuary attendant.*

Another respondent commented:

*That some teachers did not have counselling skills and knowledge and viewed counselling as a waste of students' time.*

### **Theme Five: Improvement of guidance and counseling education programme**

Participants offered recommendations for improving Guidance and Counselling programme. One of the often consideration made was the need for more practical skills in counselling than theory. Majority of the respondents under scored the need to practice guidance and counseling skills than learning theory. They reported that they were exposed to more theory than practice. A participant wrote:

*More emphasis should be placed on practical skills to build more confidence in teacher counsellors.*

Another one wrote:

*Counselling classes should start earlier so that the remaining time is used for practicum. More practical lessons should be given to the students' counselors than theory when preparing them to become counsellors.*

Some student-counsellors recommended that teaching practice and counselling practicum should be conducted at different times. This was to allow them an opportunity to effectively practice their counseling skills. A respondent wrote that: Practicum should be assessed on different occasion rather than being done concurrently with teaching practice. In my opinion having more than the practicum sessions will aid the student counsellor in dealing with the challenges they faced during counselling.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This study revealed that student counsellors reported that they were well prepared by their course instructors before going for practicum. This implied that the practicum experience accorded these students an opportunity to apply counselling principles and theoretical constructs that they had learned during training.

The second finding of this study was that student counsellors reported that they received a lot of support from the school principals in their counselling role. This study corroborates the study which revealed that the level of support guidance-counsellors received from the school management with regard to guidance and counselling was quite strong. This finding was however, inconsistent with Oraegbunam (2008) who reported that counsellors were not recognized by headmasters. Instead, participants reported less support from their teacher colleagues. They attributed this lack of support, to teachers lack of knowledge in guidance and counselling. In a written comment one respondent remarked that: "some teachers did not have counselling skills and knowledge. Some viewed counselling as a waste of students' time".

This study revealed that dual role of counselling and teaching, lack of time for counselling, and little support from the teaching staff as major challenges to counselling practicum. These findings agree with Rebekah and Bradley (2013) who reported that student-counsellors found themselves struggling to navigate particular school systems and counsel students. Rebekah and Bradley noted that they are challenged to find time and obtain supervision needed in order to draw a conclusion about what is happening in a student's life and then apply it in the midst of a pressured situation. It also concurred with Nwoko (2006) who said that some of the challenges facing practice of counselling in schools are dual job and lack of authority for execution of programmes.



Moreover, when participants were asked to indicate how stressful they perceived the various aspects of counselling, dual role of teaching counselling topped the list followed by expectations of teachers, students, assessors and principals. Thus, dual role of teaching and counselling was the single most major source of stress to student counsellors. Both quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that dual role of teaching and counselling was a major source of stress. In a written response participants wrote, "Teaching at the same time counseling was very challenging". Whereas, another noted "teaching practice and counselling practicum should be done at different times".

These findings concurred with (Carpel, (1997); Kiggundu & Nyamuli, (2009); Ngidi & Simbaya, (2003)) who reported that teaching practice although valued greatly by student teachers and their supervisors was the most stressful part of a teacher training program. It is not an overstatement to conclude therefore, that because teacher counsellors combine the responsibility of counseling and teaching during practicum the magnitude of stress they experience is more than that experienced by teaching practice students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The student counsellors are prepared well by their course instructors in our universities before they embark on practicum. These students receive enough support from school management in their counselling. The challenges faced by student counsellor during practice in schools are enormous as revealed by the study, particularly the dual role of teaching and counselling, and lack of enough time in our schools for them to practice counselling during their practicum period.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations were made:

1. More practical skills should be given to student-counselors during training
2. Student teacher counsellors should go on teaching practice and practicum at different times for them to practice teaching skills and counselling skills effectively.
3. Workshops and seminars should be organized for school teachers who see counselling as not important. These seminars will educate them and make them aware of the purpose for which counselling is important in school.

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