

Effects of Emotionally Focused Counselling and Lifestyle Skills Training on Senior Secondary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Emotional problems of secondary school students constitute a major challenge not only to the student and school authorities but also to counsellors, parents and the school community. It is worrisome that children experiencing emotional problems such as interpersonal insensitivity, aggression and hostility often fail to achieve academically at levels expected of individual with their intellectual ability and are usually unable to establish the necessary interpersonal relationships necessary for their effective social functioning. This study therefore examined the effects of emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training on the emotional problems of senior secondary school students in Anambra State, Nigeria. The emotional problems investigated were hostility, social maladjustment and interpersonal insensitivity of the participants. Quasi-experimental pre-test post-test control group design was adopted for the study. The final sample size was made up of 129 participants consisting of 77 male and 52 female students in senior secondary one (SS1) class who reported experiencing at least one or more problems of hostility, social maladjustment and interpersonal insensitivity. The relevant data were generated using the Liking People Scale (LPS), Social Maladjustment Scale (SMS) and Automatic Thought Questionnaire (ATQ). Findings show that Emotionally Focused Counselling (EFC) and Lifestyle Skills Training (LST) had significant effect in reducing hostility and social maladjustment as well as improving the interpersonal sensitivity of the senior secondary school students. It also revealed that EFC and LST was effective in enhancing the emotional growth of the students. However, the interaction effect of experimental conditions and gender on all the dependent measures (hostility, social maladjustment and interpersonal insensitivity) were not statistically significant. It was recommended that in order to reduce the problems leading to the experience of hostility, social maladjustment and interpersonal insensitivity, the sources of the problem should first be isolated to allow the counsellors design appropriate psycho-educational programmes utilizing emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training to ameliorate the problems and mitigate their symptoms and consequences.

Keywords: Emotionally focused counselling, hostility, Interpersonal sensitivity, lifestyle skills training and social maladjustment.

1. Introduction

Emotional problems among secondary school students are a growing concern as majority of the students with emotional problems go undetected. Teachers are likely to know most of the students with externalized emotional problems because the students put emotions on display and may become disruptive, even antagonistic in classroom. Some of the early warning signs for students with emotional problems are moody, apathetic, isolated from peers, become impulsive, aggressive, lack empathy or compassion, poor academic performance among others. However, it is crucial that teachers are aware of these problems and use some strategies to help students overcome their emotional barriers to learning, such as making learning relevant, helping students establish positive peer relationship, instil hope and monitor their temperament.

According to Simbolon and Purba (2022), guidance and counselling services in educational institutions form the bedrock of academic success and aids in student development. These guidance and counselling programs are designed to support students with the resources they need to overcome challenges such as academic, personal, emotional, or social issues and succeed in their educational pursuits. On the other hand, life skills training prepares student towards overcoming the tensions and difficulties in the society. The aim of life skills training is to enhance the psychological and social capabilities of students which will help in preventing harmful behaviours towards improving their mental health (Barkhordar, Hasan and Safdar, 2016). It is perceived that after receiving life skills training, students will possess some characteristics of communication, self-awareness, self-esteem, ability to cope with emotions, communication with others, and the ability to cooperate. The adolescence stage is a critical period leading to rapid physical, social, cognitive, and emotional changes in high school students. In recent time, there has been an increasing trend for schools to embed and improve access to student counselling services. Karaffa et al. (2020) posit that access to student counselling services can decrease academic distress as well as and improve retention. Students often struggle with peer relationships, family dynamics, and communication with teachers, mental health and emotional well-being which are critical factors that affect their academic success and personal development.

Recently, there has been an increasing trend for schools to embed and improve access to student counselling services. According to Pigaiani et al. (2020), life skill development during this stage takes place within a social network which is influenced by family, peers, school, community, media, and other cultural influences which will have a long-lasting effect throughout their lifetime. Hence, the need to equip them with the necessary tools to navigate these challenges. This research will provide discussions on interventions such as Emotionally Focused Counselling (EFC) and Lifestyle Skill Training (LST) and its effects on students' emotional well-being, academic performance, and social relationships.

2. Literature review

In educational settings, the emotional well-being of students is increasingly recognized as a fundamental component which impacts academic success and personal development. Emotionally focused counselling addresses the emotional and psychological needs of students, fostering resilience and self-awareness while providing support for mental health issues. On the other hand, lifestyle skill training emphasizes practical life skills, including time management, effective communication, and stress management, which are essential for academic and social success. Students may be facing variety of emotional disturbances like feelings of hatred, inferiority complex, disappointment, fear, grief, sadness, anger, nervousness, worry, anxiety and annoyance among others, which makes life very difficult to handle. The aim of this study was to determine the effects of emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training on emotional problems of senior secondary school students. Therefore, this literature review aims to synthesize the available research on EFC and LST, exploring their individual and combined effects on student outcomes.

Emotionally Focused Counselling (EFC)

Emotions play a crucial role in human lives and in human affairs, and the study of emotions is a vital and necessary part of psychology and cognitive science. Emotion, according to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2018) is defined as "an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism". Cherry (2024) highlighted that emotion is seen as a complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological changes that influence thought and behaviour. However, the way individuals regulate their emotions has an influence on their mental wellbeing and functioning, therefore emotions should be regulated effectively. According to Ho and Funk (2018), students that are emotionally healthy try to control their emotions and behaviour, show resilience in troubling situations as well as tend to build strong and lasting relationships.

Emotionally Focused Counselling (EFC) is grounded in emotion-focused therapy (EFT). This approach emphasizes the role of emotions in guiding human behaviour, building relationships, and facilitating personal growth. With regards to students, emotionally focused counselling is an approach to therapy that helps students identify their emotions, learn to explore, experience, understand and managed them effectively. The aim of EFC is the regulation, debriefing, exploring and experiencing of emotions for the development of emotional health, thinking and understanding. According to Greenberg (2010), emotionally focused approach to counselling is used for treatment of individual to facilitate emotional change. In other words, EFC helps students to identify, express, and regulate their emotions, which is especially important for students who are navigating the emotional landscape of adolescence. Morey et al. (2019) posit that EFC address complex emotional challenges that students face, as research has highlighted the significant impact of stress on their academic performance and overall well-being.

Recent study by Bagheri, Parsa and Mahdiyan (2024) investigated the effects of emotionally focused therapy (EFT) on the emotional autonomy. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-post-test control group design with

follow-up, the study population were 30 high school students with depression symptoms in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province (Iran). The findings of the study revealed that EFT enhanced emotional autonomy and improved emotion regulation strategies (i.e., reappraisal and suppression) in students with depression symptoms ($P < 0.001$). A similar study conducted by Lasisi and Annor (2023) investigated the effects of Emotional-Focused Therapy on the management of emotional health problems in Ilorin (Nigeria). The focus of the study was on secondary school teachers, findings from the study show that there was a significant main effect of treatment packages on the emotional health of secondary school teachers in Ilorin metropolis although there were no significant main effects of age or gender. In summation, EFT helps students to recognize and manage their emotions, fosters self-awareness as well as helps them to build emotional resilience by teaching them how to recover from setbacks, learn from negative experiences, and maintain emotional balance in the face of adversity.

Lifestyle Skills Training

According to Atuegbu (2018), Lifestyle Skills are the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life whether at school, work, or in personal lives. Researchers have identified lifestyle skills training as essential which can never be neglected, more especially at early childhood education. Natalia et al. (2016) assert that someone who is pursuing a high qualification would not be competitive unless he familiarises himself with the systems of preserving his own health, taking into account the idiosyncrasies of the chosen profession, as such a specialist would not be able to raise his performance level, and consequently professional capacity. Contemporary, such approaches have worn out, system of physical education should be used to further optimize the physical activity of the students via the activation of thought processes that require substantial training component with real influence on shaping of conscious attitude to the need for a healthy lifestyle.

For instance, Natalia et al. (2016) assert that “when developing an interdisciplinary course - principles of a healthy lifestyle, the need to reorientate education of physically fit students to the students intellectually focused on preserving their own health is considered. Analysis of the available technologies and teaching methods allowed to create the content in which different kinds of knowledge are the subject-oriented subjects developing the system behaviour, healthy lifestyle throughout the lifespan of the students. The main purpose of the elaborated technology is the development of an individual responsible for the state of his/her health and aware that a healthy lifestyle is a prerequisite for active life”. However, in the study titled ‘the effectiveness of the elaborated technology of developing healthy lifestyle among students’, the research confirmed that the development of healthy lifestyle skills among students is determined by a system of physical education which depends on the characteristics of students’ future careers (Natalia et al., 2016).

Lifestyle Skills Training involves a series of practical skills which are aimed at promoting healthy living, effective communication, and problem-solving abilities. It includes components such as time management, stress management, and goal setting. Development of healthy lifestyle skills among students increases motivation and create conducive atmosphere for creativity: the ability to adjust their behaviours and constantly changing environmental conditions; the ability to express and develop their own vision, to prove their point of view and attitude to a problem, the ability to understand and evaluate their own performance and actions of others (Natalia et al., 2016).

Emotionally Focused Counselling and Lifestyle Skills Training are powerful interventions that support senior secondary school students in navigating the complexities of adolescence. By addressing both emotional and practical needs, these approaches foster a supportive environment conducive to personal and academic growth. The following three research hypotheses guided the study.

- There would be no significant effect of emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training in reducing hostility among students in senior secondary schools.
- Emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training would not significantly reduce social maladjustment of students in senior secondary schools.
- There would be no significant difference between emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training in improving the interpersonal sensitivity of students in senior secondary schools.

3. Research Methodology

The study used quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test and control group. Thomas (2024) posits that “quasi-experimental design aims to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between an independent and dependent variable”. This type of design requires that the participants are tested before and after treatment. The target population for this study comprised all SS1 students in senior secondary schools, SS1 students were chosen specifically for this study because it’s a transition class and students are under pressure to excel in their studies. Multi-stage sampling process was used to select an initial sample of 600 students. The baseline assessment was conducted by administering 3 data collection instruments; Liking People Scale (LPS), Social

Maladjustment Scale (SMS) and Automatic Thought Questionnaire (ATQ) respectively. To qualify for participation in the main study, the researcher decided that a student must be experiencing a significant difficulty in at least one of the three emotional problems: hostility, social maladjustment and interpersonal insensitivity. Their norm scores were 218, 209, and 214 respectively. Therefore, students who scored above the norm on one or more of hostility, social maladjustment, and interpersonal insensitivity indicate having emotional problems. Finally, a sample of 129 students were selected to participate in the main study of which 38 students were assigned emotionally focused counselling, 45 students was assigned lifestyle skills training while 46 students were assigned the control condition.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants by Experimental Conditions and Gender.

Group	Gender	No of participants
Emotionally Focused Counselling	Male	20
	Female	18
	Total	38
Lifestyle Skills Training	Male	26
	Female	19
	Total	45
Control Group	Male	31
	Female	15
	Total	46

Liking Peoples Scale (LPS)

The Liking Peoples Scale is a 15-item instrument developed by Filsinger (1981). It measures the aspect of interpersonal orientation, the general liking of other people. Interpersonal orientation plays a significant role in students' social development and adjustment. The theoretical point of the Liking People Scale is that the degree of liking people influences whether one approaches or avoids social interaction. The reliability of the LPS was estimated using Cronbach's alpha to test internal consistency. The LPS had very good internal consistency, the coefficient alpha was 0.78.

Social Maladjustment Scale (SMS)

This is a 15-item inventory developed by Wiggins (1966) to measure those behavioural characteristics which make an individual unable to adjust adequately to social situations because he/she is too conscious, introverted, and lacks necessary skills. In this work it was used to measure social maladjustment. It has internal consistency reliability coefficients of 0.86 and 0.84 for male and female respondents respectively.

Automatic Thought Questionnaire (ATQ)

The Automatic Thought Questionnaire (ATQ) is a 30-item instrument designed by Hollon and Kendall (1980) to measure the frequency of automatic negative statements about maintenance and treatment of various psychopathologies. In this work it was used measure hostility in students. The Automatic Thought Questionnaire has excellent internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of 0.97.

Result and discussion

The data collected through the instruments were analysed according to the hypotheses using appropriate methods. All the hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis One: There would be no significant effect of emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training in reducing hostility among participants

Table 2. Descriptive Data of the Effect of Experimental Condition on Hostility Reduction among Students

Group	Pre test Mean	Pre test SD	Post test Mean	Post test SD	Mean difference
Emotionally Focused Counselling	113.45	8.49	85.11	23.24	-28.71
Lifestyle Skills Training	112.09	7.66	83.38	17.43	-28.34
Control Group	115.22	8.01	116.89	12.42	1.67

Table 2 shows that at pre-test, the mean scores of the participants were 113.45, 112.09 and 115.22 for EFC, LST and CG respectively. Also, the post-test mean scores show that EFC, LST and CG had 85.11, 83.38 and 116.89 respectively. The Mean Difference column shows that the Lifestyle Skills Training Group and the Emotionally Focused Counselling Group were neck to neck with respective pretest-posttest mean differences of -28.71 and -28.34 while the control group had a negligible mean difference of 1.67. To determine if these differences were statistically significant, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out and the result is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: ANCOVA Test of the Effect of Experimental Conditions on Hostility among Students

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	34545.96	3	11515.32	38.39*	0.000
Intercept	512.99	1	512.99	1.71*	0.193
Covariate	2792.99	1	2792.99	9.31*	0.000
Experimental Conditions	28271.64	2	14135.82	47.13*	0.000
Error	37491.62	125	299.93		
Corrected Total	72037.58	128			

F-Critical at 0.05 (2, 125) = 3.07

The ANCOVA results presented in Table 3 show that the effect of the experimental conditions in reducing feelings of hostility among participants was significant since the F-value of 47.13 was greater than F-critical value of 3.07, given 2 and 125 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, hypothesis one was rejected, and it was concluded that there was significant effect of emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training in reducing hostility among students in senior secondary schools.

Hypothesis Two: Emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training have no significant effect on social maladjustment of students in senior secondary schools.

Table 4: Descriptive Data of the Effect of Experimental Condition on Social Maladjustment of Students

Group	Pre test Mean	Pre test SD	Post test Mean	Post test SD	Mean difference
Emotionally Focused Counselling	56.13	6.89	39.89	8.14	-16.24
Lifestyle Skills Training	55.51	6.49	34.49	6.85	-21.02
Control Group	55.35	6.02	54.80	6.86	-0.55

The result presented in Table 4 show that at pre-test, the mean scores of the participants were 56.13, 55.51 and 55.35 for EFC, LST and CG respectively. Also, the post-test mean scores show that EFC, LST and CG had 39.89, 34.49 and 54.8 respectively. The Mean Differences were Lifestyle Skills Training (-21.02) followed by Emotionally Focused Counselling (-16.24) and the control group (-0.55). To determine if these differences were statistically significant, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out and the result is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: ANCOVA test of the Effect of Experimental Conditions on Social Maladjustment among Students

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	10663.504	3	3554.50	74.12	0.000
Intercept	909.59	1	909.59	18.97	0.000
Covariate	641.24	1	641.24	13.37	0.000
Experimental Conditions	9747.92	2	4873.96	101.63	0.000
Error	5994.82	125	47.96		
Corrected Total	16658.33	128			

F-Critical at 0.05 (2, 125) = 3.07

The ANCOVA results presented in Table 5 show that the effect of the experimental conditions in reducing social maladjustments among participants was significant since the F-value of 101.63 was greater than F-critical value of 3.07, given 2 and 125 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, hypothesis two was rejected and it was concluded that Emotionally Focused Counselling and Lifestyle Skills Training significantly reduced feeling of social maladjustment of students in senior secondary schools.

Hypothesis Three: Emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training would not significantly impact on the interpersonal sensitivity of students in senior secondary schools.

Table 6: Descriptive Data of the Effect of Experimental Conditions on Interpersonal Insensitivity among students.

Group	Pre test Mean	Pre test SD	Post test Mean	Post test SD	Mean difference
Emotionally Focused Counselling	52.12	4.63	33.63	6.12	-18.49
Lifestyle Skills Training	49.73	3.64	38.80	5.46	-10.93
Control Group	50.28	4.03	48.20	6.21	-2.08

Table 6 shows that the pretest post-test mean scores on interpersonal sensitivity of the students exposed to emotionally-focused counselling were $52.12 + 4.63$ and $33.63 + 6.12$ respectively, thus resulting in a mean difference of -18.49 while for the lifestyle skills training group, the mean scores were $49.73 + 3.64$ at pretest and $38.80 + 5.46$ at post-test thus yielding a pretest post-test mean difference of -10.93 as against -2.08 obtained by the control group participants who recorded $50.28 + 4.03$ at pretest and $48.20 + 6.21$ at post-test. To determine if these differences were statistically significant, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out and the result is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: ANCOVA of the Effect of Experimental Conditions on Interpersonal Insensitivity among Students

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	5924.65	3	1974.88	78.23	0.000
Intercept	0.37	1	0.37	0.02	0.903
Covariate	1279.79	1	1279.79	50.70	0.000
Experimental Conditions	5284.84	2	2642.42	104.68	0.000
Error	3155.49	125	25.24		
Corrected Total	9080.14	128			

F-Critical at 0.05 (2, 125) = 3.07

The ANCOVA results presented in Table 7 shows that there was significant improvement in the participants' interpersonal sensitivity since the F-value of 104.68 was greater than F-critical value of 3.07, given 2 and 125 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, hypothesis three was rejected, and it was concluded that there was significant difference between Emotionally-Focused Counselling and Lifestyle Skill Training in improving the interpersonal sensitivity of students in senior secondary schools.

In summary, the study has shown that the participants exposed to emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training experienced significant reduction in feelings of hostility. It also found that the participants exposed to emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training experienced significant reduction in social maladjustment than the control group. Additionally, the lifestyle skills training was significantly more effective than emotionally- focused counselling in reducing social maladjustment among the participants. The study also revealed that emotionally focused counselling was more effective than lifestyle skills training in reducing interpersonal insensitivity among secondary school students. Both emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training were effective in reducing feelings of hostility among secondary school students irrespective of their gender.

4. Conclusion

This study was carried out to determine the effect of emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training on emotional problems of senior secondary schools in Anambra state Nigeria. This was done to help students facilitate their emotional change and be able to be aware of what the mistakes are, how it is made, how to avoid it and live a well-adjusted life. The 129 students used in this study were indicated to have had experiences one or two of emotional problems of hostility, social maladjustment, and interpersonal insensitivities. The evidence yielded by the study revealed that emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training was effective in enhancing the emotional growth of the students. Further evidence revealed that there is no significant gender impact on emotionally focused counselling and lifestyle skills training on emotional problems of students.

However, it can be concluded that Emotionally Focused Counselling and Lifestyle Skills Training are powerful interventions that support senior secondary school students in navigating the complexities of adolescence. By addressing both emotional and practical needs, these approaches foster a supportive environment that is conducive to students personal and academic growth. Finally, it is hoped that this research will be strengthened by future studies on other emotional problems by counsellors, psychologists and other researchers in Nigeria. It is recommended that these two behaviour modification programs should be instituted at the counselling unit in schools to assist in ameliorating the emotional problems of students. Government also has a role to play in assisting the guidance counsellors to initiate certain programs in school for the improvement of interpersonal sensitivity of the students.

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