

## ASSESSMENT SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES IN PRACTICE BY IMO STATE SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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### Abstract

*This Research study focused on the assessment skills and competencies in practice by counselors in Imo state school system. The purpose of this study is to explore school counselors' extent of using the various assessment techniques, assessment program logistics and utilization of assessment information in their counseling work. A sample size of 72 out of a total of 362 school counselors in Imo State was used for the study. The instrument for data collection is a questionnaire made up of 4 point modified likert-type scale. Item face and content validity was determined. The result showed that the school counselors were using non-standardized assessment techniques most frequently and standardized testing least of all. In the area of program logistics, they were rarely involved in selecting school achievement tests or career inventories nor coordinating either of those testing programs. The result also showed that Imo state school counselors were not sufficiently involved in the utilization of assessment information. The researchers among others, recommend that counselors in the schools should be encouraged to update their knowledge in the use of assessment in counseling by attending conferences and workshops, in service training, and other continuing education opportunities.*

**Keywords:** Assessment skills, Competencies, Practice, School Counselors

### Introduction

In the practice of assessment skills and competencies acquired by counselors during their training, they are expected to assess, measure and evaluate their clients to enable them make effective decisions, resolve their problems, have positive mental and healthy behaviors. These processes require sound knowledge in assessment and evaluation. Assessment is the gathering of information for decision making about individuals, groups, programs or processes. Assessment skills include certain skills related to assessment while competencies describe skills or understanding that a school counselor should possess to perform evaluation activities effectively.

Counseling, according to Uwazie, Ifegbo, Ukegbu and Uwazurike (2008: 147) is "a relationship between a professionally trained, competent counselor and individual seeking help in gaining greater self-understanding and improved decision making and behaviour-changing skills for problem resolution and developmental growth". Schmidt (1995) pointed out that the purpose of counseling in schools is to assist students with their educational, career, personal and social development. In carrying out this goal, school counselors serve students directly and indirectly through counseling with their parents, teachers, and other educators. The National Association of College Admissions Counselors believes that elementary through post-secondary school counselors must be competent in developing, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Drummond, 1992). Although it is true that student information may be gathered through individual and / or group counseling, observations, and a review of school records, standardized and structured assessment procedures are also important data collection tools. Additional assessment

tools at school counselors' disposal are qualitative techniques such as observation protocols and open-ended rating scales, students' behavior rating scales, self-reports, anecdotal reports, questionnaires, structured interviews, and sociometric techniques (Gibson & Mitchel, 1995). Goldman (1992) has suggested that few school counselors other than career counselors make use of tests. Findings in a survey by Engen, Lamb, and Prediger (1981) reported by Zytowski (1982), says that 93% of secondary school counselors administered at least one test to students; 76% administered achievement test batteries; 66% administered academic aptitude or intelligent tests; and 16% administered inventories of schools or social adjustment or personality tests. Goldman (1992) has suggested that few school counselors other than career counselors make use of tests.

In assessment program logistics, school counselors are supposed to be involved in: selecting school achievement tests and career inventories; coordinating achievement tests and career testing programs.

In addition to gathering information, school counselors have an important role to play in dissemination of information. In performing this work, they are involved in identifying students' career aptitude and interests, academic achievement levels, level of social skills and interpreting assessments to students, parents and other educators. Educational professionals, including secondary school teachers rely on school counselors to provide them with assessment information and to answer their questions about testing (Impara and Plake 1995, Stiggins, 1995). Focusing on this role of test interpreter, Goldman (1982) found little research evidence that tests as they are being used by counselors have made much impact to the people they service.

Although there is considerable research about the assessment competencies school counselors need (Anastasi, 1992; Impara & Plake, 1995), there is less evidence to suggest that school counselors actually are using those skills and the training they receive is insufficient.

Drummond (1992), Tymofirich and Leroux (2000) put in that because assisting students to make effective decisions about their educational plans and future careers requires a sound foundation of accurate data, school counselors need to be skilled in information gathering and dissemination. This is why graduate program in school counseling routinely include at least one course in assessment (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Program (CACREP), 1994; Elmore, Ekstram & Diamond, 1993; Goldman, 1992; National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC); National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC). National school counselor certificate examination and state credentialing standard require knowledge and skill development in assessment. California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC), (2001); National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), (1998); and professional associations have specified assessment competencies (American School Counselor Association (ASCA), 1998).

In the study of skills needed by school counselors, Schafer and Mufson (1993) found a natural division of the job role expectations of school counselors which they grouped into six areas: counseling (individual / or group), pupils' assessment, consultation, information officer, school program facilitator, and research and evaluation. There is assessment-intensive aspects of each of these roles. These roles that have been identified imply that school counselors should have certain skills related to assessment. They concluded that these CACREP skills consciously presented in a counselor education program, would in

most areas constitute an adequate preparation for a beginning-level school counselors. Because effectiveness in assessment and evaluation is critical to effective counseling, these competencies are important for school counselors.

Tymofievich and Leroux (2000) described good assessment practice as including test selection, administration and interpretation. The ASCA national model (2003) outlined for school counselors the ethical standards to be used in selecting, administering and interpreting assessment measures. This model reflects a comprehensive approach to program foundation delivery, management and accountability.

Despite the assessment trainings that the school counselors received in their preparation programs and the links between educational assessment and counseling, it is not certain whether counselors in Imo State schools are sufficiently and frequently practicing these assessment skills and competencies in their counseling work. It is based on this that the present study focus on the investigation of assessment skills and competencies of school counselors in Imo state.

#### Research Questions

The following four research questions guided the study

- (i) To what extent do Imo State school counselors involved in the use of various assessment techniques?
- (ii) What is the level of usage of assessment program logistics by Imo State school counselors?
- (iii) To what extent do Imo State school counselors utilize assessment information?

#### Population of the Study

There are a total of three hundred and sixty-two (362) practicing school counselors in Imo State school system. (Source: Counselor Association of Nigeria (CASSON), 2013).

#### Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample size of seventy-two (72) school counselors was used for the study (20% of the total population). The seventy-two school counselors were randomly selected using balloting. The Instrument for data collection was a questionnaire made up of four likert type scales. Item validation was determined by consultation with two practicing school counselors, two counselors' educators, two experts in measurement and evaluation. Researchers personally visited Imo State school counselors during their annual meeting at Owerri, and administered the questionnaire items and retrieved on the spot their responses.

#### Method of Data Analysis

Mean served as statistical tool for data analysis. A mean rating of 2.5 and above was considered as positive responses (sufficient involvement) while a mean rating below 2.5 was considered as negative responses (insufficient involvement).

#### Results

Table 1: Analysis concerning the extent of usage of various assessment techniques by Imo State School Counselors

To what extent do Imo State school counselors involved in the use of the following assessment techniques?	No and score	GE	SE	LE	NE	Obtained mean scores
Observation of students	N	25	32	4	10	3.01
	Nx	100	99	8	10	
Achievement test	N	1	25	43	3	2.33
	Nx	4	75	86	3	
Structured students interviews	N	20	4	11	10	2.91
	Nx	80	8	11	10	
Student-completed rating scale	N	2	20	46	4	2.27
	nx	8	60	92	4	
Teachers/counselors-completed rating scales	N	3	26	40	3	2.40
	nx	12	78	80	3	
Career inventory study habit	N	2	22	44	4	2.02
	nx	8	66	88	4	
Pooled mean						2.49

From table 1 above, among the six domains of assessment techniques, school counselors reported sufficiently involved in the observation of students individually/or in group and structured students interview with means above 2.5 school counselors reported that they are less involved in the use of standardized achievement tests, student-completed rating scales, teacher/counselor-rating scales, and career inventories with means below 2.5. A grand total mean of 2.49 showed that Imo State school counselors do not make sufficient use of various assessment techniques in assessing their students.

Answering research question 2: To what extent do Imo State School counselors involved in program logistics?

Table 2: Analysis concerning the extent of involvement of Imo State School Counselors in program logistics

What is the level of your involvement in these assessment program logistics?	No and score	GE	SE	LE	NE	Obtained mean scores
Selecting school achievement tests	N	2	15	46	9	2.13
	nx	8	45	92	9	
Selecting school career inventories	N	0	10	44	18	1.88
	nx	0	20	88	18	
Coordinating achievement testing	N	1	24	43	4	2.30
	nx	4	72	86	4	
Coordinating career testing	N	2	20	46	4	2.27
	nx	8	60	92	4	
Pooled mean						2.06

Table 2 above shows that Imo State school counselors were not sufficiently involved in assessment program logistics with means below 2.5 and pooled mean of 2.06.

Table 3: Analysis concerning the extent Imo State School Counselors utilize assessment information

What is the extent of your utilization of the following assessment information?	No and score	GE	SE	LE	NE	Obtained mean scores
Identifying students career aptitudes and interests	n nx	2 8	20 60	42 84	8 8	2.22
Identifying students academic achievement level	n nx	1 4	23 69	43 86	5 5	2.27
Identifying students level of social skills	n nx	2 8	17 51	43 86	10 10	2.15
Interpreting assessments to students, parents and other educators	n nx	15 60	47 141	5 14	5 5	3.02
Grand total mean						9.64 2.41

On utilizing assessment information, table 3 above shows that school counselors were only sufficiently involved on interpreting assessments to students, parents and other educators. They were not sufficiently involved in identifying students career aptitude and interests, academic achievement levels and levels of social skills. The pooled mean of 2.41 showed insufficient utilization of assessment information.

The result generally showed that there is insignificant use of assessment skills and competencies by Imo State school counselors in their counseling work with pooled means of 2.49, 2.06 and 2.41 which are below 2.50.

### Discussion

The finding of the study shows that there is no significant level of use of assessment skills and competencies by Imo State school counselors in their counseling work. This is in line with that of Goldman (1992) who attested that few school counselors other than career counselors make use of tests. Although there is considerable research about the assessment competencies school counselors need, (Anastasi 1992; Impara and Plake 1995), there is less evidence to suggest that school counselors actually are using those skills.

Outcomes of this study suggest that school counselors use non-standardized assessment techniques most frequently with those of student observation and structured student interview being the most. This is not surprising because training in these techniques, both of which call for inter-personal and observation skills, typically occurs throughout counseling preparation programs in a multiplicity of counseling courses (CCTC, 2001). Less frequently used was indicated for teacher- or school counselor-completed rating scales, which is somewhat puzzling because these formats are likely to provide school counselors with a rich source of information. For example, teachers' day-to-day observation of students in their classrooms coupled with school counselors' ratings could provide important cross-validation between measures of behavior. However, it is not surprising that student-completed ratings and standardized tests are seldom used, because these techniques are more likely to be taught in only the one or two tests and measurement courses that are typical of school counselor preparation programs (CCCT, 2001). It is unfortunate that the school counselors are making so little use of career inventories in identifying students career aptitude and interests. This is because the major part of school counselor's role is assisting students to acquire the necessary academic skills, knowledge and strategies required for future career planning (Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998).

It is not surprising that school counselors were frequently involved in the area of interpreting assessment data to students' parents and other educators because communication and consultation skills are major part of course work in school counselors' preparation programs (CCTC, 2001). This finding could suggest that school counselors feel competent in conferring with and relaying information to others.

### Implication

Based on this study, since these school counselors did not seem to be involved in using standardized assessment technique, conducting and coordinating the school's testing program implies that the results produced by Imo state schools have questionable quality. Since school counselors in this study seem not involved in selecting school achievement tests, career inventories and coordinating school testing programs, it is therefore recommended that school counselors should update their knowledge in the use of the above assessment techniques in counseling by attending conferences and workshops, develop themselves in further studies and in-service training and continuing education. They could gather more information from the internet.

Further implications show that either our educational institutions do not have enough content in assessment coursework in counselor training programs and as a result of that, counselor educators emphasized on the assessment content which school counselors acquired the knowledge and use them in their counseling work. Also standardized tests are used by government organizations like WAEC, NECO and foreign firms in Nigeria and not made available for counselor's use. Achievement tests are in the possession of teachers and head teachers not counselors. This implies that counselors in Imo State do not administer achievement tests rather they make use of their results in counseling students/pupils. It is therefore recommended that Imo State school counselors should be involved in selecting, administering and utilizing of achievement tests/results.

### Conclusion

The finding of the study showed that there is no significant level of use of assessment skills and competences by Imo State school counselors in their counseling work. There is considerable research about the assessment skills and competences school counselors need but there is less evidence to suggest that they are actually using those skills.

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