

21st Century Skilled Workforce Development in Taraba State: The Role of Career Counseling

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Abstract: The world of work is increasingly experiencing rapid change with the advent of technology. Today, economic growth and development depend on career and technical programs that enhance the skilled workforce. The study investigates 21st-century skilled workforce development in Taraba State: the role of career counseling. Survey design research was used, the population of the study was 108,643 consisting of 103,641 students and 5,002 teachers. Using Yamane's (1967) sample size technique, 399 respondents were selected and served with questionnaires which were all duly completed and retrieved, representing 100%. Data was presented in tables using frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations to illustrate the opinions of respondents. The findings of the study indicate that many factors necessary for developing 21st-century skills are lacking or inadequate in most schools across the state. These factors include resources, training for counselors, funding for career counseling units, and integrating career education into the senior secondary school syllabus. The study emphasizes that political will and the presence of trained counselors are essential for strengthening career counseling services. It concluded that career counseling plays a vital role in preparing the students to make informed choices that align with the skill sets and competence needed for the complex and dynamic 21st-century world of work this will in turn enhance skilled workforce development in Taraba State. The study made far-reaching recommendations that if implemented can holistically improve career counseling and education in Taraba State's senior secondary schools, effectively preparing students for successful careers in a rapidly evolving world.

Keywords: Career, Counseling, Development, Workforce, 21st century, Skills, Education.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving 21st-century economy, the development of a capable and versatile workforce is crucial for a nation's advancement. Past technological and industrial progress was driven by skilled labor, and the digital transformation of work underscores the importance of a diverse skill set including critical thinking, communication, and technology literacy (Stauffer, 2022; Rotatori, 2020). Despite Nigeria's efforts to promote education and human resource development, a persistent challenge remains – a scarcity of skilled professionals is impeding national growth. Secondary school graduates often lack clear career goals, leading to unfocused choices and contributing to unemployment and skill mismatch. Economic challenges and deficiencies in the educational system further exacerbate these issues. Education must be aligned with market demands for it to be relevant to both individuals and society (Coursera, 2022).

This challenge is particularly evident in Taraba State, where the absence of effective career counseling has hindered the cultivation of a skilled workforce to meet modern demands. Career counseling plays a vital role in directing individuals toward suitable careers and skill enhancement, and its absence has hindered the state's ability to harness its workforce's potential and meet industry requirements. The state's economy, primarily centered around agriculture, faces disparities in skilled professionals, with shortages in critical fields like medicine and technology, while administration graduates are oversupplied. This imbalance can be attributed partly to insufficient career counseling at the secondary school level, resulting in inadequate career choices, unemployment, and underutilization of skills. These challenges have ripple effects on regional economic growth, leading to labor shortages and inequalities. There is a lack of comprehensive research on 21st-century workforce development specifically in Taraba

State. To address this gap, this study seeks to investigate the influence of career counseling on the development of a skilled workforce focusing on senior secondary schools across the state.

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

A multitude of empirical studies on career counseling have been conducted, employing cross-sectional and review methods, yielding varying outcomes. Notably, limited research has thoroughly investigated career counseling within secondary schools in Taraba State. For instance, Brandford's (2019) study highlighted the importance of guidance and counseling but revealed deficiencies in operational units across the state. In contrast, this study explicitly focuses on the role of career counseling, aiming to equip secondary students with acumen for 21st-century career decisions. It assesses the integration of 21st-century skills-related subjects across Taraba State's secondary school curriculum. Additionally, Martaningsih (2019) assessed vocational high school career guidance, Chang (2020) examined workplace counseling's impact on employee well-being and performance, and Parker et al. (2021) investigated career coaching's effects on MBA students. Similarly, Franklin (2022) explored employee counseling services' impact on work performance in the Kenya Police Service, while Ombayo, Otuya, and Shiamwama (2023) studied the relationship between career counseling and employee productivity in sugar firms. These studies largely centered around workplace counseling, except for Parker et al. (2021) and Brandford (2019). Despite a consensus on the value of career counseling, further exploration is needed. This study seeks to delve into the nuanced role of career counseling in enabling informed decisions aligning with the dynamic 21st-century professional landscape.

Theoretically, contemporary career counseling is shaped by the convergence of three key theories: First, the trait-factor theory advanced by Holland, 1985; Lenz, Sampson, Peterson, & Reardon, 2013; Whiston & Brecheisen, 2020; Fouad & Bingham, 2019; Chartrand & Robbins, 2016. Second, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) advocated by Savickas, 2019; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002. Lastly, developmental theory advanced by Super, 1990; Erikson, 1963; Lerner, 2006; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006. While trait-factor theory focuses on aligning individual traits, abilities, and interests with diverse career demands, stressing the significance of matching personal attributes to career options. Social cognitive career theory underscores self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual factors, highlighting the impact of societal and environmental elements on career choices. Developmental theory accentuates the dynamic, lifelong nature of career development, considering personal growth, identity establishment, and evolving needs within social contexts over time. The amalgamation of these theories in contemporary career counseling entails evaluating individuals' traits, exploring their self-efficacy and career-oriented beliefs, and considering their developmental stage. This approach aids individuals in making informed career decisions, fostering self-awareness, and navigating career transitions amid a swiftly evolving landscape, all while recognizing the effects of technology, globalization, and diverse workplaces. By adopting this holistic approach, career counseling in the modern age offers a comprehensive framework to guide individuals in their journey of career exploration and advancement.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology section of this study involves selecting a representative sample from the target population of senior secondary school students and teachers in Taraba State, with a total population of 108,643. The sample size of 399 was determined using Yamane's formula to ensure a 95% confidence level and a 0.05 error margin. The sample size is mathematically represented as follows:

$$n = \frac{n}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

n = Where;
n = Sample Size

N = Population of the Study

e = Level of "error" which is assumed to be 5% or 0.05

1 = Constant factor

SOLUTION

With a total population of 108,643 for both teachers and students in senior secondary schools in Taraba State, the sample size (n) is 399. Stratified random sampling was chosen as the sampling technique, involving the division of government-owned schools into ten educational zones. Eight schools from each zone were purposively selected based on accessibility. Data collection was conducted through a self-designed questionnaire using a Likert scale with five options consists of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neither Agree nor Disagree (NAD), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) options. Likert Scale which according to Likert (1932) is used to gauge attitudes, values, and opinions is consistent with the survey research design which this study will adopt. Besides that, is appropriate to solicit information from the respondents in a cross-sectional study (Gauru, 2005). The collected data underwent screening to eliminate outliers, and descriptive statistical tools such as frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation were employed for analysis using STATA software. This methodological approach aims to ensure a comprehensive and reliable understanding of the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

DECISION RULE

To capture the objective for which the study was poised to achieve, descriptive statistical tools were employed in analyzing the data collected during the study; this involved the use of tools like frequency distribution tables, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. Descriptive statistics are best placed to give accurate summaries of the distribution of data. It's also a term normally given to the analysis of data that helps show, describe, and summarize data in a meaningful way such that patterns might emerge from the data (Lee and Lee, 2000). For the mean score (\bar{X}), the decision rule that served as the basis for acceptance or rejection was determined based on the decision rule of a 4-point rating scale $(4+3+2+1)/4 = 2.5$; therefore responses with mean score (\bar{X}) up to the above 2.5 were regarded as good while those mean scores (\bar{X}) below 1.9 were regarded as not so strong or good. For the standard deviation (σ) which measures the amount of variation of values from its mean score, the decision rule is that the deviation of actual data from their mean values should be very small (Agung 2004 in Bubari & Salisu, 2019).

RESPONSE RATE AND OUTLIER

A total of 399 copies of questionnaires have been distributed, filled out, and returned. Specifically, after the data collection, outliers caused 4 copies of the questionnaires to be excluded. This exclusion is important because such questionnaires do not represent the sample. Outliers as those scores that are significantly dissimilar from all others in a given set of data (Bryne, 2010; Hair, Black, and Babin 2010). Out of 399 questionnaires as envisaged in table 4.1, 395 copies of the questionnaires were considered and finally retained for further analysis. Therefore, a total of 395 respondents constitute the sample for this study, this shows a good response rate of 99% that covers a wide range of responses. This rate is considered sufficient and is within the guidelines of Sekran (2003), Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2003) which state that a response rate of at least 50% in survey research is practical to meet research analysis and thus acceptable. This response rate indicates that the researcher collected adequate data to proceed to analysis.

CATEGORY OF THE RESPONDENTS

The category of the respondents must be determined based on the factors. This would ensure that the population of the study is well represented. As such, the category that was captured and analyzed was

students and teachers in the Taraba State senior secondary schools. From Table 4.1, the category of the respondents was dominated by the students representing 67% while the remaining 33% were represented by the teachers.

Table 1 Descriptive Category of the Respondents

| Item | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------|-----------|----------------|
| Students | 264 | 67 |
| Teachers | 131 | 33 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

ROLE OF CAREER COUNSELING IN SKILLED WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN TARABA STATE

Table 2 below illustrates findings gleaned from the responses of the respondents (students and teachers) highlighting both positive and negative aspects of career counseling and education in Taraba State senior secondary schools. It underscores the presence of career counseling units and their positive influence on students' career planning, while also pointing out challenges related to technological resources and the emphasis on critical skills development. Consequently, positive findings are discussed as follows:

- **Availability of Career Counseling Unit:** Both students and teachers strongly agreed that there is a career counseling unit in their schools, with mean scores of 2.162 for students and 1.986 for teachers. This suggests a widespread presence of counseling units in the schools.
- **Help in Defining Personal Goals and Career Plans:** Respondents indicated that career counseling services helped them define their personal goals and prepare for their career plans. The mean score for this aspect was 1.916, indicating a significant positive impact on student's career planning.
- **Informed Career Choice:** A considerable percentage (42.0%) of respondents strongly agreed that their school counselor can help them make an informed choice about their career environment. The mean score for this aspect was 1.969, showing that counselors played a role in guiding students' career decisions.
- **Prompt Information Provision:** Most respondents strongly agreed that their school counselors are helpful because they promptly provide information when requested. The mean score for this aspect was 2.049, indicating a positive perception of counselors' responsiveness.
- **Guidance Counselors and Psychological Testing:** Both students and teachers disclosed that guidance counselors used psychological testing to determine suitable careers for students. The mean scores were 2.219 for students and 1.955 for teachers, indicating that counselors' efforts in career guidance were recognized.

THE SECOND CATEGORIES ARE NEGATIVE FINDINGS WHICH ARE SUMMARIZED AS FOLLOWS:

- **Lack of Well-Equipped Computer Laboratory:** The majority of respondents strongly disagreed that there is a well-equipped computer laboratory with qualified teachers in their schools. The mean scores were 2.814 for students and 2.625 for teachers, indicating a lack of adequate technological resources.
- **Absence of Computer Coding, Programming, and Networking Education:** Respondents strongly disagreed that computer coding, programming, and networking are taught in their schools, suggesting a gap in technical education. Mean scores were 2.640 for students and 2.786 for teachers.
- **Inadequate Science Laboratory Facilities:** Both students and teachers strongly disagreed that the science laboratory in their schools is well-equipped with the necessary facilities and teachers. Mean scores were 2.276 for students and 2.267 for teachers, indicating a deficiency in science education resources.

- Insufficient Emphasis on Key Skills: Respondents strongly disagreed that communication skills, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, leadership, and initiative are emphasized in their schools. Mean scores were 2.215 for students and 1.954 for teachers, suggesting a lack of emphasis on these essential skills.

In a general note finding, the estimated result has shown that career counseling plays a vital role in skilled workforce development in Taraba State senior secondary schools. These findings corroborate the previous studies. For instance, Syombua (2022); Chang (2020); Manda & Wooding (2022); Adomeh (2020); Dang, Nguyen, Pham, and Ho (2022) who's investigated the impact of career guidance and counseling on labor force development. Their results established that career guidance and counseling play a significant role in labor force development among students.

Table 2: Responses on the role of career counseling in 21st-century skilled workforce development in Taraba State

| S/N | Item Statement | STUDENTS (N=264) | | | | | | | TEACHERS (N=131) | | | | | | |
|-----|--|------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|-------|------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|-------|
| | | SA | A | NAD | D | SD | \bar{X} | * | SA | A | NAD | D | SD | \bar{X} | * |
| 1 | There is a career counseling unit in my school. | 119 (45.1) | 76 (28.8) | 35 (13.3) | 29 (10.9) | 5 (1.9) | 2.162* | 1.403 | 70 (53.4) | 40 (30.5) | 4 (3.1) | 13 (9.9) | 4 (3.1) | 1.986* | 1.095 |
| 2 | 'Computer studies' is one of the subjects offered in our school. | 143 (54.2) | 97 (36.8) | 3 (1.1) | 12 (4.5) | 9 (3.4) | 1.662 | 0.965 | 76 (58.0) | 44 (33.6) | 2 (1.5) | 9 (6.9) | 5 (3.8) | 1.572 | 0.832 |
| 3 | Our school has a well-equipped computer laboratory with qualified teachers. | 25 (9.5) | 33 (12.5) | 49 (18.7) | 70 (26.1) | 87 (32.9) | 2.814* | 1.345 | 7 (5.3) | 22 (16.8) | 29 (22.1) | 34 (25.9) | 39 (29.8) | 2.625* | 1.236 |
| 4 | Computer coding, programming, and networking are taught in our school. | 27 (10.2) | 37 (14.0) | 68 (25.8) | 61 (23.1) | 71 (26.9) | 2.640* | 1.360 | 4 (3.1) | 2 (1.5) | 40 (30.5) | 42 (32.0) | 43 (32.8) | 2.786* | 1.341 |
| 5 | Communication skills, critical thinking, and creativity are emphasized in my school. | 19 (7.1) | 23 (8.7) | 32 (12.1) | 78 (29.5) | 112 (42.4) | 2.215* | 1.171 | 6 (4.6) | 2 (1.5) | 18 (13.7) | 50 (38.1) | 55 (41.9) | 1.954* | 0.929 |
| 6 | The science laboratory in our school is well equipped with the needed facilities and teachers. | 17 (6.4) | 21 (7.9) | 75 (28.4) | 34 (12.9) | 117 (44.3) | 2.276* | 1.228 | 5 (3.8) | 18 (13.7) | 24 (18.3) | 38 (29.0) | 46 (35.1) | 2.267* | 1.226 |
| 7 | Our school emphasizes collaboration, leadership, and initiative. | 12 (4.6) | 21 (7.9) | 27 (10.2) | 100 (37.9) | 104 (39.4) | 2.003* | 1.108 | 8 (6.1) | 4 (3.0) | 16 (12.2) | 48 (36.6) | 55 (41.9) | 1.969* | 1.007 |
| 8 | Career counseling services in our school have helped me define my personal goals and prepare for my career plans. | 123 (46.6) | 86 (32.6) | 24 (9.1) | 16 (6.1) | 15 (5.7) | 1.916* | 1.143 | 49 (37.4) | 15 (11.5) | 56 (42.7) | 8 (6.1) | 3 (2.3) | 1.977* | 0.992 |
| 9 | Our school counselor can help me make informed choices concerning the career environment in which I can work best. | 111 (42.0) | 95 (35.9) | 23 (8.7) | 25 (9.4) | 10 (3.8) | 1.969* | 1.109 | 56 (42.7) | 9 (6.9) | 59 (45.0) | 7 (5.3) | 2 (1.5) | 1.987* | 0.807 |
| 10 | Our school counselor is helpful because he is prompt in providing me with information when requested. | 103 (39.0) | 98 (37.1) | 23 (8.7) | 27 (10.2) | 13 (4.9) | 2.049* | 1.154 | 19 (12.2) | 50 (38.2) | 51 (38.9) | 11 (8.4) | 3 (2.3) | 1.969* | 1.029 |
| 11 | Guidance counselors through psychological testing determine the appropriate career suitable for students in my school. | 89 (33.7) | 92 (34.8) | 29 (10.9) | 44 (16.7) | 10 (3.8) | 2.219* | 1.188 | 61 (46.6) | 50 (38.2) | 12 (9.2) | 7 (5.3) | 1 (0.8) | 1.955* | 0.886 |
| 12 | Career counseling can enhance the development of 21 st -century skills. | 141 (53.4) | 83 (31.4) | 20 (7.6) | 13 (4.9) | 8 (3.0) | 1.731 | 1.005 | 70 (53.4) | 49 (37.4) | 8 (6.1) | 2 (1.5) | 2 (1.5) | 1.903* | 0.900 |

Source: Computed and Compiled by the Researchers using STATA 14 (2023)

Note: *, denotes means score acceptance, Figures in () are percentages

CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research aimed to explore the relationship between career counseling and the development of a skilled workforce in 21st-century Taraba State. The survey design method was employed, targeting a population of 108,643 individuals comprising 103,641 students and 5,002 teachers. Employing Yamane's (1967) sample size technique, a total of 399 respondents were selected and provided with questionnaires, all of which were completed and returned, achieving a 100% response rate. Data analysis involved the utilization of frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations, effectively portraying the viewpoints of participants. The findings indicated a significant role of career counseling in fostering skilled workforce development within Taraba State, at the same time the findings equally revealed that many factors necessary for developing 21st-century skills are lacking or inadequate in most schools across the state. In line with the research findings, the following recommendations are necessary to ensure the appropriate progress of career counseling and workforce development in Taraba State senior secondary schools:

- The need to strengthen career counseling services by enhancing the availability and structure of career counseling units across Taraba State's senior secondary schools; and developing comprehensive programs guiding students in defining personal goals and career paths.
- The need to boost technological resources by investing in well-equipped computer labs and qualified teachers for improved technical skills. Integrate coding, programming, and networking courses into the curriculum to align with digital demands.
- The need to enhance skills development by revising the curriculum to prioritize communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, leadership, and initiative. Include real-world experiences to apply these skills effectively.
- The need to empower Counselors by providing ongoing professional development for counselors in career guidance and psychological testing. Equip them to engage students, offer timely information, and facilitate informed career decisions.
- The need to engage stakeholders for support by fostering collaboration among parents, educators, administrators, and industries to create a supportive environment for career development. Establish partnerships with businesses to offer diverse career exposure.

Implementing these focused recommendations can holistically improve career counseling and education in Taraba State's senior secondary schools, effectively preparing students for successful careers in a rapidly evolving world. If all these aforementioned policies are put in place, the chances of achieving skilled workforce development in Taraba State would be increased and exactly possible.

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