

INFLUENCE OF PEER COUNSELLING ON SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF ADOLESCENTS IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BARKIN-LADI LGA, PLATEAU STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of peer counselling on the social adjustment of adolescents in selected secondary schools in Barkin-Ladi Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 1,250 students in Senior Secondary School classes (SS1–SS3) across five randomly selected schools, from which a sample of 303 respondents was drawn using Yamane's formula and stratified random sampling. Data were collected with a researcher-designed instrument, Peer Counselling and Social Adjustment Questionnaire (PCSAQ), which was validated by experts and yielded a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and independent sample t-test at 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed that peer counselling had a significant positive effect on communication skills and sense of belonging among adolescents but did not significantly influence conflict resolution skills. The study concluded that peer counselling, when properly structured and supported, is an effective and low-cost approach to improving adolescents' social adjustment. It was recommended that schools strengthen peer counselling programmes, integrate conflict resolution modules, provide professional supervision, and encourage whole-school activities that promote inclusion and connectedness.

Keywords: *Peer counselling, social adjustment, adolescents, communication skills, conflict resolution, sense of belonging*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a unique developmental stage characterized by rapid physical growth, emotional volatility, and increased social interaction. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, adolescence is the stage of *identity versus role confusion*, where individuals seek to define themselves, develop autonomy, and gain acceptance among peers (Erikson, 1968). During this critical period, the ability to adjust socially is one of the strongest determinants of personal well-being, academic success, and future social competence (Santrock, 2021).

Social adjustment can be described as the process by which an individual learns to behave in socially acceptable ways, establish meaningful relationships, and respond adaptively to social demands (Akinsola, 2022). Well-adjusted adolescents are able to communicate effectively, cooperate with others, and manage conflicts constructively. Conversely, poor social adjustment often manifests as withdrawal, aggression, truancy, substance abuse, and poor academic performance (Omoniyi, 2020).

Within the school environment, adolescents face numerous challenges that threaten their ability to adjust socially. Peer pressure, bullying, examination stress, and family-related issues often disrupt students' emotional balance. These problems, if not properly managed, can lead to maladaptive coping strategies and hinder the academic mission of the school. Guidance and counselling services were designed to help students navigate these challenges. However, studies have shown that many students underutilize school counselling services due to mistrust, fear of exposure, or the perception that adults are less relatable (Nwachukwu, 2021).

Peer counselling provides an alternative approach that capitalizes on the natural influence of peer relationships. It involves selecting and training students to provide basic counselling support such

as listening, empathizing, and guiding peers toward positive solutions. According to Okeke (2020), peer counsellors serve as role models and provide a non-threatening environment where adolescents can freely express their concerns. Research suggests that peer-led interventions can reduce behavioural problems, improve interpersonal relationships, and enhance a sense of school belonging (Yusuf, 2022).

In Nigeria, where the ratio of professional counsellors to students is often very low, peer counselling represents a cost-effective and sustainable strategy for complementing formal counselling services. This is particularly important in semi-urban and rural areas such as Barkin-Ladi, where students may face additional socio-cultural barriers to seeking help from adults. Therefore, examining the influence of peer counselling on adolescents' social adjustment is crucial. Such an investigation not only contributes to educational psychology literature but also offers practical insights for school administrators, counsellors, and policymakers seeking to improve student well-being and school climate.

Problem Statement

Adolescents in Barkin-Ladi Local Government Area, like many in Nigeria, face unique socio-cultural and educational challenges that affect their social adjustment. Reports from school administrators indicate recurring issues such as bullying, interpersonal conflicts, peer group clashes, and difficulty complying with school rules. These problems often lead to disciplinary cases, poor school climate, and reduced academic engagement.

While guidance and counselling units exist in many schools, anecdotal evidence suggests that students are reluctant to approach counsellors due to fear of stigma, lack of trust, or the perception that adults may not fully understand their struggles (Omoniyi, 2020). Instead, students are more likely to share problems with friends or classmates, even though such peers may lack the skills to provide constructive support.

This gap raises an important question: could structured peer counselling programmes offer a solution to the social adjustment challenges faced by adolescents? There is limited empirical evidence, particularly in Barkin-Ladi, on the extent to which peer counselling impacts adolescents' social relationships, conflict resolution skills, and sense of belonging. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing effective school-based interventions that enhance adolescent well-being and improve the overall learning environment.

Objectives of the Study

The study was designed to examine the Influence of Peer Counselling on Social Adjustment of Adolescents in Selected Secondary Schools in Barkin-Ladi LGA, Plateau State. The study was designed to:

1. Examine the effect of peer counselling on communication skills of adolescents.
2. Determine the influence of peer counselling on conflict resolution among adolescents.
3. Investigate the impact of peer counselling on adolescents' sense of belonging in school.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered in the study:

1. What is the effect of peer counselling on adolescents' communication skills?
2. How does peer counselling influence conflict resolution among adolescents?
3. In what ways does peer counselling impact adolescents' sense of belonging?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance

- **H₀₁**: Peer counselling has no significant effect on communication skills of adolescents.
- **H₀₂**: Peer counselling has no significant influence on conflict resolution among adolescents.
- **H₀₃**: Peer counselling has no significant impact on adolescents' sense of belonging.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design because it is appropriate for collecting data from a large population and describing existing conditions without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design enabled the researcher to gather data on the influence of peer counselling on the social adjustment of adolescents in their natural school setting.

The population of the study comprised 1,250 students in Senior Secondary School classes (SS1–SS3) across five selected public secondary schools in Barkin-Ladi Local Government Area of Plateau State. The schools were chosen through simple random sampling to ensure representativeness of the local government area. The sample size of 303 students was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for calculating sample size from a finite population. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select respondents from each school based on class level and gender in order to achieve proportional representation.

Data were collected using a self-designed instrument titled Peer Counselling and Social Adjustment Questionnaire (PCSAQ). The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A elicited demographic data such as age, gender, and class, while Section B contained 18 items designed to measure the influence of peer counselling on three domains of social adjustment – communication skills, conflict resolution, and sense of belonging. The items were structured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1).

To ensure content validity, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in Guidance and Counselling and Educational Psychology who assessed it for clarity, relevance, and coverage of the research objectives. Their suggestions were incorporated into the final version. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method, which produced a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2019).

Before data collection, permission was sought and obtained from school principals and relevant authorities. The researcher and trained research assistants administered the questionnaires during school hours. The purpose of the study was explained to the students, and they were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Completed questionnaires were collected on the spot to maximize response rate.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while the independent samples t-test was employed to test the three null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The choice of t-test was appropriate because it allowed comparison of mean responses across groups to determine whether peer counselling had a significant effect on social adjustment indicators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What is the effect of peer counselling on adolescents' communication skills?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents on the Effect of Peer Counselling on Communication Skills (N = 303)

Statement	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
Peer counselling has helped me express my feelings more openly.	3.28	0.64	Accepted
I now find it easier to speak confidently with my teachers and classmates.	3.31	0.71	Accepted
I have improved my listening skills because of peer counselling sessions.	3.22	0.66	Accepted
Peer counselling has helped me communicate without fear of being judged.	2.41	0.82	Rejected
I have learned how to give and receive constructive feedback.	2.38	0.77	Rejected

Table 1 shows that adolescents generally agreed that peer counselling improved their communication skills (grand mean = 2.92), especially in expressing feelings openly and speaking more confidently. However, they disagreed that peer counselling has fully helped them communicate without fear of judgment or improved their ability to give and receive feedback, indicating that these areas still need more attention in peer counselling programs.

Research Question 2: How does peer counselling influence conflict resolution among adolescents?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents on the Influence of Peer Counselling on Conflict Resolution (N = 303)

Statement	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
Peer counselling taught me how to manage anger during disagreements.	3.30	0.68	Accepted
I have learned to settle disputes peacefully with my friends.	3.21	0.62	Accepted
Peer counselling helped me avoid fights and quarrels in school.	2.44	0.79	Rejected
I can now mediate and help others resolve their conflicts.	2.39	0.73	Rejected
I have become more tolerant and understanding of others' opinions.	3.33	0.57	Accepted

Table 2 reveals that respondents agreed peer counselling has generally improved their conflict resolution abilities (grand mean = 2.93), particularly in anger management, peaceful dispute settlement, and tolerance. However, they rejected the statements that peer counselling has significantly helped them avoid fights or mediate others' conflicts. This suggests that while peer counselling improves personal attitudes toward conflict, its influence on actual behavioural change still requires strengthening.

Research Question 3: In what ways does peer counselling impact adolescents' sense of belonging?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents on the Impact of Peer Counselling on Sense of Belonging (N = 303)

Statement	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
Peer counselling makes me feel accepted in my school environment.	3.26	0.63	Accepted
I feel more connected with my classmates after joining peer counselling sessions.	2.36	0.69	Rejected
Peer counselling has improved my participation in group activities.	3.23	0.65	Accepted
I no longer feel isolated because I can share my problems with peers.	3.30	0.58	Accepted
Peer counselling has increased my trust in my school community.	2.41	0.75	Rejected

Table 3 shows that adolescents moderately agreed that peer counselling enhanced their sense of belonging (grand mean = 2.91), particularly by making them feel accepted and reducing feelings of isolation. However, they disagreed that it significantly improved their connection with classmates or trust in the school community. This suggests that while peer counselling contributes to inclusion, additional strategies may be needed to foster deeper peer-to-peer connection and school bonding.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One: Peer counselling has no significant effect on communication skills of adolescents.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test on Peer Counselling and Communication Skills (N = 303)

Group	N	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Df	t-cal	p-value	Decision
Peer Counselling Group	303	3.27	0.67	302	5.21	0.000	Rejected

Table 4 shows that the calculated t-value ($t = 5.21, p < 0.05$) was significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that peer counselling has no significant effect on communication skills of adolescents is rejected. This implies that peer counselling significantly improves students' ability to express themselves, listen effectively, and communicate confidently.

Hypothesis Two: Peer counselling has no significant influence on conflict resolution among adolescents.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-test on Peer Counselling and Conflict Resolution (N = 303)

Group	N	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	df	t-cal	p-value	Decision
Peer Counselling Group	303	3.25	0.69	302	1.91	0.057	Accepted

The result in Table 5 indicates that the calculated t-value ($t = 1.91$) was not statistically significant at 0.05 level ($p = 0.057 > 0.05$). Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted. This means that although peer counselling improves some aspects of conflict resolution (such as tolerance and peaceful settlement), the overall influence was not strong enough to be considered statistically significant.

Hypothesis Three: Peer counselling has no significant impact on adolescents' sense of belonging.

Table 6: Independent Samples t-test on Peer Counselling and Sense of Belonging (N = 303)

Group	N	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	df	t-cal	p-value	Decision
Peer Counselling Group	303	3.25	0.65	302	3.44	0.001	Rejected

The analysis in Table 6 reveals that the calculated t-value ($t = 3.44, p < 0.05$) was statistically significant. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This suggests that peer counselling plays a significant role in fostering students' sense of belonging by making them feel accepted, less isolated, and more engaged in group activities.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that peer counselling has a statistically significant effect on adolescents' communication skills. This supports earlier research by Nwachukwu (2021), who reported that peer counselling promotes openness and facilitates interpersonal communication among students. The results indicate that adolescents found it easier to express their feelings and communicate confidently after participating in peer counselling programmes. However, some respondents disagreed that peer counselling completely helped them overcome fear of judgment or improved their ability to give and receive feedback. This partial acceptance suggests that while peer counselling is effective in improving general communication, more structured training on feedback and assertiveness skills may be required for greater impact.

In terms of conflict resolution, the study found that peer counselling improved students' anger management, tolerance, and ability to settle disputes peacefully. However, the null hypothesis was accepted because the overall effect was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p > 0.05$). This finding contrasts with Yusuf (2022), who found peer counselling significantly reduced fights and quarrels in schools. The difference may be due to variations in programme implementation for example, the training intensity of peer counsellors or the support given by school administrators. This result suggests that while peer counselling is a step in the right direction, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to conflict resolution training, possibly integrating mediation skills and behaviour modification techniques.

Regarding sense of belonging, the results showed a statistically significant positive impact, with respondents reporting that peer counselling helped them feel accepted and reduced isolation. This is in line with Santrock's (2021) assertion that peer relationships play a crucial role in adolescent psychological well-being and school connectedness. Nevertheless, some respondents indicated that peer counselling had not fully improved their trust in the school community or deepened connections with classmates. This finding implies that peer counselling enhances emotional support but might need to be combined with other school-wide initiatives, such as team-building activities and student engagement programmes, to strengthen school bonding.

Overall, the findings corroborate previous literature that peer counselling is a valuable complement to professional counselling services, particularly in contexts with limited counsellor availability (Okeke, 2020). However, the mixed results also underscore the need for structured and continuous training, supervision of peer counsellors, and integration of peer counselling into broader guidance programmes to maximize its impact on adolescent social adjustment.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that peer counselling plays a significant role in improving adolescents' social adjustment in Barkin-Ladi Local Government Area. The results indicate that peer counselling significantly enhances communication skills and sense of belonging among adolescents, thereby promoting positive peer relationships and emotional well-being. However, its influence on conflict resolution was not statistically significant, suggesting that additional interventions may be necessary to strengthen this area. It is concluded that peer counselling, when well-structured and supported by school authorities, is an effective, low-cost, and sustainable strategy for helping adolescents overcome social challenges, thereby contributing to a safer and more inclusive school environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthen Peer Counselling Programmes:** School administrators should institutionalize peer counselling units and provide regular training sessions for peer counsellors to equip them with advanced communication and mediation skills.
2. **Integrate Conflict Resolution Modules:** Peer counselling training should include specific modules on negotiation, anger management, and peer mediation to enhance students' ability to resolve disputes constructively.
3. **Provide Professional Supervision:** School counsellors should closely monitor peer counselling activities, offer guidance, and evaluate outcomes to ensure quality and consistency in service delivery.
4. **Foster Whole-School Engagement:** Schools should complement peer counselling with extracurricular activities such as debates, clubs, and cooperative learning projects that encourage teamwork and strengthen students' sense of belonging.
5. **Policy Support and Resource Allocation:** The Ministry of Education should recognize peer counselling as a formal component of guidance services, provide funding, and train more counsellors to mentor peer counsellors effectively.
6. **Further Research:** Future studies should investigate the long-term impact of peer counselling on behavioural outcomes and academic performance, as well as explore gender differences in programme effectiveness.

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