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Inclusive Counselling Strategies and Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs in Rivers State

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Abstract

This paper focuses on meeting individual needs, promoting self-esteem, and maximizing learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities. Three objectives, three research questions, and three hypotheses guided the study. The study made use of a correlational research design. The study's population consists of 45 career counsellors from Rivers State University. The sample size for the study was 45 career counsellors from Rivers State University. The study made use of the census method of sampling, where the entire population size is being studied or sampled. A self-developed questionnaire was used for data gathering. The data gathered were analyzed using mean and standard deviation for the research questions, while the hypotheses were tested using t-test transformation at a 0.05 level of significance. Based on the analysis, the findings of the study revealed that positive behavioural interventions, support and counselling support services have significant academic enhancement on students with special needs. Based on the findings of the study, the study recommended that the Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize a quarterly workshop programme for career counsellors on how to adopt Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports. Career counsellors should always adopt counselling and support services to enhance their students' academics.

Keywords: Inclusive, Counselling Strategies, Academic Enhancement, Students, Special Needs

Introduction

Guidance and counselling include many professional services aimed at helping people surmount challenges, make informed choices, and promote comprehensive development. These essential tools provide a secure and private environment for people to examine their ideas, feelings, and ambitions (Egbo, 2018). Guidance and counselling experts are adept at facilitating self-discovery and empowerment in the face of academic issues, career crossroads, marital challenges, or mental health concerns. Inclusive counselling tactics and academic improvement for kids with special needs include establishing supportive learning environments, offering customized support services, and nurturing good connections among students, educators, and families (Goodstein, 2016). This methodology emphasizes addressing individual needs, enhancing self-esteem, and optimizing learning chances for all students, irrespective of their skills (Egbo, 2018).

Academic improvement for kids with special needs is the use of planned teaching methods, tactics, and interventions to help students with physical, intellectual, emotional, or learning difficulties do better in school and learn more. Individualized instruction is a key part of academic improvement. This means changing the way you teach and the resources you use to fit the requirements of each student. This is commonly done via Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or personalized learning plans. It also includes using assistive technology, which includes things like speech-to-text software, screen readers, and audio books that help fill in the gaps in learning, make it easier to get to curricular information, and encourage independence. Inclusive

teaching practices, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and individualized instruction, promote the engagement of students with varying abilities in mainstream classes.

Esuong (2021) acknowledges the existence of several inclusive counselling practices, including positive behavioural interventions and supports (PBIS). This is a strategy to make the school environment more pleasant and helpful, which will reduce bad behaviour and encourage good behaviour (Esuong, 2021). This is a proactive, research-based method that aims to improve students' behaviour and make the school a better place to be. PBIS is very important for kids with special needs because it helps them behave better and do better in school. This technique encourages the following and sets up a controlled and predictable learning space that stresses clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and regular routines. Another way to help is to enhance social-emotional development. This includes SEL activities that help kids understand and deal with their feelings, make good choices, and establish healthy relationships. Students who can control their emotions are better able to pay attention, follow instructions, and get along with their professors and classmates (Borrow, 2018). There are additional facilities for counselling and assistance. This technique gives people access to services for mental health, academic help, and social-emotional development. Counselling and support services are vital elements in inclusive education systems (Bennars, 2014). They assist meet the intellectual, emotional, psychological, and social needs of kids with special needs, which leads to higher academic results.

Individualized education programs are another way to do this. This technique is helpful for making individualized plans that meet the requirements and objectives of each student. Individualized Education Programs are tailored instructional programs created to address the specific learning requirements of individuals with disabilities or special educational needs (Lindsay, 2018). Many school systems are required by law to provide Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which are an important part of making sure that all students may succeed academically.

Statement of the Problems

Despite increasing awareness of inclusive education, students with special needs in many schools continue to face significant barriers that affect their academic achievement. These challenges often stem from inadequate or non-individualized counselling support, limited teacher training on inclusive strategies, stigmatization, and the absence of effective psychoeducational interventions tailored to their unique learning needs. While inclusive counselling strategies are designed to promote equity and ensure that all students regardless of their abilities receive the necessary academic and emotional support, the extent to which these strategies are effectively implemented remains inconsistent across educational institutions. As a result, many students with special needs experience low academic performance, poor self-esteem, school avoidance, and social isolation. This situation raises important questions about the relevance, adequacy, and implementation of inclusive counselling practices in fostering academic success for these students. There is a pressing need to investigate how inclusive counselling strategies influence the academic enhancement of students with special needs, and to what extent schools are equipped to deliver these services effectively. Therefore, this study seeks to examine Inclusive Counselling Strategies and Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs in Rivers State, with the aim of identifying existing gaps and proposing evidence-based improvements in school counselling services.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. To determine the extent to which positive behavioral interventions and supports relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.
2. To determine the extent to which counselling and support services relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.
3. To determine the extent to which individualized education programs relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does positive behavioral interventions and supports relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does counselling and support services relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State?
3. To what extent does individualized education programs relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The researcher formulates the following null hypotheses that guided the study.

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors on the extent to what positive behavioral interventions and supports relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors on the extent to what counselling and support services relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.
3. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors on the extent to what individualized education programs relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.

Methodology

This research used a correlational design. The study's population comprises 45 career counsellors from Rivers State University. The study's sample size was 45 career counsellors from Rivers State University. The research used a census sampling approach, in which the whole population was examined or sampled. A self-developed questionnaire was used for data collection. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation for the research questions, while the hypotheses were checked using a t-test at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does positive behavioral interventions and supports relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis on the Extent Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Relate to Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs

S/N	Questionnaire Items	Male Counsellors =13			Female Counsellors = 32		
		Mean \bar{x}	SD	Remark	Mean \bar{x}	SD	Remark
1.	Positive behavioral interventions and supports creates a structured and predictable learning environment	2.89	0.85	High Extent	2.95	0.86	High Extent
2.	Positive behavioral interventions and supports plays a critical role not only in improving behavior but also in enhancing academic achievement	2.86	0.83	High Extent	2.86	0.84	High Extent
3.	Positive behavioral interventions and supports reduces disruptive behavior that interrupts learning	2.78	0.83	High Extent	2.91	0.85	High Extent
4.	Positive behavioral interventions and supports improve student engagement and participation	2.83	0.84	High Extent	2.82	0.84	High Extent
5.	Positive behavioral interventions and supports enhance social-emotional learning	2.86	0.84	High Extent	2.86	0.84	High Extent
Grand mean		2.84	0.84		2.88	0.85	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 indicates that items 1 to 5 yield means of 2.89, 2.86, 2.78, 2.83, and 2.86 for male counsellors, with standard deviations between 0.85 and 0.84. For female counsellors, the means are 2.95, 2.86, 2.91, 2.82, and 2.86, with standard deviations ranging from 0.86 to 0.84. This suggests a "High Extent" regarding the positive behavioural interventions and supports' correlation with the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State. The mean scores for male and female counsellors were 2.84 and 2.88, respectively, further substantiating a "High Extent" about the relationship between positive behavioural interventions and supports and the academic improvement of kids with special needs in Rivers State. Consequently, it is determined that positive behavioural interventions and supports are strongly correlated with the academic improvement of kids with special needs in Rivers State to a considerable degree.

Research Question 2: To what extent does counselling and support services relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis on the Extent Counselling and Support Services Relate to Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs

S/N	Questionnaire Items	Male Counsellors =13			Female Counsellors =32		
		Mean \bar{x}	SD	Remarks	Mean \bar{x}	SD	Remarks
6.	Counselling and support services lead to emotional stability and mental health support	2.86	0.84	High Extent	2.91	0.85	High Extent
7.	Counselling and support services are essential components in inclusive education systems	2.83	0.84	High Extent	2.95	0.86	High Extent
8.	Counselling and support services help address the academic, emotional, psychological, and social needs of students with special needs	2.97	0.86	High Extent	2.98	0.86	High Extent
9.	Counselors assist students in understanding their learning challenges and creating realistic academic goals	2.94	0.86	High Extent	2.99	0.86	High Extent
10.	Counselling and support services lead to individualized academic guidance and goal setting	2.97	0.86	High Extent	2.98	0.86	High Extent
Grand mean		2.90	0.85		2.97	0.86	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 indicates that items 6 to 10 yield means of 2.86, 2.83, 2.97, 2.94, and 2.97 for male counsellors, with standard deviations between 0.84 and 0.86. For female counsellors, the means are 2.91, 2.95, 2.98, 2.99, and 2.98, accompanied by standard deviations from 0.85 to 0.86, reflecting a "High Extent" regarding the relationship between counselling and support services and the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State. The overall means for male and female counsellors are 2.90 and 2.97, respectively, further affirming the "High Extent" of this relationship. These results suggest a positive correlation between counselling and support services and the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State to a High Extent.

Research Question 3: To what extent does individualized education programs relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis on the Extent Individualized Education Programs Relate to Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs

S/N	Questionnaire Items	Male Counsellors =13			Remark	Female Counsellors=32		
		Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD
11.	Individualized education programs help in developing personalized plans that address each student's unique learning needs and goals	2.83	0.84	High Extent	2.91	0.85	High Extent	
12.	Individualized education programs help to tailor instruction based on student needs	2.72	0.82	High Extent	2.86	0.84	High Extent	
13.	Students remain focused and motivated as they see progress toward achievable milestones	2.75	0.83	High Extent	2.93	0.85	High Extent	
14.	Individualized education programs help in promotes self-advocacy and independence	2.69	0.82	High Extent	2.95	0.86	High Extent	
15.	Individualized education programs help in collaboration among educators, specialists, and parents	2.67	0.82	High Extent	2.87	0.85	High Extent	
Grand mean		2.73	0.83		2.90	0.85		

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 indicates that items 11 to 15 yield means of 2.83, 2.73, 2.75, 2.69, and 2.67 for male counsellors, with standard deviations between 0.84 and 0.82. For female counsellors, the means are 2.91, 2.86, 2.93, 2.95, and 2.87, accompanied by standard deviations of 0.85. These results signify a "High Extent" regarding the relationship between individualized education programs and the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State. The mean scores for male and female counsellors were 2.73 and 2.90, respectively, further substantiating a "High Extent" about the impact of individualized education programs on the academic advancement of kids with special needs in Rivers State. Consequently, it was determined that individualized education programs are strongly associated with the academic improvement of children with special needs in Rivers State to a considerable extent.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors on the extent to which positive behavioral interventions and supports relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of the Significant Difference in the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Counsellors on the Extent to which Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Relate to Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs

	F	Sig.	T	Df	p-value	α-value	Decision
Equal variances assumed	1.085	.298	4.251	798	.107	.050	H_0 Accepted
Equal variances not assumed			4.251	796.709	.107	.050	

Table 4 indicates that, under the assumption of equal variances, $t = 4.251$, $df = 798$, and the two-tailed p -value is 0.107. The null hypothesis 1, stating that “there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors regarding the effectiveness of positive behavioural interventions and supports for the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State,” was not rejected, as $t(798) = 4.251$, 2-tailed $p = 0.107 > \alpha = 0.05$. This indicates that respondents agreed that there is no substantial difference in the average assessments of male and female counsellors about the relationship between positive behavioural interventions and supports and the academic improvement of students with special needs in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors on the extent to which counselling and support services relate to academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State

Table 5: t-test Analysis of the Significant difference in the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Counsellors on the Extent to which Counselling and Support Services Relate to Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs.

	F	Sig.	T	Df	p-value	α-value	Decision
Equal variances assumed	15.599	.123	11.985	798	.097	.050	H_0 Accepted
Equal variances not assumed			11.985	781.568	.097	.050	

Table 5 indicates that, under the assumption of equal variances, $t = 11.985$, $df = 798$, and the two-tailed p -value is 0.097. The null hypothesis stating that “there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors regarding the impact of counselling and support services on the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State” is not rejected, as $t(798) = 11.985$, 2-tailed $p = 0.097 > \alpha = 0.05$. The respondents concurred that there is no substantial difference in the mean evaluations of male and female counsellors about the effectiveness of counselling and support services for the academic development of students with special needs in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors on the extent to which **individualized education programs relate to** academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State

Table 6: t-test Analysis of the Significant difference in the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Counsellors on the Extent to which Individualized Education Programs Relate to Academic Enhancement of Students with Special Needs.

	F	Sig.	T	Df	p-value	α -value	Decision
Equal variances assumed	67.311	.258	7.038	798	.071	.050	H_0 Accepted
Equal variances not assumed			7.038	675.913	.071	.050	

Table 6 indicates that, under the assumption of equal variances, $t = 7.038$, $df = 798$, and the two-tailed p-value is 0.71. The null hypothesis stating that "there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female counsellors regarding the effectiveness of individualized education programs for the academic enhancement of students with special needs in Rivers State" was not rejected, as $t(798) = 7.038$, 2-tailed $p = 0.71 > \alpha = 0.05$. This indicates that respondents unanimously agreed that there is no significant difference in the mean evaluations of male and female counsellors about the extent to which individualized education programs contribute to the academic improvement of children with special needs in Rivers State.

Discussion

Research Question One: showed that positive behavioural interventions and supports had a big effect on the academic performance of kids with special needs in Rivers State. This research corroborates Lopes, Rodrigues and Quintino (2014), who noted that Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provide a constructive and supportive school environment that reduces problematic behaviours and encourages pro-social behaviours. It was a proactive, research-based method that aimed to make kids behave better and make the school a better place to be. PBIS is very important for kids with special needs because it helps them behave better and do better in school.

Research Questions Two: demonstrated that counselling and support services strongly correlated with the academic improvement of kids with special needs in Rivers State. This research aligns with Muris and Petrocchi (2017), who observed that Counselling and Support Services provide access to mental health assistance, academic help, and social-emotional learning tools. Counselling and support services were important parts of inclusive education systems. They assist meet the intellectual, emotional, psychological, and social needs of kids with special needs, which leads to higher academic results.

Research Question Three: showed that individualized education programs were substantially correlated with the academic improvement of kids with special needs in Rivers State. The study aligns with Goleman and Senge (2014), who contends that Individualized Education Programs provide tailored strategies that cater to each student's distinct learning requirements and objectives. Individualized Education Programs are tailored instructional programs created to address the specific learning requirements of individuals with impairments or special educational needs. Many school systems were required by law to provide Individualized Education Programs, which are very important for helping all students do well in school.

Conclusion

Positive behavioural interventions and supports, counselling and support services, and individualized education programs have a beneficial and substantial impact on the academic improvement of children with special needs in Rivers State. The research also found that using the power of inclusion via guiding and counselling in inclusive education is a groundbreaking idea with a lot of promise to make education fairer and rewarding. Inclusive education requires more than just breaking down physical barriers; it also requires a mentality that appreciates each student, recognizes their unique talents, and celebrates diversity. Guidance and counselling are very important for this change since they provide personalized help, promote a healthy school atmosphere, and help with mental health. Counsellors create welcoming spaces where all students can do well by using personalized tactics, working with stakeholders, and celebrating diversity. This emphasis on personalized methods not only helps students do well in school, but it also helps them grow as people.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made to ensure that the study meet its objectives.

- 1 Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize quarterly workshop programme for career counsellors on how to adopt positive behavioral interventions and supports.
- 2 Career counsellors should always adopt Counselling and Support Services to enhance the students' academics.
- 3 Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize seminar programme for career counsellors on how to adopt individualized education programs hence it has positive effects on the students' academic achievement.

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