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Psychosocial Skills of Special Education Teachers for Professionalizing Career Choice in Nigeria

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Abstract

Teachers play a crucial role in national development, guiding students in their career choices. Enhancing their psychosocial skills, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, effective communication, and conflict resolution, is essential for providing comprehensive career counseling. These skills enable teachers to support students' emotional and social needs, creating a conducive environment for informed career decision-making. By fostering a generation better equipped for the workforce, these enhancements contribute significantly to economic growth and social stability. Research shows that teachers with high emotional intelligence and empathy are more effective in managing classrooms and fostering positive student-teacher relationships, building trust for effective career guidance. Effective communication and conflict resolution skills also help teachers mediate discussions between students, parents, and other stakeholders, facilitating smoother decision-making processes. This article reviews contemporary studies and best practices, drawing from diverse educational systems and policy frameworks, to offer a comprehensive perspective on this crucial issue. Implementing similar strategies can help other African nations align their educational outcomes with labor market needs, reduce unemployment rates, and promote social well-being, driving broader national development.

Keywords: Psychosocial skills, Career Guidance, Professionalization and National Development

Introduction

Education serves as the cornerstone of national development, providing the framework upon which a nation's economic growth, social stability, and overall progress are built. At the heart of this educational endeavor like teachers, who play pivotal role not only in imparting academic knowledge but also in shaping the trajectory of the future workforce. Their influence extends far beyond the confines of the classroom, encompassing the crucial task of guiding students' career choices, a responsibility that profoundly impacts students' life paths and their subsequent contributions to society (Gore et al., 2017). Effective career guidance provided by teachers serves as a bridge, aligning students' educational experiences with the evolving needs of the labor market. By facilitating this alignment, teachers contribute to the enhancement of economic productivity and the reduction of unemployment rates, thereby fostering national prosperity (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). However, despite the critical nature of this role, many teachers find themselves lacking necessary psychosocial skills required to provide high-quality career guidance.

The arsenal of psychosocial skills essential for effective career guidance encompasses emotional intelligence, empathy, communication, and conflict resolution (Jennings & Greenberg, 2018). Emotional intelligence enables teachers to recognize and manage their emotions and those of their students, fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue and effective guidance. Empathy, on the other hand, allows teachers to understand and relate to the diverse perspectives and needs of their students, thereby facilitating personalized and supportive career counseling. Moreover, effective communication skills are fundamental for conveying information clearly and listening actively to students' questions and concerns, ensuring mutual understanding of career options and pathways (Watson & McMahon, 2020). Additionally, proficiency in conflict resolution equips teachers with the

ability to mediate discussions between students, parents, and other stakeholders, facilitating smoother decision-making processes and creating a supportive environment for career exploration (Mullen & Lambie, 2016).

By enhancing these competencies among teachers, the process of career guidance can be professionalized, leading to improved educational and career outcomes for students. Study has shown that professionalized career guidance not only helps students make informed career choices but also aligns their skills with labor market demands, thereby enhancing employability and job satisfaction (Watson & McMahon, 2020). Consequently, the impact of such enhancement extends beyond individual success to contribute significantly to national development, as a well-prepared and strategically guided workforce becomes a driving force behind economic growth and societal advancement (OECD, 2018). For instance, the African Development Bank's (AfDB) initiatives in Nigeria highlighted the importance of educational reforms and skill development programs in fostering economic resilience and growth (AfDB, 2017). Thus, investing in the augmentation of teachers' psychosocial skills emerges as a critical imperative in the pursuit of national prosperity and progress (Jennings & Greenberg, 2018).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions as well as those of others (Salovey & Mayer, 2018). Teachers with high EI can create a supportive and nurturing learning environment, which is essential for effective career guidance (Goleman, 2017). Research by Durlak et al. (2021) underscores the importance of EI in educational settings, showing that emotionally intelligent teachers are more effective in managing classrooms and fostering positive student-teacher relationships. These relationships are critical for building trust, which is necessary for students to feel comfortable discussing their career aspirations and concerns. For example, a study by Brackett et al. (2019) found that teachers with higher EI were better at managing stress and conflict in the classroom, leading to more effective communication and guidance. This ability to handle stress and conflict positively impacts on students' emotional well-being and their ability to make informed career choices. Teachers with high EI can tailor their guidance to individual student needs, providing personalized support that can help students navigate their career paths more effectively (Ciarrochi et al., 2016).

Empathy

Empathy enables teachers to perceive and understand students' perspectives, fostering trust and open communication. This skill is paramount for effective career counseling, as students must feel understood and valued to openly discuss their aspirations and concerns (Savickas, 2019). Empathetic interactions create safe and supportive environment where students can express their career interests without fear of judgment. According to Jennings and Greenberg (2018), empathetic teachers are better equipped to address diverse needs of their students, leading to more personalized and effective career advice. Research indicates that empathy enhances teachers' ability to identify students' hidden talents and interests, which might not be apparent through academic performance alone (Jennings & Greenberg, 2018). This deeper understanding allows teachers to recognize strengths that standardized tests and grades may overlook. For example, a student who struggles in traditional subjects might excel in creative arts or technical skills. By acknowledging these unique abilities, empathetic teachers can guide students toward careers that align with their inherent abilities and passions, ultimately leading to greater career satisfaction and success (Zinsser et al., 2019).

Furthermore, empathy is crucial in addressing the emotional and social challenges students' face, which can impact their career decisions. Teachers who demonstrate empathy can better support students dealing with personal issues, such as family problems or mental health concerns, which might otherwise hinder their career exploration process (Brackett et al., 2019). By providing emotional support, empathetic teachers help students overcome these barriers and focus on their career development. Empathy also plays a significant role in cultural competence. In increasingly diverse classrooms, teachers must be sensitive to cultural differences and how these impact students' career aspirations. Empathetic teachers can bridge cultural gaps, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, receive equitable career guidance (Zinsser et al., 2019). This inclusivity promotes a more diverse workforce, which is beneficial to national development.

Communication Skills

Effective communication is fundamental to career guidance. Teachers must convey information clearly and listen actively to students' questions and feedback, ensuring a mutual understanding of career options and pathways (Watson & McMahon, 2020). Clear and open communication helps demystify the complexities of the job market, making career options more accessible and understandable for students. According to recent studies, effective communication is linked to better student outcomes, as it enhances engagement and motivation (Hattie & Zierer, 2018). The advent of digital communication tools has significantly expanded the resources available for teachers to engage with students. Integrating digital platforms can enhance communication and provide students with more comprehensive resources for career exploration (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). For example, platforms like Naviance

and Career Cruising offer interactive career assessments and virtual career fairs, allowing students to explore various career options more thoroughly. These platforms provide a wealth of information on different professions, including required skills, educational pathways, and potential job opportunities, making it easier for students to make informed decisions (Hooley et al., 2018).

Moreover, digital tools facilitate continuous communication between teachers and students, enabling ongoing career guidance beyond the classroom. Through online fora, chat features, and virtual meetings, teachers can provide timely advice and support, helping students navigate their career journeys more effectively (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). These tools also allow for the inclusion of parents and industry professionals in the career guidance process, creating a more holistic support system for students. Effective communication also involves using language that is inclusive and encouraging. Teachers should avoid jargon and technical terms that might confuse students, instead opting for clear, simple explanations (Hattie & Zierer, 2018). This approach ensures that all students, regardless of their academic proficiency, can understand and engage with the career guidance provided. Additionally, teachers should use positive reinforcement to build students' confidence and encourage them to pursue their interests and goals.

Conflict Resolution

Teachers frequently encounter conflicts within the classroom, which often extend to career guidance scenarios. These conflicts can arise from diverse viewpoints and expectations between students, parents, and other stakeholders. Developing and utilizing conflict resolution skills is crucial for teachers to mediate these discussions effectively, facilitating a smoother decision-making process (Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Effective conflict resolution skills enable teachers to address and manage disagreements that may arise between students' career aspirations and parental expectations. This ability is vital for creating a harmonious and supportive environment where students feel empowered to pursue their true interests and talents (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2020). For example, a teacher trained in conflict resolution can adeptly navigate situations where a student expresses a desire to pursue a career in the arts, while their parents advocate for a more traditional and perceived stable career path in fields such as medicine or law. Recent studies underscore the importance of conflict resolution in educational settings. According to Jones and Kahn (2017), teachers who possess strong conflict resolution skills can mitigate tensions and foster a collaborative atmosphere that benefits all parties involved. These skills are particularly significant in career counseling contexts where the stakes are high, and decisions can impact students' future trajectories.

Further, conflict resolution training can equip special needs education teachers with strategies to handle cultural and socio-economic differences that may influence career choices. For instance, Levinson et al. (2019) highlight that cultural values often shape career aspirations and parental expectations. Teachers who understand and respect these cultural dynamics can mediate conflicts more effectively, promoting an inclusive environment that respects diverse perspectives. Moreover, conflict resolution skills are essential for addressing peer-related conflicts that may arise from competitive academic environments or differing career goals among students. According to Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2021), teachers who can mediate peer conflicts foster a supportive and cooperative learning environment. This environment is crucial for students to feel comfortable exploring various career options without fear of judgment or competition. In addition to managing conflicts, these skills also enable teachers to educate students on constructive ways to handle disagreements. By modeling effective conflict resolution techniques, teachers can impart these valuable skills to their students, preparing them for the collaborative and often conflict-ridden nature of modern workplaces (Johnson & Johnson, 2020). To sum up, integrating conflict resolution training into teacher development programs is vital for enhancing the quality of career guidance provided in schools. By equipping teachers with these skills, educational institutions can ensure that students receive comprehensive support in navigating their career paths, ultimately contributing to more informed and harmonious career decisions. This approach not only benefits individual students but also fosters a more collaborative and inclusive school environment that is conducive to personal and academic growth.

The Role of Special Needs Education Teachers in Career choice

Teachers are uniquely positioned to influence students' career choices due to their ongoing interactions and insights into students' strengths and interests. Professionalizing this role involves structured training and resources to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge. Despite their pivotal role, many teachers lack formal training in career counseling. This gap can lead to inadequate guidance, resulting in students making ill-informed career choices that do not align with their skills or job market demands (OECD, 2018). The increasing complexity of the modern job market further exacerbates this issue. Teachers need to be aware of emerging industries and career paths, as well as the skills required to succeed in these fields (Schleicher, 2020). For instance, the rapid growth of technology and automation requires teachers to guide students towards careers in tech-savvy fields and help them develop relevant skills like coding and data analysis. Implementing comprehensive training programs for teachers can address this gap. These programs should cover career counseling techniques, labor market trends,

and the integration of psychosocial skills in guidance practices (Watson & McMahon, 2020). Effective training programs should also include ongoing professional development to keep teachers updated on the latest trends and techniques in career guidance (Collins & Halverson, 2018). This continuous learning is crucial in a rapidly changing job market. For example, professional development workshops can introduce teachers to new career assessment tools and provide insights into evolving job market demands considering the unique nature of special education students.

Impact of career choice on National Development

Effective career guidance contributes to national development by aligning educational outcomes with labor market needs. When students are well-informed and supported in their career choices, they are more likely to pursue paths that lead to employment and economic productivity.

Economic Growth

A well-prepared workforce drives economic growth. By professionalizing career guidance, teachers can help students choose careers that are in demand, reducing skills mismatches and unemployment rates (Savickas, 2019). Economic studies have shown that countries with robust career guidance systems tend to have lower unemployment rates and higher rates of job satisfaction among their workforce (OECD, 2018). This correlation highlights the importance of investing in career guidance as a means of economic development. For example, Germany's dual education system, which combines vocational training with classroom instruction, students spend 70% of time in the workplace and 30% at college, they learn through a mix of "on-the-job" training as well as in the classroom, has been successful in reducing youth unemployment and aligning education with industry needs (Euler, 2013).

Social Stability

Career satisfaction and stability contribute to overall social well-being. When individuals are engaged in fulfilling careers, they are more likely to be productive members of society, reducing social issues related to unemployment and underemployment (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, effective career guidance can help address social inequalities by providing all students, regardless of their background, with the support they need to pursue their desired careers (Bimrose & Brown, 2019). For instance, targeted career counseling programs can help disadvantaged students' access information and opportunities that they might not otherwise be aware of, thereby promoting greater social equity.

Innovation and Competitiveness

Encouraging students to pursue careers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and other innovative fields is essential for maintaining national competitiveness. Teachers play a crucial role in identifying and nurturing potential in these areas (Goleman, 2017). Recent initiatives emphasized the need for teachers to be aware of and encourage careers in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and biotechnology (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). This forward-looking approach is vital for maintaining national competitiveness in a globalized economy.

Case Studies and Best Practices

While there might be a scarcity of specific case studies on career guidance in African countries and Nigeria in Particular, there are broader studies and reports that touch on educational development and workforce preparation in these regions. For instance, the World Bank conducted extensive research on education and human capital development in Africa, including Nigeria, which indirectly relates to the importance of career guidance in national development (Uetela, 2023; Njifen, 2024). Similarly, UNESCO regularly publishes reports and policy briefs on education in Africa, emphasizing the need for skill development and the role of teachers. One such report is "The Role of Teachers in Peace building and Social Cohesion in Africa" (UNESCO, 2017). This report highlights the crucial role teachers play in not only educating students but also in guiding their career choices to foster social cohesion and economic development. While specific case studies might be limited in African nations, synthesizing findings from various reports and studies in other parts of the world can still provide relevant information to support the argument for enhancing career guidance in African countries like Nigeria.

Finland: A Model of Integrated Career Guidance

Finland's education system is renowned for its comprehensive approach to career guidance. Teachers receive extensive training in psychosocial skills and career counseling, resulting in high student satisfaction and successful career outcomes (OECD, 2018). The Finnish model integrates career guidance throughout the educational journey, starting from early education and continuing through secondary education. This continuous support helps students make informed decisions at each stage of their academic and career paths (Sahlberg, 2019). For example, Finnish schools provide regular career guidance sessions where students can explore different career options and receive

personalized counsel.

Singapore: Linking Education and Industry

Singapore's educational framework emphasizes the alignment of educational programs with industry needs. Teachers are trained to provide career guidance that reflects current market trends, ensuring that students are well-prepared for the workforce (OECD, 2018). Singapore's approach includes partnerships with industries to provide students with real-world experiences and insights into various career paths. These collaborations help bridge the gap between education and employment (Ng, 2020). For instance, the Skills Future initiative offers students opportunities for internships, job shadowing, and industry visits, allowing them to gain firsthand experience in their chosen fields.

Canada: Collaborative Career Guidance

In Canada, career guidance involves collaboration between teachers, parents, and industry professionals. This holistic approach ensures that students receive well-rounded advice and support, leading to better career decisions (Watson & McMahon, 2020). Canadian schools often employ dedicated career counselors who work alongside teachers to provide specialized support. This model ensures that students receive both academic and career guidance that make them take well-informed decisions (Jarvis & Keeley, 2021). For example, the Canadian Career Development Foundation offers resources and training to educators to enhance their career counseling skills.

Conclusion

Psychosocial skills of Special education teachers are essential for professionalizing career choice, which is a critical component of national development. By investing in teacher training and development, we can ensure that students receive the support they need to make informed career choices, ultimately contributing to economic growth, social stability, and national competitiveness. The integration of best practices from various countries and the adoption of innovative strategies can further strengthen career guidance systems in Nigeria, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of students and the labor market.

Suggestions

- Governments should prioritize policies that mandate career counseling training for teachers. Funding and resources should be allocated to develop and sustain these programs.
- Policymakers should also consider implementing national standards for career guidance to ensure consistency and quality across educational institutions.
- Collaboration between educational institutions, industries, and government agencies can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of career guidance.
- Industry partnerships can provide valuable insights into emerging job markets and the skills required for future careers.
- Continuous Professional development programs should be flexible and accessible, allowing teachers to participate without disrupting their teaching responsibilities. Online courses, workshops, and seminars can provide convenient options for continuous learning.
- The integration of technology in career guidance can provide students with access to a wealth of resources and tools for exploring career options. Digital platforms can offer personalized career assessments, virtual job fairs, and online mentoring.
- Teachers should be trained to use these technological tools effectively, enabling them to guide students in leveraging digital resources for career planning

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