



International Journal of Development and Sustainability

ISSN: 2168-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds

Volume 3 Number 7 (2014): Pages 1526-1537

ISDS Article ID: IJDS14050803



The relevance of counseling practicum in counselor education programmes in Nigeria

Nsisong A. Udoh *, Ime N. George

Department of Educational Foundations, Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education, University of Uyo, Uyo
P.M.B. 1017, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Abstract

Counseling practicum is an integral part of the counselor education curriculum and therefore requires careful planning, implementation, and evaluation. In this article, the researchers present the relevance of counseling practicum in counselor education programmes in Nigeria. The researchers explore the variations in field placement approaches and practicum duration globally. The researchers also further an understanding of the skills, knowledge and competencies expected from and for the trainee-counselors during the practicum exercise; discussing extensively how the practicum may assist trainees to develop professional skills and competencies. The researchers then advance key performance criteria that may be employed in gauging the success of every counseling practicum exercise. The researchers conclude by recommending, *inter alia*, that counseling practicum programme should be given the primacy it deserves in the counselor education programme and that such importance should reflect in the quality of supervision, stringency in entry requirement and performance evaluation.

Keywords: Counseling Practicum; Counselor Education; Counseling Internship; Guidance and Counseling; Counseling Profession

Published by ISDS LLC, Japan | Copyright © 2014 by the Author(s) | This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



Cite this article as: Udoh, N.A. and George, I.N. (2014), "The relevance of counseling practicum in counselor education programmes in Nigeria", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 3 No. 7, pp 1526-1537.

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: nsisong99@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

The practicum in counseling is an academic programme that is designed to provide student counselors with closely supervised counseling practice at approved field sites in either schools or non-school settings such as hospitals, industries, government agencies, and so on. The practicum is generally aimed at giving the student-counselors practical experience in guidance and counseling. According to Nwachuku (2009), the practicum period is a period of closely supervised field work experience in guidance and counseling during which theoretical skills, techniques and organizational strategies are practiced in a selected and approved setting. The setting could be a school, an industry, a financial institution, or any other human institutional establishment as may be deemed appropriate to the fulfillment of the trainee's professional aspiration. Furthermore, the clientele during practicum may include children if a pre-school or primary school setting, adolescents, and adults who are experiencing or planning to successfully circumnavigate personal, social, vocational, family, educational, managerial, organizational, financial and/or interpersonal relationship crisis and thus require professional guidance and counseling. By thus exposing the counselor-trainee to real life counseling experience under close supervision by experienced professional guidance counselors, the counseling practicum thus aims to groom these counselor-trainees for success in the counseling profession.

This paper is an attempt to bring to the fore the invaluable role of counseling practicum in counselor education and instill appreciation for the programme among students, practitioners, researchers, and the general clientele whilst advancing ways of maximizing the gains from counseling practicum programmes. The paper thus explores the existing variations in the scope and duration of counseling practicum exercise. It further touches on the expectations of and for counselor-trainees embarking on the practicum, highlights the strategies for effective practicum exercise, discusses the relevance of the practicum exercise in the counselor education curriculum and outlines the performance criteria for a successful counseling practicum.

2. Global variations in counseling practicum programme

Generally, practicum in counselor education varies in numerous ways—from the duration of the field placement to the scope and the aim of the counseling practicum. The duration of counseling practicum in Nigeria for instance, is generally between 6 and 12 weeks for counselor education programmes at the Bachelor's degree, Master's degree and Doctoral degree programmes in Guidance and Counselling. The same may not be said of counselling practicum in most other countries of the world. The University of Maryland counseling Practicum and Internship is a 16 weeks long programme (University of Maryland, 2014). The Practicum programme at the Texas University Counseling Centre lasts for a period of 9 months (Moore, 2014). The University of Southern Maine stage what they call individual counseling Practicum class, with a regular two and a half hour class and a one hour individual supervision session each week, beginning from the second week of class. Elsewhere, the Graduate counseling Practicum Programme of the Camasoun College normally lasts for one full academic session (Willchngangz, 2014).

2.1. Variations in placement approach

Within the Nigeria context, counseling practicum also varies in orientation, style of monitoring and skills development emphasis. Some of the varieties in the field work placement approach as observed by Nwachuku (2013) include:

1. Periodic Advanced Group Practicum
2. One Time Review
3. Weekly Advanced Group Practicum and
4. The participatory Model

- **Periodic Advanced Group Practicum:**

Students are sent out on fieldwork placement and are told to report to the supervisor periodically or on emergency as need arises for a group review, skills update and case conferences.

- **One Time Review:**

Students are sent out on fieldwork placement and are told to report back only once, on completion of the exercise with an audio or audio-visual recording at the end of the exercise, for a general class review.

- **Weekly Advanced Group Practicum:**

Students are placed on fieldwork and are told to report weekly in a large class group for weekly review. Trainees attend the weekly group practicum bringing cases and audiocassettes for tape analysis. Group assistance is also given in case studies review to offer more appropriate interventions, with which the intern revisits the case as he goes back to the field the following week.

- **The participatory Model:**

Students are placed on fieldwork in model schools where counseling laboratories have been established for training practice purposes. Counseling practices are closely monitored and supervised almost on daily bases by the faculty staff using the laboratory facilities.

In a situation of poor funds such as is typical in many tertiary institutions in developing countries, the third alternative programme is the most useful. The weekly meetings in class groups of advanced practicum assist the trainees to build up skill, correct errors, and re-enforce poor learners. Each intern on fieldwork carries along a personal sense of group membership, a feeling of group support and a reassurance of collective response to any case that may need critical intervention.

The intern brings along to the advanced group practicum narrative case studies where further help is needed and audiocassettes of fieldwork counseling interview for helpful tape critique. This is the closest alternative to real life supervision on daily basis in the field and it is used where the monitoring of live activities is not possible due to insufficient counselor supervisors and lack of adequate infrastructure for monitoring intern's performances.

2.2. Variations in field work duration

The period of the counseling practicum exercise varies in length across programmes and institutions offering programmes in counselor education. Nwachuku (2009) offers the following Five Models as few examples of existing variations.

- Model 1:

Practicum lasts for two years in a two-year master's degree programme. For the first year students, two days a week are spent on the field. One day is spent at a selected field site. Another day is spent observing or working in other settings or agencies other than the school setting. That is, students, spend two days a week throughout the school year on field work. For the second year, students reserve three full days a week for work in a school setting throughout the school year. By this implication, in a properly designed counselor education programme, students are supposed to spend two full years in schools (two days a week for the first year and three full days a week for the second year) doing guidance and counseling. At the end of the two years, a student counselor becomes confident to take his place in the world of work either to do pioneering work of setting up guidance and counseling services where none exists or fit into the mainstream of professional practice with minimal adjustments. Ideally, guidance and counseling should be graduate level program. The rationale behind this approach to counselor education is that some good measure of experience is needed in the school system, in understanding the nature of children, learning and teaching, and ability to proffer solutions to perennial as well as circumstantial problems. From this point of view, recruiting a secondary school graduate in counselor education is inappropriate.

- Model 2:

Some educators have argued that due to scarcity of trained and sustainable man power in the schools especially in developing countries, which are facing school population explosion, the programme in school Guidance and Counseling could be done at the undergraduate level. This is a way to meet the great demand from schools. Guidance counselors could function from the nursery/kindergarten to the tertiary institution level. Where good and in-depth guidance programme is designed, this approach is practicable. In reality, this option predominantly obtains in Nigerian Universities. Ideally, the duration of fieldwork practicum should also take a period of two years following the pattern designed for the two year Master's Degree Programme. Graduates of this model possess a Bachelor's degree in Education with guidance and counseling as area of Specialization.

In a four-year bachelor's degree programme, the last two years should be spent on practicum two days a week, in the third and fourth years. The first of the two days reserved for field work should be spent in the schools and the second day in a non-school setting or related agency doing and observing the work of a counselor. In the final year, students should spend three days a week for supervised guidance and counseling work in school, throughout the school year.

Adaptation of this programme is also recommended to suit local situation as well as respond to unique state or country specific needs. However, a situation where adaptation waters down quality, content and strength of counselor education and field practice is not commendable. Thus the four year programme could be reduced to three year programme for N.C.E. holders, as is done in some Nigerian Universities. In the three

year graduate programme, the trainee gets placed on field work soon as programme begins and starts work with observation of counseling practices from centre to centre and school to school at least for the first half of the year. The same case with the four-year programme, soon as trainee enters the third year. The observation period has been found to be of great value in the training exercise.

- Model 3:

In this model, Practicum lasts for one full secondary school term in a graduate or undergraduate programme of counselor education. Students engage full hours in the school placement for one term of twelve weeks for guidance and counseling work. They fit in and flow together with the mainstream staff for one whole term and experience the realities of typical school life. This alternative falls grossly inadequate when compared with the two years fieldwork placement towards professionalization. However, it is still better than not experiencing a supervised fieldwork at all, which some 'crash' and 'sandwich' programmes seem to do.

- Model 4:

Practicum lasts for a maximum of ten weeks of three full days a week in the schools for guidance and counseling work during a school term. This alternative programme has great limitation towards full professionalism as a school guidance counselor. This alternative is adopted when students are combining training as school counselor with training as a classroom subject teacher to graduate as "Teacher counselor". It is also applicable when students have already qualified as middle management teachers (holders of National Certificate of Education, (NCE) and are admitted into counselor education program for bachelor's degree to be school guidance counselors. This programme usually lasts for a period of three years. Within such a period of time, students are out in the field for a brief period of practice of ten weeks.

- Model 5:

Guidance and counseling is merged with students' Training Practice (TP). The trainee is primarily in field placement to teach a school subject in the classroom, but also is expected to spend some hours playing the role of a school guidance counselor. This programme alternative is grossly inadequate, poor and falls below any professional standard. In effect, the trainee could be said to have not gone on fieldwork for the guidance practicum at all. The programme generates a lot of role confusion for the trainee on practice. He is always asked whether he is a teacher, or a counselor. It also generates same measure of confusion for the students who are not quite sure whether he is a teacher or a counselor. The ambivalence is also bound to add to the counselor's role misperception, misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding of what he is, what he does and what is expected of him. At best this type of programme sends across to the education system several confusing messages such as: "a counselor is really not fully occupied doing counseling only"; "a counselor is an odd jobs staff"; "all teachers can counsel with little or no training at all". As much as possible, this programme alternative should be totally discouraged in counselor education.

3. Effective guidance practicum: Expected competencies, skills, and knowledge

Generally there are guidelines for practice and policy statement specifying the general competencies expected to be acquired during the practicum exercise. Moreover, before trainee-counselors embark on the

practicum, they are equally expected to have acquired from theories learnt in the classroom, certain foundational skills. In addition to the foregoing, the trainee-counselor must have learned about a variety of theoretical approaches to guidance and counseling and thus should be armed with a sound knowledge of the application of these theories to real-life situations.

3.1. Expected competencies

The competencies which trainee-counselors are expected to acquire usually include both broad-range and short-range competencies. According to Nwachuku (2003), the broad-range competencies are:

- Personal philosophy of life adjusted to build with choice of counseling theoretical basis of professional practice.
- Acquisition of basic experience in program development, implementation, administration and organization of guidance and counseling services in a real-life setting whether in private or public sector.
- Systematic development of functional skills in counselor–client relationship.
- Greater awareness of counselor’s personal areas of strengths and weaknesses for further self-adjustment and improvement in practice.

Nwachuku (2003) further enumerated the short-range competencies to include:

- Ability to carry out systematically basic routines of a daily functioning practitioner in the field.
- Development of a people-oriented attitude, aptitude, interest and skills.
- Confirmation of the self incompatibility with the professional demands which calls the trainee to serious personality adjustment if he/she is to proceed to certification. However, where the personality is grossly incompatible with the professional requirements, the trainee works towards a change of either personality or profession.
- Acquisition of beginner-level professional ethics which should manifest with improving confidence of the young professional over time in his/her interaction with professional colleagues and clientele.
- Ability to initiate the establishment of a functional counseling centre where non-existed before. Experience in pioneering a centre is essential in a nation just beginning to introduce school counseling as an essential education service.
- Development of a teachable mind and on-going on the job attitude which makes for openness for feedback and improvement in practice.
- Development of a beginner-level professional network which will expand and improve in quality of relationship with time.

3.2. Expected skills

While the trainee-counselors are expected to acquire the competencies outlined above, they are also required to go into the practicum exercise with certain fundamental skills, which they must have learned in the course of their classroom training. The practicum will then provide them with the opportunity to demonstrate these counseling skills under close supervision in real-life settings. That underscores the need

for trainee-counselors to choose their practicum sites based on the prospective environment in which the trainee-counselor are preparing to work. The primary goal of the practicum in this respect is to help trainee-counselors combine their counseling skills and personality into an effective therapeutic style (University of Southern Maine, 2014). Generally, therefore, trainee-counselors are expected to possess the following skills:

- Self-awareness, they should know their strengths and weaknesses
- Listening skills, especially the ability to listen to feelings and content
- Responding skills, especially the skill of responding to clients from their inscape without faking or putting on a façade.
- Willingness to learn and to change to new situations and circumstances
- Creativity and ingenuity, especially in employing counseling techniques

Beyond the foregoing professional skills, the trainee-counselor also needs to possess a handful of foundational skills that will allow him/her to function magnanimously during and after the practicum exercise. Such skills will usually be called for or employed when the trainee-counselor will need to:

- Practice the skills learned in the classroom (transfer of learning)
- Learn how effective they are in a helping relationship (self-evaluation)
- Discuss their experiences with others in a supportive setting (group facilitation and interaction)
- Learn what problems others are encountering and what solutions could be considered
- Discuss techniques that are-successful (appraisal skills)
- Work with a variety of clients in a variety of settings, when possible (adaptability)
- Evaluate their professional growth (goal setting skills)
- Relate theory to practice (application of knowledge)

3.3. Expected knowledge base

Trainee-counselors embarking on counseling practicum are expected to possess in-depth and clear knowledge of human behaviour—how such behaviour may come about and how such behaviour may be modified. This entails that the trainee-counselor be forearmed with an understanding of key theoretical models of human behaviour, behaviour modification and psychotherapy. The trainee-counselor should be abreast of a handful of the following approaches to counseling:

- Psychodynamic psychotherapy
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- Humanistic/existential therapy
- Mindfulness (CBT)
- Postmodern therapy
- Family systems therapy
- Person-centered therapy
- Existential therapy
- Gestalt therapy, and
- Eclectic Techniques

4. Development of counseling competencies: The role of practicum

4.1. Skills development and evaluation

Min (2013) affirms that self-efficacy acquired during counseling practicum accelerates the development of trainee-counselors. This self-efficacy grows as the trainee-counselor plays his/her professional role, applying counseling skills in the process, and masters his/her professional skills set. The counseling practicum thus provides a platform for trainee-counselors to put the knowledge they acquired in the classroom into practice in real-life scenarios and therefore gain experience for future work.

Close supervision by experts during the practicum exercise allows trainee-counselors the opportunity to evaluate themselves in terms of professional direction within the field as they evolve their professional identity. Furthermore, the trainee-counselors are able to evaluate their personality and aptitudes in relation to the counseling profession in order to consolidate fully into the profession. Where there are felt needs for personality adjustment, the trainee-counselor will through such evaluation be able to tell and thus adjust to the profession by plugging areas of skills deficits or otherwise change from the profession as mediocrity cannot be accommodated in the helping profession.

The practicum exercise also affords the trainee-counselors the opportunity to access and use existing assessment instruments such as intelligence tests, aptitude tests, personality inventories, and other relevant assessment instruments and techniques. Furthermore, they may learn about the dimensions along which assessment instruments should be evaluated including purpose, validity, usability, norms, reliability and measurement error, score reporting method, and consequences of use. The trainee-counselors will also be acquainted with how to modify and administer assessment instruments to accommodate individual differences consistent with author recommendations and current statements of professional practice. Also, the trainee would get to know when to obtain informed consent before administering sensitive assessment instrument on a client.

Finally, the practicum will allow the trainee-counselor to acquire experience in applying the ethical code that guide counseling practice. This includes, prominently, the ability to follow the confidentiality clause without putting the life of the client or a third party in danger. Generally, the trainee-counselor will develop competency in handling counseling data gathered from his/her clientele.

4.2. Developing sensitivity and awareness

The practicum training adheres to a developmental model of change and growth for the trainees providing training that balances safety with challenge. The practicum will assist the trainee to develop self-awareness and examine his/her personal biases regarding differences in age, gender, race, sexual orientation, albinism, and religion which may cause a conflict with professional practice. Thus, the practicum experience allows trainee-counselors to become sensitive and respectful of these areas of human diversity as they continue to develop their professional identity (Hernandez, 2014; University of Maryland, 2014).

4.3. Mentorship and soft skills learning

Counseling practicum teaches soft skills such as independent problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, professional values and etiquette (Ramsden, 1992). During practicum, trainee-counselors are mentored and guided by their coordinators and supervisors through systematic observations, assistance, advice and periodic evaluations. This will offer the trainee-counselor the opportunity to hone their professional and interpersonal skills and attributes, thus evolving a blend of creative problem solving techniques, coping skills, and interpersonal skills with essential professional skills.

4.4. Application of counseling techniques and theories

Every trainee-counselor is expected to go into the practicum exercise with some foundational knowledge of counseling theories and therapeutic techniques. The practicum period will then afford an opportunity to employ these therapeutic techniques in real-life situations. Most significantly, the practicum will allow trainee-counselors to develop a therapeutic style or identity based on the particular technique he/she is most comfortable with and which techniques he/she is most proficient at employing in real-life problem solving scenarios. Such therapeutic identity may also be influenced by which approach is most suitable to the field setting the trainee-counselor is deployed. This makes it imperative for trainee-counselors to choose their practicum sites based on their future work preference. Thus, after the practicum exercise, the trainee-counselor may evolve as a reality therapist, a psychodynamic therapist, a cognitive behavioural therapist and so on.

4.5. Making referrals

Generally, it may be felt that making a referral is an indication of professional incompetence. This is not the case in the helping profession of guidance and counseling. In the counseling profession, limited efficiency is prized above unlimited mediocrity. This underscores the imperative of referral services in counseling. The fact is that it takes professional acuity to identify cases that require specialized intervention, which may fall outside the ambit of the counselor's expertise, and make a referral. Furthermore, making referral is an indication that the counselor has the best interest of the client at heart and thus refuses to gamble or dabble into areas that he/she does not have needed qualification.

During the counseling practicum, the trainee-counselor will acquire competence in making referrals whenever a client presents a problem or a request for information which is beyond his/her level of competency; or when he/she feels that personality differences (which cannot be resolved) between the trainee-counselor and the client will interfere with his/her effective progress; or if the client shares personal or familial ties with the counselor, or if the counselor feels that the goals of the therapeutic relationship is not coming to fruition due to unidentifiable reasons.

5. After the practicum: Performance criteria

The counseling practicum will expose trainee-counselors to numerous performance objectives along with other course requirements as stipulated in the counselor education curriculum. Generally, these expectations will have to be achieved at some acceptable grade before the trainee-counselor is graduated and certified to practice. The criteria listed hereunder may be employed in assessing the outcome of the counseling practicum. While these set of performance criteria may apply universally, they are not necessarily the only criteria that may be used. Be that as it may, after completing the counseling practicum, trainee-counselors should be able to:

- Develop procedures for meetings with clients
- Establish a safe and acceptance environment for the client
- Elicit information from the client
- Recognize and understand the content presented by the client
- Recognize and understand the affect of the client
- Distinguish the differences in the cognitive and affective messages of the client
- Transmit understanding of the affective and cognitive message to the client
- Distinguish the client's needs from his/her own needs
- Select and apply an appropriate therapeutic technique
- Establish and maintain a professional helping relationship with the client
- Make prompt and correct referral when necessary
- Uphold the confidentiality trust of the counseling profession

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This article presents clearly the relevance of the counseling practicum exercise in counselor education programmes. It highlights the entry skills requirements and foundational knowledge expected of the trainee-counselor embarking on the counseling practicum. The paper further explains in detail how the counseling practicum exercise may provide trainee-counselors the platform to develop professional competencies and skills while also forming their professional identity. Finally, this article advances key performance criteria that may be employed in assessing the success of a counseling practicum programme. For the practicum programme in counselor education to achieve its aim of grooming sound professionals in the helping profession of guidance and counseling for various institutions, the following are recommended:

Counselor education programmes should place premium on counseling practicum as it forms the core of the counselor education programme. Besides making it mandatory for graduation and certification, counselor educators should also aim to improve the quality of mentorship and supervision during the practicum exercise in order to ensure that the trainee-counselor is able to meet the objectives of the practicum exercise.

Trainee-counselors should be well informed of the need to go into the practicum exercise well prepared. This is imperative as there are certain skills set and foundational knowledge which the trainee-counselor is expected to bring into the practicum. Of course, the trainee-counselor will underperform or even fail woefully in the event where he/she goes into practicum without the requisite skills set. Thus, it is recommended that counselor educators design an assessment approach that will enable them ascertain whether or not the trainee-counselor is ready for the field experience; failure to meet which criteria should disqualify the trainee from embarking on the practicum.

After every practicum, it is recommended that counselor educators spend quality time and resources in evaluating the gains. It is necessary to utilize the performance criteria advanced in this article to examine the extent to which the trainee-counselor has achieved the objectives of the practicum exercise. Where there is obnoxious failure, the trainee-counselor may be advised to reconsider a career in the counseling profession. Otherwise the counselor education curriculum should spell out whether or not trainees shall be offered another opportunity of field experience in order to confirm their suitability for graduation and certification.

References

- Corey, G. (2005), *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (7thEd), Thomson/Brooks & Cole Publishers.
- Denga, D.I. (2001), *Guidance and Counseling in School and Non-School Setting*, Calabar, Double Diamond Publications.
- Denga, D.I. (1983), *The School Counsellor in a Developing Nation: Problems and Prospects* (2nded.), Jos, Savannah Publishers.
- Hernandez, S.W. (2014), "Practicum Training/Counseling and Psychological services", Oregon State University, Oregon State. Ed/counsel/Practicum – Training, Retrieved March, 2014.
- Min, R.M. (2013), "Self-Efficacy Whilst Performing Counselling Practicum Promotes Counsellor Trainees Development: Malaysian Perspective", *The European Journal of social of Behavioural Sciences*, Vol. 69, pp. 2301–2218.
- Moore, P. (2014), "Graduate Practicum Training Programme: Counseling Center: Texas State University", W.W.W Counseling, Txstate.Edu/training/Practicum.Html.Retrieved March, 2014.
- Nwachuku, D.N. (2009), "Guidance and Counseling Practicum in Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary Schools. A Guide to Guidance Counselors: Methods, Skills, Techniques and Competencies (2nd edition)", University of Calabar Press.Calabar, Nigeria.
- Ramsden, P. (1992), *Learning to teach in Higher Education*, London: Rutledge.
- Seligman, C. (2006), "Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy: Systems, Strategies and Skills", Pearson/Pentice Hall.

Smith, K. and Lev – Ari, L. (2005), “The Place of the Practicum in Pre-Service Teacher Education, The Voice of the students”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 289–302.

Texas A & M University (2014), “Practicum Programme Overview/student counseling service”, Available: <https://scs.tamu.edu/?q=Pracpverview>. Retrieved, March 9, 2014.

University of Maryland (2014), University of Maryland counseling Practicum and Internship (Practicum – Coun 836 or Psyc 836).

University of Southern Maine (2014), Individual Counselling Practicum /Counselor Education, Available at: <https://usm.maine.edu/Counselor-Education/Nce690/691-Individual-Couns>.

Willchnganz, B.F. (2014), The Graduate Counseling Practicum Programme of The Camosun College.