

Students with Deafness' Access to Counselling Services at the University of Education, Winneba-Ghana

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explore deaf students access to counselling services at the University of Education, Winneba. The study was underpinned by Murray's system of needs theory, phenomenological research was adopted as the design and a purposive sampling technique was used to select twelve deaf students and two counsellors for the study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically via verbatim transcriptions, coding, drawing of themes and discussions of findings. The findings of the study indicated that deaf students have unique counselling needs such as educational needs, financial, health and personal needs that are often not adequately addressed by the existing counselling services at the University of Education, Winneba. The findings again revealed that deaf students often perceived counselling as mere advise-giving, not relevant for the needs and is meant for the hearing students only. Deaf students however, as revealed by the students resort to accessing counselling services from lecturers, church leaders, peers and sign language interpreters who are most times closer to them and who again can communicate with them through sign language. Based on the study's findings, the study recommended collaboration between lecturers who offer counselling services and the University counselling professionals, lecturers should be aware of their role as facilitators and the limits of their counselling capabilities, The University Management in collaboration with Counseling Unit should recruit and train counselors who are proficient in sign language and have a deep understanding of deaf culture and experiences. The Counseling Unit should offer online counseling options with sign language interpretation for students who may face challenges accessing on-campus services.

Keywords: Access, Counselling, Deaf, Service

Introduction

In an era marked by increasing awareness of diversity and inclusivity, the University of Education, Winneba, stands as a beacon of higher education committed to embracing students from all walks of life, including those with disabilities. Among these students, the deaf community holds a significant place, deserving of specialized attention and support. Deaf students, like their hearing peers, harbor aspirations and dreams of pursuing higher education to enhance their personal growth and contribute to society. Yet, their journey is often marked by distinctive challenges that necessitate a comprehensive understanding and dedicated efforts to ensure equitable access to all aspects of university life, including counseling services.

Counseling services within the university context are pivotal, transcending the conventional boundaries of academic assistance. They serve as a pillar of holistic student support, addressing not only academic concerns but also nurturing mental health, emotional well-being, and personal development. These services are particularly crucial for deaf students, who, like any other students, encounter academic pressures, life transitions, and personal struggles. However, the effectiveness of counseling services for this specific group hinges on how well the university addresses the barriers that may impede their access and engagement.

According to Eshun (2016), counselling needs can be explained as certain issues an individual may be faced with that would require assistance to overcome and manage the situation. These needs for deaf students are the various life situations confronting them in their pursuit towards academic excellence; which include language barriers, difficulties in adjusting the educational curricula, financial difficulties, poor social skills, and poor health care (Alutu, 2012).

Deaf students face multifaceted challenges that encompass both external and internal dimensions. Externally, communication barriers can hinder effective interaction between deaf students and hearing counseling professionals. The absence of trained sign language interpreters or communication technologies tailored to their needs can thwart meaningful dialogue, potentially leaving their concerns unaddressed. Moreover, the limited awareness among counseling staff about the unique needs and experiences of deaf students might inadvertently perpetuate an environment where these students feel marginalized.

Internally, deaf students grapple with the psychological impact of isolation and the struggle for identity within a predominantly hearing society. These challenges might manifest as feelings of alienation, stress, anxiety, and depression, underscoring the indispensable role of counseling services in providing a safe space to express and work through these emotions. However, seeking counseling can be daunting when the environment lacks the cultural competency to understand and address the nuanced needs of the deaf community. Within this context, the study on access to and challenges of counseling services for deaf students at the University of Education, Winneba, emerges as a potent tool for change. It endeavors to shed light on the intricate interplay between the university's aspirations for inclusivity and the ground realities faced by its deaf student population. Through careful examination, the study sought to unearth the barriers that hinder deaf students' access to counseling services. These barriers may range from inadequate training for counseling staff to the absence of proper accommodations and communication aids.

By dissecting these barriers, the study aspires to pave the way for effective solutions. These solutions could encompass targeted training programs for counseling staff to enhance their understanding of deaf culture and communication needs. They could also involve the integration of technology, such as video conferencing platforms equipped with sign language interpretation capabilities, to bridge communication gaps. Additionally, the study might underscore the importance of raising awareness among the student body about the needs and experiences of their deaf peers, fostering a sense of inclusivity within the broader campus community.

Deaf students' counselling needs cannot be solved successfully without the use of effective counselling intervention programmes (Eshun, 2016). Students whose hearing loss prevents them from perceiving sound and understanding speech and whose mode of communication is sign language. Elzouki, et al (2011), team these students as with an inability to hear; which may be caused by factors like ageing, exposure to noise, illness, chemicals and physical trauma.

Individuals may seek counselling for various reasons, however, whatever the reason may be, clients seek counselling to be able to address certain issues they may be faced with in their lives. Some situations that may cause individuals to seek counselling are bereavement, illness, abuse, relationship and family issues among others (Abubakar, 2020). In these cases, people may be sympathetic and empathetic towards the individual because they are events that may happen to every individual at a point in their lives. Being deaf or losing your ability to hear may come with other problems, be they mild, moderate or profound results in a communication barrier, which may make it impossible to understand the deaf or what they are going through hence the need for them to be counselled.

Cultural factors generally underpin deaf students' access to counselling services, promoting their preference for prayer camp services, and traditional healing centers, relying on their peers for advice instead (Osafo et al., 2015). Fear of social stigma and rejection also deter students from participating in counselling center activities on various Ghanaian University campuses, deaf students in Ghanaian schools seem not to appreciate and access counselling services despite their severe need for support, their lack of access could be a result of fear of social stigma, communication barriers, and lack of awareness of the services (Abubakar, 2020).

In sum, the study on access to and challenges of counseling services for deaf students at the University of Education, Winneba, encapsulates the institution's commitment to inclusivity and social responsibility. Through a deeper understanding of the barriers that hinder these students' access to counseling services, the study seeks to lay the groundwork for a more equitable and supportive educational environment. Ultimately, its findings could spark a transformative journey toward embracing diversity, fostering empathy, and enriching the university experience for all.

Statement of the problem

The problem at hand revolves around the substantial disparity between the aspirations of the University of Education, Winneba, to provide an inclusive and supportive education environment for all students, and the prevailing challenges faced by deaf students in accessing and benefiting from counseling services. Despite the university's overarching commitment to diversity and equity, a critical gap exists in ensuring that the counseling services offered effectively cater to the unique needs and circumstances of the deaf student population. This discrepancy underscores the urgent need to address the barriers impeding deaf students' access to counseling services and to devise comprehensive solutions that foster their holistic well-being and academic success.

Literature Review

Counselling is not about giving advice or making a judgement, but helping the client to see clearly the root of problems and identify the potential solutions to the issues. The counsellor also changes the viewpoint of the client, to help him take the right decision or choose a course of action. It also helps the client to remain intuitive and positive in the future. Counseling emphasizes the aspects of increasing client's responsibility for their own lives (Regis, 2006). The aim of counselling according to Egbo (2015) is always to assist the client in better understand him/herself in relation to the present and future problems. Counselling is an in-depth interaction between the professional counsellor and the counsellee that focus basically on areas of nurturing and healing emotionally, problem management, decision making, crises management, support and life skills training. Egbochuwku (2008) defined counselling as a facilitative

two-way collaborative exchange of ideas with a supportive relationship that enables clients to explore their problems.

In Canada, a study investigating why University students seek counselling found that most students irrespective of the abilities or conditions present reasons such as relationship concerns, anxiety, distress, grief, depression, academic and career issues (Cairns & Deeth, 2010). The above study does not address the aspect of how deaf students have access to counselling, which equips students with skills and abilities such as positive attitude and problem-solving skills to help them gain knowledge and learn how to cope with issues affecting them. Counselling can act as an early intervention strategy that create awareness in students to look at their problems from different angles and manage their academic, emotional and behavioural difficulties and be more successfully both in school and at home (Atta-Frimpong, 2013). Early referral can prevent problems in attitudes, behaviour and promote mental health to help them develop a clearer focus or sense of direction. A self-reported increase in coping by students from ten percent before counselling to over fifty percent after counselling in the Brunel University Evaluation study. This improvement from 10% to 50% indicates that a student is able to cope with whatever difficulty he/ she may be faced with through counselling. School counselling service has also been reported successful in helping deaf students reduce anxiety and stress (Cheek & Bradley, 2002).

Deaf students face numerous challenges in seeking counseling services, including limited availability of qualified providers, lack of accessible resources, and stigma within the deaf community. Accessibility is also a major concern, as interpreters or accommodations may not be provided, and online counseling services may not be accessible for some deaf students (Fernandez & Steinberg, 2019). In a study investigating coping strategies employed by deaf students to address stress emanating from social, economic, and academic challenges in Zimbabwe, Soda and Bondai (2015) found out that counselling in University is severely compounded by students' challenges such as lack of school fees, inadequate stationery, and sexual harassment. Counsellors have consequently faced challenges in handling students' psychological problems due to students' issues taking a complex dimension. This study shows that some personal issues with the deaf are beyond the counsellor's intervention and pose a challenge to the delivery of counselling services.

Another study sought to explain challenges confronting deaf students' accessing counselling services such challenges include; inadequate counselling staff, fear, lack of information about the counselling services, lack of sign language interpreters, and counsellor's inability to communicate with deaf students directly. In a related study in Zimbabwe, Musika, and Bukaliya (2015) reported in their study which involved 100 University students on the effectiveness of counselling on deaf students that inadequate counselling services provider by counselors, inadequate counselling skills and poor counsellor characteristics curtail students' motivation to seek counselling services. Below are some identified obstacles that confront all students with deaf included in seeking counselling services.

Methodology

The study adopted a phenomenology design. Phenomenological studies provide detailed explorations of personal lived experiences of participants and a close examination of the sense-making process by focusing on the meanings of particular experiences, states, events and objects to participants. Smith (2004) confirms the report by asserting that phenomenological analysis begins 'with a detailed examination of one case until some degree of closure or gestalt has been achieved' (p. 41).

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique in selecting only deaf students based on their perceived knowledge and experiences on their needs and access to counselling services. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the most fitting participants in this qualitative research method (Saunders et al., 2015). This technique is an arbitrary selection of a sample based on the features of the subject and those thought to be significant for the investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). All the twelve others were direct undergraduate students. The sampled participants also comprised both males and females though not in equal gender proportions.

Instrumentation

The semi structured interview guide was adopted to facilitate further probing through follow up questions to delve deeper into participants' personal lived experiences on access to counselling services and services rendered to students. According to Guion et al. (2001), interviews promote a thorough preparation and appraisal purposes following their openness to exploratory discoveries regarding the feelings and opinions of participants over a concern. The use of this tool further facilitated my perception that the world cannot be understood through the eyes of the participant by interaction with the participants through interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p. 87).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured in this study, Speziale and Carpenter, (2011) stated that qualitative research is trustworthy when it accurately represents the experiences of the study participants. The model was adopted due to the fact that it is developed conceptually and is widely used by qualitative researchers. The researcher's efforts at establishing trustworthiness facilitated a foremost decision to concentrate on only the deaf students at the University of Education, Winneba. According to Bryman (2012), a detailed presentation of the research process expels doubts about the study. The researchers accordingly placed emphasis on every detail we indulged in during this research and data collection complimented with good questioning skills. Despite limiting the study focus to only deaf students counselling needs at the University of Education, Winneba- southern Ghana, we are confident the study could be replicated in other institutions and within other regions, besides the University of Education, Winneba.

Procedure for data collection

The researchers sought permission from the Coordinator of the Resource Centre for Students with Special Needs at the Department of Special Education, University of Education, Winneba to conduct the study since the Center was conducive and more comfortable for students who are deaf, the researchers desired to conduct the study at the comfort of the participants, hence that Centre served the purpose. After receiving an approval from the to use the Resource Center, participants were contacted and informed about the study, its purpose and intention well explained. The data and duration for the interview process was agreed upon, participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity that will be given to the information gathered. The tool for the data collection was explained to agree on by the participants. The interview was granted by the researchers personal through use of Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL), the interview sessions were video recorded for transcribing upon agreement with the study participants

Data Analysis

Thematic approach was used to analyse the data collected. Data for the study was analysed based on each theme drawn from the research question raised. The process drew from my perceptual and descriptive skills in identifying contrasts, ambiguities and harmonious thoughts within the data to derive broad-based themes from the study. Via this method, the researchers were able to focus directly, on the participants’ perceptions, thoughts, involvements and understandings regarding their access to counselling services (Reid et al., 2005). We applied this method with the aim of thoroughly exploring the meaning making process of participants regarding deaf students experiences with the University counselling service (Smith et al., 2009).

Results

Demographic information of participants

Table 1: Demographic Data of Deaf Participants

Variable	Participants	Percentage
Age group		
21 – 25	7	58.33
26 – 30	3	25.00
30 – 35	2	16.67
Gender		
Male	8	66.67
Female	4	33.33
Level		
Level 100	5	41.67
Level 200	2	16.67
Level 300	5	41.67
Department		
Special Education	8	66.67
Basic Education	1	8.33
Art Education	3	25.00
Total	12	100

Findings on Access to Counselling Services by Deaf Students At UEW

Deaf Students’ Access to Counselling Services at the University of Education, Winneba

Comments gathered points to the fact that, deaf students at the University of Education, Winneba do not seek counselling from the professional counsellors:

Accessing Counselling via Lecturer Support and Understanding

As a result of the communication obstacles frequently encountered in interactions with the hearing society, deaf students tend to turn to professors within the Department of Special Education and members of the church community whenever they confront concerns that impact their overall well-being and their harmonious tenure at the University. This preference stems from the ability of these individuals to engage

with them effectively through sign language, ensuring a channel of clear and understandable communication.

Here are some responses from participants:

“The last time I had some problem, I went to my lecturer for counselling because he can communicate through sign language to advise and motivate me very well to carry on with life issues” (P.1)

A participant reported:

“I mostly seek guidance and counselling through one lecturer who understands my communication though he is not in my department” (P.2)

One participant commented

“The lecturers in my department are able to offer me counselling because they are teachers of the deaf and by experience understand the needs and culture of the deaf students, so they are able to offer me good counselling which is capable of meeting my academic and personal needs” (P. 4)

The participants consistently underscore the central role of lecturers in providing guidance and counseling for deaf students. A key theme revolves around the significance of effective communication, particularly through sign language, as a foundation for trust in the counseling relationship. The participants express a notable willingness to seek support from lecturers beyond their academic departments, emphasizing the value placed on personal connections and specific expertise. Lecturers who demonstrate proficiency in sign language and an understanding of the unique needs and culture of deaf students are highly regarded. The participants appreciate an integrated approach to counseling that addresses both academic and personal concerns. Overall, there is a unanimous positive perception of lecturers as essential and effective counselors, shaping a supportive and trusting environment for deaf students.

Counselling from Religious Leaders/ "Faith-Based Support and Community:

Participants have this to say regarding accessing counselling services from religious leaders;

“My church welcomes and offers me the needed counselling and advice I needed to succeed in my academic and spiritual life. Every Sunday, my church leaders will ask me through an interpreter if I have any needs or challenges that may be confronting me” (P. 1)

One participant has this to say;

“In my church, we have interpreters, who always lead me to seek counselling from our pastor” (P. 3)

Participant four stated that;

“I am part of an association in my church, so the leaders in the association are helpful enough towards all my needs regarding my educational and mental well-being. When I have any concern, they will lead me to our pastor for help” (P.4)

The dataset reveals a positive and supportive role of religious leaders in providing counseling services to participants. The participants express a strong connection between their church community and the guidance they receive, both academically and spiritually. The church leaders, equipped with interpreters, actively engage with participants, inquiring about their needs and challenges. This proactive approach creates a conducive environment for seeking counseling, with participants specifically mentioning the role of interpreters in facilitating communication. Additionally, the participants highlight their involvement in church associations, emphasizing the supportive nature of these groups in addressing educational and mental well-being concerns. Overall, the dataset suggests that religious leaders, aided by interpreters and

community associations, play an integral role in providing counseling support that encompasses both academic and personal aspects of the participants' lives.

Peer and Interpreter Support Networks

Undoubtedly, it remains a universal truth that companions and individuals in our vicinity provide a certain level of guidance in the absence of a certified counselor. Regardless of the manner in which this guidance is extended, its fundamental objective is to assist individuals in comprehending life circumstances and making sound choices conducive to a meaningful existence. The data collected regarding these themes substantiate these assertions. The ensuing remarks, voiced by the study participants, encapsulate this reality:

“I live and work with friends every day, whom I can trust, so whenever life situations hit me, I usually resorted to the counsel of some trusted friends around me. I know though they are not professionals but they are always helpful. I don't have to wait till I come to campus to talk to a lecturer or go with an interpreter to seek counselling from the counselling unit” (P. 2)

A participant has this to say;

“My friends offer me counselling something in the past, I was hurt and almost going to stop school, but friends who understand sign language came to my aid with their opinions, suggestions and advice which really help me. So, to me, my friends give me the best of counselling in handling my life problems” (P. 11)

Another participant commended;

“Whenever I go for lectures before the lecturer will start teaching, the sign language interpreters who are in to sign for them will be asking me questions about my well-being while staying on campus, I usually take that opportunity to tell me my problem and they will counsel me on the best option or way to go” (P.12)

The dataset underscores the vital role of friends, particularly those proficient in sign language, as a primary source of counsel and support for the participants. While acknowledging that these friends lack professional qualifications, the participants express a deep sense of trust and reliance on their advice during challenging life situations. The convenience of seeking guidance from friends on a daily basis is highlighted, providing an alternative to the formal channels such as campus counseling units. The participants attribute their resilience and perseverance in the face of personal struggles to the opinions, suggestions, and advice received from friends who understand sign language, emphasizing the valuable role these friendships play in providing effective and immediate counseling for handling life problems. Additionally, the engagement of sign language interpreters inquiring about well-being before lectures provides further opportunities for participants to share their concerns, receiving counsel on various matters related to their lives. Overall, the dataset reflects a strong reliance on the supportive network of friends and interpreters, portraying them as instrumental in addressing the participants' emotional and life challenges.

Limited Engagement with Formal Counseling Services

The university's counseling professionals possess expertise in aiding students in surmounting academic, personal, or vocational obstacles that might otherwise have adverse ramifications on their well-being. These services are readily accessible, and incoming freshmen during their level 100 orientation are typically introduced to these services along with other university offerings. However, concerning this

aspect, it becomes evident that deaf students have not been reaping the benefits of these crucial university-provided services. Several counselors have conveyed that they have not had the opportunity to counsel deaf students due to their lack of presence at the counseling facility. The ensuing comments by select deaf students and counselors provide insight into this matter:

“I have never gone to the counselling unit for professional counselling” (P. 4)

Another participant said;

“I have asked people to assist me in taking decision especially my friends, but i have never gone for professional counselling before at the counselling unit” (P. 10)

Participant seven has this to say;

“I am not aware of the professional counselling unit at the University, so I have never access counselling from there” (P.3)

The participants uniformly express a lack of engagement with the university's professional counseling unit, citing either unawareness of its existence or a preference for seeking guidance from friends when making decisions. Participant 4 explicitly states never seeking professional counseling, while Participant 10 acknowledges turning to friends for assistance instead of utilizing the counseling unit. The participants reveal a lack of awareness regarding the existence of the professional counseling unit at the university, indicating a potential communication gap or limited visibility of available services. Collectively, the responses suggest a common tendency among participants to rely on informal support networks rather than accessing formal professional counseling services provided by the university. This trend may be influenced by factors such as awareness, accessibility, or a preference for seeking guidance from familiar social circles.

Challenges Deaf Students Face in Seeking Counselling Services

One of the topics investigated under the first research question revolved around the challenge faced by the deaf community in effectively communicating with individuals in the hearing society and being comprehended. In order for counseling to effectively meet the needs of a recipient, the counselor must have a complete understanding of their circumstances before presenting potential advice or solutions. The ensuing remarks were provided by deaf students who took part in the research:

Communication Barriers and Cultural Misunderstanding

“I find it difficult in explaining to myself when I am stressed due to my academic work. Some of the people whom I wish to seek help from do not understand my language and culture, to appreciate my concerns, it makes impossible for me to ask of help from them” (P. 12)

Participant Seven said;

“Without an interpreter, communication with counsellors will be very difficult for me because I cannot express my problems fully. Because I cannot communicate by speaking, I find it difficult seeking counselling my department and family because the society around me will not understand me and give me a positive solution (P.7)

The participants express significant challenges in seeking help and counseling, primarily related to communication barriers and a lack of understanding of their language and culture. Participant 12 highlights the difficulty in explaining academic stress when facing a language and cultural gap with potential sources of support. This frustration leads to a reluctance to seek help from those who may not fully appreciate the

concerns. Similarly, Participant 7 emphasizes the critical role of an interpreter in facilitating communication with counselors, indicating that without this support, expressing problems becomes daunting. The responses collectively underscore the crucial importance of accessible communication channels and cultural understanding in the counseling process. These barriers, if unaddressed, can contribute to a sense of isolation and hinder the participants from seeking the support they need both within their department and from their families. The narratives highlight the need for more inclusive and culturally sensitive counseling services to better meet the unique needs of these individuals.

Lack of awareness about Counselling Services at the University

Regarding this particular aspect, the individuals who were interviewed conveyed a lack of awareness about the counseling unit. For some participants, this lack of awareness extends to not even being familiar with the physical location of the counseling center, despite facing substantial life challenges that they contend with on a daily basis. Below, you will find a selection of responses provided by these participants:

“I have no idea about the counselling unit at the University of Education, Winneba. Counselling unit was mentioned to me sometime in the past, during my L100 orientation but I have never sought counselling from the unit because I don’t even know where it is located” (P.9)

A participant said;

“I don’t know that there is a place called counselling center in the University here, though I have some needs my lack of information about it will not allow me to search for it and go for counselling” (P.2)

The participants collectively highlight significant barriers to accessing counseling services at the University of Education, Winneba, primarily stemming from a lack of awareness about the existence and location of the counseling unit. Participant 9, for instance, mentions having heard about the counseling unit during orientation but has not sought counseling due to a lack of knowledge about its whereabouts. The participants expressed a similar sentiment, underscoring that a lack of information inhibits their ability to search for and access counseling services. The theme of "Lack of Awareness and Information" emerges as a prominent factor hindering participants from utilizing available counseling resources.

Confidentiality Concerns

Participants shared their perspectives on confidentiality as a notable challenge experienced by deaf students when seeking counseling services.

Participant 11 said:

“Some challenges confronting my life are personal and I am afraid to share my problem with someone. So, when I am even seeking counselling from friends, or church members I reserve some deep part because of confidentiality reasons” (P.11)

Another participant said:

“Something, after telling your problem to a hearing person, instead of helping me with solution and ways to improve my challenges, the person will go around telling other people. This stopped me from going for counselling. But sometimes I will just ignore all these challenges and go for counselling from my friends” (P.9)

One participant remarked:

“For me, I am scared to even involved an interpreter when I am discussing my issues with someone, so I prefer seeking to counselling alone because I can’t trust all the people around me” (P.2)

Moreover, the participants identify a critical issue related to confidentiality when seeking counseling. Participant 11 articulates concerns about sharing personal challenges, emphasizing the need to withhold some information due to confidentiality reasons. The fear of information leakage is echoed by Participant 9, who notes a reluctance to seek counseling due to past experiences of hearing individuals sharing their problems with others. Participant 2 further emphasizes a preference for seeking counseling alone, expressing a lack of trust in involving interpreters and, by extension, concerns about the confidentiality of discussions.

Gender Preferences in Counseling: Influence on Confidentiality and Comfort

This observation may be attributed to apprehension, timidity, or unease when addressing matters with individuals of the opposite gender, particularly when the concern is of a highly sensitive nature. The following are excerpts from their statements:

“I am a man and would prefer a male counsellor, when I meet a female counsellor, I will not be comfortable expressing myself because I think some issues should not be shared with a female” (P.1)

Another participant said;

“I know the counselling is highly confidential, however, I will just not be comfortable seeking counselling from a woman” (P. 2)

Another participant said;

“I find it difficult to discuss confidential issues with the opposite genders. Depending on the situation, some of the problem is ok for everyone to hear, while others are gender specific related issues. If the problem is about relationship, I will not be comfortable discussing it with a gender different from mine” (P. 8)

The participants collectively express a preference for gender-specific counselors, emphasizing a discomfort in discussing certain confidential issues with counselors of the opposite gender. Participant 1 explicitly states a preference for a male counselor, believing that some issues should not be shared with a female. Participant 2 echoes this sentiment, acknowledging the confidentiality of counseling but noting a discomfort in seeking counseling from a woman. Participant 8 provides additional context, specifying that the discomfort is particularly related to gender-specific issues, such as those concerning relationships.

Discussion of findings

Deaf Students’ Access to Counselling Services at University of Education, Winneba

Accessing Counselling via Lecturer Support and Understanding

The study's findings indicate that deaf students predominantly turn to their lecturers and academic advisors when seeking assistance for their challenges. This discovery aligns with the observations made by Mendieta et al. (2012), highlighting that students often receive various forms of support, encompassing emotional, personal, and social domains, from their educators in the absence of professional counselors. This alignment with prior research underscores the validity of the current findings. The prevalence of seeking support from lecturers can be rationalized by their proximity and familiarity within the academic setting. Lecturers serve as immediate and easily approachable figures for all students, thus facilitating seamless communication. This direct and unhindered flow of information simplifies the process of sharing concerns and obtaining guidance. The convenience of interacting with lecturers, who are readily accessible, fosters an environment conducive to seeking assistance.

Moreover, the significance of having lecturers who are proficient in sign language cannot be overstated. Deaf students encounter distinctive challenges, some of which may be intricate to articulate in written form. Discrimination and social isolation, for instance, are intricate issues that may not be effectively conveyed through writing alone. A counselor proficient in sign language is better equipped to fathom these complexities, leading to a more profound comprehension of such challenges. Consequently, tailored guidance can be provided to cater to individualized needs, ensuring comprehensive support.

Faith-Based Support and Community:

The majority of participants in the study emphasized the profound impact of counseling services provided by their religious leaders and church groups on both their spiritual development and mental well-being. This aligns with the biblical principle outlined in Ephesians 4:11-13, which emphasizes the diverse roles of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers in preparing God's people for service and fostering unity and maturity in faith. According to this perspective, pastors and teachers within the church are bestowed by God to undertake the responsibilities of counseling and instructing members, as highlighted in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. For deaf students who are well-versed in theological teachings and deeply rooted in faith, seeking various forms of counseling becomes a significant aspect of their spiritual journey, with the assurance that their confidentiality will be maintained (Cheek & Bradley, 2002). This underscores the intertwined roles of faith, theological understanding, and the accessibility of confidential counseling services within religious communities.

Peer and Interpreter Support Networks

Sign language interpreters and individuals who understand sign language have a vital role in facilitating communication between deaf individuals and those who can hear. However, their involvement goes beyond communication assistance and extends to providing valuable counseling support directly to deaf students while being sensitive to the cultural aspects of the deaf community. Incorporating deaf culture into the counseling approach is essential for establishing a more effective counseling relationship with deaf students. For example, a study conducted by Wang et al. (2020) revealed that deaf students feel more comfortable seeking counseling from individuals who understand their culture and language. This finding suggests that deaf students may turn to unprofessional sources, such as unqualified sign language interpreters, peers, or resources with some understanding of the deaf community but lacking proper counseling training.

Limited Engagement with Formal Counseling Services:

The study findings uncovered a notable trend among deaf students, indicating a notable underutilization of the counseling services offered by the University's counseling unit. This observation aligns with the conclusions drawn from a study published in the *Journal of Hearing Impairment and Deaf Education in Africa* by Ampiah and Tachie in 2019. Their research, too, highlighted the challenges faced by deaf students in effectively communicating with counselors. This difficulty in communication is identified as a significant factor impacting the students' socialization skills, potentially resulting in self-esteem issues. The cited study provides empirical evidence supporting the present research, indicating that the communication barriers faced by deaf students are not unique to a particular university but are reflective of broader challenges within the academic context. These findings underscore the critical need for tailored

and accessible counseling services that consider the unique communication needs of deaf students to address both their academic and psychological well-being effectively (Ampiah & Tachie, 2019).

Challenges Deaf Students Face in Seeking Counselling Services

Communication Barriers and Cultural Misunderstanding

Frequently, counselors arrange for the assistance of interpreters to facilitate communication. While counseling sessions typically prioritize confidentiality, the inclusion of a third party (such as a sign language interpreter) can hinder deaf individuals from openly expressing their emotions and thoughts. A more engaging approach would involve deaf individuals directly narrating their own experiences, emotions, and challenges to their chosen counselor, without the involvement of an intermediary. The study's first research question addressed the theme of the deaf's struggle to communicate effectively and be comprehended within the hearing society.

Lack of Awareness about Counselling Services at the University

This aspect of the study uncovered the extent of deaf students' familiarity with the counseling services provided by the University. Limited knowledge concerning these services can act as a hurdle for deaf students in utilizing the counseling resources available at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). The investigation revealed that deaf students possess insufficient awareness about the existence of counseling services within the University. This absence of information might hinder them from seeking assistance or availing the necessary support for their mental well-being. A lack of awareness could lead them to assume that these services are either unavailable or not designed for their accessibility. This observation aligns with the findings of Renuka et al. (2013), emphasizing that the provision of lucid and comprehensive information regarding counseling services—encompassing communication methods, policies on confidentiality, and the counseling procedure—can empower deaf students to make well-informed decisions and access the support essential for their needs.

Confidentiality Concerns

The study identified a lack of confidentiality in counseling sessions. This became evident through interactions with the students, who indicated that individuals other than designated counselors, including teachers, were sometimes present during sessions. This situation posed a challenge for the students in fully opening up about their concerns. The primary reason for this was the absence of professional counseling expertise among these individuals.

These findings appear to align with reality, given that lecturers and friends often serve as the immediate points of contact for students within the school environment. This accessibility fosters a seamless and uncomplicated exchange of information. A study conducted by the American Counseling Association (2014) corroborated the significance of confidentiality in counseling. It underlined that confidentiality is vital as it cultivates trust in the privacy of disclosures made to the counselor, thereby enhancing the overall counseling relationship.

Gender Preferences in Counseling: Influence on Confidentiality and Comfort

The study's participants exhibited a sensitivity to gender when selecting the counselors, they preferred to engage with. Deaf students displaying such preferences might be less inclined to openly express themselves, feeling self-conscious or hesitant about discussing their feelings and thoughts with counselors from specific gender categories. It's a common tendency for individuals to find greater comfort in

discussing particular matters with a counselor of the same gender, which could be due to shared life experiences or cultural norms. This aligns with a study that attributes this pattern to socialization processes, where males are conditioned to view themselves as strong (O'neil, 2006).

Conclusion

A key discovery from the study is that a significant number of deaf students at the University turn to their lecturers within the Department of Special Education for counseling due to their ability to communicate using sign language. These lecturers' familiarity with the culture and needs of deaf students enables them to provide effective counseling that caters to both academic and personal requirements. Additionally, religious leaders and church members play a vital role in extending counseling and guidance to deaf students. Churches equipped with interpreters or members proficient in sign language serve as essential pillars of support for the deaf student community.

In contrast, despite these alternative counseling sources, the study highlights that professional counseling services from the University's counseling unit are not accessed by deaf students. The primary contributing factor to this trend is the lack of awareness among deaf students about the counseling unit and its available services. Additionally, communication barriers and concerns about confidentiality deter some deaf students from seeking external counseling support.

The challenges encountered by deaf students in accessing counseling services at UEW emphasize the urgency of targeted interventions to enhance inclusivity and accessibility. Addressing communication obstacles is paramount, involving the recruitment and training of counselors who are adept in sign language and well-versed in deaf culture. Furthermore, efforts should focus on heightening awareness among deaf students about on-campus counseling services.

Recommendations

1. The University Management in collaboration with Counseling Unit of the University of Education, Winneba should recruit and train counselors who are proficient in sign language and have a deep understanding of deaf culture and experiences. These specialized counselors can better connect with and support deaf students during counseling sessions.
2. The Counseling Unit should establish a system to schedule sign language interpreters in advance, allowing deaf students to book counseling appointments without delays or barriers.
3. The Counseling Unit should offer online counseling options with sign language interpretation for students who may face challenges accessing on-campus services.
4. The Counseling Unit should collaborate with deaf student organizations and advocacy groups to gain insights into the specific needs and preferences of deaf students concerning counseling services.

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