

Reframing School Counselling in the Digital Age: The Promise of Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing various sectors, including education, by enhancing the effectiveness and accessibility of counselling services. This paper examines the transformative role of AI in improving school counselling, with a particular focus on its potential to address students' academic, psychological, and career guidance needs. The study highlights key AI innovations, such as AI-driven chatbots, mental health applications, predictive analytics for identifying at-risk students, and bridge gaps in counselling services, particularly in underserved areas. Despite these advancements, the integration of AI into school counselling faces several challenges, including limited internet access, cultural perceptions of AI, the digital divide, ethical concerns, and the need for adequate training for school counselors. Future directions for research and implementation are also discussed, emphasizing the importance of policy support, investment in digital infrastructure, and collaboration between educators and technology providers to ensure the responsible and effective integration of AI into schools counselling services. In conclusion, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into school counselling services presents a transformative opportunity to enhance student support, improve accessibility, and increase the efficiency of counselling processes. The paper recommends among others strategies, way to maximize the potential benefits of AI in school counselling, educational stakeholders including policymakers, school administrators, counselors, and technology experts must actively explore opportunities for AI integration.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Counselling Services, Innovations, Challenges, Future Directions

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of counselling services in schools has undergone gradual transformation over the years. Traditionally, school counselling in centered mainly on academic guidance and career advice, typically provided by teachers or school administrators with limited professional training in psychological support. The counselling process was largely reactive in nature, addressing issues only when crises arose rather than proactively meeting students' developmental and emotional needs (Adeniyi, 2018). This approach often led to underwhelming outcomes as students faced various psychological, emotional, and social challenges.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of comprehensive counselling services in addressing the diverse needs of students. The National Policy on Education emphasizes the need for student welfare, including psychological well-being. However, the implementation of these policies remains inconsistent across different regions and types of schools. In many cases, schools lack dedicated counselors or mental health professionals, resulting in inadequate support for students (Olayinka & Loto, 2020). Counselling practices in schools have traditionally emphasized advice-giving, mentorship, and classroom-based guidance sessions aimed at supporting students in their academic, personal, and career development. However, these conventional methods face significant limitations in effectively addressing the diverse psychological and emotional needs of students. A key challenge lies in the limited professional training of school counsellors. In many cases, teachers are assigned counselling responsibilities despite having minimal or no formal preparation

in psychological counselling techniques. This lack of expertise often leads to inadequate recognition and management of complex mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, thereby diminishing the overall quality of support provided to students (Ibrahim, 2019).

Additionally, school counselling services tend to be reactive rather than proactive. Instead of engaging in preventive strategies, many counselors only intervene when students already face significant academic or emotional difficulties. This approach reduces the ability to identify and support at-risk students at an early stage, thereby increasing the likelihood of more severe issues developing over time (Adeniyi, 2018). Cultural stigma surrounding mental health and counselling further limits the effectiveness of traditional methods. Many students perceive seeking counselling as a sign of weakness or fear being judged by their peers. This stigma discourages students from accessing the support they need, leading to unresolved psychological and emotional struggles (Olayinka & Loto, 2020). Resource constraints present another significant challenge, particularly in rural schools. Many institutions lack sufficient funding, adequate counselling facilities, and access to psychological materials and tools. Without these essential resources, school counselors are often unable to provide effective, evidence-based interventions to support students' well-being (Ajiboye & Bakare, 2019). Given these limitations, there is a growing need for innovative approaches, such as the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), to enhance school counselling services and improve student support systems. The traditional counselling approaches used in Nigerian schools face several limitations that have profound implications for student well-being, academic success, and overall school retention. Many students, particularly those facing significant mental health struggles, do not receive the support they need to manage academic and personal stress. This lack of intervention contributes to increased dropout rates, as students disengage from school due to unresolved emotional distress and overwhelming academic pressure (Ajiboye & Bakare, 2019).

Furthermore, ineffective counselling services have a profound impact on students' academic performance. Learners experiencing mental health challenges often face difficulties with concentration, motivation and self-discipline—key factors that are essential for effective learning and academic success. Without appropriate psychological support, these students are more likely to perform poorly in their studies, leading to lower grades and reduced overall academic achievement (Olayinka & Loto, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) Theory, which serves as the foundational framework for examining the transformation of counselling services through Artificial Intelligence (AI) in schools. The DOI theory offers valuable insights into how new technologies, such as AI, are adopted within social systems, highlighting the processes through which innovation spreads, the factors influencing acceptance, and the challenges that may arise. By applying this framework, the study seeks to understand how AI can reshape counselling practices, introduce novel approaches, and guide future strategies for effective integration within the educational context. Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2003) explains how new ideas and technologies spread through societies. It classifies adopters of innovations into five categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. In the context of this study, the DOI theory will be crucial in analyzing how quickly AI-based counseling services are likely to be adopted in schools. It will help identify factors that affect the pace of AI integration into counseling services, such as cultural attitudes towards technology, the readiness of infrastructure, and the preparedness of teachers and counselors. Additionally, it will aid in forecasting how innovations in AI counseling might be embraced at various levels of schooling.

Transforming Counselling Services through Artificial Intelligence in Schools

The primary aim of this paper is to explore the transformative role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in enhancing counselling services within schools. AI-driven solutions have the potential to address the unique socio-cultural, academic, and psychological needs of students, thereby improving access to personalized guidance and mental health support (Luckin et al., 2018). Given the increasing demand for counselling services in schools due to factors such as academic pressure, socio-economic challenges, and mental health concerns, AI-based interventions can serve as a viable solution to bridge the gap in counselor-student ratios and improve service delivery (Obi et al., 2022).

This study aims to explore the innovative applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in school counselling, including AI-powered chatbots, predictive analytics for early identification of at-risk students, and intelligent tutoring systems. It also examines the challenges associated with AI adoption, such as ethical considerations, data privacy concerns, and the necessity for human oversight (Shum, Heffernan, & Ferguson, 2022). By assessing both the potential benefits and limitations, the study seeks to offer recommendations and future directions for the effective integration of AI into counselling services in schools. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on AI in education, offering insights for policymakers, school administrators, and counselling professionals on leveraging AI-driven tools to enhance student well-being and academic success (Adegbite & Yusuf, 2021).

Significance of Incorporating AI into School Counselling

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into school counselling services presents a transformative opportunity to enhance student support, particularly in the rapidly digitalizing educational landscape. AI driven counselling tools can provide timely, personalized guidance to students, addressing academic, social, and emotional challenges while supplementing the work of human counselors (Luckin et al., 2018). Given growing student population and the limited availability of professional counselors, AI can bridge the counselor-student gap by offering scalable, data-driven solutions that improve efficiency and accessibility (Obi, Okonkwo, & Bello, 2022).

One key advantage of AI in school counselling is its ability to analyze student behavioral patterns and predict mental health risks, enabling early interventions. Machine learning algorithms and natural language processing (NLP) can help detect signs of stress, anxiety, or depression based on students' interactions with AI-powered chatbots and digital platforms (Shum, Heffernan, & Ferguson, 2022). This proactive approach is particularly important in schools, where mental health awareness is still evolving, and early detection can significantly improve student well-being (Adegbite & Yusuf, 2021).

Furthermore, AI-powered career counselling tools can offer students personalized guidance based on their academic performance, interests, and prevailing labor market trends. By utilizing big data analytics, AI systems can align students with appropriate career pathways, internship opportunities, and higher education options, thereby supporting more informed decision-making (Baker & Smith, 2019).

In addition, integrating AI into school counselling services can promote inclusivity by supporting students with disabilities and those in remote or underserved areas. AI-driven virtual counselling platforms can provide round-the-clock support, overcoming geographical limitations and ensuring equitable access to guidance for all students (Holmes, Bialik, & Fadel, 2019). However, to fully realize these benefits, challenges such as data privacy, ethical considerations, and the necessity of human oversight must be carefully addressed. When implemented responsibly, AI has the potential to strengthen counselling services in schools, improve student outcomes, and align educational practices with global trends in digital learning (Luckin et al., 2018).

Importance of Counselling Services in Schools

Counselling services play a critical role in supporting students' overall development within schools. They provide guidance in academic, personal, social, and career-related areas, helping students navigate challenges and make informed decisions. Effective counselling contributes to improved mental health, enhanced academic performance, and the development of essential life skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and emotional regulation. Despite the importance of counselling, many schools lack a structured guidance and counselling framework due to inadequate funding, insufficient personnel, and limited awareness about its significance (Okoli & Okechukwu, 2021). In most schools, a single counselor is often responsible for hundreds of students, making it difficult to provide individualized attention and timely interventions (Adewale & Yusuf, 2019). Moreover, the rising prevalence of mental health issues among students underscores the need for effective counselling services. Studies indicate that academic pressure, family expectations, and socioeconomic challenges contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression among secondary school students (Ogunleye &

Adebayo, 2022). Therefore, integrating innovative solutions such as artificial intelligence (AI) into counselling services could help bridge this gap and provide students with accessible, confidential, and data-driven support.

Integrating Artificial Intelligence in Educational practices

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been increasingly integrated into education systems worldwide to enhance learning experiences, personalize instruction, and streamline administrative functions (Holmes, Bialik, & Fadel, 2019). AI-driven technologies, including chatbots, predictive analytics, and intelligent tutoring systems, are transforming the ways in which students receive both academic and emotional support (Luckin et al., 2018). For example, AI-powered platforms such as IBM Watson Tutor and Microsoft's AI-based education solutions have been successfully implemented in numerous educational institutions globally, offering tailored learning experiences and supporting students' emotional well-being (Baker & Smith, 2019).

AI applications in school counselling include automated mental health chatbots that offer students a safe space to express their concerns and receive instant responses based on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) principles (Shum, Heffernan, & Ferguson, 2022). Studies have shown that AI-driven counselling tools can detect patterns in student behavior, predict academic struggles, and provide timely interventions before issues escalate (Adegbite & Yusuf, 2021). Additionally, AI-based career counselling platforms can analyze students' interests, skills, and academic performance to recommend suitable career paths, thereby improving career decision-making processes (Obi, Okonkwo, & Bello, 2022). Although AI has achieved significant success in educational systems in developed countries, its implementation in African school counselling remains limited. Many schools continue to rely on traditional, human-centered counselling approaches, often constrained by insufficient resources and a shortage of trained personnel (Eze & Egbunike, 2020). This situation underscores the need for research into the feasibility, effectiveness, and potential benefits of integrating AI-driven counselling services within the educational context.

Gaps in Research

Despite the growing interest in AI applications in education, research specifically examining AI's role in school counselling remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on AI's effects on teaching, learning, and administrative efficiency, with relatively little attention given to its potential for supporting students' mental health and career counselling (Obi et al., 2022). Additionally, the majority of AI-based counselling research originates from developed countries, where technological infrastructure and student digital literacy are considerably higher than in the educational context (Holmes et al., 2019).

Another critical gap is the lack of empirical evidence on the acceptability and effectiveness of AI-driven counselling services among students, parents, and educators. Given cultural perceptions surrounding counselling and mental health in schools, further research is needed to explore how AI powered counselling tools can be designed to align with the socio-cultural context and ethical considerations of schools (Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2022). Additionally, there is a need for policy discussions on data privacy, security, and ethical concerns associated with implementing AI in counselling services. Addressing these research gaps can yield important insights into the ways AI can be effectively utilized to improve counselling services in schools. By investigating the potential benefits, challenges, and implementation strategies, future studies can inform policymakers, educators, and technology developers in designing AI-driven counselling solutions that are tailored to the specific needs of students.

AI – Driven Innovations in Education Practices

AI-Powered Chatbots

AI chatbots simulate human conversation to provide real-time counselling support. These systems can assist students with academic guidance, emotional concerns, and mental health resources (Zhou et al., 2021). For example, AI counsellors can help students cope with stress or anxiety and offer appropriate referrals when professional help is needed.

Predictive Analytics

AI-powered predictive analytics analyze academic, behavioral, and attendance data to identify at-risk students early (Holmes et al., 2022). By detecting early warning signs, school counsellors can intervene proactively, improving student retention and well-being.

Virtual Counselling and Mental Health Platforms

AI-based platforms provide remote access to counselling services, enabling students in rural or underserved regions to receive timely psychological support (Okoro, 2023). These virtual systems can assess emotional states using natural language processing and provide tailored coping strategies.

Personalized Career Guidance

AI tools evaluate student interests, aptitude, and performance to suggest appropriate academic and career pathways (Bhardwaj & Mehta, 2022). This personalized approach enhances the relevance of career counselling and bridges the gap between school education and employability.

Adaptive Learning Systems

Adjust lesson difficulty and content delivery in real-time based on student responses.

Automated Administrative Tools

Streamline scheduling, record-keeping, and reporting, allowing teachers and counsellors to focus on student support.

Advantages of Counselling Services for students

The review suggests that AI-assisted counselling significantly improves students' access to mental health and career guidance services. Traditional counselling in Nigerian schools often suffers from a shortage of trained counselors and overwhelming student-to-counselor ratios (Oladokun & Adebayo, 2021). AI applications can bridge this gap by providing 24/7 support, enabling students to seek help at any time. Additionally, AI-driven tools allow for personalized support tailored to individual students' needs. For instance, machine learning algorithms can analyze students' concerns over time and provide targeted recommendations, improving the effectiveness of counselling interventions. Another key benefit is the efficiency AI brings to the counselling process. Automated scheduling systems, digital self-help resources, and AI-assisted career guidance platforms can help streamline counselling operations, allowing human counselors to focus on more complex cases that require direct human intervention.

Emerging Challenges in AI Integration

Despite its numerous benefits, integrating AI into school counselling presents several challenges that must be addressed for effective and ethical implementation.

Ethical and Privacy Concern

AI systems rely heavily on data collection, raising significant ethical issues related to privacy, consent, and data misuse (Floridi & Cowls, 2021). Counselling often involves sensitive personal information, making confidentiality a top priority.

Digital Divide and Infrastructure Limitations

Many schools, particularly in developing regions, lack the digital infrastructure and internet access needed to deploy AI tools effectively (Okoro, 2023). This inequality restricts students in rural or low-income areas from benefiting from AI innovations.

Cultural and Perceptual Barriers

Negative attitudes or misconceptions about AI can hinder its acceptance among educators, parents, and students (Amir, 2022). Awareness and sensitization programs are needed to promote trust and confidence in AI-based counselling tools.

Lack of Professional Training

Most school counsellors have limited exposure to digital technologies and require specialized training to effectively use AI-based tools (Singh & Kaur, 2023). Without adequate capacity building, the potential of AI may remain underutilized.

Policy and Regulatory Gaps

There is a pressing need for clear policies and ethical frameworks to guide the implementation of AI in school counselling. Without proper governance, schools risk data breaches, algorithmic bias, and inconsistent application (Holmes et al., 2022).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize the potential benefits of AI in school counselling, several strategic measures should be prioritized:

Policy Development

Governments and educational authorities should establish ethical and operational guidelines for AI use in counselling (Floridi & Cows, 2021).

Capacity Building

Continuous training programs must be introduced to enhance digital literacy among school counsellors (Bhardwaj & Mehta, 2022).

Infrastructure Investment

Expanding access to reliable internet and technological resources is essential to bridge the digital divide.

Collaborative Frameworks

Partnerships between schools, policymakers, and technology experts can ensure sustainable implementation.

Research and Evaluation

Ongoing studies should assess the effectiveness, risks, and long-term impact of AI integration in counselling services.

CONCLUSION

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into school counselling services presents a transformative opportunity to enhance student support, improve accessibility, and increase the efficiency of counselling processes. AI-powered tools such as chatbots, mental health applications, and predictive analytics can provide personalized guidance, identify at-risk students, and bridge gaps in counselling services, particularly in underserved areas. However, several challenges must be addressed for successful implementation. These include infrastructural limitations, such as unreliable internet access, the digital divide between urban and rural schools, cultural perceptions of AI and mental health, the need for training counselors and educators, and ethical concerns regarding data privacy and security. Addressing these barriers requires a structured approach that

includes capacity-building initiatives, collaboration with technology providers, and the development of clear policies for ethical AI use in education.

SUGGESTIONS

1. To maximize the potential benefits of AI in school counselling, educational stakeholders including policymakers, school administrators, counselors, and technology experts must actively explore opportunities for AI integration.
2. Government agencies should invest in digital infrastructure, ensuring that schools, especially in rural areas, have access to the necessary resources for AI-driven counselling.
3. School administrators and teachers should embrace AI as a complement to traditional counselling methods, leveraging technology to enhance student well-being.
4. Additionally, further research is needed to examine AI's long-term implications in the educational context, assessing its effectiveness, potential risks, and strategies for sustainable implementation. By fostering collaboration between education and technology sectors, schools can create an innovative and inclusive counselling system that meets the evolving needs of students in a rapidly digitalizing world.

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