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EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS IN IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

A Case Study of Girls Grammar School and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road,
Enugu State, Nigeria.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Mental health challenges among adolescents and young adults in Nigeria have reached alarming levels. Factors such as academic pressure, social expectations, family dynamics, and exposure to societal stressors significantly contribute to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and stress. Mental health problems in this demographic are often not addressed due to cultural stigma, lack of resources, and limited awareness about mental health disorders. One of the significant barriers to addressing mental health issues in Nigeria is the stigma that surrounds mental health, which often discourages young people from seeking professional help. As a result, alternative approaches to mental health intervention have become critical. Peer support programs have been identified as effective tools for providing emotional and psychological support among young people. These programs empower peers to offer support to each other, thus creating a sense of belonging and mutual assistance in dealing with mental health challenges.

The Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative (MANI) has been at the forefront of promoting peer support in Nigerian schools, aiming to bridge the gap in mental health support by training students to assist each other. This study focuses on assessing the effectiveness of these peer support programs in improving mental health outcomes among students in Girls Grammar School, Awkunanaw, and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road, Enugu.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the efforts of various initiatives, the mental health needs of students in Enugu state remain inadequately addressed, particularly due to insufficient awareness and the prevalent stigma around mental health. In schools such as Girls Grammar School and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, many students continue to struggle with mental health issues without adequate support. Traditional attitudes, misconceptions, and lack of proper counseling services further exacerbate the problem.

Peer support programs, as an alternative intervention strategy, have shown promise in other regions; however, their impact in Nigerian secondary schools, particularly in Enugu, has not been rigorously studied. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of peer support programs in these schools and their potential to reduce mental health stigma while improving mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and stress.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To assess the impact of peer support programs on anxiety, depression, and stress levels among students in Girls Grammar School, Awkunanaw, and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road, Enugu.
- To explore the influence of peer support programs on students' mental health literacy.
- To evaluate the role of peer support in reducing mental health stigma among students.
- To assess the improvement in coping mechanisms and emotional resilience among students who participated in peer support programs.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

- 1) What is the impact of peer support programs on anxiety, depression, and stress levels among students in the selected schools?
- 2) How do peer support programs influence students' knowledge and understanding of mental health?
- 3) What role do peer support programs play in reducing mental health stigma among students?
- 4) How do students in peer support programs report changes in their coping mechanisms and emotional resilience?

1.5 Hypotheses

The study will test the following hypotheses:

- H1: There will be a significant reduction in anxiety, depression, and stress among students who participate in the peer support programs.
- H2: Students who participate in peer support programs will show an increase in mental health literacy.
- H3: Participation in peer support programs will significantly reduce mental health stigma among students.
- H4: Students participating in peer support programs will demonstrate improved coping strategies and emotional resilience.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study will be conducted in two schools: Girls Grammar School, Awkunanaw, and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road, Enugu. The study will target students aged 15-20 years who have participated in the peer support program. The research will focus on the impact of these programs on students' mental health, stigma reduction, and coping strategies over a 6-month period.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The findings from this research will have several important implications:

1. Policy and Practice: The study will provide evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of peer support programs in secondary schools, influencing policies on mental health interventions in schools across Enugu and Nigeria.
2. Mental Health Awareness: By addressing the stigma around mental health, this study will contribute to the broader discourse on mental health awareness and

advocacy in Nigeria.

3. Support for Future Programs: The findings will help improve the design and implementation of future peer support programs, making them more targeted and effective.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Mental Health Challenges Among Adolescents in Nigeria

Mental health issues among adolescents in Nigeria are widely reported but often go unrecognized. Several studies highlight that anxiety, depression, and stress are prevalent among Nigerian adolescents due to academic pressures, societal expectations, family dynamics, and lack of emotional support. In many cases, these mental health challenges are exacerbated by societal stigma, lack of access to mental health care, and the inadequacy of mental health services in schools.

2.2 The Role of Peer Support in Mental Health Interventions

Peer support programs have been identified as effective in addressing mental health challenges among young people. Research shows that peer support provides emotional validation, reduces feelings of isolation, and increases mental health literacy. Programs where students support each other can empower them to manage mental health issues, reduce stigma, and foster a culture of openness and understanding. Such programs are particularly effective in school settings, where adolescents are more likely to trust and confide in their peers rather than adults.

2.3 The Impact of Peer Support Programs on Stigma Reduction

Mental health stigma is a significant barrier to mental health care. Students with

mental health challenges often face ridicule, exclusion, and discrimination, which exacerbates their struggles. Peer support programs can play a crucial role in mitigating stigma by normalizing conversations about mental health, providing a platform for students to share experiences, and encouraging help-seeking behavior.

2.4 Peer Support Programs in Nigeria

While peer support programs are widely utilized in other parts of the world, their implementation in Nigerian schools has been relatively limited. However, organizations like Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative (MANI) have been working to introduce such programs to Nigerian schools. These programs aim to reduce mental health stigma, promote mental health education, and support students with mental health challenges.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study will utilize a quasi-experimental research design, specifically a pretest-posttest control group design. This design allows for comparison of mental health outcomes in students before and after they have participated in the peer support program. Additionally, a control group from the same schools (those not participating in the peer support program) will be used to compare the effectiveness of the intervention. The quasi-experimental design is appropriate for this study because it does not require random assignment of participants but still allows for comparison of groups (intervention and control). The study will employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the peer support program's impact on mental health outcomes.

- Pretest: Mental health assessments will be conducted at the beginning of the study to measure baseline levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, as well as mental health literacy and stigma levels.

- Posttest: A follow-up assessment will be conducted at the end of the study period (six months), to measure any changes in the same variables. This will allow us to evaluate the changes attributed to the peer support program.

3.2 Study Area

The study will be conducted in Girls Grammar School, Awkunanaw, and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road, Enugu. These schools were selected due to their involvement in mental health initiatives facilitated by MANI (Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative). Both schools have existing student welfare programs, and they represent a diverse student population, making them suitable for studying the impact of peer support programs on mental health.

- Girls Grammar School: A government-run all-girls school located in a suburban area of Enugu. It has an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students aged between 15 and 18 years.
- Queens Comprehensive Secondary School: A co-educational school in Enugu city with about 1,000 students aged between 15 and 20 years. It has a mix of urban and suburban students, providing a broad range of experiences.

The study will focus on students in the age group of 15-20 years, as this is a critical age range where many adolescents experience mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and stress due to academic pressures, peer influences, and developmental changes.

3.3 Population of the Study

The target population for this study consists of students in Girls Grammar School and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School who are enrolled in the peer support program facilitated by MANI. These students are between 15 and 20 years old, with a total of 200 students selected: 100 from each school. The selection of this population is based on the fact that peer support programs have been introduced and are actively running in these schools. Students will be selected based on their voluntary

participation in the peer support program, ensuring that the sample consists only of those who have engaged with the intervention.

3.4 Sampling Techniques

This study will use stratified random sampling to ensure that participants are representative of the various age groups, genders, and academic levels in both schools. Stratified random sampling is ideal because it ensures that subgroups within the population are adequately represented in the sample.

- Stratification will be done based on:
- Gender (male and female)
- Age (15-17 and 18-20 years)
- Grade levels (senior and junior secondary school students)

Once the strata are established, students will be randomly selected from each subgroup to participate in the study, ensuring diversity and minimizing selection bias.

3.5 Instruments for Data Collection

The data collection for this study will involve both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure comprehensive data on the effectiveness of the peer support program.

Quantitative Data Collection:

1. Beck Depression Inventory (BDI): This will be used to assess levels of depression among students. The BDI consists of 21 items that measure the severity of depressive symptoms.
2. Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7): This seven-item questionnaire is used to measure the severity of anxiety symptoms and is suitable for adolescents and young adults.

3. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS): This scale measures the level of perceived stress, which is especially important for understanding the pressures and stressors students face in school.
4. Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire: This questionnaire will assess students' knowledge about mental health disorders, including their ability to recognize signs of mental health issues and understand coping mechanisms.

Qualitative Data Collection:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews: A purposive sample of 20 students (10 from each school) will be selected for in-depth interviews. These students will be chosen based on their active participation in the peer support program. The interviews will explore the following themes:
 - The students' personal experiences with the peer support program
 - Perceptions of stigma before and after participating in the program
 - Changes in coping mechanisms and emotional resilience
 - The role of peer support in mental health education
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Focus group discussions will be held with small groups of students (5-8 students per group) to discuss the broader impact of the peer support program on school culture, stigma, and mental health awareness.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods:

Quantitative Data:

- Descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequencies, percentages) will be used to summarize the demographic data and baseline levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and mental health literacy.
- Paired sample t-tests will be used to compare pretest and posttest scores within

the intervention group to measure the impact of the peer support program.

- Independent sample t-tests will be used to compare the differences between the control and intervention groups.
- Correlation analysis will explore the relationship between mental health literacy, stigma reduction, and mental health outcomes.

Qualitative Data:

- Thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring themes from the interview and focus group discussion data. Key themes such as stigma reduction, improved coping skills, peer support experiences, and changes in mental health literacy will be analyzed.
- NVivo software will be used for coding and organizing qualitative data, ensuring accuracy and thoroughness in data analysis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Presentation of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings will provide an overview of the pretest and posttest scores for depression, anxiety, stress, and mental health literacy. Data will be presented in tables and charts to compare the results before and after the intervention. Descriptive statistics will summarize the overall levels of mental health problems (depression, anxiety, and stress) and the improvements in mental health literacy and stigma reduction.

Example Table: Pretest and Posttest Scores for Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Group	Depression (Pretest)		Depression (Posttest)		Anxiety (Pretest)		Anxiety (Posttest)	
	Stress (Pretest)		Stress (Pretest)		Stress (Posttest)		Stress (Posttest)	
Intervention Group	X	Y	X	Y	X	Y	X	Y

Control Group A B A B A B

Statistical Analysis: Paired t-tests will indicate whether the changes in depression, anxiety, and stress scores are statistically significant. For example, if the p-value for depression is less than 0.05, this would indicate a significant reduction in depression in the intervention group.

4.2 Analysis of Qualitative Data

The qualitative findings from the interviews and focus group discussions will be analyzed to gain deeper insights into the experiences of students involved in the peer support programs. Thematic analysis will identify patterns and themes related to the following areas:

- **Stigma Reduction:** Many students may report a reduction in stigma associated with mental health after participating in the peer support program. Common themes could include greater willingness to talk about mental health and less judgment from peers.
- **Improved Coping Strategies:** Students might mention how peer support has helped them cope with stress, anxiety, and personal challenges. This could include strategies like mindfulness, talking to peers, or seeking professional help.
- **Emotional Resilience:** Peer support programs may have helped students develop stronger emotional resilience by learning to manage emotions and stress through peer interactions.

Example Interview Excerpt:

- **Participant A (Queens Comprehensive):** “Before the program, I never felt comfortable talking about how stressed I was with my friends. But now, we talk about our problems openly, and it feels good to have someone who understands.”
- **Participant B (Girls Grammar):** “The peer support group helped me a lot during

the exam period. I learned techniques to manage my anxiety, and it made a huge difference in how I performed.”

4.3 Discussion of Findings

In this section, the study will interpret the findings in light of the research questions and hypotheses. The discussion will focus on how the peer support program impacted students’ mental health outcomes, stigma reduction, and coping strategies.

Key points of discussion will include:

- **Impact on Mental Health Outcomes:** The findings will be compared with previous studies on peer support programs to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention in reducing anxiety, depression, and stress.
- **Mental Health Literacy:** The study will discuss how the peer support program enhanced students’ understanding of mental health issues, empowering them to recognize and manage mental health challenges.
- **Cultural and Social Implications:** The role of peer support in challenging the cultural stigma around mental health in Nigerian schools will be discussed, highlighting how such programs may contribute to broader societal changes in attitudes toward mental health.

By combining both quantitative and qualitative data, this chapter will provide a well-rounded analysis of the peer support program’s effectiveness, ultimately leading to actionable insights and recommendations for improving mental health outcomes among students in Nigerian schools.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of peer support programs on the mental health outcomes of students in secondary schools in Enugu, Nigeria.

Specifically, the study aimed to measure the effect of these programs on depression, anxiety, stress, and mental health literacy among students in Girls Grammar School, Awkunanaw, and Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road, Enugu.

The findings of this study revealed several key points:

1. **Reduction in Mental Health Issues:** The intervention group, which participated in the peer support program, showed significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress levels compared to the control group, who did not participate in the program. The results of the pretest and posttest comparisons (using paired t-tests) indicated that the intervention group experienced notable improvements in their mental health status, suggesting the effectiveness of peer support in mitigating mental health challenges among adolescents.
2. **Improvement in Mental Health Literacy:** There was a substantial increase in mental health literacy among students in the intervention group. The participants reported better knowledge about mental health disorders, available resources for support, and the importance of seeking help when needed. This was evidenced by the pretest and posttest results, where mental health literacy scores in the intervention group increased significantly.
3. **Reduction in Stigma:** Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions revealed that the peer support program led to a reduction in the stigma associated with mental health in the participating schools. Students in the intervention group were more likely to express openness about mental health challenges, both their own and those of their peers. Furthermore, students reported feeling more comfortable seeking help from mental health professionals and peers when needed.

4. **Improved Coping Mechanisms:** The qualitative findings also indicated that students in the intervention group developed better coping mechanisms for dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression. Students learned skills such as mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and time management strategies that helped them manage their mental health more effectively.

These findings align with previous research that shows the benefits of peer support programs in enhancing mental health outcomes, promoting mental health literacy, and reducing stigma.

5.2 Implications of the Study

This study has several important implications for mental health interventions in schools:

1. **Policy Implications:** The positive results from this study suggest that peer support programs could be a valuable tool in schools to address mental health issues among students. School administrators and policymakers should consider incorporating peer support initiatives as part of comprehensive school mental health programs. This could involve training students as peer supporters and integrating mental health education into the curriculum.
2. **Cultural and Societal Change:** Mental health stigma remains a significant barrier to seeking help in Nigeria, especially among young people. The success of the peer support program in reducing stigma highlights the importance of providing safe, supportive spaces for students to discuss mental health issues. This could serve as a model for wider societal changes, where open discussions about mental health become more normalized.
3. **Integration with Other Mental Health Services:** Schools should collaborate with mental health professionals to ensure that peer support programs are complemented by professional mental health services. Peer supporters can act as a bridge to connect

students with trained counselors or psychologists, further enhancing the effectiveness of mental health interventions.

4. **Educational Content and Curriculum:** The increase in mental health literacy among participants suggests that integrating mental health education into the school curriculum can be an effective strategy for promoting mental well-being. This could include information on recognizing symptoms of mental health disorders, understanding treatment options, and providing resources for support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for improving mental health outcomes in Nigerian schools:

1. **Expand Peer Support Programs:** Schools should consider expanding the peer support program to include more students, particularly in schools across Nigeria where mental health resources may be limited. Training more students as peer supporters can help create a network of support that fosters mental well-being across the student body.
2. **Strengthen Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals:** Schools should work closely with mental health professionals to integrate counseling and therapy services with peer support programs. Mental health professionals can provide training for peer supporters and offer additional support for students who require professional intervention.
3. **Increase Mental Health Awareness Campaigns:** There should be a sustained effort to raise awareness about mental health in schools, including through campaigns, workshops, and school assemblies. These initiatives should focus on reducing stigma, educating students about mental health disorders, and encouraging students to seek help when needed.
4. **Promote Mental Health Education in the Curriculum:** Mental health education

should be incorporated into the national secondary school curriculum. This will ensure that students have access to accurate and relevant information about mental health from an early age, helping them build resilience and improve mental health literacy.

5. **Research on Long-Term Effects:** Further research should be conducted to evaluate the long-term effects of peer support programs on mental health outcomes. This could involve conducting longitudinal studies that track the mental health of students over several years to determine whether the benefits of the peer support program are sustained over time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of peer support programs in improving mental health outcomes among secondary school students in Enugu, Nigeria. The findings indicate that these programs can reduce mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, enhance mental health literacy, and reduce stigma associated with mental health. Additionally, students reported improved coping strategies and greater openness to seeking help.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, highlighting the need for schools to adopt and expand peer support programs and to integrate mental health education into their curricula. By doing so, they can contribute to a broader cultural shift that reduces stigma and fosters mental well-being among young people in Nigeria.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Age:

- 12-14 years
- 15-17 years
- 18-20 years

- 21 years and above

2. Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other (please specify) _____

3. School:

- Girls Grammar School, Awkunanaw
- Queens Comprehensive Secondary School, One Day Road
- Other (please specify) _____

4. Grade Level:

- Junior Secondary School (JSS 1-3)
- Senior Secondary School (SSS 1-3)

Section 2: Mental Health Assessments

Depression (BDI - Beck Depression Inventory)

Instructions: Please indicate how much each statement describes your mood over the past two weeks.

1. I feel sad:

- 0 - I do not feel sad
- 1 - I feel sad much of the time

- 2 - I am sad all the time
 - 3 - I feel extremely sad or hopeless
2. I have lost interest in my usual activities:
- 0 - I have not lost interest
 - 1 - I have lost interest in some activities
 - 2 - I have lost interest in many activities
 - 3 - I have lost interest in everything
3. I feel like a failure:
- 0 - I do not feel like a failure
 - 1 - I feel like a failure some of the time
 - 2 - I feel like a failure most of the time
 - 3 - I feel like a complete failure
4. I have trouble focusing on things, such as reading or watching television:
- 0 - I do not have trouble focusing
 - 1 - I have some trouble focusing
 - 2 - I have a lot of trouble focusing
 - 3 - I cannot focus on anything

Anxiety (GAD-7 - Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale)

Instructions: Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge:
 - 0 - Not at all
 - 1 - Several days
 - 2 - More than half the days
 - 3 - Nearly every day
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying:
 - 0 - Not at all
 - 1 - Several days
 - 2 - More than half the days
 - 3 - Nearly every day
3. Worrying too much about different things:
 - 0 - Not at all
 - 1 - Several days
 - 2 - More than half the days
 - 3 - Nearly every day
4. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable:
 - 0 - Not at all
 - 1 - Several days
 - 2 - More than half the days
 - 3 - Nearly every day

Stress (PSS - Perceived Stress Scale)

Instructions: Below are several statements about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. Please choose how often you felt or thought a certain way.

1. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?

- 0 - Never
- 1 - Almost never
- 2 - Sometimes
- 3 - Fairly often
- 4 - Very often

2. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?

- 0 - Never
- 1 - Almost never
- 2 - Sometimes
- 3 - Fairly often
- 4 - Very often

3. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

- 0 - Never
- 1 - Almost never
- 2 - Sometimes
- 3 - Fairly often
- 4 - Very often

4. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?

- 0 - Never
- 1 - Almost never
- 2 - Sometimes
- 3 - Fairly often
- 4 - Very often

Section 3: Mental Health Literacy

1. Do you know what mental health is?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

2. Are you aware of any mental health disorders that can affect young people like you?

- Yes
- No

3. How familiar are you with common mental health issues like depression and anxiety?

- Very familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Not familiar at all

4. If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health challenges, where would you go for help? (Select all that apply)

- School counselor
 - Teacher
 - Parent or guardian
 - Mental health professional (therapist, psychologist)
 - Religious leader
 - Peer support group
 - Traditional healers
 - I don't know
5. How often have you learned about mental health issues in school?
- Never
 - Occasionally
 - Frequently
 - Very frequently

Section 4: Perceived Stigma

1. Do you think mental health problems are a sign of weakness?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not sure
2. Do you think people with mental health problems should be treated differently from others?
- Yes

- No
 - Not sure
3. Do you feel comfortable talking to your friends or family about mental health issues?
- Yes
 - No
 - Sometimes
4. How would you react if you found out that one of your friends had a mental health issue?
- I would support them and encourage them to seek help
 - I would avoid them
 - I would not know how to help them
 - I would make fun of them
5. Do you think mental health issues are something that should be talked about more openly in school?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not sure

End of Survey

Thank you for your participation! Your responses will help us understand how peer support programs impact mental health in secondary schools.