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The Role of School Counselors in Promoting Sustainability in the Post Covid-19 Era to Enhance Child Health and Livelihoods

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ABSTRACT

The most significant challenges for education systems in the post-COVID-19 context have emerged in the areas of child health and sustainable living. This paper aims to investigate the ways through which school counselors contribute to the promotion of sustainability for the benefit of students' welfare and future. Mental health and environmental problems are becoming intertwined; thus, school counselors play a crucial role in linking sustainability to psychosocial care. The study adopted a descriptive survey design with a sample of 177 participants comprising teachers, students, and members of a selected community. Data gathering was done using a structured questionnaire adapted from Google Forms. The questionnaire used a 4-point Likert scale to capture the level of awareness, implementation, and results of sustainability practices. To increase the validity of the instrument measuring the level of academic stress, the Scale of Academic Stress was reviewed by several experts in educational psychology and counseling. Reliability was determined to have robust validity with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82, which is the result of the assessment of the stability and reliability of the measurement of the study's constructs. Descriptive analysis was done in SPSS version 26. Mental health challenges that have been worsened by the pandemic are discussed and the ways that school counselors manage them as they support education that fosters responsible behavior are discussed in the study. Such strategies comprise psychological treatment, personal development education, and coordination with teachers and parents to design a supportive school environment. The research also reveals that due to counselor's many roles, they can largely contribute to promoting student resilience and a sustainable culture to improve child foolishness and livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

The change in the working principles of school counselors can be observed when considering the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, making them the agents of sustainability in the sphere of education. In a world that aims to recover from COVID-19, sustainability does not only encompass environmental preservation but also the promotion of mental health, the protection of children, and even sociopolitical stability (Fagbemi, 2021; Giancesan & Chethiyar, 2021). Sustainability is a concept that implies the use of resources in a manner that will not harm the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It includes

environmental, economic, and social aspects in its operations and policies, calling for the sustainable management of resources for sustainability and human welfare (Dominic et al, 2021). Sustainability in education and other professions implies utilizing methods that foster fairness, well-being, and durability to enable organizations, societies, and the environment to succeed without using up or damaging human and natural assets.

This new role of school counselors in advancing sustainable practices in the education system is particularly timely when counselors are contending with the impacts of the pandemic on learners, their welfare, and the growth of

sustainable realities for children. School counselors are qualified educators who work in primary and secondary learning institutions to offer career as well as personal and academic guidance (Jacob & Owobamigbe, 2021). They exist to meet several important needs of students by offering help with academic difficulties, assisting in the achievement of personal well-being and employment readiness, and addressing students' emotional needs. They also spend a lot of time with teachers, parents, and administrators to help develop an appropriate learning climate and foster programs to support students' needs (Brunner et al, 2014). The role of school counselor: School counselors are very significant in the lives of students in and out of class.

Another area in which school counselors have been influential is in supporting the mental health concerns that have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The losses of daily normalcy, social contacts, and structure led to a significant deterioration in children's and adolescents' mental health. School counselors have applied School Counseling Psychology by developing long-term care systems for students' mental health in sustainable schools (Faith & Olanrewaju, 2024). Such systems consist of promoting awareness and understanding of mental disorders, providing social support for individuals struggling with anxiety, depression, and stress, and utilizing tools and practices that prevent or reduce the impact of these conditions (Ugwuozor et al, 2020). School counseling interventions are not only focused on the current problems, but they also teach children to cope with those problems to be able to live a fulfilling life in the future. Counselors have the responsibility of evaluating which students need support services and linking them with the relevant means, be it one-on-one counseling or a group session (Ukwueze & Jabi, 2020). As such, counselors play a part in developing enduring frameworks that would contain the children's mental well-being after the pandemic has passed and throughout their lifetime.

COVID-19 affected health as well as education is illustrated in this case because quite many children responded to questions related to health and education. School counselors are now regarded as active practitioners in facilitating healthy practices that are suitable for the short run and

beyond in students. These efforts include enhancing healthy choices, the reduction of social determinants of health, and developing school health promotion policies in the post-COVID-19 world as highlighted by Madueke et al, (2020). The post-COVID-19 period is the period after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic involving the recovery, adjustment as well as reconstruction of various parts of society. Many changes are affecting people, societies, and organizations in their interactions with the environment in the context of health and education, economy, and social type (Livet & Fixsen, 2019). It is defined by priorities such as mental health, economic recovery, social imbalances brought to light by COVID-19, and digital adaptation to improve the quality of life in a world of continuous change. After the pandemic, being active in education and incorporating health knowledge into programs, including wellness, healthy eating, and check-up procedures are some of the changes that have been adopted by school counselors (Weder et al, 2022). This strategy is sustainable since it supports children to develop positive habits in their lifestyle that will help them for the rest of their lives.

Furthermore, counselors work closely with teachers and other members of staff to ensure that child health is supported and enhanced within the school setting this includes mental health support and physical health education as well as the promotion of health well-being within a school environment (Jaber & Al-Hroub, 2023). Apart from fostering the health and welfare of specific individuals, school counselors are involved with the enhancement of societal and ecological sustainability in schools. They continue to promote social justice, diversity, and equality, to ensure all students get the required necessities to excel academically as well as socially (Geesa et al, 2022). School counselors also defend the rights of students who are discriminated against and fight against policies or practices that hinder such students from excelling in school. Also, counselors have a role in the process of environmentally sustainable development through the integration of environmentally appropriate activities in the program. This may entail educating the students on environmental conservation, participation in sustainable activities, and support of sustainable learning activities (Aharoni-Lir & Ayalon, 024).

Such efforts not only help to solve ecological problems but also teach students to be responsible for the planet, which is an important aspect of the concept of sustainability.

School counselors can also play a role in ensuring that this gap between academics and the environment is closed. Through incorporating sustainability education into the career guidance, they advocate for students to choose career paths that embrace sustainability, including energy production, natural resources, and justice systems. Thus, counselors assist in developing a workforce capable of effectively responding to the sustainability issues of the future (Bennett et al, 2018; Jowarder, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened social inequalities, especially in accessing resources, especially among students coming from impoverished backgrounds. These disparities have been mitigated by school counselors who have now adopted a more central function in ensuring that students get appropriate help and direction in regard to their education and career (Wamsler, 2020). It helps students find out about some possible careers, that may be of interest to them and offers them information on scholarships, grants, or any kind of financial assistance and vocational training (Omobowale et al, 2024).

While advocating for sustainability, school counselors emphasize the role of teaching students the necessary skills that will help them find employment in the future. Further, counselors support policies that respond to students' socioeconomic context and challenges and strive to ensure that all students receive the necessary support to succeed (Alegbeleye et al, 2019). The importance of the present study thus derives from the increasing appreciation of the problems of children. First, assessing the current role of school counselors in sustainability is crucial, as existing literature indicates a gap in their integration within sustainable practices (Akeel et al, 2019). Second, the pandemic has significantly altered school counseling practices, demanding an evaluation of how counselors have adapted to promoting sustainability, particularly in mental health and well-being. Third, identifying key areas where counselors can influence sustainability efforts, such as social justice and environmental education, will inform targeted interventions. Finally, exploring best practices in school-based sustainability

programs will address the lack of comprehensive models for counselors to implement, ensuring a structured approach to enhancing child health and livelihoods.

The objectives of this study include: (1) Assessing the current role of school counselors in promoting sustainability, (2) Evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability, (3) Identifying key areas where school counselors can influence sustainability efforts, (4) Explore best practices in school-based sustainability programs.

METHODS

This research work studied the post-COVID-19 manifestation of school counselors and their contributions towards sustainability with reference to child health and livelihood in Anambra State, Nigeria. Drawing on a descriptive survey design, the study sought to examine the role that school counselors play in promoting sustainability and the effects on students and communities. The study was conducted in Anambra State, involving a sample of 177 participants: 29 teachers and school counselors, 103 students, and 45 community members participated in the study. The participants in this study were chosen purposefully so that the study will only include participants who have adequate understanding and participation in school counseling and sustainability practices. Data collection was done by sending a structured questionnaire developed through Google Forms. This method ensured that many people and anyone who wanted to participate in the study could do so, given the geographical distribution of the sample. The self-developed questionnaire that was used had a 4-point Likert scale to assess the awareness, implementation, and results of implementing sustainability practices. For the credibility of the instrument, the questionnaire was subjected to a review by a panel of experts in educational psychology and counseling. The reliability of the scores was established by conducting a Cronbach's Alpha, which returned a coefficient of 0.82, signifying that there was reliable assessment of the study's constructs. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, ensuring robust and accurate insights into the participants' perspectives on the contributions of school counselors to sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Frequency Table for Age of the Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-28 years	124	70.1	70.1	70.1
	29-39 years	23	13.0	13.0	83.1
	40-50 years	15	8.5	8.5	91.5
	51-61 years	12	6.8	6.8	98.3
	62+ years	3	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	177	100.0	100.0	

The frequency table 1 for the age of respondents shows that the majority are aged 18-28 years (124 or 70.1%). Smaller groups are in the 29-39 years (23 or 13.0%), 40-50 years (15 or 8.5%), 51-61 years (12 or 6.8%), and 62+ years (3 or 1.7%) categories. The cumulative percentages indicate that 70.1% are aged 18-28, and all age groups combined account for 100% of the respondents.

Table 2. Frequency Table for the Role of the Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Teacher/school counselor	29	16.4	16.4	16.4
	Student	103	58.2	58.2	74.6
	Community members	45	25.4	25.4	100.0
	Total	177	100.0	100.0	

The frequency Table 2 for respondents' roles shows that most are students (103 or 58.2%), followed by community members (45 or 25.4%) and teachers/school counselors (29 or 16.4%). Cumulatively, students make up 74.6% of the sample, while community members and teachers/counselors combined account for 25.4% and 16.4%, respectively, totaling 100% of the respondents.

Table 3. Frequency Table for Gender of the Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	57	32.2	32.2	32.2
	Female	120	67.8	67.8	100.0
	Total	177	100.0	100.0	

The gender distribution of respondents in Table 3 shows that 120 individuals (67.8%) are female, while 57 individuals (32.2%) are male. Cumulatively, females account for 67.8% of the sample, with males making up the remaining 32.2%. This total of 177 respondents represents the full dataset.

Table 4: Tests of Normality

	Age	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Role of school counselors in promoting sustainability	18-28 years	.246	124	.000	.885	124	.000
	29-39 years	.235	23	.002	.866	23	.005
	40-50 years	.269	15	.005	.771	15	.002
	51-61 years	.331	12	.001	.650	12	.000
	62+ years	.385	3	.	.750	3	.000
How COVID-19 impacted school counseling practices	18-28 years	.187	124	.000	.926	124	.000
	29-39 years	.280	23	.000	.719	23	.000
	40-50 years	.195	15	.128	.901	15	.098
	51-61 years	.331	12	.001	.650	12	.000
	62+ years	.314	3	.	.893	3	.363

Key areas that school counselors influence sustainability efforts	18-28 years	.288	124	.000	.866	124	.000
	29-39 years	.216	23	.007	.870	23	.006
	40-50 years	.266	15	.005	.778	15	.002
	51-61 years	.331	12	.001	.650	12	.000
	62+ years	.385	3	.	.750	3	.000
Best practices in school-based sustainability programs	18-28 years	.274	124	.000	.875	124	.000
	29-39 years	.242	23	.001	.822	23	.001
	40-50 years	.231	15	.030	.905	15	.114
	51-61 years	.331	12	.001	.650	12	.000
	62+ years	.253	3	.	.964	3	.637

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The tests of normality for the various age groups and variables in Table 4 indicate that the data generally do not follow a normal distribution. Both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to assess normality, with significant p-values suggesting deviations from normality. For most age groups, the p-values from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests are less than 0.05, indicating significant deviations from normality. For example, for the age group 18-28

years, the p-values are 0.000 for both tests in all variables, confirming non-normality. The only exceptions are the age groups 40-50 years and 62+ years for “How COVID-19 impacted school counseling practices”, where the Shapiro-Wilk test p-values are above 0.05, suggesting closer adherence to normality.

Hypothesis 1: The role of school counselors in promoting sustainability within schools does not differ by age.

Table 5. Univariate analysis of variance on the role of school counselors in promoting sustainability within schools based on age

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	553.292 ^a	4	138.323	22.971	.000
Intercept	16866.283	1	16866.283	2800.997	.000
Age	553.292	4	138.323	22.971	.000
Error	1035.703	172	6.022		
Total	67709.000	177			
Corrected Total	1588.994	176			

a. R Squared = .348 (Adjusted R Squared = .333)

Table 5 captured the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Hypothesis 1, which posits that the role of school counselors in promoting sustainability does not differ by age, reveals a significant result (F = 22.971, p < .001). This indicates that there are notable differences in how different age groups perceive or enact the role of

school counselors in sustainability. With an R-squared value of .348 (Adjusted R-Squared = .333), approximately 35% of the variability in the role of counselors can be explained by age differences. Thus, the hypothesis is rejected, as age significantly affects the role of counselors in promoting sustainability.

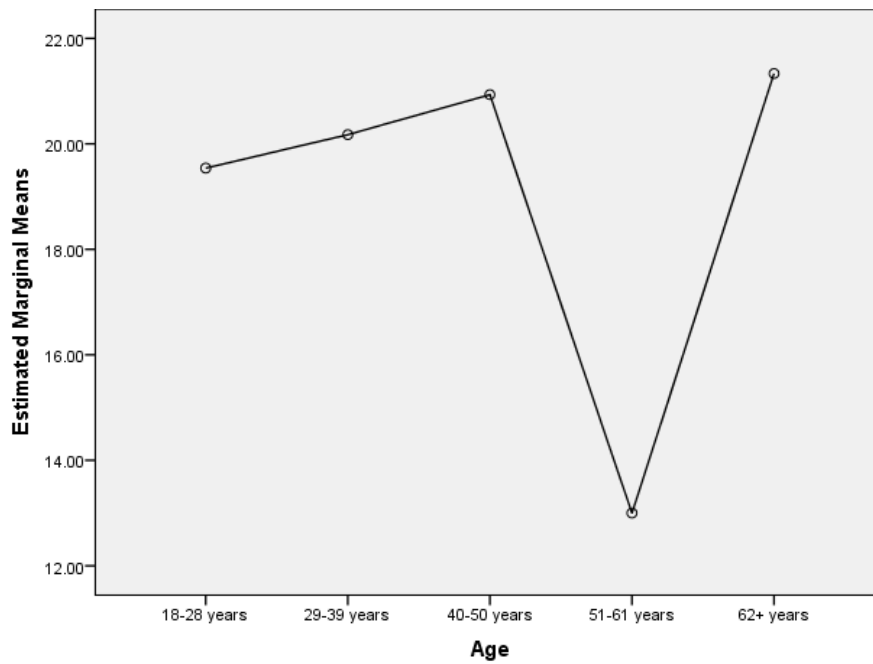


Figure 1. Mean plot on role of school counselors in promoting sustainability within schools based on age

The figure 1 depicts the relationship between age groups and the perceived role of school counselors in promoting sustainability within schools. Individuals aged 51–61 years reported the lowest estimated marginal means, indicating a diminished view of counselor roles, while those in

the 62+ age group rated the counselors' roles highest. Younger adults (18–50 years) exhibited relatively consistent perceptions.

Hypothesis 2: The impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability is not significantly different across different age groups.

Table 6. Univariate analysis of variance on the impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	224.257 ^a	4	56.064	9.221	.000
Intercept	16374.724	1	16374.724	2693.052	.000
Age	224.257	4	56.064	9.221	.000
Error	1045.822	172	6.080		
Total	61645.000	177			
Corrected Total	1270.079	176			

a. R Squared = .177 (Adjusted R Squared = .157)

Table 6 shows the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Hypothesis 2, which suggests that the impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability is not significantly different across age groups, showing significant results ($F = 9.221, p < .001$). This indicates substantial differences in how COVID-19 affected school counseling practices across different

age groups. With an R-squared value of .177 (Adjusted R-Squared = .157), approximately 18% of the variance in the impact is explained by age. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected, as age significantly influences the extent of COVID-19's impact on counseling practices related to sustainability.

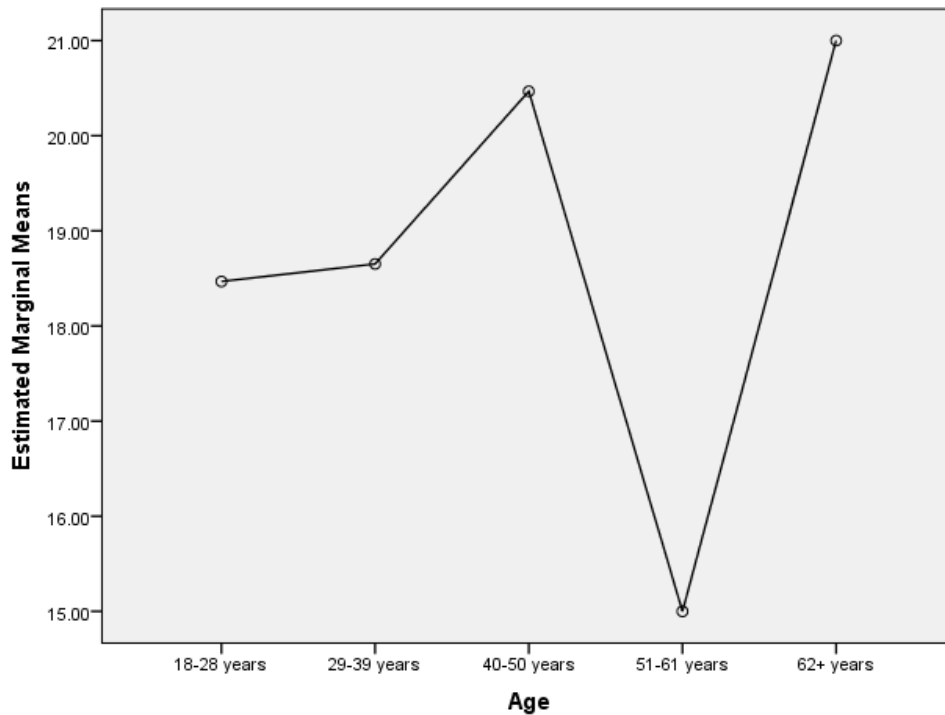


Figure 2. Mean plot on the impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability

Figure 2 shows the impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability across different age groups. Individuals aged 51–61 years reported the lowest impact, while those aged 62+ years indicated the highest impact. The 40–50 age group experienced a peak in impact, whereas

younger adults (18–39 years) reported relatively stable perceptions, though lower compared to older groups.

Hypothesis 3: The influence of school counselors on key areas of sustainability efforts does not vary by age.

Table 7. Univariate analysis of variance on the influence of school counselors on key areas of sustainability efforts

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	269.858 ^a	4	67.465	12.498	.000
Intercept	17330.079	1	17330.079	3210.573	.000
Age	269.858	4	67.465	12.498	.000
Error	928.424	172	5.398		
Total	67241.000	177			
Corrected Total	1198.282	176			

a. R Squared = .225 (Adjusted R Squared = .207)

Table 7 shows the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Hypothesis 3, which posits that the influence of school counselors on key areas of sustainability does not vary by age, shows significant results ($F = 12.498, p < .001$). This indicates that the impact of school counselors on sustainability efforts differs significantly across age

groups. The R-squared value of .225 (Adjusted R-Squared = .207) suggests that approximately 22% of the variance in counselors' influence on sustainability is explained by age differences. Consequently, the hypothesis is rejected, as age significantly affects the extent of counselors' influence on sustainability efforts.

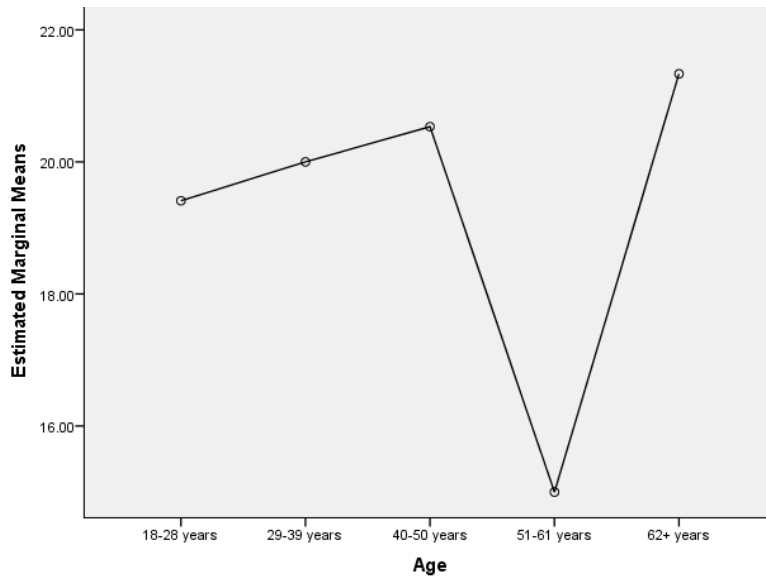


Figure 3. Mean plot on the influence of school counselors on key areas of sustainability efforts

The figure 3 illustrates the perceived influence of school counselors on key sustainability efforts by age group. Respondents aged 51–61 years reported the lowest influence, while those aged 62+ indicated the highest. The 40–50 age group showed a peak in perceived influence, and younger

respondents (18–39 years) exhibited moderate but relatively stable perceptions. There is a significant dip in perceptions for the 51–61 age group.

Hypothesis 4: The best practices in school-based sustainability programs led by school counselors do not differ by age.

Table 8. Univariate analysis of variance on best practices in school-based sustainability programs led by school counselors

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	352.955 ^a	4	88.239	14.237	.000
Intercept	16837.405	1	16837.405	2716.715	.000
Age	352.955	4	88.239	14.237	.000
Error	1066.006	172	6.198		
Total	64596.000	177			
Corrected Total	1418.960	176			

a. R Squared = .249 (Adjusted R Squared = .231)

Table 8 shows the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Hypothesis 4, which asserts that best practices in school-based sustainability programs led by school counselors do not differ by age, reveals significant results ($F = 14.237$, $p < .001$). This indicates that there are notable differences in best practices across different age

groups. The R-squared value of .249 (Adjusted R-Squared = .231) shows that approximately 25% of the variance in best practices can be attributed to age differences. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected, as age significantly influences the best practices in sustainability programs led by school counselors.

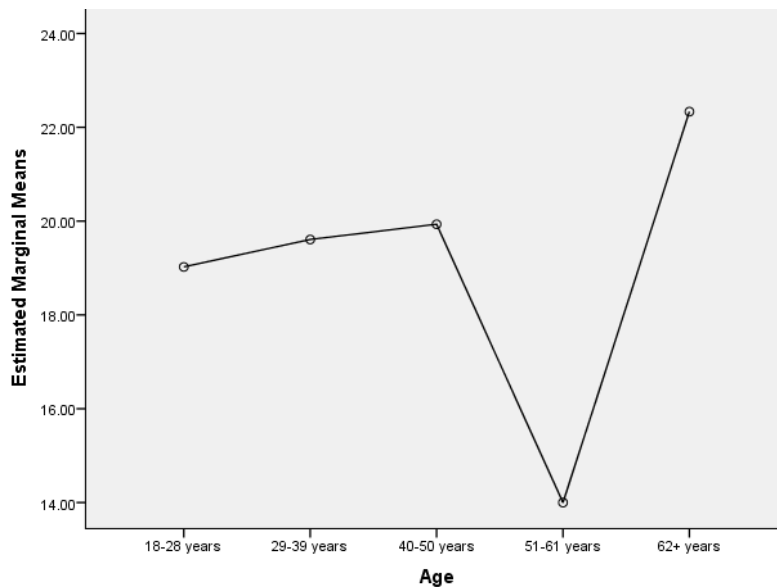


Figure 4. Mean plot on best practices in school-based sustainability programs led by school counselors

The mean plot in Figure 4 shows the variation in best practices for school-based sustainability programs led by school counselors across different age groups. Individuals aged 40–50 exhibit the lowest estimated marginal means, while those 62+ years demonstrate the highest. There is a steep decline between 40–50 and 51–61 years, followed by a significant rise in the 62+ age group.

The first research question focused on the contribution of school counselors to sustainability. This study confirmed that school counselors are indeed involved in raising awareness of the community to sustainability and implementation of sustainable programs in school activities. For instance, Wamsler (2020) established that counselors raise students' awareness of sustainable lifestyles while Patel et al. (2022) observed that counselors facilitate awareness-creation sessions on environmental conservation. In contrast, Eneji et al, (2023) highlighted that counselors collaborate with teachers to integrate sustainability into the curriculum, focusing on more formal educational processes. In a related study, Bennett et al, (2018) emphasized that school counselors not only advocate for sustainable lifestyle choices but also push for policy changes to embed environmental stewardship within the school system. Furthermore, the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) conducted on Hypothesis 1 indicates significant age differences in how counselors perceive their role in promoting sustainability. This finding agrees with Aharoni-Lir and Ayalon (2024), who reported age-based disparities in environmental advocacy roles,

suggesting that younger counselors may be more proactive in environmental initiatives compared to older counterparts.

Research question 2 examined the role of school counselors in promoting sustainability. The result showed that the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the focus of school counseling practices from sustainability to urgent health concerns, as noted by Geesa et al, (2022). In contrast, Jaber & Al-Hroub (2023) found that while the focus changed, counselors adapted by integrating sustainability into remote lessons, despite the limitations of virtual platforms. Remote learning hindered counselors' ability to promote interactive sustainability programs, which aligned with Lowell and Ilobinso. (2023), who reported that virtual platforms limited engagement and the experiential learning typically involved in sustainability education. In a related study, Weder et al, (2022) observed that sustainability programs were significantly altered during the pandemic, with counselors facing difficulties in maintaining momentum for sustainability initiatives in a remote setting. This finding agrees with the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Hypothesis 2, which shows that the impact of COVID-19 on school counseling practices related to sustainability varied across age groups. Older counselors struggled more with technology-based adaptation, explaining why age accounted for 18% of the variance in impact, a finding supported by Livet and Fixsen (2019).

Research question 3 examined the key areas where school counselors can influence

sustainability efforts. The result showed that school counselors can significantly influence sustainability efforts through various key areas. Ganatsios et al, (2024) emphasized the counselors' role in educating students about eco-friendly habits, which aligns with Garcia et al. (2023), who observed that counselors support student projects focused on sustainability solutions. In contrast, Brunner et al, (2014) argued that counselors' impact is more noticeable in leading recycling programs and other green initiatives, highlighting a more direct involvement in school-wide sustainability actions. In a related study, Maree and Di-Fabio (2018) discussed how counselors integrate sustainability into career development, helping students explore green career paths. This finding is consistent with Al-Hamad et al, (2024), who noted that counselors also advocate for sustainable policies within schools, ensuring that long-term eco-friendly practices are implemented. The Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Hypothesis 3 shows significant differences in how counselors influence sustainability across age groups, with younger counselors being more active in pushing for policy changes, while older counselors focus more on developing sustainable lifestyle choices.

Research question 4 identified best practices in school-based sustainability programs. The result showed that in school-based sustainability programs, integrating various practices can yield diverse outcomes depending on student engagement, age, and support from the community. Recycling programs that clearly outline participation for students, as highlighted by Ogwueleka and Naveen (2021), have been shown to be more effective when students understand their role, in contrast to programs lacking clear guidelines (Oh & Hettiarachchi, 2020). Integrating sustainability into the curriculum, as observed by Ofojebe (2014), proved effective in enhancing students' knowledge, agreeing with Akeel et al, (2019) findings that this approach fosters long-term environmental stewardship. Similarly, school gardens offer hands-on lessons in sustainability, in contrast to Williams and Brown (2013), who found older students were less engaged in garden activities. Partnerships with local organizations provide essential support, particularly when paired with regular workshops on sustainable practices, in agreement with Alegbeleye et al., (2019) findings

on community engagement. Furthermore, creating incentives for student involvement aligns with research by Omobowale et al, (2024), who found that incentives increased participation across age groups. However, the ANOVA results reveal that age significantly influences engagement in counselor-led programs, contradicting prior assumptions of uniform best practices across age demographics.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of school counselors in promoting sustainability in the post-COVID-19 era is pivotal for enhancing child health and livelihoods. As schools adapt to new norms and challenges, counselors are uniquely positioned to address the psychosocial needs of students while fostering an awareness of sustainability. Integrating mental health support with educational initiatives focused on environmental and social sustainability helps build resilience in students, encourages healthy lifestyle choices, and empowers them to become advocates for sustainable practices. The post-pandemic period demands a holistic approach to education that addresses not only the academic and emotional well-being of students but also promotes sustainable development goals. School counselors, in collaboration with educators, parents, and communities, create a supportive environment that nurtures the physical, emotional, and environmental health of students. Their involvement in mental health interventions, life skills training, and sustainability education significantly improves students' overall well-being and equips them with the tools needed for future success. School counselors are essential in bridging the gap between mental health support and sustainable practices in education. Fostering emotional resilience and promoting sustainability allows counselors to play a critical role in shaping a healthier, more equitable, and environmentally conscious future for children and society at large.

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