

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS' PROFESSIONALISM AND STUDENTS' CONSULTATION INTENTION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL: A SERIAL MEDIATION OF INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND EMPATHETIC DISPOSITION

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***Abstract:** This study deals with the professionalism and students' consultation intention of guidance counselors. The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of the quality of interventions on the students' intention to consult guidance counselors, via interpersonal skills and empathetic disposition. The data presented in this study were collected by means of a questionnaire from 388 students from three high schools in the city of Yaoundé, Cameroon. The mediation analysis carried out support the indirect effect of the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions on the students' consultation intention, through the successive mediators of relational qualities and empathic disposition.*

***Keywords:** Consultation intention, empathetic disposition, guidance counselor, intervention quality, interpersonal skills, professionalism.*

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Introduction

The economic, social and cultural development of any society is the conjugation of several factors such as the awakening of consciousness, the acquisition of knowledge, and in general, education (Fonkeng, 2007). Therefore, the development of humanity inevitably passes through education, which is the means for any society to ensure its sustainability. As old as human societies, education is a field that requires patience, attention, regularity and continuity. The issue of education is therefore vital at the individual, community and international levels. In Cameroon, this determination was concretized by some consultations that led to the holding of the General Forum on Education in 1995. The resolutions led to the adoption in April 1998 of the Law of Education (Ntebe Bomba, 2008). This law demonstrates the State's desire to ensure the efficiency of its education system, which led it to make basic education compulsory and free (Fonkeng, 2007). Post-primary education has benefited from this commitment, with adjustments to ensure the quality of education in secondary schools.

For Fonkoua (2008), if the Law of Education stipulates that the teacher is the main guarantor of the quality of education, in order to accomplish his mission, he works in consultation with other partners, including guidance counselors who provide orientation and school psychology activities for students at all levels of education (Ntebe Bomba, 2008). However, it turns out that the latter and their missions are not always well understood by the educational community. It was observed that students still have difficulties in seeking the help

of guidance counselors when they faced academic and personal (Fonkoua & Youtha, 2008; Yahaya & Bomda, 2014).

For instance, a study carried out by Fonkoua in 2007 revealed that guidance counselors do not exhibit the professional qualities that are expected from them in the school milieu. It is understandable why students put their trust in either parental guidance or their personal orientations and then what their peers tell them. The guidance counselor is only statutorily third in their orientation. Meanwhile, the guidance counsellor, who works with students and the entire educational community, is supposed to mobilize a set of professional qualities (quality of his pedagogical intervention, interpersonal skills and empathetic disposition) to inform and guide students according to their aptitudes, interests and needs (Yahaya & Bomda, 2014).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate students' perceptions of guidance counsellor professionalism and how it affects consultation intention among students. The study aims to determine the relationship between the professional qualities of school guidance counsellors and their consultation intention by secondary students with interpersonal skills and empathetic disposition as mediators. The research method used was a survey study. This paper examines the relationship between intervention skills and consultation intention of secondary school students, mediated by interpersonal skills and empathetic disposition. We believe that if the guidance counsellor mobilizes good interpersonal skills, ensures the quality of his pedagogical intervention, demonstrates a certain adaptability in the school environment, and shows an empathetic disposition, he would arouse interest in guidance counselling activities among the students; and this would have the advantage of increasing the rate of intention to consult the guidance counselling services by the students for help (Fonkoua & Youtha, 2008; Okéné, 2009; Yahaya & Bomda, 2014).

Literature Review

The major works on educational and vocational guidance approach professionalism in at least two directions (Blanchard & Gelpe, 2008; Guichard & Huteau, 2006). Of course, competences concerning specific know-how will be necessary and will have to be renewed during the career (Guichard, 2002). But other competences will also be indispensable, centered around their capacity to understand their environment in a broad sense and not only with the glasses of the guidance counselor (Okéné, 2009). This is why this work of understanding will have to be organized more collectively in the guidance counselling service (Guichard, 2002; Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016). The guidance process is now largely incorporated into the general functioning of the school system (Bomda, 2008; Fonkoua, 2007; Okéné, 2009; Sikali, 2009). Student support is increasingly assigned to schools (MINESEC, 2009). The figure of the student counsellor-psychologist is evolving and becoming smaller (Fonkoua & Youtha, 2008; Sikali, 2009). For a long time, it has been hypothesized that the main target of the guidance counsellor is changing: it is shifting from helping the student and his parents to helping other professionals in the school to move towards educational and vocational guidance (Fonkoua & Youtha, 2008; Yahaya & Bomda, 2014).

Towards quality in guidance and counselling services: Considered as the third pillar of the Cameroonian education system after pedagogy and school administration, guidance and counselling has replaced purely academic and vocational guidance. It is defined by UNESCO (2002) as "an educational practice of a continuous type, aiming to help each individual to choose for himself the training most in line with his aptitudes, tastes and interests, to adapt to it and to solve his behavioral, psychological, relational, personal and social issues in view of his full personal development and his integration into active life, in conformity with the needs of the country and its prospects for economic, social and cultural progress". Today, the guidance needs of students are diverse and depend on their psychological functioning, the resources available to them and the conditions of the environment around them (Guichard, 2002; Order of Guidance Counselors of Quebec (OCCOPPQ), 2010; Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali,

2016). Helping them to transform an educational goal, such as finding a direction of study, into a set of actions to achieve that goal should be a fundamental concern for guidance counselling services and its professionals, the guidance counselors (Yahaya & Bomda, 2014).

In the school environment, the guidance counselor who accompanies the young person in his or her self-discovery, in the concrete and active exploration of the world of training and work, in the support for the development of his or her autonomy, in his or her decision-making, in the confirmation of his or her career plan and in its realization, will have to sharpen his or her skills more in order to be up to the task of meeting the expectations of students and society (Guichard, 2004). He knows what can inform the choices that the student has to make, both with regard to intrinsic elements such as his personality traits, beliefs, values and interests, and with regard to extrinsic aspects such as his family and social environment, his skills, his knowledge and the personal resources at his disposal. The guidance counselor must provide the student with this insight in relevant ways in order to enable him or her to better define him or herself, to better understand the various aspects influencing his or her choice and to help him or her find meaning in his or her learning so as to persevere in his or her academic path and, ultimately, to find his or her place in society (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016). The guidance counselor's assistance thus provides guidelines and benchmarks that enable students to engage in school and in the realization of their future plans (Guigue, 2001).

Training and professionalism of the guidance counselor: According to Fonkoua & Youtha (2008), the guidance counsellor is a staff member with three skills: skills related to knowledge of the individual and groups, skills related to knowledge of the school and university environment, and finally skills related to knowledge of the economic world. Entering the second cycle of higher education with a bachelor's degree, preferably in the humanities, the guidance counselor receives training based on fundamental knowledge (psychology, sociology, economics, pedagogy, administration and planning), practical knowledge (statistics, demographics, computer science), and finally professional knowledge (the practice of tests, interviewing, information, guidance and counseling techniques, ethics and deontology, a final thesis and professional internship) (Yahaya & Bomba, 2014).

At first sight, he/she is trained to advise and to orientate at school, university and professional level, but he/she can be attached to structures using applied psychology such as the educational system, manpower services, various services of professional selection in public and private administrations and more precisely the services of human resources which are interested in the problems of socio-professional insertion (Okéné, 2009). These are the issues of reciprocal adaptation related to work system and the improvement of skills during a career. From the psychological and individual point of view, the guidance counselor has a legitimate role in the structures interested in guidance problems such as school and vocational statistics services, school mapping services, educational planning services and the child welfare system (Guichard, 2002; Guichard & Huteau, 2006).

Independent and mediating variables

The guidance counselor (school psychologist) accompanies students in the construction of lifelong orientation skills (Guichard & Huteau, 2006; Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016; Yahaya & Bomda, 2014). He/she ensures and coordinates the organization of information for students on self-discovery, careers and training, in conjunction with the educational teams. In other words, on a day-to-day basis, the counselor must welcome all students from the 6th grade upwards, help them sort through the numerous pieces of information they gather here and there, but above all listen to them, reassure them and motivate them (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016). The essential skills required of guidance counselors are: adaptability, competence and creativity, interpersonal skills and empathy.

Intervention quality: Intervention quality are tasks, exercises that can arouse the interest of students to immerse themselves in vocational activities when they meet the needs in line

with their personal and professional future project (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016). Thus, if the guidance counselor is to be creative and relevant in his or her interventions to captivate the students, and get them to identify their needs of which they are previously unaware. If we admit that each student envisages his or her future to some extent, the guidance counsellor will not bring them anything new, but it is a relevant approach that will awaken in these students the desire to consult the counselor and to become actively involved in his or her guidance activities.

Studies carried out by Guigue (2001) among secondary school students in France show that many of them say that schools do not provide them with any guidance at all in their choice of course of study and profession. They say that their orientation and their professional project are defined by themselves or by their parents without the notable help of the guidance counselor. For them, the latter are of no use in the schools and they state in their speech that they do not know what the guidance counsellor can do for them in terms of their academic and professional orientation (Fonkoua & Youtha, 2008; Guigue, 2001).

It is essential to be able to adapt and evolve the relevance of interventions (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016). Be willing to work extra hours or take on new tasks when necessary. Be able to revise one's judgment or opinions. Questioning one's knowledge and beliefs. Be willing to learn. Be a good observer and listener. The guidance counselor must be adaptable to the school environment and be increasingly involved in finding new ways of doing things in order to reach the maximum number of students in their interventions (Guigue, 2001).

Interpersonal skills: The effective guidance counselor is genuinely interested in the happiness and well-being of students. He or she feels deeply concerned, which builds confidence in the student being helped (Guichard, 2002; Guichard & Huteau, 2006). Even better, because the student feels valued and cared for, he or she feels valuable and begins to like him or herself. The counselor must be authentic. He or she must be open and sincere, and avoid any falsehoods or airs of superiority. Relational authenticity means being spontaneous without being impulsive and frank without being cruel. It means that the counselor is truly transparent, not thinking or feeling one thing while saying another (Okéné, 2009).

Relational qualities imply that the counselor has a humble spirit. A counselor who is arrogant, self-absorbed, or thinks he or she knows everything is likely to cause havoc. A proud and haughty spirit will turn off teens and cause more problems than it solves. A humble spirit, on the other hand, will seek to understand rather than be understood. The humble spirit will never be quick to give advice. Instead, it encourages the student to seek his own answers and directions. He focuses the conversation on the mentality and sensibility of the person he is talking to, and does not draw attention at all to the talents, know-how or wisdom of the Counselor (Guichard, 2002).

The empathetic disposition: The knowledge acquired in listening enables them to truly identify the profile of the students they meet, to have a real quality of listening in interviews, to have a fine perception of their expectations both in relation to the educational system and in relation to the help they can give them in their orientation process (Guichard, 2002).

The quality of the reception, the listening and the orientation process, which requires a great deal of empathy, could influence positively or negatively their behaviour with regard to the training activities and adapted services that the guidance counsellor provides within the institution (Guichard & Huteau, 2006). The guidance counsellor 's contribution is to break the ice between the learner and the guidance counselor. The guidance counsellor 's contribution is to break the ice between the learner and the guidance counsellor, because the guidance counselor should not be on the administrators' side, but on the students' side, so that the students are able to approach the guidance counselor easily and talk to it easily (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016).

Dependent variable

Intentionality for consulting school counselors: Intentionality is a psychological state that guides an individual's attention, experience, and actions in a process to achieve a specific goal. Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) have demonstrated the effect of the components of intention (attention, expectation and belief) on behavior. In addition, Roy & Savoie (2007) describe the construction of the consultation intention as the result of the interaction between the personality and the characteristics of the social context on the one hand and rational and intuitive reasoning on the other hand. In the fields of education and psychology, intention has another dimension. Intention" is considered by Krueger & Carsrud (1993) to be a process that emerges with the needs, values, habits and beliefs of the individual. It expresses the intensity with which an individual is ready to try, the level of effort that he/she plans to invest, to adopt a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). It is, according to Bird (1992), dependent on contextual variables, the element that structures and guides the action. It is expected that the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions will influence the students' consultation intention, through the successive roles of relational qualities and empathic disposition.

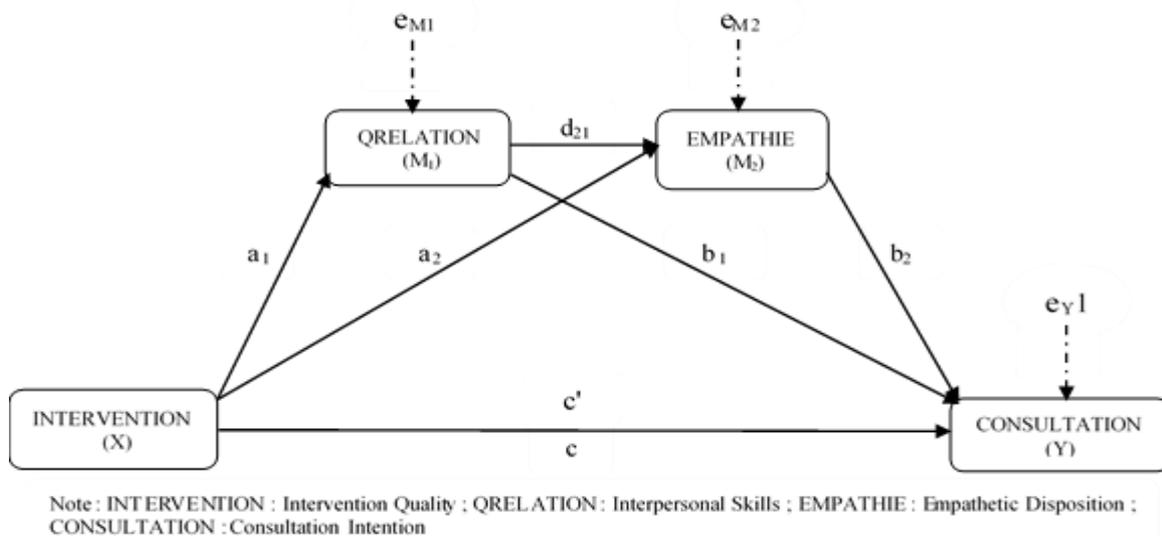


Figure 1 Conceptual research model

Methodology

Research tools

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items and 7 factual questions (school attended, class attended, gender, age, etc.). Participants were asked to respond using 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from "Never" to "Very often", or from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". The internal consistency of the dimensions of each scale is assessed by the coefficient of Cronbach's alpha (α). The use of different instructions minimizes response bias according to the recommendations of (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Data collection procedure

Participants were informed of their right not to participate in this study as well as the anonymous nature of the study. The students were also told that there were no right or wrong answers and that the data collected would remain confidential and would only be used for research purposes. The instruction on the questionnaire was: "The following statements are about opinions you may have about school and career services. Indicate how much you agree with each one. The time limit for the questionnaire was 15 minutes.

Methods of analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software (version 26.0 for Windows). In order to test all the hypotheses, several steps were followed. First, we analyzed first-order correlations to explore combinations between factors of guidance counselor professionalism and students' counseling intention in school counseling services. In the final part of the results, descriptive analyses were conducted on the relationship between the study variables, and mediation analyses were conducted to test the mediating effect of relational ability and empathy on the relationship between guidance counselor professionalism factors and students' intention to consult school-based guidance services. To conduct these mediation analyses, the procedure defined by Preacher & Hayes (2008) was used. Following Fig. 1, it consists in estimating parameters (a, b, c and c') that allow to differentiate the total effects from the direct effects of the predictor variable on the dependent variable. On the basis of these initial calculations, the indirect effects are estimated on a 95% confidence interval using a bootstrapping procedure on a probability sample of $n = 10000$. This procedure is commonly used and is robust to the possible biases of non-normal distributions of the data (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Participants to the study

This study was conducted among ninth, tenth, and twelfth grade students in three public secondary schools (Mendong and Etoug-Ebe bilingual high schools, and Biyem-Assi high school) in Yaoundé, Cameroon. After obtaining permission from school principals, students were invited to complete the questionnaires on a voluntary and anonymous basis during school hours. A total of 388 students completed the questionnaires, however 04 questionnaires were withdrawn from the study because they were incomplete. In fact, the study was conducted with a total of 384 high school students, of which 195 were boys and 189 were girls, with an average age of 17.13 years ($SD = 1.84$); 133 of them were in the ninth grade, 125 in the first grade, and 126 in the last grade.

Research results

Descriptive analysis

The descriptive statistics for the different variables under study are presented in Table 1. Also included are means, standard deviations, internal consistency index (Cronbach's α), and correlations among the study variables. The results of correlation analyses indicate that consultation intention, intervention quality, interpersonal skills, and empathetic disposition of the guidance counselor are all significantly and positively correlated.

The relationships between intervention quality, interpersonal skills, empathetic disposition, and student consultation intention were measured using Pearson correlations (Table 1). To this end, Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients between the components of our three variables. The measure of intervention quality was positively and significantly correlated with interpersonal skills ($r = .341, p < .001$), and empathetic disposition ($r = .604, p < .001$), as well as consultation intention ($r = .337, p < .001$). In addition, interpersonal skills were positively and significantly correlated with empathetic disposition ($r = .661, p < .001$) and consultation intention ($r = .424, p < .001$). Finally, the measure of consultation intention correlated positively and significantly with empathetic disposition ($r = .459, p < .001$).

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, coefficient (α), and correlations among the study variables

	Means (M)	(SD)	α	1	2	3
1 INTERVENTION	3,093	0,658	0,820	-		
2 QRELATION	2,698	0,732	0,791	0,341***	-	
3 EMPATHIE	2,904	0,727	0,832	0,604***	0,661***	-
4 CONSULTATION	2,615	0,524	0,784	0,337***	0,424***	0,459***

Note : INTERVENTION: Intervention Quality; QRELATION: Interpersonal Skills; EMPATHY: Empathetic Disposition; CONSULTATION: Consult Intention; N = 382; ddl = 384; *** p < 0.001

Mediation analysis

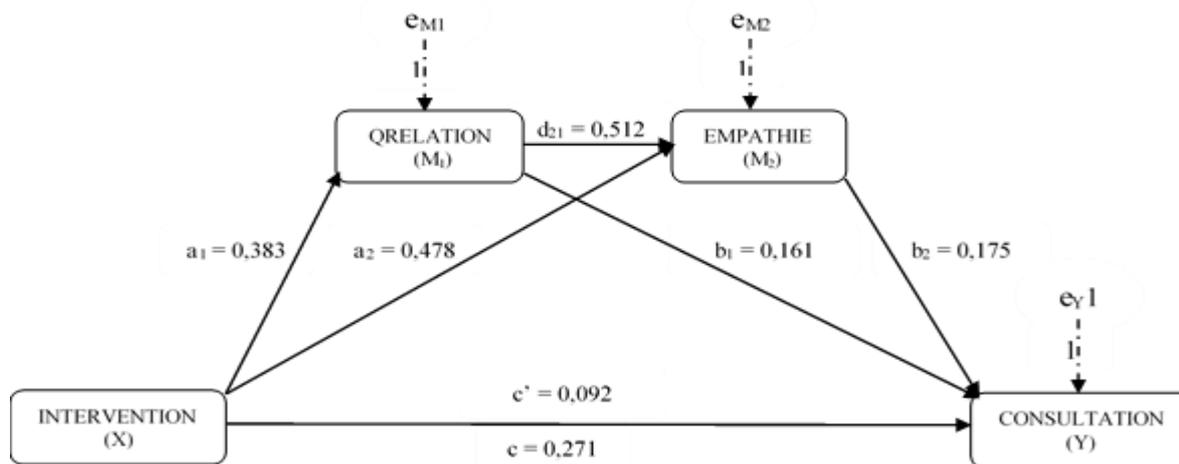
We tested a serial mediation model with relational qualities and empathetic disposition, in the relationship between the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions and counseling intention. The analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (Model 6) of Hayes (2018), with 10000 bootstraps.

Table 2 Regression coefficients, standard errors, and summary of the tested research model of two serial mediators for students' consultation intention

Antecedent	Consequent											
	M1(QRELATION)			M2 (EMPATHIE)			Y (CONSULTATION)					
	Coeff. (B)	ES	p	Coeff. (B)	ES	p	Coeff. (B)	ES	p			
Constant	i _{m1}	1,513	0,171	<,001	i _{m2}	0,047	0,126	=,710	i _y	1,391	0,1245	<,001
X (INTERVENTION)	a ₁	0,383	0,054	<,001	a ₂	0,478	0,038	<,001	c'	0,092	0,045	=,044
M1 (QRELATION)	-	-	-	d ₂₁	0,512	0,034	<,001	b ₁	0,161	0,043	<,001	
M2 (EMPATHIE)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	b ₂	0,175	0,051	<,001	
		$R^2 = 0,116$				$R^2 = 0,559$				$R^2 = 0,245$		
		F(1, 383) = 50,328 ; p <,001				F(2, 381) = 284,580 ; p <,001				F(3, 380) = 41,015 ; p <,001		

Note : INTERVENTION : Intervention Quality ; QRELATION : Interpersonal Skills ; EMPATHIE : Empathetic Disposition ; CONSULTATION : Consultation Intention ; N = 382

The quality of the guidance counselor's interventions had a significant and positive effect on interpersonal skills (a₁ = .383; t = 7.094; p < .001). Quality of guidance counselor interventions had a significant and positive effect on empathetic disposition (a₂ = .512; t = 14.93; p < .001). Controlling by the quality of guidance counselor interventions and empathetic disposition variables, the effect of interpersonal skills on students' counseling intention was significant and positive (b₁ = .161; t = 3.762; p < .001). Controlling by the variables of quality of guidance counselor interventions and relational qualities, the effect of empathetic disposition on students' counseling intention is significant and positive (b₂ = .175; t = 3.437; p < .001). In addition, the direct effect of the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions on students' counseling intention was significant and positive (c = .270; p < .001).



Note: ** The parameter is significant at the 1% risk level
 *** The parameter is significant at the 0.1% risk level
a, b, c and d are the unstandardized coefficients of a linear regression
 $a_1 \times d_{21} \times b_2$ estimated with bootstrap test (Hayes 2018, PROCESS Model 6)

Figure 2 Statistical plot of the tested search model of two serial mediators for student consultation intention

The indirect effect of the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions on students' consultation intention, through interpersonal skills, is significant and positive ($a_1 \times b_1 = .062$), with a 95% confidence interval excluding 0 (CI = [.025 to .105]). The indirect effect of the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions on students' counseling intention, through the counselor's empathetic disposition, is significant and positive ($a_2 \times b_2 = .083$), with a 95% confidence interval excluding 0 (CI = [.033 to .142]). Finally, the indirect effect of the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions on students' counseling intention, through successive mediators of interpersonal skills and empathetic disposition, is significant and positive ($a \times b_1 \times b_2 = .034$), with a 95% confidence interval excluding 0 (CI = [.013 to .58]). This result indicates complementary mediation (Hayes & Preacher, 2014).

Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this study was to verify the influence of the quality of the guidance counselor's interventions on students' consultation intention, through the successive mediators of interpersonal skills and empathetic disposition.

Finally, these results are in agreement with the works of (Fonkoua, 2009; Fonkoua & Youtha, 2008; Guigue, 2001; Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016), which insist on the quality of the pedagogical interventions as factors that can maintain the interest of the students for a better learning and therefore, a better success.

In this sense, for Sikali (2009), quality interventions are then tasks that can arouse the interest of students to immerse themselves in guidance activities when they meet their needs in line with their personal and professional future project. Thus, if the guidance counsellor is to be creative and relevant in his or her interventions to captivate the students, and get them to identify their needs of which they are previously unaware. If we admit that each student envisages his or her future to a certain extent, the guidance counsellor will not bring them anything new, but he or she will propose a relevant approach that will awaken in these students the desire to consult the guidance counsellor and to become actively involved in guidance activities.

In view of our results, we agree with Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali (2016), who think that the non-realization of a quality of pedagogical interventions leads to multiple complaints and actions of claims that are manifested by stereotypes that border on the contempt of the

students towards the guidance counselors. Also, in his study, Sikali (2009) argues that many students do not consult guidance counselors because they do not find it interesting. This is because, in their words, "most guidance counselors are limited, stuck on courses of study that have outlived their usefulness and are contrary to the new expectations of the world," or "generally on little things like the timetable. This researcher noted that learners increasingly need information about the vocational training sought by companies. It is often noted that guidance counselors are unable to meet these needs. They are unable to mobilize all the resources necessary to create extrinsic motivation in students (Guigue, 2001). However, although the investment in physical resources is virtually nil, the demand for guidance continues to grow. The provision of a stimulating environment for guidance counseling and research for students should all be geared towards ensuring quality in guidance counseling services.

These findings emphasize the role of relational qualities in promoting adolescent counseling intention. Indeed, according to Guichard (2002), the effective counselor is genuinely interested in the happiness and well-being of his or her interlocutor. The counsellor must demonstrate relational authenticity, which implies being spontaneous without being impulsive or blunt, and not using cruel language. The majority of authors consider relational qualities as very important in the formation of intentions in clients in consultation. However, there is often a gap between relational quality and the actual experience of its manifestation. This is, in fact, an aspect that Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali (2016) considers fundamental. Insofar as counsellors are, according to them, most often full of theoretical knowledge, but in terms of the experience and experience that should accompany them, in this case their interventions, they are often lacking.

Relational skills require that the counsellor possess a humble spirit. An arrogant, egocentric or know-it-all guidance counsellor is likely to be a loss. A proud and haughty spirit will turn off teenagers and cause many more problems than it solves; and this is precisely what students' complaints are about as revealed in our pre-survey. A humble mind, on the other hand, will seek to understand rather than to be understood. The humble mind will never rush to give advice. Instead, it encourages the student to seek his or her own answers and directions.

Previous studies have noted the importance of the empathetic qualities of the guidance counsellor in fostering students' intent to consult in guidance counselling services. The quality of reception and listening in the process of orienting students requires a great deal of empathy, and could positively or negatively influence their behaviour in relation to the training activities and adapted services that the guidance counsellor provides within the institution. The guidance counsellor's contribution consists in breaking the ice between the learner and him/her. The guidance counselor should not be on the side of the administrators, but on the side of the students, so that the students can approach him or her easily and talk with him or her. The young Cameroonians who took part in this study showed little interest in consulting guidance counselors, contrary to what studies such as that of Fonkoua & Youtha (2008) might suggest. School and career guidance by parents seems to be preferred.

On the other hand, our results show that the quality of interventions has a positive influence on students' intention to consult guidance counselors, via relational qualities and empathic disposition. This result reinforces those of Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali (2016). This influence of the quality of interventions on students' consultation intentions means that the professional qualities of guidance counselors, and more specifically qualities such as relational ease and empathic disposition, is not neutral on young students' consultation intention. This analysis could be extended by seeking to identify the antecedents of these professional qualities in both consultation intention and actual consultation with guidance counselors. However, this study underscores the importance of taking into account the needs of students in order to provide them with appropriate guidance. To this end, we recall that the guidance needs model OCCOPPQ (2010) demonstrates that taking guidance needs into account is necessary for the adequate guidance of students.

Finally, in view of the work carried out and the results of this research, this study offers a method for evaluating the intention of consulting guidance services by students in general secondary schools. It allows the guidance department to intervene on certain dimensions of the student experience of its guidance services to increase their level of effectiveness.

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