

**ASSESSING SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN
SERVING INTERNALLY DISPLACED AND REFUGEE STUDENTS IN
NORTH-EAST NIGERIA**

Alfred Olatayo AWOYEMI (Ph.D),

awoyemi.ao@unilorin.edu.ng

Phone no... 08032096989

Akinade Adebawale ADEWOJO (PhD)

akinadewojo@gmail.com

Busayo Omolade AJIBOLA (PhD)

ajibola.bo@unilorin.edu.ng

Christiana Boluwatife OLADOKUN

christinaoladokun7@gmail.com

Dept of Educational Guidance and Counselling Faculty of Education,
University of Ilorin

Principal Librarian & Head of Information and Documentation, NSPRI.

Dept of Educational Guidance and Counselling Faculty of Education
University of Ilorin

Abstract

School counsellors in North-East Nigeria face complex demands in serving internally displaced and refugee students amid ongoing conflict and displacement. Using a phenomenological design, this study explored how 12 purposively selected school counsellors enact cultural competence, the strategies they employ, and the systemic barriers they encounter. Data from semi-structured interviews and institutional documents were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Three analytic clusters emerged: (1) Competence: counsellors demonstrated self-awareness and cultural knowledge but reported partial confidence due to training gaps; bilingualism was a key asset. (2) Strategies: they built trust through home visits and consistent presence, adapted interventions (e.g., storytelling, group activities), used peer mediators, and collaborated across sectors. (3) Challenges: limited training, role ambiguity, scarce resources, insecurity, stigma, and weak referral systems undermined continuity of care for displaced students. While counsellors actively adapt their practice, systemic constraints hinder consistent, culturally competent service delivery. Findings call for context-specific professional development, formalised roles, investment in bilingual staffing, and standardised referral protocols. This study informs policy and training for education and humanitarian actors, emphasising the need for student-centred evaluation, robust monitoring systems, and strengthened accountability in crisis-affected educational settings.

Keywords: Cultural Competence, Internally Displaced Persons, North-East Nigeria, Psychosocial Support, Refugee Students, School Counselling

Introduction

North-East Nigeria has been devastated by over a decade of Boko Haram insurgency, widespread violence, and recurrent attacks, forcing millions from their homes and creating one of Africa's most severe internal displacement crises. As of 2025, the region hosts hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, many of them children enrolled in overcrowded host schools with limited support systems. These students carry profound psychological wounds from exposure to violence, loss, and forced migration, while simultaneously struggling to adapt to unfamiliar linguistic, cultural, and educational environments. Their educational engagement is thus deeply intertwined with unmet psychosocial needs, making recovery and learning contingent on safe, culturally responsive support. In this setting, school counsellors are not merely academic advisors but essential frontline responders who must actively enact cultural competence through trauma-informed communication, culturally adapted interventions, and trust-building practices to foster safety, inclusion, and resilience among displaced learners.

Cultural competence in school counselling is essential because it equips counsellors with the necessary skills to understand and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds of internally displaced and refugee students, many of whom come from distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities such as Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani, and Shuwa Arab groups. This understanding facilitates effective communication, builds trust, and enables psychosocial support that is both trauma-informed and culturally resonant. The Campinha-Bacote Model (Bauer & Bai, 2015) highlights that cultural competence is not a fixed trait but a continuous process of developing self-awareness, cultural knowledge, and practical skills to deliver care that aligns with clients' worldviews and lived experiences.

In North-East Nigeria, most school counsellors receive foundational training in general guidance and counselling during their undergraduate education, often through Nigerian universities' Faculty of Education or Social Sciences programs. However, this training rarely includes specialised modules on displacement, trauma response, or intercultural communication. As a result, many counsellors rely on informal learning, on-

the-job experience, NGO-led workshops, or community engagement to develop the adaptive strategies needed to serve displaced populations effectively.

School counsellors in North-East Nigeria must engage with students from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as many navigate the complexities of displacement while grappling with the impact of their traumatic experiences. Research indicates that school counsellors with specialised training in culturally sustaining practices are more effective in managing diverse classroom settings and can better support culturally and linguistically diverse students (Boulden & Goodman-Scott, 2023).

Incorporating experiential learning strategies and adaptive training frameworks can enhance the cultural competence of school counsellors (Minton, 2017). Such frameworks enable counsellors to foster inclusivity and responsiveness within the school environment, ensuring that all students, including those from refugee and internally displaced backgrounds, feel valued and supported. This is particularly important in North-East Nigeria, where language barriers are common: many IDP and refugee students speak Kanuri, Hausa, Fulfulde, or Shuwa Arabic as their first languages, rather than English or even the dominant regional lingua franca. Counsellors who are proficient in these languages or who work effectively with trained interpreters are better positioned to communicate empathetically and build trust. Bilingual capabilities among counsellors can significantly enhance service delivery for linguistically diverse students, as expressing feelings in a native language often leads to clearer communication and deeper emotional understanding (Yıldız, 2021).

Studies indicate that a lack of readiness to engage with multicultural dynamics can result in cultural encapsulation, negatively affecting the counselling process (Roziqi, 2023; Zamroni et al., 2022). Therefore, school counsellors must develop and refine their multicultural counselling competencies through ongoing training and reflective practice. Additionally, school leaders must actively support counsellors in their professional growth, facilitating an environment where the nuances of cultural diversity are acknowledged in both practice and policy (Cruz et al., 2020). Collaborative efforts among counsellors, educators, and school administrators can foster a communal effort towards achieving inclusive educational environments.

The education and psychosocial needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are inherently connected to their experiences of trauma and disruption. Access to quality education is not merely a right but a critical aspect of recovery and resilience among displaced populations, as endorsed by various UN frameworks (Valenti & Yasukawa, 2024). Limiting educational access can exacerbate psychological distress and compromise mental health, especially among youth who may struggle to integrate into new social environments (Doocy et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2016).

Evidence indicates that the psychosocial well-being of displaced children is significantly enhanced when they receive continuous educational support that addresses their specific emotional and practical needs (Ünver et al., 2021). Moreover, collaboration between the health and education sectors is vital in meeting the physical and psychological health needs, thereby paving the way for more effective interventions in educational settings (Borkowska et al., 2024). Understanding the dynamics of internal displacement also necessitates accurate data collection to improve resource allocation and develop strategies directly addressing the unique challenges faced by these populations (Doocy et al., 2015).

Enhancing the cultural competence of school counsellors in North-East Nigeria is not only beneficial but necessary for optimally supporting internally displaced and refugee students. Effective school counselling practices must embrace cultural intelligence and be informed by ongoing dialogue about diversity and inclusion, thus allowing for educational frameworks that address and respond to the challenges faced by these students. This aligns with broader movements in educational reform that emphasise the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and the critical role of school counsellors as advocates for equity in educational settings (Vespia et al., 2010; Hines et al., 2019).

Statement of the Problem

School counsellors in North-East Nigeria are essential frontline responders for internally displaced and refugee students who navigate trauma, cultural dislocation, and educational disruption. To support these learners effectively, counsellors must enact cultural competence, demonstrating self-awareness, knowledge of local ethnic and linguistic contexts (e.g., Kanuri, Hausa, Fulfulde, Shuwa Arabic), and adaptive, trauma-

informed strategies. Without such competence, counselling risks misinterpreting distress, reinforcing stigma, or failing to build the trust necessary for healing and learning.

Yet many counsellors operate without adequate preparation. Pre-service training rarely includes displacement-sensitive or intercultural content, leaving practitioners to rely on informal, on-the-job learning, a gap that undermines service quality and student well-being. Compounding this deficit are systemic barriers: role ambiguity (where “guidance” duties mask unmet psychosocial needs), chronic under-resourcing, insecurity limiting outreach, community stigma around mental health, and fragmented referral systems that disrupt continuity of care. These challenges align with broader findings that inadequate multicultural preparation perpetuates inequities in crisis-affected schools (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Lee et al., 2024). Without targeted investment in context-specific training, formalised roles, and coordinated support systems, school counsellors will remain ill-equipped to meet the urgent needs of displaced learners despite their pivotal role in the education-humanitarian nexus (Hines et al., 2019; Harman & Ausloos, 2024).

Research Objectives

1. To examine the dimensions of cultural competence that school counsellors enact in their work with internally displaced and refugee students in North-East Nigeria.
2. To identify culturally responsive counselling strategies that effectively address the psychosocial and educational needs of internally displaced and refugee students.
3. To analyse systemic and contextual barriers that constrain the delivery of culturally competent counselling services in conflict-affected schools.

Research Questions

1. What dimensions of cultural competence do school counsellors enact when serving internally displaced and refugee students in North-East Nigeria?
2. What culturally responsive counselling strategies are used to meet the psychosocial and educational needs of internally displaced and refugee students?

3. What systemic and contextual factors hinder the consistent delivery of culturally competent counselling in North-East Nigeria's conflict-affected schools?

Literature Review

Cultural Competence in Counselling

Cultural competence is a foundational element in effective counselling, particularly in multicultural contexts, encompassing counsellors' ability to understand, communicate with, and interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Research shows that cultural competency enhances the therapeutic alliance, reduces misunderstanding, and improves client satisfaction (Yohani et al., 2019). For instance, insights from Syrian refugee families illustrate that counsellors must navigate cultural differences to foster a supportive environment conducive to psychosocial adaptation (Yohani et al., 2019). The challenges and best practices outlined in this study further emphasise the necessity of culturally sensitive approaches in counselling sessions, specifically for populations undergoing significant stress and trauma.

The integration of cultural competence in counselling practices is increasingly recognised as essential in professional training. Competence frameworks, as highlighted by Valenti and Yasukawa, assert that sound knowledge of cultural dynamics is critical for educators and counsellors working with displaced populations (Valenti & Yasukawa, 2024). In North-East Nigeria, where the educational and cultural landscapes are diverse and fluid due to displacement and conflict, school counsellors need a strong foundation in cultural competence to adequately support their students' psychosocial needs.

Role of School Counsellors in Humanitarian Emergencies

School counsellors play a pivotal role in navigating the complexities of humanitarian emergencies. They serve as frontline workers, tasked with addressing academic needs while also mitigating the psychological impact of trauma on students. Research indicates that schools are crucial environments for delivering mental health support, particularly for refugee and IDP populations (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). This

is particularly pertinent in contexts like North-East Nigeria, where community ties may be disrupted, and external support systems are limited (Brotherton et al., 2022).

Effective school counselling during such emergencies requires tailored interventions that address behavioural issues and promote emotional resilience (Hassan et al., 2016). Through culturally sensitive approaches, counsellors can help displaced students feel secure and integrated within the school community. The findings of Weine et al. illustrate that protective factors enhancing psychosocial well-being for adolescent refugees can be cultivated within educational environments, emphasising the importance of school counsellors as advocates and facilitators of recovery (Weine et al., 2014). Additionally, Sullivan and Simonson underscore the necessity of school-based social-emotional interventions to improve mental health among refugee youth, affirming the critical role of counsellors in these contexts (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016).

As North-East Nigeria continues to grapple with crises stemming from conflict and displacement, the interconnectedness of cultural competence, educational access, and the proactive roles of school counsellors must be prioritised. This comprehensive understanding is essential for devising strategies that truly address the needs of IDP and refugee youth, fostering an environment where they can thrive despite the challenges they face.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Competence Model

The Cultural Competence Model aims to enhance the ability of counsellors to effectively engage with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds (Sue et al., 1998). The model comprises three crucial components: awareness of one's own cultural biases, knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and the development of skills necessary for culturally appropriate interventions (Chao, 2013). In the context of school counselling, particularly during crises, the application of this model becomes relevant as educators and counsellors face challenges posed by acute social disruptions, such as those experienced by displaced populations.

In the realm of school counselling, the cultural competence model can be effectively mobilised to address the psychosocial needs of internally displaced and refugee students. This model underscores that counsellors must cultivate a deep understanding of the specific cultural contexts in which these students exist, including their experiences of trauma and resilience (Powers et al., 2010). Multicultural training, as highlighted by Chao, suggests that integrating social justice discussions and frequent interactions with diverse groups can significantly enhance counsellors' multicultural competence (Chao, 2013). The necessity for such training is emphasised by empirical evidence linking high competencies in multiculturalism to successful counselling outcomes in diverse educational environments (Noh et al., 2022).

The pastoral role that school counsellors are expected to play in crisis contexts calls for adaptive strategies that incorporate the model at every stage of the counselling process. This involves not only fostering cultural awareness but also actively building collaborative relationships with students, families, and communities to ensure that interventions respond to culturally-specific needs (Rifani et al., 2021). The emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness is vital, as it allows counsellors to navigate the complex socio-emotional landscapes confronted by displaced youth.

The adaptation of the cultural competence model is crucial for addressing the unique challenges of humanitarian emergencies. Research indicates that school counsellors who integrate cultural nuances into their counselling practices can mitigate the psychological impact of crises and facilitate better educational outcomes for all students, thereby promoting well-being and academic achievement during tumultuous times (Minton, 2017; Sriharan et al., 2021).

Employing the Cultural Competence Model in school counselling contexts, particularly amid crises faced by displaced student populations, provides a robust framework for enhancing culturally responsive practices that significantly contribute to holistic psychosocial well-being.

Methodology

This phenomenological study explored how school counsellors enact cultural competence, what strategies they use, and what systemic barriers constrain their practice when serving internally displaced and refugee students in North-East Nigeria. Purposive, criterion-based sampling targeted practising school counsellors with direct counselling experience in schools hosting displaced learners; inclusion required at least 12 months of school counselling experience and documented engagement with IDP or refugee students within the past 24 months (Patton, 2015). The final sample comprised 12 participants, a size sufficient to achieve idiographic depth while enabling cross-case pattern recognition relevant to the study's threefold focus: competence-in-action, adaptive strategies, and structural constraints.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (45–75 minutes) conducted face-to-face where security permitted, or by secure teleconference. The interview schedule invited first-person accounts of definitions of cultural competence, routine practices, case examples, perceived training needs, and institutional barriers; interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews took place between 22nd May and 10th June, 2025. Secondary data comprised relevant school documents (inclusion policy excerpts, anonymised referral logs, counsellor training materials), gathered to triangulate accounts and provide institutional context (Bowen, 2009).

Ethical Approval

Written consent and permission for audio recording were secured; pseudonyms replaced identifiers, and documents were redacted to protect confidentiality. Interviewers were trained to manage distress and provide referrals aligned with IASC guidance on mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies (IASC, 2007) and INEE standards for education in emergencies (INEE, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data analysis used reflexive content thematic analysis with manual coding following Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, definition and naming of themes, and report production (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Manual coding supported immersion in participants' language and enabled tracking of code provenance. The analytic process began with line-by-line open codes anchored in participants' terms, progressed to axial clustering into preliminary themes, and concluded with cross-case synthesis that preserved individual nuance while identifying shared patterns. Analytic memos recorded interpretive decisions; a codebook with definitions and exemplar extracts was maintained.

Quality procedures included member reflection, participants received a one-page summary of preliminary themes for corrective feedback, and peer debriefing with an external qualitative researcher. An audit trail (raw transcripts, coding notes, memos, and codebook versions) was preserved to support dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity was practised via researcher journals documenting positionality and potential influence on interpretation (Finlay, 2002).

Participants (codes)

- P01 — Female, Secondary, 8 years of experience, bilingual
- P02 — Male, Primary, 5 years, former NGO counsellor
- P03 — Female, Secondary, 12 years, trauma-informed training
- P04 — Male, Secondary, 3 years, recent placement in IDP camp school
- P05 — Female, Primary, 6 years, bilingual
- P06 — Male, Secondary, 10 years, special needs liaison
- P07 — Female, Secondary, 4 years, refugee intake coordinator
- P08 — Male, Primary, 7 years, school admin + counselling
- P09 — Female, Secondary, 9 years, NGO partnership lead
- P10 — Male, Secondary, 2 years, newly qualified counsellor
- P11 — Female, Primary, 11 years, community outreach lead
- P12 — Male, Secondary, 15 years, senior counsellor

(Each labelled P01–P12; demographic details kept minimal for confidentiality)

Findings

Analysis produced three superordinate clusters: Competence (how counsellors understand and judge their own readiness), Strategies (practices they use), and Challenges (barriers that limit service delivery). Themes were derived by manual line-by-line coding, axial clustering, and cross-case synthesis. Percentages below report prevalence across the 12 participants.

Competence

1. Conceptual clarity and self-awareness (11/12; 91.7%)

Most participants defined cultural competence as knowledge of students' cultural practices plus the ability to adapt interventions. Comments emphasised respect for cultural norms and personal reflexivity. They emphasised understanding students' ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani), trauma histories, and cultural norms around help-seeking, then modifying interventions accordingly. For example, several noted that direct questioning about trauma was often counterproductive; instead, they used indirect, culturally familiar methods like storytelling or group activities to create psychological safety. Others described reframing "counselling" as "school support" to overcome stigma, or conducting home visits to build trust with families wary of formal systems. This reflects a shift from *knowing about* culture to *acting responsively within* it, a critical adaptation when serving populations navigating both displacement and cultural dislocation.

Excerpts

"Cultural competence to me is knowing what matters to the child's family beliefs, language and changing how I speak and what I suggest." — P03.

"I check my assumptions every time I meet a new family; that keeps me from doing harm." — P12.

Interpretation

Counsellors foregrounded an ethical stance (self-awareness) alongside practical knowledge; manual codes such as awareness-check, cultural-knowledge, and adaptation clustered under this theme.

2. Partial confidence; need for more training (8/12; 66.7%)

Two-thirds described themselves as partially competent but undertrained.

Excerpts

“I can manage basic cases, but when trauma and different cultural reactions meet, I realise my training stops short.” — P06

“I learned on the job. Formal courses were rare.” — P10

Interpretation

This theme signals an experience-practice gap; it links to codes skill-gap and training need.

3. Language competence as an asset (7/12; 58.3%)

Over half reported bilingual skills as critical to effective counselling.

Excerpts

“Being fluent in Hausa and the local dialect means a student can name feelings in their language that changes the work.” — P01.

Strategies

1. Trust-building and relationship work (12/12; 100%)

Every participant described rapport-building as primary: home visits, consistent presence, and informal listening.

Excerpts

“I sit with parents under the tree; they tell me things they won’t at school.” — P11.

Interpretation

Code home-visit, consistent-presence, and informal-listening fed this robust cluster.

2. Culturally adapted interventions (9/12; 75.0%)

Common tactics included storytelling, group activities shaped by local norms, and the use of culturally meaningful metaphors.

Excerpts

“We use local stories to help children talk about loss without naming traumatic details.” — P07

3. Multi-sector collaboration (10/12; 83.3%)

Counsellors routinely partnered with NGOs, health workers and community leaders for referrals and resources.

Excerpts

“If a case needs clinical attention, we call the partner NGO; I cannot do it alone.” — P09.

4. Use of interpreters and peer mediators (7/12; 58.3%)

When bilingual staff were unavailable, peer mediators or ad hoc interpreters were used with mixed confidence about confidentiality.

Excerpts

“Sometimes a teacher translates; it helps, but I worry about privacy.” — P05.

Challenges

1. Training gaps and role ambiguity (10/12; 83.3%)

Most reported limited pre-service training and unclear job expectations.

Excerpts

“My job is 'guidance' on paper, but in practice I do psychosocial triage with no formal mandate.” — P02

2. Resource constraints (11/12; 91.7%)

Scarcity of private space, materials, referral slots and funds was near-universal.

Excerpts

“There is no quiet room; sessions happen in corridors or under trees.” — P08

3. Security and access limitations (6/12; 50.0%)

Half reported that insecurity restricted movement, reducing outreach and continuity.

Excerpts

“When attacks rise, students disappear; follow-up stops for weeks.” — P04

4. Stigma and community resistance (8/12; 66.7%)

Counsellors faced parental suspicion and cultural resistance to mental-health labels.

Excerpts

“Parents say ‘we are strong’ and refuse counselling; I have to reframe support as schooling help.” — P11.

5. Recordkeeping and referral breakdowns (9/12; 75.0%)

Poor documentation and weak referral feedback loops undermined continuity of care.

Excerpts

“We make notes, but logs are incomplete, and NGOs rarely send back outcomes.” — P09.

Discussion

This study reveals a professional stance among school counsellors that combines reflexive self-monitoring with pragmatic adaptation, yet is hampered by systematic gaps in training, resources, and institutional support. The prominence of reflexivity and culturally specific knowledge in participants’ accounts aligns tightly with Campinha-Bacote’s framing of cultural competence as an active process of awareness, knowledge, and skill development (Bauer & Bai, 2015). Participants did not describe cultural competence as a static credential but as repeated, deliberate practice, a finding that maps

directly onto Sue et al.'s components (awareness, knowledge, skills) and Chao's arguments for embedding social-justice content into multicultural training. (Sue et al., 1998; Chao, 2013).

The finding that many counsellors report only partial confidence highlights a persistent training–practice gap. Counsellors frequently relied on on-the-job learning to handle trauma-complex referrals; such learning substituted for formal instruction rather than complementing it. This pattern mirrors Ratts and Greenleaf's concern about uneven uptake of multicultural and social-justice competencies in school counselling, and accords with empirical reports of limited formal preparation among counsellors working in high-need settings (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Roziqi, 2023; Zamroni et al., 2022). Linked to this shortfall is the specific problem of trauma complexity: counsellors reported that existing training did not prepare them for cases where cultural expressions of distress interact with severe trauma, a gap noted by Lee et al. (2024).

Language emerged as a clear determinant of depth in clinical work. Bilingual counsellors described richer affective disclosure and more accurate emotional labelling among students, which supports Yıldız's claim that native-language expression facilitates clearer emotional communication (Yıldız, 2021). This is not merely practical: it modifies the therapeutic content and the kinds of interventions that become possible in school settings.

Strategies reported by participants, consistent presence, home visits, storytelling and locally adapted group activities, correspond to protective elements documented for displaced youth. School-based relationships and culturally relevant, experiential methods strengthen resilience and promote engagement (Weine et al., 2014; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Minton, 2017). Use of storytelling and group rituals aligns with Ünver et al.'s evidence that psychosocial supports rooted in local meaning systems produce better uptake among displaced children (Ünver et al., 2021). The frequent reliance on NGO partnerships and cross-sector referrals also echoes empirical calls for integrated health–education responses in displacement settings (Doocy et al., 2015; Borkowska et al., 2024).

Systemic constraints reported by participants, role ambiguity, scarce private spaces, fractured referral feedback, insecurity and stigma, materially limit sustained, high-quality practice. Role ambiguity reflects broader institutional weaknesses documented by Harman and Ausloos and by Alexander et al., in which counsellors operate without clear mandates or protected time for psychosocial work (Harman & Ausloos, 2024; Alexander et al., 2022). Resource shortages and insecure access directly reduce continuity of care and outreach capacity (Doocy et al., 2015). Stigma and parental resistance observed here mirror Yohani et al. and Hassan et al., who document how cultural reluctance to adopt mental-health labels undermines service uptake (Yohani et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2016).

Implications for professional development and policy follow directly from these linkages. Training must be modular, practice-focused and trauma-sensitive, combining supervised experiential placements with reflective exercises that operationalise Campinha-Bacote's elements (Bauer & Bai, 2015; Chao, 2013; Minton, 2017). Certification or appraisal systems should include documented competence milestones to reduce reliance on informal learning (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Staffing norms should prioritise bilingual hires and trained interpreters because language alters clinical possibilities (Yıldız, 2021). At the system level, formalised job descriptions, designated counselling spaces, standardised referral protocols and mandatory feedback loops between schools, NGOs and health services are necessary to close continuity gaps identified by participants (Doocy et al., 2015; Borkowska et al., 2024; Harman & Ausloos, 2024).

Methodologically, the study's findings validate the use of idiographic qualitative methods to surface practical, locally-grounded competencies and constraints that larger surveys might miss (Smith et al., 2009). Practically, the evidence points to achievable policy changes, training redesign, staffing adjustments, and simple referral templates that can increase counsellors' capacity to deliver culturally competent psychosocial care to displaced learners. Future implementation should pair such reforms with rigorous evaluation measuring counsellor competence and student psychosocial outcomes to confirm impact (Boulden & Goodman-Scott, 2023; Valenti & Yasukawa, 2024).

Implications for professional development and policy

1. **Deliver structured, context-specific training:** Implement modular professional development that integrates trauma-informed approaches, culturally sustaining practices, and language-sensitive communication. Training should include reflective exercises and supervised experiential placements to translate theory into practice.
2. **Formalise counsellor roles and career pathways:** Education authorities should clearly define the psychosocial responsibilities of school counsellors in emergency settings, reduce role ambiguity, and allocate dedicated time and resources for counselling functions.
3. **Invest in language and mediation capacity:** Prioritise recruitment and fair compensation of bilingual staff, and establish ethical protocols for trained interpreters to ensure confidentiality and therapeutic effectiveness.
4. **Strengthen cross-sector referral and data systems:** Introduce standardised referral templates and mandatory feedback loops between schools, NGOs, and health services. Simple, secure record-keeping systems can improve continuity and accountability.
5. **Support community-engaged stigma reduction:** Scale up locally accepted approaches such as framing counselling as educational or resilience support, and partner with community and religious leaders to build trust and service uptake.

Conclusion

School counsellors in North-East Nigeria demonstrate practical cultural competence through reflexive practice, language use, and adaptive strategies, yet their effectiveness is constrained by limited formal training, unclear role definitions, resource shortages, insecurity, stigma, and weak referral systems. Strengthening training, staffing, and institutional procedures would allow counsellors to deliver more consistent, culturally appropriate psychosocial support to displaced and refugee learners.

Recommendations

Integrate Training and Assessment for Cultural Competence

To build cultural competence, organisations should implement mandatory, modular training courses that focus on awareness, knowledge, and skills. These courses must be complemented by documented self-assessments during appraisals to track counsellor development and ensure a systematic approach to professional growth.

Formalise and Fund Culturally Responsive Practices

To promote culturally responsive practices, it is essential to fund supervised placements and peer-learning forums that help counsellors turn local methods into replicable interventions. Additionally, organisations should recruit and properly compensate bilingual staff or establish ethical protocols for using peer mediators to protect client confidentiality.

Strengthen Infrastructure to Overcome Service Barriers

To address service delivery barriers faced by school counsellors, organisations must clarify job descriptions, ensure access to designated private spaces for confidential sessions, standardise referral templates, and deploy basic digital record systems where feasible. Organisations must clarify job descriptions and ensure counsellors have designated private spaces for sessions. Additionally, standardise referral templates and deploy basic digital record systems where possible.

References

- A. Alexander, E. R., Savitz-Romer, M., Nicola, T. P., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., & Carroll, S. (2022). We are the heartbeat of the school: How school counsellors supported student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Professional School Counselling, 26*(1b). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x221105557>
- Bauer, K., & Bai, Y. (2015). Innovative educational activities using a model to improve cultural competency among graduate students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences, 174*, 705–710. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.605>
- Borkowska, K., Ketuly, K. A., Osborne, M., Mohammed, S. A., & Azizi, N. (2024). Embedding the Third Mission of universities in humanitarian crisis response: Profiling the role of the University of Duhok in addressing health needs of

- internally displaced people and refugees. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 31(1), 160–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14779714241290658>
- Boulden, R., & Goodman-Scott, E. (2023). A quantitative exploration of school counsellors' evidence-based classroom management implementation: Investigating culturally sustaining practices and multicultural competence. *Professional School Counselling*, 27(1a). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x231153346>
- Brotherton, T., Brotherton, S., Ashworth, H., Kadambi, A., Ebrahim, H., & Ebrahim, S. (2022). Development of an offline, open-source, electronic health record system for refugee care. *Frontiers in Digital Health*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2022.847002>
- Chao, R. (2013). Race/ethnicity and multicultural competence among school counsellors: Multicultural training, racial/ethnic identity, and color-blind racial attitudes. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 91(2), 140–151. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2013.00082.x>
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314–321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>
- Doocy, S., Lyles, E., Delbiso, T. D., & Robinson, C. W. (2015). Internal displacement and the Syrian crisis: An analysis of trends from 2011–2014. *Conflict and Health*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-015-0060-7>
- Finlay, L. (2002). Outing the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052>
- Harman, L., & Ausloos, C. D. (2024). “It’s just been a wild ride”: A phenomenological study of emergency school counsellor credentialing experiences. *Professional School Counselling*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x241293637>
- Hassan, G., Ventevogel, P., Jefee-Bahloul, H., Barkil-Oteo, A., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2016). Mental health and psychosocial well-being of Syrians affected by armed conflict. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 25(2), 129–141. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s2045796016000044>
- Hines, E. M., Vega, D., Mayes, R. D., Harris, P. C., & Mack, M. C. (2019). School counsellors and school psychologists as collaborators of college and career readiness for students in urban school settings. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 13(3), 190–202. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-02-2019-0015>
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2007). *IASC guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.
- Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies. (2010). *Minimum standards for education: Preparedness, response, recovery*. New York, NY: Author.

- Lee, J., Haberski, J., Hovey, S., Mirielli, L., Williams, M. S., Morris, C. A. W., & Slaten, C. D. (2024). The hidden pandemic: School counsellors' insights on post-pandemic socialisation. *Professional School Counselling*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x241304425>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- María de la O. Toscano Cruz, Falcón, I. G., Hurtado, I. G., & García Rodríguez, M. del P. (2020). Educational counselling and temporary language adaptation classrooms: A study through in-depth interviews. *Sustainability*, 12(24), 10433. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122410433>
- Minton, S. J. (2017). Examining graduate student engagement in counselling services with diverse populations in P-12 education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(3), 103–130. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i3.1380>
- Noh, M. M., Bakar, A. Y. A., & Nasir, M. K. M. (2022). Relationship between multicultural counselling competency level, length of service and gender. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(7). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i7/14251>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Powers, C. A., Zapka, J. G., Biello, K. B., O'Donnell, J., Prout, M. N., & Geller, A. C. (2010). Cultural competency and tobacco control training in US medical schools: Many but missed opportunities. *Journal of Cancer Education*, 25(3), 290–296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13187-010-0090-1>
- Ratts, M. J., & Greenleaf, A. T. (2017). Multicultural and social justice counselling competencies. *Professional School Counselling*, 21(1b). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x18773582>
- Rifani, E., Artika, M. Y., Kunwijaya, I., & Hani, H. Y. (2021). Indonesian adaptation of the multicultural school counselling behaviour scale. *Jurnal Kajian Bimbingan dan Konseling*, 6(3), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um001v6i32021p132-140>
- Roziqi, M. (2023). Bibliometric study: Trends in multicultural counselling competence research in Indonesia, 2013–2022, and its implications. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 24(2), 692–702. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12706>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Sriharan, A., Hertelendy, A. J., Banaszak-Holl, J., Fleig-Palmer, M. M., Mitchell, C., Nigam, A., ... Singer, S. J. (2021). Public health and health sector crisis leadership during pandemics: A review of the medical and business literature. *Medical Care Research and Review*, 79(4), 475–486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775587211039201>

- Sue, D. W., Carter, R. T., Casas, J. M., Fouad, N. A., Ivey, A. E., Jensen, M., ... Vazquez-Nuttall, E. (1998). *Multicultural counselling competencies: Individual and organisational development* (Vol. 11). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sullivan, A., & Simonson, G. R. (2016). A systematic review of school-based social-emotional interventions for refugee and war-traumatised youth. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(2), 503–530. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315609419>
- Ünver, H., Çeri, V., & Fiş, N. P. (2021). An overview of the mental and physical health status and post-migration psychosocial stressors of refugee toddlers and preschoolers. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 34(4), 335–342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcap.12340>
- Valenti, C., & Yasukawa, L. (2024). Missing education data on internally displaced people (IDPs). In *Education data in fragile contexts* (pp. 103–119). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035313839.00012>
- Vespia, K. M., Fitzpatrick, M. E., Fouad, N. A., Kantamneni, N., & Chen, Y. (2010). Multicultural career counselling: A national survey of competencies and practices. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 59(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2010.tb00130.x>
- Weine, S., Ware, N. C., Hakizimana, L., Tugenberg, T., Currie, M., Dahnweih, G., ... Wulu, J. A. (2014). Fostering resilience: Protective agents, resources, and mechanisms for adolescent refugees' psychosocial well-being. *Adolescent Psychiatry*, 4(3), 164–176. <https://doi.org/10.2174/221067660403140912162410>
- Wilkerson, K., & Bellini, J. (2006). Intrapersonal and organisational factors associated with burnout among school counsellors. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 84(4), 440–450. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2006.tb00428.x>
- Yıldız, N. G. (2021). Collaborative leadership in the school community: School counsellors and principals join forces for linguistically diverse students. *International Journal on Lifelong Education and Leadership*, 7(2), 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.25233/ijlel.909564>
- Yohani, S., Kirova, A., Georgis, R., Gokiart, R., Mejia, T., & Chiu, Y. E. (2019). Cultural brokering with Syrian refugee families with young children: An exploration of challenges and best practices in psychosocial adaptation. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 20(4), 1181–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-019-00651-6>
- Zamroni, E., Hanurawan, F., Muslihati, M., Hambali, I., & Hidayah, N. (2022). Trends and research implications of guidance and counselling services in Indonesia from 2010 to 2020: A bibliometric analysis. *SAGE Open*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221091261>