

Exploring the Challenges Faced by Bachelor of Education with Guidance and Counselling Students during Practicum

Dr. Lucy Njeri Ngure, PhD.

Department of Psychology & Foundations, University of Kabianga, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this study is to explore the challenges faced by Bachelor of Education with Guidance and Counselling (B. Ed -G&C) students during their practicum, aiming to identify specific obstacles that hinder their professional development. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from a structured questionnaire administered to students from a public University in Kenya. The findings reveal six primary themes of challenges: logistical issues, resource-related deficiencies, role conflict and overload, relational dynamics, confidentiality and ethical concerns, and inadequacies in training and curriculum. Notably, logistical challenges, such as difficulties accessing counselling facilities and inadequate time allocation, were prevalent among 90% of respondents. Resource-related challenges, including insufficient clients and referral documents, further limited the students' practical training. The study highlights the dual roles of teaching and counselling as a significant stressor and emphasizes the relational issues stemming from negative attitudes among students, staff, and administration. Ethical challenges concerning confidentiality were also identified, indicating a critical gap in the students' preparedness for real-world counselling scenarios. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations to enhance the practicum experience, ultimately fostering the growth of competent and resilient counsellors capable of meeting the increasing demand for mental health services.

Keywords: Guidance and counselling, practicum challenges, counselling education.

INTRODUCTION

The practicum experience is an important component of professional training in the field of guidance and counselling. It serves as a bridge between the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and the practical skills needed in real-world counselling settings (Fantinelli *et al.*, 2024). Typically conducted in the final stages of a student's academic program, the practicum involves direct interaction with clients under the supervision of experienced professionals. This hands-on approach allows students to apply their academic learning to real-life situations, facilitating the development of essential counselling competencies such as active listening, empathy, and problem-solving (Ricks & Brannon, 2023; Adedotun, Abidogun & Mumuni, 2023). The practicum is designed to be a transformative period where students refine their skills, gain confidence in their abilities, improve their self-efficacy, and begin to internalize the ethical and professional standards of the counselling profession (Ikonomopoulos, Vela, Smith & Dell'Aquila, 2016).

The primary purpose of the practicum is to provide students with an opportunity to practice and enhance their skills in a controlled, supportive environment (Kahila, Kuutti, Kahila & Sajaniemi, 2023). This experience is integral to their development as competent, reflective practitioners. During the practicum, students are exposed to a variety of client issues, ranging from academic and career guidance to more complex psychological and emotional challenges (Borders *et al.*, 2024). The practicum setting can vary widely, including schools, community counselling centres, and private practice environments (DeLorge, 2012). Regardless of the setting, the practicum is structured to allow students to engage in all aspects of the counselling process, from initial assessment to intervention and follow-up. This comprehensive exposure is intended to prepare students for the realities of professional practice, ensuring they are well-equipped to handle the diverse needs of their future clients (Dias & Yesudhas, 2021).

The practicum is conducted under close supervision, with regular feedback sessions to help students reflect on their experiences and identify areas for improvement. Supervisors play a crucial role in this process, offering guidance, support, and constructive criticism (Ali, Gardner, & Edmondson, 2022). They help students navigate the challenges of the practicum, which can include managing client confidentiality, maintaining professional boundaries, and coping with the emotional demands of counselling work (Thompson, Frick & Trice-Black, 2014). The practicum also often includes group supervision sessions, where students can share their experiences with peers, gain new perspectives, and build a sense of community and mutual support (Valentino, LeBlanc & Sellers, 2016).

Despite the carefully structured nature of the practicum, students often face numerous challenges during this period, which can hinder their professional growth and development. These challenges are varied, and could encompass logistical issues, emotional and psychological pressures, and gaps in the training provided by academic institutions (Al-Momani, 2016; Peetoom & Nuttgens, 2019). The transition from the classroom to the practicum setting can be overwhelming, as students must quickly adapt to the demands of real-world counselling while still grappling with feelings of insecurity and inadequacy (Thompson *et al.*, 2014). Understanding these challenges is crucial for educators and supervisors, as addressing them effectively can significantly enhance the quality of the practicum experience and better prepare students for their future roles as professional counsellors. Therefore, this paper aims at providing an analysis of the challenges faced by Bachelor of Education with Guidance and Counselling (B. Ed -G&C) students during practicum. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on improving practicum experiences and enhancing the professional preparation of future counsellors.

Statement of the Problem

Practicums play an important role of helping students gain field experience, connect theory to practice, prepare for their career, and develop skills that will help them succeed in their field of work. Despite the crucial role of practicum in shaping competent guidance and counselling professionals, many students encounter significant challenges during this period that can impede their professional development. Although the practicum is designed to be a formative experience that bridges theoretical knowledge and practical application, the presence of these challenges can undermine its effectiveness. Students often find themselves ill-prepared to manage the complexities of real-world counselling, leading to a potential gap between their academic training and professional readiness. This disconnect not only affects the quality of the students' learning experience but also raises concerns about their ability to provide effective counselling services post-graduation. Therefore, it is important to identify, understand, and address these challenges to ensure that the practicum fulfils its intended purpose of preparing students for successful careers in guidance and counselling.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the specific challenges faced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum.
2. To propose recommendations for improving the practicum experience for B. Ed -G&C students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practicum experience presents a myriad of challenges that differ depending on geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts. One of the most widely reported challenges for students during practicum is securing access to appropriate practicum sites. A study by Bibi and Aziz (2024) at the University of Education, Attock Campus in Pakistan, explored the challenges faced by prospective teachers during their teaching practicum and highlighted placement issues as a key concern. The study, which employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, revealed that students often struggled with being assigned to schools located far from their homes. The long commutes not only increased their workload but also negatively affected their overall practicum experience and satisfaction.

A study conducted by Liang, Tan, Kaiyun, Lim and Soh (2019) in Singapore highlighted the logistical and experiential challenges that B. Ed -G&C students face during their practicum. One of the key issues identified was the difficulty in securing practicum placements, particularly for students early in their training. The research found that two of the five participants in the study were assigned to nursing homes, where they worked with elderly clients, while the others were able to secure placements in community service providers or counselling centres through their own connections. The limited availability of practicum sites, especially in settings other than nursing homes, posed significant challenges for the trainees. The students also reported that the elderly client profile, common in nursing homes, added complexity to their practicum experience, as they faced difficulties in communication and limited opportunities to apply their classroom knowledge in a broader range of counselling contexts. Similar findings were echoed by Nwaoba and Nwankwo (2019) in Nigeria, where postgraduate students identified the lack of funding and unfit practicum environments as significant barriers to effective learning.

In Kenya, VanLeeuwen, Kathuri-Ogola, Weeks and Muriithi (2018) found that students experienced substantial difficulties accessing appropriate facilities for their practicum. Many students reported that the institutions they were placed in lacked adequate counselling spaces, and in some cases, students had to balance their practicum with teaching roles. This dual responsibility, common in many African settings, often caused stress, as students struggled to meet the demands of both roles effectively. Such logistical issues underscore the need for institutions to provide adequate infrastructure and clear delineations between roles to help students focus on their counselling practice.

The transition from theoretical learning to practical application can also be emotionally taxing for students, with feelings of anxiety, incompetence, and stress commonly reported. Kurtyilmaz (2015) found that in Turkey, counsellor trainees frequently experienced negative emotions, including confusion and anxiety, largely driven by the pressures of managing real-world counselling sessions. The researcher concluded that counsellor trainees became anxious and worried because of the ambiguous nature of counselling, and recommended the need to address this ambiguity during the practicum period. Similarly, Kaihlanen *et al.* (2020) highlighted how students in Finland experienced stress and burnout due to the cumulative emotional demands of the practicum period.

Stress related to the practicum is not limited to the counselling roles themselves but also extends to how students perceive their professional identity. Klassen and Durksen (2014) noted that pre-service teachers, during their practicum, displayed high levels of work-related stress that fluctuated as they progressed through their teaching practice. This pattern is mirrored in the counselling profession, where students' emotional resilience and ability to cope with stress play critical roles in their professional development. The fluctuation in stress levels, from high at the beginning of practicum to moderate or low towards the end, highlights the importance of emotional and psychological support systems during this period.

Mahmoudi and Özkan (2016) conducted a study that sheds light on the emotional and psychological challenges faced by pre-service teachers during their practicum, particularly within the context of English language teacher education. The research identified several key stressors that pre-service teachers encountered, including issues related to classroom management, school-related factors, and emotional or affective concerns. Notably, the study highlighted that supervisors and mentors were the most significant source of stress for the participants, reflecting the pressure and anxiety experienced in their interactions with authority figures during the practicum. This emotional strain can be compounded by the demands of managing classroom dynamics, which often leads to heightened feelings of incompetence and insecurity. These findings underscore the importance of addressing emotional and psychological challenges within teacher education programs, as such challenges can hinder the professional development of pre-service teachers if left unmanaged.

Saki and Şahin (2021) explored the challenges faced by counsellor trainees during their first counselling practicum at Trabzon University, Turkey. Their findings revealed that the trainees encountered problems in three main areas: personal issues, counselling-related challenges, and supervision-related difficulties. Personal challenges included being emotionally affected by clients' problems and allowing their personal issues to influence their counselling sessions. In the counselling process, the trainees struggled with finding clients, scheduling sessions, managing the flow of counselling, and feeling inadequately skilled. Supervision-related

issues were also prevalent, with difficulties in communication with supervisors, negative attitudes from supervisors, and discomfort with audio recording of sessions being noted.

Professional competence is another area where B. Ed -G&C students face significant hurdles. Many students report that they feel unprepared to handle real-world counselling cases, especially in situations involving sensitive issues such as bereavement, relationship problems, and drug abuse (Jin *et al.*, 2023). In Malaysia, Ngui and Lay (2018) discovered that stress among trainee teachers was exacerbated by a lack of confidence in managing counselling sessions, especially when dealing with complex emotional and relational issues. Moreover, inadequate supervision during practicum has been widely cited as a key professional challenge. A lack of proper guidance from experienced supervisors not only increases students' stress levels but also hinders their ability to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application. In their Nigerian study, Nwaoba and Nwankwo (2019) emphasized that postgraduate students often felt unsupported, with insufficient supervision contributing to their difficulties in meeting clients' needs.

The institutional framework in which practicum takes place significantly affects students' experiences. In some regions, educational institutions lack the resources or infrastructure to adequately support practicum programs. This was evident in studies conducted in Kenya and Nigeria, where limited access to psychological testing materials and inadequate exposure to practical counselling techniques during training were reported as key challenges (VanLeeuwen *et al.*, 2018; Nwaoba & Nwankwo, 2019). Without the necessary tools and resources, students found it challenging to perform effectively in their practicum roles.

Cultural factors also play a critical role in shaping the practicum experience. In some cultures, counselling as a profession is not as widely accepted or understood, leading to resistance from both clients and colleagues. For example, Nwaoba and Nwankwo (2019) reported that in Nigeria, students often encountered negative attitudes from both teachers and administrators towards counselling, which created additional barriers to their work. These cultural attitudes can influence how students are perceived and embraced in their practicum settings, affecting their ability to gain practical experience and confidence.

Various strategies have been proposed to address the challenges experienced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum. Kurtyilmaz (2015) suggested that institutions should pay closer attention to the emotional and psychological needs of students, providing them with support mechanisms such as counselling services and supervision to help them cope with the emotional demands of the practicum. Ngui and Lay (2018) recommended fostering emotional intelligence and self-efficacy among students to help them navigate the stress of practicum roles, especially in environments where institutional support is lacking. Additionally, providing financial and logistical support to students, as suggested by Nwaoba and Nwankwo (2019), could help alleviate some of the pressures associated with securing practicum placements and accessing the necessary materials for effective counselling practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design aimed at examining the challenges experienced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum. The approach was selected to gather detailed information on students' practicum experiences and the factors contributing to the challenges they face. Descriptive designs are particularly useful in studies focused on describing characteristics of a specific population and identifying patterns in the data, making it suitable for this investigation (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019).

Participants

The participants for this study were 30 fourth-year B. Ed -G&C students at a public University in Kenya. These students had recently completed their practicum following their third year of study. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure that the sample accurately represented the diverse student population. The target population consisted of 300 students, from which the 30 participants were selected, ensuring proportional representation based on various demographic factors, such as gender and specialization area.

Instruments

Data for the study were gathered using a structured questionnaire, designed to capture the challenges faced during practicum. The questionnaire was composed of two sections. The first section contained 18 items assessing different aspects of challenges students encountered during their practicum. The second section comprised an open-ended question that solicited respondents' views on challenges related to key stakeholders involved in the practicum experience, including the practicum supervisor, school administration, teachers, students, and non-teaching staff. The instrument was developed based on a comprehensive review of literature on practicum challenges, and pilot-tested for reliability and validity prior to full administration.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaires were distributed to the selected participants at the end of their practicum period. Before administration, the purpose of the study was explained, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Students were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were given adequate time to complete the questionnaire. Upon completion of the data collection, the responses were coded and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, and percentages, were used to summarize the challenges experienced by the students. The data were analysed to allow for a clearer understanding of which challenges were most prevalent and how they may have interrelated to influence students' overall practicum experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The challenges faced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum, as presented in Table 1, reveal several significant obstacles. These challenges can be grouped into six main themes: logistical challenges, resource-related challenges, role conflict and overload, relational challenges, confidentiality and ethical issues, and training and curriculum-related challenges. The challenges experienced by the B. Ed -G&C students are discussed below for each of the identified themes. For each set of challenges identified, relevant recommendations are proposed to improve the practicum experience and support the development of capable, resilient counsellors who are adequately prepared to address the increasing need for mental health services.

Table 1: Challenges experienced during practicum

Challenges experienced	No. of students	%
<i>Logistical challenges</i>		
Problems accessing counselling facilities	29	90.0
Inadequate time set aside for counselling	25	83.3
Absence of counselling rooms	22	73.3
<i>Shortage of resources</i>		
Inadequate referral documents and contacts	22	73.3
Inadequate psychological tests to use	18	60.0
Insufficient clients	18	60.0
<i>Role conflict and overload</i>		
Dual role of counselling and teaching problems	22	73.3

Overwhelming number of clients	10	33.3
Relational challenges		
Negative attitude of students to counselling	22	73.3
Not being embraced by students	17	56.7
Negative attitude of teachers to counselling	14	46.7
Not being embraced by staff	11	36.7
Negative attitude of the administration to counselling	11	36.7
Negative attitude of non-teaching staff to counselling	9	30.0
Confidentiality and ethical issues		
Confidentiality related issues for individual counselling	15	50.0
Confidentiality related issues for group counselling	15	50.0
Training and curriculum-related challenges		
Inadequate exposure to practical aspect of counselling during training	18	60.0
Inadequate theoretical approaches taught	11	36.7

Logistical challenges

The first set of challenges identified by the B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum was the issue of logistics. According to our findings, a significant 90% of the students encountered difficulties accessing counselling facilities. This is compounded by the fact that 83.3% of students reported that inadequate time had been set aside for counselling, while 73.3% noted the absence of dedicated counselling rooms, making it even more challenging to carry out effective sessions. These logistical barriers significantly hindered the students' ability to immerse themselves fully in the practicum experience, which could limit their professional growth.

Our findings are consistent with similar studies, such as Bibi and Aziz (2024), who observed that long commutes and poorly allocated resources severely impacted the practicum experience for prospective teachers in Pakistan. While the Kenyan context is distinct, the universal impact of such logistical obstacles on trainee performance and satisfaction is evident. In both cases, students felt that logistical challenges detracted from their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, often leading to increased frustration and a diminished sense of preparedness for their future careers.

The implications of these findings are substantial, particularly in the Kenyan context where many institutions may lack the necessary infrastructure to support counselling training adequately (VanLeeuwen *et al.*, 2018). Without proper facilities or sufficient time allocated for sessions, students struggle to gain the hands-on experience that is vital to their growth as competent counsellors. This lack of access to counselling facilities often translates into a missed opportunity for students to build confidence and refine their skills, which are critical as they transition into professional roles.

Addressing logistical issues should be prioritised in order to improve the practicum experience for future cohorts. Institutions offering counselling programs need to prioritise the creation of proper spaces for counselling activities, such as designated rooms, and ensure that enough time is dedicated to practice sessions. In addition, ensuring that students are placed in accessible locations with adequate resources can go a long way in reducing the strain of logistical challenges. Drawing from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the provision of basic needs like

a conducive environment for practice can significantly enhance students' motivation and ability to perform at their best.

Resource-related challenges

The second category of challenges that emerged from the study was resource-related issues, which directly impacted the students' practical training during their practicum. One of the most prevalent concerns was the lack of adequate referral documents and contacts, with 73.3% of students indicating that this hindered their ability to make informed decisions and provide comprehensive support to their clients. This gap in resources limited the trainee-counsellors' ability to practice the full range of counselling services, such as referring clients to appropriate specialists or external services when necessary.

In addition, 60% of the students reported that there were insufficient psychological tests available for use during counselling sessions. Psychological assessments are a critical component of effective counselling, as they help identify underlying issues and guide the counselling process. The absence of these tools means that students are often left to rely on theoretical knowledge without the practical application that such tools provide, weakening the overall quality of their training. This limitation is particularly concerning, as it undermines the competency students need to transition from trainees to professional counsellors.

Moreover, 60% of the students also cited insufficient clients to practice their counselling skills. This lack of client engagement reduces the frequency and variety of real-world experiences students can draw upon during their practicum. Counselling, by its very nature, requires hands-on experience, and without a steady stream of clients, students miss valuable opportunities to refine their skills. The challenges students face in Kenya echo similar findings from Liang *et al.* (2019) in Singapore, where trainees encountered difficulty in self-sourcing practicum sites. The study highlighted a global trend of resource constraints within practicum environments, showing that inadequate resources are not limited to any one region but are a widespread issue that affects the quality of counselling training.

These findings on resource-related challenges imply that, when trainee-counsellors lack the necessary tools – be it psychological tests, referral documents, or sufficient clients – the quality of their training is severely compromised. Without enough opportunities to apply what they have learned in theory, their ability to grow and develop into competent, confident counsellors is restricted. This may have long-term implications, not just for the students themselves but also for the future clients they will serve. This calls for training institutions and professional bodies to focus efforts on providing adequate counselling tools, such as psychological tests and referral systems, as well as ensuring that students have access to a sufficient number of clients, which would significantly enhance the practicum experience. Institutions could also partner with community organisations and schools to create practicum sites where students can engage with real clients under professional supervision. Such measures would help students develop the practical skills necessary to offer high-quality counselling services after graduation, improving the overall quality of mental health services in Kenya.

Role conflict and overload

The third set of challenges faced by students during their practicum was the issue of role conflict and overload. This challenge, identified by 73.3% of students, arose from the difficulty of juggling the dual roles of teaching and counselling. The practicum experience required them to fulfil both responsibilities simultaneously, making it hard to dedicate sufficient time and attention to either role. Balancing these competing demands left students struggling to maintain a clear focus on their primary training objective – becoming effective counsellors. In a field like counselling, where focus, presence, and active listening are essential, the divided attention created by dual roles compromises the quality of service offered to clients.

In addition to role conflict, 33.3% of the students reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of clients they were expected to manage. This client overload increased their emotional and mental fatigue, further complicating their ability to meet the demands of both teaching and counselling. Unlike seasoned professionals, practicum students are still developing their time management and counselling skills, so an excessive client load can hinder their ability to grow in the profession. Moreover, the pressure of serving many clients within a limited timeframe

creates a situation where students may rush through sessions or fail to apply the depth of knowledge required for effective counselling.

These findings mirror those of Saki and Şahin (2021), who found that students in Turkey similarly struggled to balance their time and maintain the required counselling standards due to the conflicting demands of their practicum roles. The dual responsibilities during practicum create a high-pressure environment, making it difficult for students to excel in either teaching or counselling. This overlap can be overwhelming, especially when combined with the steep learning curve that comes with applying theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios. The result is often a compromise in the quality of both teaching and counselling, which ultimately undermines the students' professional growth.

From a broader perspective, role conflict and overload pose significant risks to the well-being and development of B. Ed -G&C students. When students are stretched too thin, they may not only underperform in their practicum but may also experience heightened stress and burnout, which can affect their motivation and long-term career outlook. This is particularly concerning in the Kenyan context, where schools often face a shortage of trained counsellors (Wambu & Fisher, 2015), leading to a heavier reliance on practicum students to fill the gap. While the need for counselling services is high, the pressure placed on students to meet this demand may be detrimental to their development as competent professionals.

To address role conflict and overload, training institutions must reassess the structure of practicum placements. Institutions could consider reducing the teaching load for students during the practicum period to allow them to concentrate more fully on counselling. In addition, setting a cap on the number of clients each student is assigned would ensure that the students are not overwhelmed and can focus on delivering quality counselling services. Offering students support in the form of time management workshops or peer counselling groups could also help them navigate these challenges more effectively. By addressing role conflict and overload, institutions can create a more supportive practicum environment that fosters the professional growth of students and prepares them for the realities of full-time counselling roles.

Relational Challenges

Relational challenges emerged as another key area of concern during the practicum, with students highlighting difficulties in building rapport with key stakeholders. These challenges significantly impacted their practicum experience and professional growth. A striking 73.3% of students reported negative attitudes from their students – specifically, students showing disinterest or scepticism towards counselling. In a school setting, where guidance and counselling are vital for supporting student well-being, such attitudes hinder the effectiveness of the counselling process. When students are unwilling or resistant to engage with counselling services, it can limit the counsellor's ability to provide meaningful support. This, in turn, demotivates the trainee counsellors, making it harder for them to develop confidence in their role.

The negative attitude was not limited to learners; 46.7% of trainee counsellors also encountered resistance from teachers in the practicum schools. Teachers, being central to the school environment, often play a key role in referring students for counselling or supporting the counselling process. When teachers exhibit negative attitudes towards counselling, they may fail to see its value, making it difficult for trainees to collaborate effectively with them. This dynamic can lead to a lack of referrals, insufficient cooperation, and an overall reduction in the impact that counselling can have on students. For trainee counsellors, such resistance can be particularly discouraging, as it undermines their sense of contribution and relevance within the school environment.

The lack of support from staff was another significant issue, with only 36.7% of students feeling embraced by the school staff. This suggests that a majority of the trainees felt isolated or unwelcomed, further complicating their efforts to integrate into the school community and effectively carry out their counselling duties. Similarly, 36.7% of the counselling trainees reported experiencing negative attitudes from the school administration. Given that school administrators often have the power to create conducive environments for counselling, such attitudes can create barriers that limit the accessibility and visibility of counselling services. Trainee counsellors, who rely on a supportive environment to apply their training, are disadvantaged when key figures in the school community fail to acknowledge or support their role.

Previous research by Mahmoudi and Özkan (2016) showed that negative interactions with supervisors and mentors were significant sources of stress for trainee teachers. In the Kenyan context, where guidance and counselling profession is still evolving, these relational challenges reflect a broader cultural and institutional misunderstanding of the counselling profession. When students, teachers, and administrators do not fully appreciate the role of counselling, it becomes difficult for trainee counsellors to thrive. This lack of support can lead to increased practicum-related stress, diminished morale, and reduced effectiveness in delivering counselling services.

Addressing these relational challenges requires a concerted effort from schools and training institutions. There is need to sensitise schools on the importance of guidance and counselling, not just as an ancillary service, but as a core component of student welfare and development. Regular training and workshops for teachers, students, and non-teaching staff could help change the perception of counselling, promoting a more supportive environment for trainee counsellors. Furthermore, school administrators should actively involve trainee counsellors in school activities, fostering a sense of belonging and partnership. By creating a culture that values counselling, schools can provide a more enabling environment for trainee counsellors, which is crucial for their professional development.

Confidentiality and ethical issues

Confidentiality and ethical issues were identified as another category of challenges during the practicum. Half of the students (50%) indicated difficulties in maintaining confidentiality in both individual and group counselling settings. In the field of counselling, confidentiality is a cornerstone of ethical practice (Segal, 2023), and challenges in this area raise concerns about the effectiveness of the practicum in adequately preparing students to handle sensitive client information. Maintaining confidentiality is crucial for establishing trust between the counsellor and the client, and any breach – whether intentional or accidental – can undermine the integrity of the counselling relationship.

The challenge of confidentiality in group counselling, in particular, can be attributed to the complexity of managing multiple clients at once, each of whom may have their own concerns about privacy. In such settings, students may struggle to ensure that the personal information shared by one client is not unintentionally exposed to others in the group. This issue is particularly pronounced in school environments where the boundaries between personal and public information can sometimes blur, especially when the clients are students who may interact with one another outside the counselling space. The difficulty of managing these dynamics can make it hard for trainee counsellors to uphold ethical standards, leaving them feeling ill-equipped to navigate these sensitive issues.

The challenges of maintaining confidentiality in individual counselling sessions may be linked to the practical realities of the school setting, where counselling rooms are often shared or inadequately secured. Without private spaces dedicated solely to counselling, students may feel that their sessions are not fully confidential, which can inhibit their openness and willingness to engage in meaningful discussions. This lack of privacy not only affects the client's experience but also makes it difficult for the trainee counsellor to apply best practices in handling confidential information.

The ethical issues surrounding confidentiality are consistent with findings from Saki and Şahin (2021), who similarly reported that counsellor trainees faced challenges in navigating ethical concerns during their practicum. In their study, students encountered difficulties in managing confidentiality and other ethical issues, indicating that these concerns are widespread across different practicum contexts. This suggests that ethical training and supervision may require more emphasis in counselling programs to ensure that students are well-prepared to manage these issues in real-world settings.

For trainee counsellors in Kenya, addressing confidentiality and other ethical issues during the practicum requires a more structured approach from both training institutions and practicum sites. Clear guidelines and protocols for handling confidential information should be established and reinforced through supervision. Additionally, practicum supervisors need to provide ongoing support to help students navigate ethical dilemmas, offering practical solutions to challenges such as insufficient privacy and the complexities of group counselling.

Schools, as practicum sites, also have a role to play in creating environments that respect the ethical requirements of counselling. Dedicated, private counselling spaces should be made available to ensure that both counsellors and clients feel secure in their interactions. Furthermore, sensitising teachers, administrators, and non-teaching staff on the importance of confidentiality in counselling can help to foster an environment where ethical practices are upheld. By addressing these challenges, the practicum experience can better equip trainee counsellors to manage confidentiality and other ethical issues, thereby enhancing their preparedness for professional practice.

Training and curriculum-related challenges

The findings also point to significant shortcomings in the training and curriculum that guided the students' preparation for their practicum. Notably, 60% of the students reported inadequate exposure to the practical aspects of counselling during their training, while 36.7% highlighted a lack of sufficient theoretical approaches. These gaps in training leave students ill-equipped to handle the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of real-life counselling situations. The lack of practical exposure is particularly concerning, as counselling is a hands-on profession that requires not only theoretical knowledge but also the ability to apply that knowledge in practice. Without adequate opportunities to engage in real or simulated counselling sessions, students may struggle to develop the skills and confidence needed to navigate complex client interactions. Practical training is essential for bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world application, allowing students to practice key counselling techniques such as active listening, empathy, and problem-solving.

Similarly, the lack of sufficient theoretical grounding further exacerbates the challenges faced by trainee counsellors. A solid understanding of various theoretical approaches in counselling is critical for informing the techniques and interventions used in practice. However, when students are not adequately exposed to a diverse range of counselling theories, they may find themselves limited in their ability to adapt to different client needs and situations. This issue is not unique to our study but is mirrored in research conducted by Liang *et al.* (2019), who found that counselling trainees in Singapore also felt underprepared due to training deficiencies, particularly in the practical and theoretical aspects of their education.

Addressing these training and curriculum gaps is crucial for ensuring that trainee counsellors are adequately prepared to handle the challenges they will face in professional practice. This could involve a more integrated approach to training that combines both theory and practice from the onset. For instance, incorporating more practical exercises, such as role-playing and case study analysis, into the curriculum could give students a clearer understanding of how theoretical concepts are applied in real counselling scenarios.

Moreover, supervised practical experiences should be increased to provide students with regular, hands-on opportunities to counsel clients under the guidance of experienced professionals. In the Kenyan context, ensuring that students have access to practical exposure can also be enhanced through collaborations with schools, community centres, and mental health organisations that allow for more diverse practicum placements. This would not only enrich the students' learning experience but also increase their readiness for the demands of the profession. Additionally, the incorporation of current trends in counselling practice, such as digital counselling platforms and teletherapy, should be considered in updating the curriculum. As the field of counselling evolves, particularly in response to technological advancements, it is essential that students are trained in both traditional and emerging methods of delivering counselling services.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth exploration of the various challenges faced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum, highlighting key areas that hinder their professional growth and effectiveness. The findings point to significant challenges, including logistical, resource-related, role conflict, relational, confidentiality, and training gaps, all of which have a profound impact on the practicum experience. These challenges not only affect students' ability to practice counselling effectively but also have far-reaching implications on their readiness to transition into professional roles.

The study underscores the urgent need for reforms in the practicum structure to address the identified challenges and better support trainee counsellors. This could include providing better access to counselling facilities,

addressing resource constraints, and ensuring that students receive comprehensive practical and theoretical training. Furthermore, fostering positive attitudes among key stakeholders – students, teachers, staff, and administration – towards counselling is critical for creating an environment conducive to effective learning and practice.

Addressing these issues is not only necessary for the successful completion of practicum but is also fundamental to ensuring that future counsellors are adequately prepared to offer high-quality, ethical, and client-centred services in their professional careers. By tackling these challenges through a combination of logistical improvements, curriculum reforms, and stakeholder engagement, institutions can enhance the overall practicum experience and contribute to the development of competent, resilient, and resourceful counsellors who are well-equipped to meet the growing demand for mental health services.

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