

Pastoral, Institutional, and Contextual Challenges Faced By Christian Pastors and Counsellors in Delivering Guidance and Counselling Services in Livingstonia Synod Secondary Schools- Malawi

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000332>

Received: 06 September 2026; Accepted: 11 September 2026; Published: 24 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Christian guidance and counselling constitutes an important component of holistic education by addressing learners' academic, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual needs. However, the delivery of such services in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia secondary schools is constrained by interconnected pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges. This study examined the challenges faced by Christian pastors and counsellors in delivering guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools, with particular reference to Karonga Presbytery, Malawi. The study was informed by the Common Factors Theory of Counselling and Self-Determination Theory, which provided complementary perspectives on counsellor competence, counselling relationships, institutional context, student motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed involving six CCAP Synod secondary schools in Karonga Presbytery. Quantitative data were collected through unstructured questionnaires administered to students, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews with school heads, chaplains, guidance and counselling teachers, and education officials, supplemented by documentary and literature review. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages and means while qualitative data were analysed thematically and integrated with quantitative findings. The findings revealed three major categories of challenges. Pastoral challenges included inadequate professional counselling preparation, role conflict between pastoral and counselling responsibilities, and excessive workload. Institutional challenges comprised inadequate counselling personnel, limited counselling materials and technological resources, insufficient dedicated facilities, weak administrative support, and increasing student enrolment. Contextual challenges included stigma and misconceptions about counselling, fear of judgment and inadequate confidentiality, peer influence, family instability, socio-economic difficulties, and changing social and moral realities. The study concludes that although Christian guidance and counselling plays an important role in supporting students' academic, emotional, social, behavioural, and spiritual development, its effectiveness is constrained when pastoral responsibilities are not matched with professional competencies and when institutional and contextual barriers remain inadequately addressed. The study recommends strengthening institutional support for counselling, recruiting and continuously developing professionally trained Christian counsellors, improving counselling facilities and resources, integrating preventive counselling and life-skills education, strengthening collaboration among schools, parents, churches, and communities, promoting positive student attitudes towards counselling, establishing peer counselling and mentorship programmes, and adapting counselling services to emerging psychosocial and technological challenges. The study contributes context-specific evidence for strengthening the pastoral and educational mission of Christian secondary schools in Malawi.

Keywords: Christian guidance and counselling; pastoral challenges; institutional challenges; contextual challenges; Christian pastors; school counsellors; secondary schools; CCAP Synod of Livingstonia; Karonga Presbytery; Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counselling in secondary schools have increasingly been recognised as integral to holistic education because learning is not only a cognitive activity but also a moral, emotional, social, and spiritual process. Within Christian education, counselling is grounded in pastoral theology and seeks to nurture the whole person created in the *imago Dei*. Christian guidance and counselling therefore aim not merely at improving grades, but at cultivating character, discipline, resilience, vocation, and spiritual maturity among learners (McLeod, 2018; Nelizone-Jones, 2020). From a theological standpoint, academic performance is inseparable from the formation of identity and purpose, which are nurtured through sustained pastoral engagement in the school community.

Historically, counselling draws from both philosophical and theological traditions. Classical Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle emphasised self-knowledge and ethical formation, which later converged with Christian pastoral traditions in the Middle Ages. As Christianity expanded, counselling became institutionalised through confession, spiritual direction, and moral instruction administered by priests and pastors (Bright, 2001). Presbyterian traditions in particular shaped dialogical models of care that resemble modern counselling practice. These traditions were later transferred to Africa through missionary education, where schooling was understood not only as intellectual instruction but also as moral and spiritual formation oriented towards vocation and service.

Globally, Christian and secular counselling are increasingly acknowledged as contributors to student retention and academic success. Psychological and spiritual well-being foster self-awareness, problem-solving capacity, environmental mastery, and moral agency, enabling learners to cope with academic and social demands (Yu, Shek, & Zhu, 2019; Baugh, 2018). In Christian schooling, counselling functions as a ministry of accompaniment, helping students interpret their struggles through faith, discipline, and hope. Consequently, learners who receive structured pastoral guidance demonstrate stronger motivation, self-regulation, and academic engagement. In the United States, Christian counselling in schools is closely various challenges. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that approximately 19% of students do not get counselling services, with major causes associated with shortage of staff (NCES, 2022). Despite that, comprehensive school counselling programs have been shown to improve attendance, behaviour, and achievement by addressing emotional and moral dimensions of learning (Baugh, 2018).

Across Europe, counselling is embedded in educational policy as a means of promoting inclusion and moral formation. The European Commission (2021) reports that early school leaving remains between 9–10%, particularly among learners affected by socio-economic and psychological vulnerability. Studies across OECD countries show that counselling interventions face various challenges including poor care from the clients, peer emotional influence, and unethical practices among the councilors (OECD, 2020).

In South America, educational inequality and psychosocial stress undermine learner performance. UNESCO (2021) indicates that nearly 20% of secondary learners in Latin America fail to complete upper secondary education. Students face anxiety, poverty, peer pressure, and family fragmentation that weaken motivation and discipline. Research from Brazil, Chile, and Colombia demonstrates that counselling programs integrating moral and faith-based dimensions promote resilience and goal orientation, both of which positively influence academic success and school retention.

In Asia, intense academic competition heightens learners' psychological and spiritual vulnerability. In China, national statistics suggest that nearly 25% of secondary students experience serious academic stress and adjustment problems, often leading to disengagement (Florza, 2018). Religious based councilors confront language barriers, political ideologies that do not favour Christian way, financial strain to support the programm, and staff performance pressure. Although counselling structures exist, their effectiveness improves when psycho-educational support is integrated with moral and spiritual formation, enabling counselors to cultivate discipline, perseverance, and student focus.

In West Africa, guidance and counselling are increasingly recognised as tools for reducing dropout. The World Bank (2021) estimates that over 40% of learners in parts of West Africa fail to complete secondary education.

Contributing factors include teenage pregnancy, poverty, domestic labour, peer pressure, and psychological distress. Counselling that integrates moral values, life skills, and career discernment strengthens learners' commitment to schooling and improves academic participation, especially within faith-based educational contexts. However, Christian pastors and counsellors face numerous challenges in delivering guidance and counselling services including poor government support, little guidance and counselling skills, poor motivation as well as shortage of staff.

In Eastern Africa, governments integrate counselling into education policy to respond to youth vulnerability. In Kenya and Tanzania, millions of learners are affected by poverty, early marriage, and psychosocial stress (Mutie & Ndambuki, 1999). Life-skills counselling seeks to enhance learners' coping capacity and moral agency. However, limited professional staffing and weak theological integration reduce its impact, leaving many students without sustained pastoral support necessary for academic focus and retention.

In Malawi, counselling is deeply rooted in both cultural and Christian traditions of moral formation. Senelson (1978) notes that young people were traditionally guided through initiation rites, apprenticeship, and communal mentoring. Missionary education later institutionalised Christian counselling within church schools to cultivate discipline, vocation, and spiritual identity. Following independence in 1964, educational reforms expanded guidance and counselling to curb delinquency and improve performance (Phiri, 2010). The CCAP Synod of Livingstonia formalised counselling centres in the 1990s, and the establishment of the National Guidance and Counselling Association of Malawi (NAGCAM) in 2003 aimed to professionalise pastoral counselling practice (Sulemwa, 2015).

Despite these efforts, Livingstonia Synod secondary schools continue to face serious academic and psychosocial challenges. Dropout rates reach approximately 37%, attributed to financial hardship, academic difficulty, peer pressure, pregnancy, crime, and weak psychosocial support (Banda, 2016; Kaunde, 2016; Ndegũ, 2010). Students transitioning to secondary school frequently experience anxiety, declining confidence, excessive freedom, and weakened study discipline (Abanda, 2011).

Theologically, Christian guidance and counselling should function as a ministry of formation that integrates psycho-education with spiritual discernment. Such counselling equips learners with problem-solving skills, moral reasoning, vocational clarity, and emotional resilience grounded in Christian values (Chibwana, 2014). Yet, empirical evidence on the pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges faced by Christian pastors and counsellors in delivering guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools remained scarce.

Accordingly, this paper assesses the pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges faced by Christian pastors and counsellors in delivering guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools, with particular reference to Karonga Presbytery, Malawi, thereby contributing scholarly insight into how faith-based pastoral care strengthens academic achievement and holistic student formation.

Perspectives guiding this paper

This study is guided by a multidimensional perspective that integrates educational, pastoral, and psychosocial viewpoints to explore the pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges faced by Christian pastors and counsellors in delivering guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. The Common Factors Theory of Counselling provides an important lens for understanding the pastoral and institutional challenges encountered by Christian pastors and counsellors in delivering guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. The theory emphasizes that counselling effectiveness depends not only on specific counselling techniques but also on the characteristics of the counsellor and student, the quality of the counselling relationship, the process of change, and the broader counselling context (Grencavage & Norcross, 1992). In the Livingstonia Synod context, factors such as counsellor competence, empathy, moral integrity, pastoral maturity, communication skills, institutional support, and the cultural and spiritual environment can significantly shape the delivery and effectiveness of counselling services. However, the theory's limited attention to individual motivation and its predominantly Western orientation suggest the need to consider the distinctive religious, cultural, and institutional realities within Malawian secondary schools.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) complements the Common Factors Theory by explaining the motivational and developmental dimensions underlying students' engagement with guidance and counselling. According to Deci and Ryan (2000, 2003), students are more likely to develop motivation, persistence, well-being, and positive behavioural outcomes when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported. Within Livingstonia Synod secondary schools, pastors and counsellors can facilitate these needs through supportive relationships, mentoring, encouragement, and opportunities for students to participate actively in academic, personal, and spiritual decision-making. Nevertheless, SDT may underemphasize external structural, institutional, cultural, and relational barriers that influence counselling provision. The integration of the two theories therefore provides a stronger framework for examining how pastoral challenges, institutional limitations, and contextual factors interact with counsellor–student relationships and student motivation, ultimately shaping the accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of Christian guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools.

Statement of the Problem

Secondary education is expected to promote learners' intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual development through effective guidance and counselling services. However, in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia secondary schools, pastors and counsellors face pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges that may constrain their ability to respond effectively to learners' diverse needs, including grief, family problems, peer conflicts, emotional difficulties, discipline, and spiritual concerns. Institutional limitations such as inadequate counselling facilities, limited resources, insufficient time, and competing responsibilities may further affect the accessibility, continuity, privacy, and quality of counselling services.

The problem is compounded by contextual factors such as stigma, cultural expectations, fear of disclosure, confidentiality concerns, and limited understanding of counselling among some learners. These challenges are important given that, between 2020 and 2023, Karonga District recorded 15,293 secondary school students, of whom 2,460 (16%) dropped out, while academic underachievement remained a concern (Karonga District Council, 2024). Although previous studies have examined learners' resilience, academic advising, and educational challenges (Simwaga, 2017; Wolmaga, 2014; Supagi, 2011; Mlotwa, 2012), limited attention has been given to the challenges experienced by Christian pastors and counsellors themselves. This study therefore examines the pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges affecting the delivery of guidance and counselling services in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia secondary schools, with particular reference to Karonga Presbytery, Malawi.

Research Objectives

To explore the pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges faced by Christian pastors and counsellors in delivering guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools.

Empirical Literature review

Christian guidance and counselling in secondary schools operates at the intersection of education, psychosocial support, pastoral ministry, and adolescent development. The empirical literature therefore needs to be examined according to the conditions under which pastors and counsellors perform their roles. In this study, the evidence is synthesised under three principal dimensions: pastoral challenges, institutional challenges, and contextual challenges.

Pastoral Challenges in the Provision of Christian Guidance and Counselling

A major theme in the international literature is the tension between the multiple roles assigned to school counsellors and the professional requirements of effective counselling. School counsellors are increasingly expected to respond to academic, behavioural, social, emotional, and mental-health needs while simultaneously undertaking administrative and disciplinary responsibilities. Blake (2020), for example, found that unclear job descriptions, role conflict, supervision by non-counselling administrators, and non-counselling duties substantially reduced counsellors' direct engagement with students. More recent research similarly identifies workload, role definition, available support, and professional well-being as important challenges affecting school

counsellors working with adolescents. Bettman and Digiacomio (2021) found that counsellors experienced tensions between students, parents, school staff, and external agencies, requiring counsellors to advocate both for students and for recognition of their professional role. A recent global scoping review further identifies professional identity, role diversity, contextual influences, training, continuing professional development, and leadership as interconnected dimensions of school counsellor professional identity (Harrison & Hong, 2025). These findings suggest that pastoral effectiveness cannot be separated from the professional conditions under which counselling is delivered.

The problem becomes particularly significant in contexts where teachers, pastors, chaplains, or other school personnel provide counselling without specialised preparation. Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa shows that task-sharing can increase access to psychological interventions, but the approach requires appropriate training, supervision, referral mechanisms, and clearly defined competencies (Tareke et al., 2023). This creates an important distinction between access to counselling and access to professionally appropriate counselling. In Malawi, recent qualitative evidence found that teachers lacked sufficient skills and time to respond adequately to learners' psychosocial needs, while schools also lacked an adequate policy framework for mental-health services (Kuyokwa et al., 2023). Thus, relying on existing teachers or religious personnel may expand access but may simultaneously create concerns regarding workload, competence, professional boundaries, and continuity of care.

The pastoral dimension is further complicated by the distinctive position of Christian pastors and chaplains. Unlike secular school counsellors, they may be expected to combine spiritual guidance, moral formation, disciplinary support, pastoral visitation, religious instruction, and counselling. Evidence from Tanzania demonstrates that counselling provided through religious organisations can be beneficial, but the same study recommends continuing education and referral networks to strengthen service provision (Maliti et al., 2023). This finding is important because it challenges an assumption that religious commitment alone is sufficient preparation for counselling. In faith-based educational settings, pastoral identity may constitute an important relational resource, but it also creates a need for clear boundaries between spiritual guidance, counselling, disciplinary intervention, and specialised mental-health care.

Professional ethics represents another unresolved component of the pastoral challenge. School counsellors frequently encounter situations involving confidentiality, parental involvement, student safety, professional competence, and competing institutional expectations. Şensoy and İkiz (2023), studying school counsellors' ethical dilemmas, identified confidentiality, unclear professional roles, stakeholder disagreement, and suspected child abuse as recurring ethical concerns. Such findings are particularly relevant to Christian school counselling because pastors may occupy positions of religious authority within the same communities in which students live. Consequently, students may experience uncertainty about whether information disclosed during counselling will remain confidential or be communicated to teachers, parents, church leaders, or school administrators. The pastoral challenge therefore extends beyond workload and training to include the ethical management of power, confidentiality, safeguarding, and professional boundaries.

Although international and African studies provide substantial evidence concerning counsellor workload, role ambiguity, training, professional identity, and ethical dilemmas, important limitations remain. Much of the international literature examines secular school counsellors, while African studies frequently focus on guidance teachers or general school-based mental-health programmes. Relatively little empirical attention has been given to pastors and Christian counsellors whose counselling role is simultaneously pastoral, educational, and spiritual. The present paper addresses this gap by examining these pastoral challenges within Livingstonia Synod secondary schools.

Institutional Challenges in the Provision of Christian Guidance and Counselling

The second major dimension concerns the institutional environment within which counselling is organised and delivered. International evidence consistently indicates that the effectiveness of school counselling depends not only on the competence of individual counsellors but also on organisational structures, leadership support, staffing, facilities, supervision, and clearly defined counselling programmes. A systematic review of school-based mental-health programmes in low- and middle-income countries found considerable variation in

programme quality and implementation, with weaknesses in implementation and evaluation capacity limiting the strength of the evidence base (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Similarly, Grande et al. (2023) found that school-based interventions can be effective in LMICs but emphasised the importance of implementation conditions. These findings suggest that institutional capacity is not a secondary consideration; it is a central determinant of whether counselling services can move from isolated individual interventions to sustainable school-wide provision.

One important institutional problem is the availability of qualified personnel. Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates a substantial shortage of specialised mental-health personnel, which has encouraged the use of teachers, community workers, peers, and other non-specialists in school-based interventions (Tareke et al., 2023). While task-sharing can increase service coverage, it also raises questions concerning training, supervision, referral, workload, and accountability. The Malawian evidence is particularly relevant: Kuyokwa et al. (2023) found that schools faced a shortage of mental-health services and that teachers lacked adequate time and skills to provide the required support. This indicates that simply assigning counselling responsibilities to existing school personnel may create a structural mismatch between the size of the student population and the capacity of the available providers.

Institutional support also influences the extent to which counselling becomes preventive rather than reactive. Where counselling is not incorporated into school planning, budgeting, staff development, referral systems, and monitoring mechanisms, it may remain peripheral to the school's core educational activities. Evidence from the wider African literature shows that school-based interventions can reach large numbers of adolescents, but their sustainability depends on institutional integration and appropriate delivery structures (Mthiyane et al., 2023; Tareke et al., 2023). The implication is that counselling should not be conceptualised merely as an individual service provided when a student presents with a problem. Rather, it requires an institutional system capable of prevention, early identification, individual support, referral, follow-up, and evaluation.

Physical and organisational resources constitute another institutional concern. Counselling requires private spaces, appropriate materials, sufficient time, record-management procedures, and opportunities for consultation and referral. Ethical research on school counsellors demonstrates that confidentiality is difficult to protect when counsellors operate within unclear organisational arrangements or lack appropriate professional boundaries (Şensoy & İkiz, 2023). This is particularly significant in secondary schools where students may fear being identified by peers or school authorities as users of counselling services. Thus, the absence of private facilities is not simply an infrastructural deficiency; it can directly affect students' willingness to seek help and their confidence in the counselling process.

The institutional literature also reveals an important distinction between the existence of counselling services and their institutionalisation. A school may have a chaplain, pastor, guidance teacher, or counselling room but still lack a coherent policy, defined roles, referral procedures, professional supervision, or mechanisms for evaluating outcomes. The recent literature on school counsellor professional identity reinforces this point by identifying leadership, advocacy, professional development, role definition, and organisational context as interconnected elements of effective school counselling (Harrison & Hong, 2025). Therefore, institutional commitment should be assessed not merely by whether counselling personnel are present but by whether the school creates conditions that enable them to perform their responsibilities effectively.

For faith-based schools, the institutional question is even more complex because responsibility may be distributed between church structures and school administration. A pastor may receive direction from a church or presbytery while simultaneously being accountable to school management. This dual accountability can create uncertainty concerning priorities, confidentiality, referral, reporting, and professional supervision. Research on faith-based school systems indicates the potential for organised counselling and social-work services within religious educational structures, but also demonstrates the importance of coordinated systems for responding to student needs (Vander Vennen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, existing studies have rarely examined how denominational structures themselves shape the delivery of counselling in African Christian secondary schools.

Existing African literature identifies shortages and weak institutional support, while international literature provides stronger conceptual and organisational analyses. What remains insufficiently understood is how these

institutional conditions operate together within a specific African Christian school system. The present study addresses this gap by examining institutional challenges in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools in Malawi.

Contextual Challenges in the Provision of Christian Guidance and Counselling

The third dimension concerns the social, cultural, family, religious, and developmental context in which students experience problems and decide whether to seek counselling. Adolescence is a particularly important period because mental-health difficulties frequently emerge during this stage, while young people in sub-Saharan Africa are exposed to multiple social and structural risks. A systematic review and meta-analysis documented a substantial burden of common mental-health problems among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa (Hunduma et al., 2023). At the same time, reviews of adolescent mental-health interventions emphasise that effective responses need to be culturally sensitive and responsive to the multiple levels at which adolescent difficulties develop (Seekles et al., 2023; Mthiyane et al., 2023). These findings challenge approaches that treat student counselling as an individual problem-solving activity detached from family, peer, community, and cultural environments.

Stigma and perceptions of counselling represent an important contextual barrier. Adolescents may avoid counselling because seeking help can be interpreted as evidence of weakness, indiscipline, failure, or serious personal problems. Such perceptions can be reinforced when counselling is associated primarily with students experiencing behavioural or academic difficulties. The school therefore becomes not only a place where counselling is offered but also a social environment that shapes how counselling is understood. Evidence from school-based mental-health research indicates that accessibility alone does not guarantee utilisation; the acceptability and cultural fit of interventions also influence participation (Seekles et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant to Christian schools where counselling may be understood through both psychological and religious frameworks.

Family and community conditions constitute another major contextual dimension. Adolescents' psychosocial experiences are influenced by family relationships, economic conditions, peer networks, community expectations, and exposure to social stressors. A systematic review of multi-level interventions in sub-Saharan Africa found that adolescent mental-health outcomes are shaped by factors operating beyond the individual level, supporting interventions that address family and community environments alongside individual support (Mthiyane et al., 2023). Consequently, school counsellors may encounter problems such as family conflict, poverty, bereavement, peer pressure, social exclusion, and other difficulties whose causes cannot be resolved through individual counselling alone. This places counsellors in a position where effective practice may require collaboration with parents, teachers, church leaders, health providers, and community organisations.

Cultural and religious context is especially important for Christian guidance and counselling. Religious institutions can provide trusted spaces through which adolescents access information and psychosocial support. Research from Tanzania demonstrates that faith-based organisations can engage adolescents in culturally sensitive programmes and can serve as important community platforms for adolescent support (Teizazu et al., 2023). Similarly, evidence from religious organisations in Arusha suggests that faith-based counselling can contribute to positive psychosocial outcomes, while referral networks and continuing counsellor education remain necessary (Maliti et al., 2023). These findings suggest that religious affiliation can function as a resource rather than merely a barrier. However, the benefits of faith-based counselling depend on whether spiritual support is integrated with appropriate professional practice and referral to specialised services when necessary.

Confidentiality and safeguarding also have a strong contextual dimension because students' willingness to disclose sensitive information depends on their perception of safety and trust. International evidence demonstrates that school counsellors face ethical dilemmas involving confidentiality, professional boundaries, parental involvement, and suspected abuse (Şensoy & İ̇kiz, 2023). In African settings, these issues may be further complicated by close-knit school and community relationships, limited numbers of trained professionals, and overlapping educational, family, and religious authority structures. A student may therefore hesitate to disclose personal difficulties when the counsellor is simultaneously a teacher, pastor, disciplinarian, or member of the student's local community. This creates a critical tension between maintaining a trusting counselling relationship and fulfilling institutional and safeguarding responsibilities.

The contextual literature nevertheless has an important limitation. Much of the existing research examines adolescent mental health generally, school counselling in secular settings, or community-based interventions, while comparatively little research examines how these contextual factors influence Christian pastoral counselling within African faith-based secondary schools. Moreover, evidence from Malawi has identified gaps in school mental-health provision, including limited services, inadequate teacher skills and time, and absence of an adequate policy framework (Kuyokwa et al., 2023), but this does not sufficiently explain how cultural expectations, family circumstances, student perceptions, religious identity, stigma, confidentiality, and safeguarding interact with the work of Christian pastors and counsellors. The unresolved issue is therefore how the wider social, cultural, family, religious, and school environment shapes students' engagement with Christian guidance and counselling and the ability of pastors and counsellors to respond appropriately. The present study addresses this gap within the specific context of Livingstonia Synod secondary schools in Malawi.

Existing research indicates shortages of school mental-health services, limited teacher capacity, insufficient time, and policy weaknesses, but there remains inadequate empirical understanding of how these conditions affect Christian pastors and counsellors working within denominational secondary schools (Kuyokwa et al., 2023). Likewise, evidence from Tanzania demonstrates the potential contribution of religious organisations to counselling while highlighting the need for training and referral systems (Maliti et al., 2023). These findings cannot, however, be directly generalised to the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia because church governance structures, pastoral expectations, school organisation, and local social contexts may differ. The unresolved empirical issue, therefore, is not simply whether counselling challenges exist, but how pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges interact to shape the delivery of Christian guidance and counselling in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. The present study addresses this gap by generating context-specific evidence from Christian pastors, counsellors, school personnel, students, and relevant educational and church authorities in Malawi.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework presents interactions between pastoral challenges, institutional challenges, and contextual challenges affecting Christian counselling services and their impact to academic performance and retention rate in secondary schools.

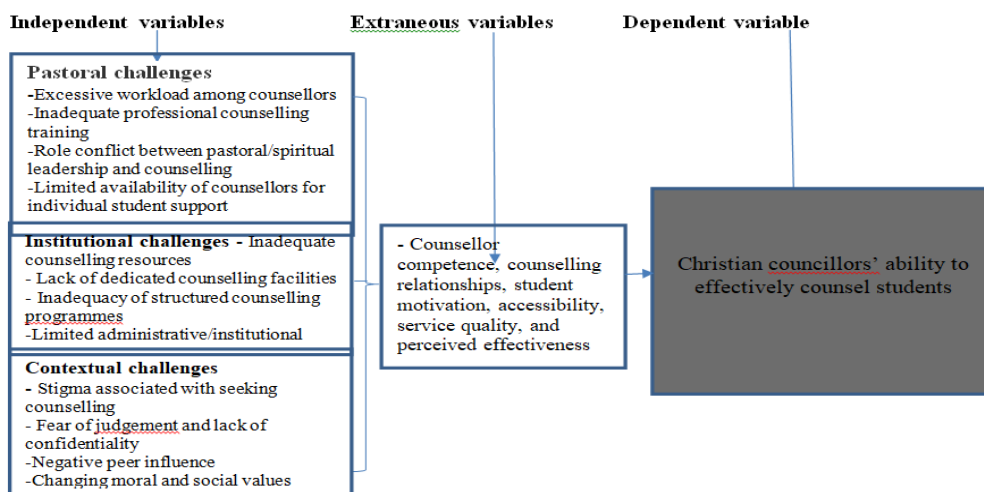


Figure 2.3: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Researcher's Own Construct, 2026

Figure 1.3 demonstrate that pastoral challenges, institutional challenges, and contextual challenges are as major factors of counselling (independent variable) influence the academic performance and retention rate (dependent variable) of students. The two way interaction between the independent variables result to the dependent variable. The interplay of these variables ensures effectiveness of counselling to enhance academic performance and retention rate of the student in secondary schools.

METHODOLOGY

Apart from comprehensive review of literature that facilitated the integration of diverse methodologies, yielding extensive insights into the status of Christian guidance and counselling services in Malawian secondary schools.

Research Design

For the aim of this study, a convergent mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study involved six CCAP Synod secondary schools selected from Karonga Presbytery (Cohen *et al*, 2013). More specifically, it helped answer the what, when, where, and how questions regarding the research problem rather than the why. A researcher conducted this type of research design using various methodologies. It predominantly employed quantitative data and qualitative data which was used for descriptive purposes.

Research Philosophy

This study was anchored in pragmatism as its guiding research philosophy. Pragmatism emphasized the practical consequences of inquiry, the centrality of real-world problems, and the use of methods that best addressed the research questions rather than adherence to a single epistemological tradition (Morgan, 2014). Within this philosophical stance, truth was understood as what works in a given context and what produces meaningful solutions to lived challenges. Because this study sought to examine the challenges of Christian guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools, pragmatism provided an appropriate framework. It allowed the researcher to focus on the practical improvement of counselling systems while maintaining methodological flexibility and contextual responsiveness.

Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed research approach grounded in pragmatism in order to comprehensively address its four interrelated objectives and hence quantitative and qualitative data was collected. The study employed a quantitative approach to measure the structural status and measurable outcomes of Christian guidance and counselling services in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. Complementarily, the study utilized a qualitative approach to explore pastoral, institutional, and contextual challenges faced by counsellors and pastors, as well as the theological foundations guiding their practice. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the research captured lived experiences, spiritual perspectives, and contextual realities that could not be reduced to numerical data.

Target Population

The study population comprised all stakeholders directly involved in or affected by Christian guidance and counselling services in secondary schools under Karonga Presbytery of the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia. Specifically, the study included students, teaching staff, school chaplains, school managers (headteachers/principals), and Presbytery leadership responsible for overseeing educational and pastoral programs. These groups represented the key actors in both the implementation and reception of guidance and counselling services, providing insights into the structural, operational, and theological dimensions of counselling in faith-based schools.

Table 1: Population of study among the sampled schools

S	School Name	Students			Teachers		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1	Ekwendeni Girls		320	320	6	10	16
2	Karonga Girls	-	600	600	17	04	11

3	Karonga Boys	800	-	800	18	03	11
4	Karonga Community Day	162	176	338	9	7	16
5	Maghemo	190	201	391	6	5	11
	Total	1152	1247	2449	56	29	64

Source: Northern Region Education Department (2024)

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study purposively selected three secondary schools namely, Ekwendeni girls, Karonga Boys and Girls secondary schools church owned schools and randomly sampled two government schools namely Karonga Community day and Maghemo. Those sampled purposively were due to consideration given to the oldest schools at Livingstonia Synod since they were viable as “information rich” for this study. The schools were accessible to the researcher, a fact that it was vital for easy collection of data. The population in these five schools were large enough to draw the respondents of this study. Significantly a total sample size of 372 respondents was sampled for this study. The purposively selected schools proved to be convenient for study as (Hargeaves, 2010) reported that the most significant amount of student failure and dropout occurs where students are either in first year or third year. The study employed a stratified random sampling approach in obtaining student samples for the study. Since the sampled schools were from different sexes (male and females) the research aimed to ensure that within each school category samples of students representing diverse socio-economic groups including all class levels, religious sects/denominations, academic performance and family backgrounds. Therefore using schools-student and teacher recognition system the students were grouped in respective categories and the sample from each group was obtained using simple random sampling where 15% of each group was randomly selected for the study. This combination of stratified random sampling (for students), simple random sampling (for teachers), and census sampling (for chaplains, managers, and presbytery leadership) ensured representativeness, inclusivity, and comprehensive coverage of all key stakeholders.

Data Collection and Research Instruments

Data collection begun in June 2024 and ended in October 2025 where the researcher used questionnaire to collect data from students and interviews to collect data from school heads, chaplains, guidance and counselling teachers and education officials, Focus Group Discussion was also conducted among students. Data collection involved both field primary data as well as synthesizing previous research and analyzing relevant documents with a randomly chosen sample aimed to corroborate the study’s conclusions (Creswell, 2012). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the quantitative data whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically and integrated with quantitative findings during interpretation. The relevant staff were consulted for proper project setting, respondents’ preparedness, data collection and finally data analysis. A register was established to track the participant attendance each group was asked to choose a representation to open a separate register to minister the group member attendance. During data collection procedure the researcher recorded each participants Grade Point Average (GPA) for exams from the control groups (the higher performers and low performers) and the control as the basic for the study the participants in the control group was taken through counselling in pyscho- education in study skills, critical and creative thinking, problem solving, decision making skills, management, positive attitude, motivation, social relationship, substance use and abuse, financial management and career planning (Fullen, 2015) the counselling venue was provided by the schools’ counselling centres.

Data analysis

Data analysis refers to examining what has been collected in a survey or experiment and making deductions and in forever inferences. It involve uncovering underlying structures, extracting important variables, detecting any anomalies and testing any underlying assumptions (Bliss, 2018). The study obtained both quantitative and qualitative. The data were first cleaned, grouped into themes, coded and then keyed into the computer and

analyzed using the SPSS version 25. Quantitative data was collected from the sample size of 300 students. Finally, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically, frequency distribution, percentage and means to describe demographics characteristics of participant, status of counselling service patterns of academic performance and retentions challenges experienced in counselling. Qualitative data analysis was thematically done as per the study objectives. For example on the status of the counselling services, the focus was on the experience of the students in the ability to feel relaxed in order to be able to open up on issues of retention. The outcome was presented as narrative quotes. Both qualitative data qualitative data was triangulated to provide an in-depth description of counselling services.

Ethical considerations

Any study involving human being should be conducted with ethics considerations about the fairness and justice of the researcher process and actual results. All possible strategies were implemented to prevent the violation of the rights of the respondent. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and what would be the result of participating in the research. High confidentiality and privacy was maintained during and after the research whereby the researcher explained to the participant the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' Characteristics

Respondents were from various groups including secondary school students (form I-IV), teachers, School Managers, School Chaplains as well as Presbytery Leadership. Percentages for the respondent categories are calculated against the total sample of 372: Students = 87.9%, Teachers = 8.6%, School Chaplains = 1.1%, School Managers = 1.1%, and Presbytery Leadership = 1.3%. Overall, male respondents dominated over females whereas majority of students were aged (67.4%) below 18 years and most teachers, school chaplains, school managers and presbytery leadership were aged above 30 years.

Table: 2 Characteristics of Respondents by Category, Gender and Age (N = 372)

Respondent Category	Gender	(f)	(%)	Age Group	(f)	(%)
Students	Male	199	53.4	Below 18 years	251	67.4
	Female	128	34.4	18–25 years	76	20.4
	Total	327	87.9	26 years and above	00	0.0
Teachers	Male	15	4.0	18–30 years	09	2.4
	Female	17	4.5	31–45 years	13	3.5
	Total	32	8.6	46 years and above	10	2.6
School Chaplains	Male	03	0.8	26–35 years	01	0.3
	Female	01	0.3	36–45 years	01	0.3
	Total	4	1.1	46 years and above	02	0.5
School Managers	Male	02	0.5	36–45 years	02	0.5
	Female	02	0.5	46–55 years	01	0.3

	Total	4	1.1	56 years and above	01	0.3
Presbytery Leadership	Male	03	0.8	36–45 years	01	0.3
	Female	02	0.5	46–55 years	02	0.5
	Total	5	1.3	56 years and above	02	0.5
Overall Total	Male + Female	372	100.0	All age groups	372	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2025

Pastoral, Institutional and Contextual challenges faced by Christian Pastors and Counsellors in Delivering Guidance and Counselling Services

Based on the research findings, the overall results of the findings are presented in Table 3

Table: 2 Pastoral, Institutional and Contextual Challenges in the Provision of Christian Guidance and Counselling Services (N = 327)

Challenge Category	Identified Challenge	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Pastoral challenges	Excessive workload among counsellors	232	71.0
	Inadequate professional counselling training	184	56.3
	Role conflict between pastoral/spiritual leadership and counselling	136	41.6
	Limited availability of counsellors for individual student support	129	39.4
Institutional challenges	Inadequate counselling personnel	241	73.7
	Inadequate counselling materials and technological resources	226	69.1
	Lack of adequate/dedicated counselling facilities	218	66.7
	Absence/inadequacy of structured counselling programmes	199	60.9
	Limited administrative/institutional support	191	58.4
	Increasing student enrolment relative to available counsellors	179	54.7
Contextual challenges	Stigma associated with seeking counselling	211	64.5
	Fear of judgement and lack of confidentiality	205	62.7

	Negative peer influence	173	52.9
	Family instability and parental conflict	166	50.8
	Socio-economic difficulties and poverty	158	48.3
	Cultural beliefs and expectations	149	45.6
	Misconceptions about counselling services	141	43.1
	Changing moral and social values among students	121	37.0

Source: Field data, 2025

Pastoral Challenges

The findings revealed that pastors and Christian counselors experience several challenges that affect the effective implementation of Christian Guidance and Counselling (CGC) within secondary schools. The findings indicate that pastoral challenges significantly constrain the delivery of Christian Guidance and Counselling (CGC) services. Excessive workload among counsellors was the most frequently reported challenge, identified by 232 students (71.0%). This was followed by inadequate professional counselling training, reported by 184 students (56.3%). Role conflict between pastoral/spiritual leadership and counselling was reported by 136 students (41.6%), while limited availability of counsellors for individual support was reported by 129 students (39.4%).

Qualitative evidence confirms that increasing student enrolment places considerable pressure on the available counselling personnel. One counsellor explained:

“As the number of student enrollment increases for Christian Guidance and Counseling also increases. On the other hand, you find the increase of counselors are not increasing to lead with these rising numbers of students... that I get drained...” (Male Counsellor, 40 years).

This quotation provides direct evidence that workload is not merely an administrative concern but is experienced by counsellors as exhaustion that can limit sustained individual attention to students.

The findings are consistent with Common Factors Theory, which emphasises counsellor characteristics, competence, the counselling relationship and the wider counselling context as determinants of counselling effectiveness (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). Inadequate training may constrain professional competence, while excessive workload may reduce the time available to establish effective therapeutic relationships. The findings also support Self-Determination Theory, since students' needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy are more likely to be supported when counsellors have adequate time for meaningful interaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similar challenges were reported by Sima (2018), who identified high workloads, inadequate training and limited administrative collaboration among Tanzanian secondary-school counsellors.

Theologically, pastoral counselling is grounded in the responsibility to care for and guide God's people. The study relates this responsibility to 1 Peter 5:2, which presents pastoral leadership as shepherding God's flock, and Proverbs 11:14, which associates safety with the availability of wise counsel. These teachings suggest that effective pastoral care requires more than willingness to serve; it also requires wisdom, preparation and adequate support. Professional counselling training can therefore complement, rather than replace, the pastor's spiritual vocation by enabling pastoral caregivers to respond appropriately to complex student needs. Biblically, pastoral ministry emphasizes the responsibility of shepherding, guiding, and caring for individuals. The Apostle Peter instructs church leaders:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them...

(1 Peter 5:2).

Similarly, Proverbs 11:14 emphasizes the importance of wise counsel:

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

These scriptures demonstrate that guidance and counselling are central responsibilities within Christian leadership. However, without adequate professional preparation, institutional support, and continuous capacity building, pastors and counselors may experience difficulties in effectively integrating biblical teachings with modern counselling approaches. Therefore, strengthening professional development opportunities for pastors and school counselors is essential to improve the quality and effectiveness of Christian Guidance and Counselling services.

Institutional Challenges

The findings further indicated that institutional factors significantly influence the effectiveness of Christian Guidance and Counselling programs. Institutional challenges were among the most prominent problems reported by students. Inadequate counselling personnel ranked highest, with 241 students (73.7%), followed by inadequate counselling materials and technological resources, reported by 226 students (69.1%). Lack of adequate or dedicated counselling facilities was reported by 218 students (66.7%), while 199 students (60.9%) identified the absence or inadequacy of structured counselling programmes. Limited administrative support was reported by 191 students (58.4%), and 179 students (54.7%) identified increasing enrolment relative to available counsellors.

Interviewees and FGDs identified increased enrolment, shortage of counselling personnel and counsellor burnout as major challenges affecting service delivery. It was further observed that the number of counsellors has not increased proportionately with the growing number of students requiring psychosocial, spiritual, academic and behavioural support. The counsellor's observation that "*I get drained*" therefore illustrates how institutional staffing limitations translate into practical pressure on individual service providers.

The institutional findings strongly support the contextual dimension of Common Factors Theory, because counselling effectiveness depends partly on the environment in which counselling takes place (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). Shortages of personnel, facilities, materials and administrative support can restrict privacy, accessibility and continuity of counselling. The findings also correspond with Self-Determination Theory, because supportive institutional environments can facilitate students' needs for relatedness and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Previous research similarly reports inadequate facilities, heavy workloads and weak institutional support. Sima (2018) found comparable challenges in Tanzania, while Arfasa and Weldmeskel (2020) reported shortages of trained counsellors, weak counselling policies and limited student awareness in Ethiopian secondary schools.

Institutional support for counselling can be understood as an expression of responsible stewardship theologically. The study associates institutional organisation with 1 Corinthians 14:40, which teaches that things should be done "decently and in order." Applied to Christian education, this principle suggests that pastoral care should be intentionally organised rather than left entirely to individual commitment. Adequate personnel, facilities, resources and procedures therefore provide practical structures through which the church's responsibility for the holistic development of young people can be exercised.

The importance of institutional organization is also emphasized in Scripture:

But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

(1 Corinthians 14:40).

This verse highlights the importance of planning, organization, and proper structures in achieving effective outcomes. In the context of Christian Guidance and Counselling, schools require deliberate policies, adequate resources, and supportive leadership to ensure sustainable implementation. Therefore, institutional strengthening

remains necessary for maximizing the contribution of CGC toward students' academic and personal development.

Contextual Challenges

Contextual challenges also emerged strongly from the students' responses. Stigma associated with seeking counselling was reported by 211 students (64.5%), while fear of judgement and lack of confidentiality was identified by 205 students (62.7%). Negative peer influence affected 173 students (52.9%), and family instability and parental conflict were reported by 166 students (50.8%). Socio-economic difficulties and poverty were identified by 158 students (48.3%), followed by cultural beliefs and expectations at 45.6%, misconceptions about counselling at 43.1%, and changing moral and social values at 37.0%.

School managers and school chaplains revealed that students' social environment can either facilitate or discourage counselling utilisation. The study identifies cultural beliefs, stigma, socio-economic hardship, family instability, peer pressure and moral decline as contextual realities affecting counselling in the Livingstonia setting. Evidence from the wider student interviews also demonstrates the importance of privacy, with one student explaining that;

"The counselling room is private and located away from places where many students pass. I feel confident because no one knows why I am there." (Female student, 16 years).

The contextual findings are consistent with Common Factors Theory, particularly its emphasis on the counselling context and the therapeutic relationship (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). Stigma, fear of judgement and concerns about confidentiality may weaken trust and openness, thereby reducing effective engagement. Self-Determination Theory further suggests that supportive relationships strengthen students' need for relatedness and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Previous research similarly identifies cultural perceptions, stigma and inadequate awareness as barriers to counselling participation. In Malawi, the reviewed literature indicates that counselling services remain under-resourced and inconsistently implemented, while Kholowa and Mkandawire (2019) identified inadequate materials and limited administrative support among important challenges. This evidence demonstrates how confidentiality and the social visibility of counselling can influence students' willingness to seek assistance.

Theologically, contextual sensitivity is essential to Christian pastoral care because counselling takes place within real families, communities and cultural settings. The study relates this principle to 1 Corinthians 9:22, which highlights the importance of adapting one's approach to different people and circumstances. Similarly, Deuteronomy 6:6–7 presents the formation of young people as a responsibility involving families and faith communities. Christian counselling should therefore address students' actual social and cultural circumstances while maintaining appropriate biblical and professional principles.

The Apostle Paul demonstrates the importance of contextual adaptation when he states:

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

(1 Corinthians 9:22).

This principle emphasizes the need for counselors to understand the social and cultural environment of learners while providing meaningful guidance. According to Mlotwa (2024), counselling practices within African contexts must consider cultural values and social realities because students' experiences are shaped by family structures, community expectations, religious beliefs, and economic circumstances. In contexts such as Malawi and the Livingstonia Synod, communal values and traditional perspectives may sometimes differ from formal counselling approaches adopted from Western psychological models. For example, some students may hesitate to seek counselling because they associate counselling with personal weakness, failure, or serious problems. Effective CGC should therefore combine biblical foundations, professional counselling knowledge, and contextual awareness.

Summary

The findings of this study indicate that effective Christian Guidance and Counselling must be holistic, institutionalized, contextually relevant, and professionally informed. Christian counselling should address the complete nature of human development, including the mind, body, and spirit. A holistic approach recognizes that students' academic performance is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including emotional wellbeing, spiritual development, social relationships, personal discipline, motivation, and learning skills. Overall, the findings show that pastoral, institutional and contextual challenges are interrelated dimensions of the same counselling environment. Pastoral workload and inadequate preparation affect counsellor capacity; institutional shortages affect the organisation and accessibility of services; and contextual factors influence students' willingness to seek and participate in counselling. The combined application of Common Factors Theory and Self-Determination Theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how counsellor competence, relationships, institutional conditions and student motivation interact in CGC provision. The evidence supports the need for a model of Christian counselling that is professionally competent, institutionally supported, relationally sensitive, culturally responsive and theologically grounded.

Therefore, Christian Guidance and Counselling should be considered an essential component of secondary school education. When properly structured, professionally implemented, and supported institutionally, CGC can transform students into disciplined, motivated, resilient, and purpose-driven individuals capable of achieving academic success and contributing positively to society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study explored institutional, pastoral, and contextual challenges affecting Christian Guidance and Counselling services in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia Secondary Schools. The findings revealed that although counselling services were valuable, several challenges limited their effectiveness. Among the major challenges were inadequate counselling personnel; the increasing number of students requiring academic, emotional, behavioural, and spiritual support created excessive workloads for available counsellors. As a result, some counsellors experienced emotional exhaustion and burnout, reducing their capacity to provide individualized counselling services.

The study also found that shortage of counselling materials and technological resources affected service delivery. Although basic counselling materials were available in some schools, counsellors reported inadequate access to computers, documentation systems, and other professional equipment needed for effective counselling management. Another challenge identified was increased student enrolment. The growing student population created a mismatch between the number of learners requiring counselling services and the available counselling personnel. Consequently, counselling services sometimes became reactive rather than preventive.

The findings further revealed that negative attitudes towards counselling among some students affected service utilization. Some learners perceived counselling as a service only for students with serious problems, disciplinary issues, or personal failure. Fear of stigma, judgment, and lack of confidentiality discouraged some students from seeking counselling support.

Peer influence was also identified as a significant challenge. Some students avoided counselling because of fear of negative comments or misunderstanding from friends. Negative peer attitudes weakened students' willingness to participate in counselling programmes. Additionally, limited parental involvement and weak collaboration between schools, families, and churches reduced the effectiveness of counselling interventions. Since many student challenges originate from family and social environments, effective counselling requires cooperation among all stakeholders. The persistence of such challenges indicate a need to strengthening Christian Guidance and Counselling services by addressing institutional limitations, improving counsellor capacity, creating awareness among students, strengthening stakeholder collaboration, and developing contextually relevant interventions.

Recommendations of the Study

The recommendations of this study are based on the findings and conclusions regarding the institutional, pastoral, and contextual challenges affecting Christian Guidance and Counselling services in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia Secondary Schools. The recommendations are directed to school administrators, CCAP Synod leadership, counsellors, parents, churches, educational authorities, and other stakeholders involved in Christian education.

Strengthening Institutional Support for Christian Guidance and Counselling Services

The study revealed that although Christian Guidance and Counselling services exist in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia Secondary Schools, their effectiveness is affected by inadequate institutional support, limited resources, and insufficient staffing. Therefore, school administrations and CCAP Synod education authorities should strengthen counselling departments by allocating adequate financial resources, establishing functional counselling units, providing appropriate counselling materials, and ensuring that counselling activities are incorporated into school development plans. Counselling should not be treated as an additional or optional activity but as an essential component of quality Christian education. Schools should develop clear operational guidelines, monitoring systems, and evaluation mechanisms to ensure sustainability and effectiveness of counselling programmes.

Recruitment and Professional Development of Christian Counsellors

The study identified shortage of trained counsellors and excessive workloads as major challenges affecting counselling effectiveness. Some counsellors were required to combine teaching responsibilities with counselling duties, limiting their ability to provide adequate individual support. Therefore, CCAP Synod leadership and school authorities should recruit sufficient professionally trained Christian counsellors to meet the growing needs of students. Furthermore, continuous professional development programmes should be provided through:

- i. Counselling workshops;
- ii. Theological seminars;
- iii. Refresher courses;
- iv. Adolescent psychology training;
- v. Trauma-informed counselling;
- vi. Mental health awareness;
- vii. Career guidance;
- viii. Conflict resolution; and
- ix. Counselling ethics.

Such capacity building will enable counsellors to address students' academic, emotional, social, behavioural, and spiritual challenges effectively.

Improvement of Counselling Facilities and Resources

Although the study established that many schools had counselling spaces, findings also revealed shortages of important counselling materials and technological resources.

Therefore, school authorities should improve counselling infrastructure by providing:

- i. Private counselling rooms;

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- ii. Computers for confidential record management;
 - iii. Counselling manuals;
 - iv. Assessment tools;
 - v. Christian counselling materials;
 - vi. Referral resources;
 - vii. Filing systems; and
 - viii. Communication facilities.

Adequate facilities will improve confidentiality, professionalism, documentation, follow-up, and quality of counselling services.

Strengthening Parent, Church and Community Collaboration

The study found that family challenges such as poverty, conflict, neglect, and limited parental involvement affected students' emotional wellbeing and academic performance. Therefore, schools should establish stronger partnerships with parents, churches, and communities. Parents should be actively involved in: moral guidance; spiritual development; discipline; academic monitoring; and Emotional support. Churches should strengthen their contribution through pastoral counselling, mentorship, spiritual programmes, and support for vulnerable students. A collaborative approach will create a supportive environment for students' holistic development.

Promoting Positive Student Attitudes towards Counselling

The study revealed that some students avoided counselling because of stigma, fear of judgment, and misconceptions that counselling is only for students with serious problems. Therefore, schools should conduct awareness programmes to educate students about the purpose and benefits of Christian Guidance and Counselling. Students should understand that counselling is a developmental service available to all learners for academic improvement, personal growth, emotional support, spiritual development, and responsible decision-making. Schools should also strengthen confidentiality practices to increase students' trust and willingness to seek counselling support.

Establishing Peer Counselling and Mentorship Programmes

The findings demonstrated that peer influence affects students' willingness to seek counselling support. While negative peer influence discouraged counselling participation, positive peer relationships encouraged emotional and academic support. Therefore, schools should establish structured peer counselling and mentorship programmes. Selected students should receive appropriate training to provide basic peer support, encourage positive behaviours, and refer serious cases to professional counsellors. Christian student fellowships, alumni mentorship programmes, and teacher-student mentoring initiatives should also be strengthened.

Suggestions for further studies

- i. The present study examined the influence of Christian Guidance and Counselling within a specific research period. Future studies should employ longitudinal research designs to examine the sustainability of counselling outcomes over time, because this will permit stronger assessment of sustained counselling outcomes.
- ii. Future studies should examine the effectiveness of specific Christian Guidance and Counselling interventions such as: pastoral counselling, peer counselling, mentorship programmes, prayer-based counselling and family counselling.

iii. Future studies should examine how Christian Guidance and Counselling can respond effectively to: social media addiction, cyber-related challenges, online moral risks, digital identity development and responsible technology use among young people.

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