

SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH IN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KERICHO COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

School counselling is an important dimension of school-based support for students' psychosocial and mental health. Their capacity to address students' mental health needs, however, might be affected by workload, time, resources, professional development, institutional support, and students' views on counselling. The study was conducted to identify some of the problems school counsellors face to respond to students' mental health needs in the senior secondary schools in Kericho County, Kenya. Person-Centered Theory and Ecological Systems Theory guided the study and a convergent parallel mixed methods research design was used. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 68 school counsellors and key informant interviews were conducted with seven purposively selected principals and deputy principals to collect qualitative data. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation in SPSS version 30 and thematically respectively. The results obtained revealed a composite mean of 3.10 (SD = 1.17) which represented an average score close to the neutral point (3) of the five-point scale used to indicate the respondents' overall perception of the assessed challenges. The specific indicators recorded the highest mean (M) scores, with insufficient counselling time (M = 3.22, SD = 1.22), followed by inadequate counselling resources (M = 3.15), stigma associated with seeking counselling (M = 3.15), and lack of continuous professional training (M = 3.15). The mean score for inadequate referrals was the lowest score (M = 2.87, SD = 1.04). Qualitative results added contextual evidence of heavy workload, counselling time limitations, lack of resources, lack of professional development and stigma. The results highlight that School Counsellors face a set of interconnected operational level, professional and socio-cultural issues, with the extent of these issues being different for the various respondents and for the various school contexts. The study suggests that counselling time be protected, staffing and resources be increased, ongoing professional development be enhanced, and the stigma associated with school counselling be mitigated.

Keywords: school counselling; mental health; school counsellors; counselling challenges; adolescents; senior secondary schools; Kericho County

1.0 Introduction

Adolescent mental health is a public health and education issue because emotional, psychological and social (EPS) problems can impact learning, relationships, school attendance and overall mental health. Schools are a good environment for mental health promotion as they provide a

continuous access to adolescents and the opportunities to identify problems early, counsel, psycho educate, refer and follow-up. UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP 2023, UNICEF 2021 and World Health Organization [WHO] 2025 emphasize the importance of coordinated school-

based and whole-school approaches to promoting learners' mental health and well-being.

Student counseling is more likely to be embedded within a broader framework of student support than considered a stand-alone service. Comprehensive school counseling programs are characterized by planned delivery, management and accountability (American School Counselor Association, 2019) and evidence reviews demonstrate that school-based mental health interventions are more likely to be beneficial when delivered appropriately and integrated within the larger school setting (Fazel & Soneson, 2023; Weare & Nind, 2011). The ability of schools to adopt these approaches varies, however, based on the human resources, resources, leadership and professional preparation of schools, as well as the organization of counselling services.

School counsellors in resource-poor settings may experience high numbers of students, multiple school duties, less counselling time, fewer resources, fewer opportunities for ongoing professional development and fewer institutional resources. Socio-cultural factors may also affect students' willingness to seek counseling. Students may not seek counseling due to stigma, misunderstanding and concerns about counseling (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2025).

There are also signs of troubles with school counseling in Kenya. Some of the reported challenges by counsellors in secondary schools in Kiambu County include increased workload, limited support and other professionals related issues (Gachenia & Mwenje, 2021). The same point was made by Majimbo et al. (2023) who emphasized that the guidance and counselling programmes in Kenyan secondary schools require the support of the school, the parents, and the institution. The finding indicates that the mere provision of a counselling function is not a context condition to counselling provision.

In the current study, the target schools were in the Senior Secondary Schools in Kericho County. The

quantitative evidence of school counsellors and qualitative evidence of school administrators were harmonized in the study to examine the practical conditions under which school counselling is offered. The article focuses on school counsellors' challenges in responding to students' mental health needs.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Students should be able to get suitable psychosocial and mental health services in school. Staff Counselling services, however, do not imply that staff Counsellors have adequate time, resources, professional preparation and institutional support to respond to students' needs. Factors that affect counselling practice include workload, lack of time for counselling sessions, lack of resources, professional development, stigma, parental involvement, financial support, administrative support and referral systems.

Some issues facing school counselling have been documented in the past in Kenya. For example, Gachenia and Mwenje (2021) found that increased workload and lack of support from teacher-counsellors Majimbo et al. (2023) showed how significant it is for counsellors, parents and school stakeholders to work together. However, despite the various problems encountered by school counsellors in the context of the senior secondary schools in Kericho County, limited evidence has been assembled.

This context gap was filled in the present study by analyzing ten possible indicators of challenge and by also incorporating the qualitative perspectives of school administrators. This was to give an overall sense of perceived challenge and to offer context explanations of the nature of barriers in school contexts.

1.2 Research Question

What challenges are encountered by school counsellors in addressing students' mental health needs in senior secondary schools in Kericho County, Kenya?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The study was based on Person-Centered Theory and Ecological Systems Theory. Person-Centered Theory (Rogers, 1951) includes the three elements of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard that are essential for establishing a positive counseling relationship (Rogers, 1957). These are conditions that can foster trust, openness and psychological safety in school counselling. The theory is relevant because the students' perceptions of counselling could affect the students' willingness to share their problems with a counsellor.

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is a theory that sees development as having a process in a web of interrelated environmental systems. School counselling is also integrated into a network that includes counsellors, students, teachers, parents, administration and external consultation services. The theory can, therefore, be used as a lens for investigating the environments of counselling practice, including workload, resources, administrative support, parental involvement and referral systems.

Both theories mutually support each other. Person-Centred Theory offers an interpersonal view on the counselling relationship and on help-seeking while Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes institutional and wider environmental factors in which counselling occurs.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Workload and Counselling Time

School counsellors should have sufficient time to conduct individual or group sessions, maintain records, follow up and coordinate referrals, etc. If counsellors are providing counselling support alongside teaching and administrative/discipline duties, this could limit the time available for counselling. Gachenia and Mwenje (2021) reported higher workload and professional issues of teacher-counsellors in secondary schools in Kenya. This is important because if students are

having persistent difficulties, they may need multiple sessions and follow-up.

2.2 Resources and Financial Support

Counselling programmes need to have the necessary resources including spaces, materials and financial resources. The service can be formally offered in a school but then be restricted by the lack of materials or resources. Whole-school policies recognize the need for good organization, coordination and investment in school wellbeing programmes (UNESCO, UNICEF, & WFP, 2023; Weare & Nind, 2011).

2.3 Professional Development

Schools may face some mental health issues that go beyond just academic and career counselling. Ongoing professional development in areas like adolescent mental health, crisis response, trauma, substance use and referral are something counsellors might need. The importance of capacity building for the school mental health workforce and for implementing and implementing appropriately designed support programmes is emphasized in the evidence on school mental health (Fazel & Sonesson, 2023; ASCA, 2019).

2.4 Stigma and Help-Seeking

Students' perceptions of counselling may impact services utilization. Stigma can lead to fear that a student will be "labeled", "judged" or "identified" with mental illness. Stigma and barriers to help-seeking are salient issues related to adolescent mental health that are highlighted by UNICEF (2021) and WHO (2025). Misconceptions such as counselling being linked to punishment or disciplinary actions can also hinder the uptake of counselling in school settings.

2.5 Institutional, Parental and Referral Support

The institutional setting for the school counselling program. Administrative support can impact on allocation of time and resources; parental

involvement may be significant to follow-up and coordinated support. There is a need for referral systems to be implemented when a student needs specialist services that are not provided in a school setting. Collaboration between counsellors, parents and school stakeholders is found to be relevant to guidance and counselling programmes in Kenya (Majimbo et al., 2023).

2.6 Research Gap

The literature indicates that school counsellors can experience a variety of challenges, some of which are interrelated. Much of the evidence, however, focuses on specific barriers, or comes from contexts that are not similar to the Kericho County senior secondary schools. This context gap was targeted in the present study by looking at ten challenge indicators from quantitative data provided by school counsellors and qualitative data provided by school administrators.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. Quantitative and

qualitative data were collected and analysed separately and brought together at the interpretation stage. The design was appropriate because the study required structured evidence on the perceived extent of counselling challenges and contextual explanations from school administrators (Tashakkori et al., 2021).

3.2 Study Population and Participants

A total target population of 240 (120 school counsellors and 120 principals / deputy principals) were selected in senior secondary schools in Kericho County. The quantitative component followed the approved sampling plan of the 75 school counsellors. Sixty-eight of these returned questionnaires correctly and were analyzed quantitatively. Questionnaires returned were 68 usable, accounting for 90.7% of planned counsellors. The qualitative phase included seven principals and two deputy principals who were purposively selected for key informant interviews. The two groups of participants were treated separately as they were used for different methodological purposes in the convergent design.

Table 1. Participants in the Study

Participant category	Target population	Planned/selected	Actual respondents
School counsellors	120	75	68
Principals/deputy principals	120	7	7
Total	240	82	75

Source: Field Data (2026).

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The challenge section contained ten statements rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Qualitative data were collected using a semi-structured key informant interview guide administered to principals and deputy principals.

3.4 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 30. Mean, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were used for descriptive statistics. A neutral point of 3.00 was used for the challenge items. Qualitative data was thematically analyzed using familiarization, coding, grouping of codes according to their relatedness, development of themes and review of themes. While interpreting the two strands of evidence, evidence convergence and complementarity were looked for.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained during data collection and reporting. Participant quotations are identified using codes rather than names. The study followed the relevant institutional and research authorisation procedures.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Challenges Encountered by School Counsellors

The research question sought to establish the challenges encountered by school counsellors in addressing students' mental health needs. Respondents rated ten statements using a five-point Likert scale. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Challenges Encountered by School Counsellors (N = 68)

Code	Statement	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
E1	School counsellors have an excessive counselling workload.	68	1.00	5.00	3.13	1.17
E2	Inadequate counselling resources limit the effectiveness of counselling services.	68	1.00	5.00	3.15	1.27
E3	Students are reluctant to seek counselling services because of stigma.	68	1.00	5.00	3.15	1.20
E4	Limited parental involvement affects the effectiveness of school counselling programmes.	68	1.00	5.00	3.09	1.14
E5	Inadequate financial support limits the implementation of counselling programmes.	68	1.00	5.00	3.06	1.24
E6	School counsellors	68	1.00	5.00	3.22	1.22

Code	Statement	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
	have insufficient time to provide counselling services.					
E7	Lack of continuous professional training affects the quality of counselling services.	68	1.00	5.00	3.15	1.28
E8	Inadequate administrative support affects the implementation of counselling programmes.	68	1.00	5.00	2.96	1.07
E9	Referral services for students with severe mental health conditions are inadequate.	68	1.00	5.00	2.87	1.04
E10	Overall, school counsellors experience significant challenges in supporting students' mental health.	68	1.00	5.00	3.28	1.20
	Composite Mean	68			3.10	1.17

Source: Field Data (2026).

Results indicate a composite mean of 3.10 (SD = 1.17) and are fairly close to the neutral point of 3.00. This means that the challenges assessed were not judged by respondents as being low or high in all cases. The individual indicators, however, show certain ones that were more noticeable than others. The highest mean was found to be the overall assessment item E10 with 3.28 (SD = 1.20). The specific challenge indicators with the highest mean were insufficient

counselling time (3.22, SD = 1.22), and insufficient referral for extra funding (3.19, SD = 1.98). The mean scores for inadequate counselling resources, stigma, and lack of continuous professional training were 3.15 each. Inadequate referral services (M = 2.87, SD = 1.04) and inadequate administrative support (M = 2.96, SD = 1.07) had the lowest means. The findings highlight, however, that time, resources, stigma and professional development were more salient

concerns than the other indicators measured, such as referral services and administrative support.

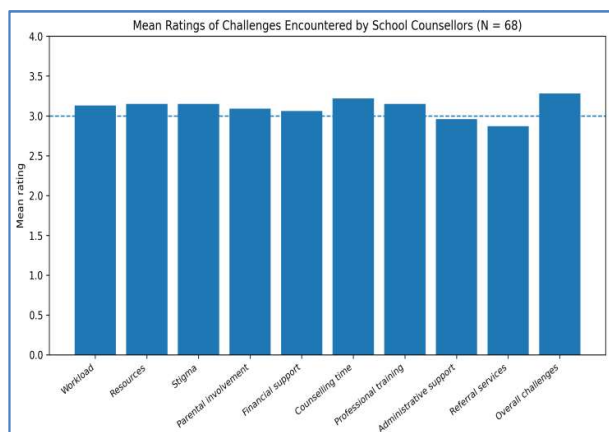


Figure 1. Mean Ratings of Challenges Encountered by School Counsellors (N = 68)

Note. The dashed horizontal line represents the neutral midpoint of 3.00.

4.2 Counselling Time and Workload

The specific challenge indicators had the highest means, with insufficient counselling time at 3.22 (SD = 1.22) and excessive counselling workload at 3.13 (SD = 1.17). The results of this study suggest that time limitation was one of the more salient operational concerns mentioned by counsellors. Counselling takes time to establish rapport, to do counselling, to document, follow up and coordinate referrals. Sometimes counsellors are working in a school and counselling can be integrated with other school duties, which can impact the continuity of support.

The qualitative findings were found to support the quantitative findings. Heavy workload and too little time were cited as problems for counselling provision. “Many students need counselling, but one counsellor needs to be able to serve the entire student body and follow up is difficult” (Participant 7). This account highlights the potential restrictions of follow-up due to counsellor workload. This finding is similar to that of Gachenia and Mwenje (2021) who reported higher work demands and other professional problems facing Kenyan teacher-counsellors.

4.3 Counselling Resources

A mean rating of 3.15 (SD = 1.27) for inadequate counselling resources indicated a higher rating than other specific challenges. This result would suggest that the participants were aware of resource-related issues as factors that affect counselling services delivery. Counsellors need appropriate setting and resources to be able to provide confidential and organized services. Research also highlights the importance of ongoing school-wide development and resilience support and investment in children's wellbeing (UNESCO, UNICEF, & WFP, 2023; Weare & Nind, 2011).

4.4 Stigma and Students' Help-Seeking

The mean score for the challenge of stigma was 3.15 (SD = 1.20), one of the relatively high rated challenges. This suggests that they were aware that a barrier to seeking counselling was reluctance. This pattern is contextualized by the qualitative results. One administrator said: “Some students still think that counselling is a punishment or a disciplinary measure, so they are not willing to take the assistance” (Participant 5). The finding is pertinent to Person-Centered theory as students might feel more comfortable in revealing personal problems when they feel the counselling is accepted, confidential and non-judgmental. It also aligns with the evidence that stigma and barriers to help seeking can impact mental health support for adolescents (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2025).

4.5 Professional Development

The mean for the lack of continuous professional training was 3.15 (SD = 1.28). The results clearly suggest that the relevance of continuing professional development to counselling service delivery is an ongoing process. Counsellors may find that issues arise which they need special expertise to address that is not a part of the guidance and counselling process. Continuing professional development can be used to build

capacity for adolescent mental health, crisis response, trauma-informed support and referrals. Capability of the school councillors and programme delivery are also known as part of school counselling (ASCA, 2019; Fazel & Sonesson, 2023) and are also recognized within the whole-school frameworks.

4.6 Parental, Financial and Administrative Support

Limited parental involvement had a mean of 3.09 (SD = 1.14), inadequate financial support had a mean of 3.06 (SD = 1.24) and inadequate administrative support had a mean of 2.96 (SD = 1.07). The results show that stakeholder and institutional challenges existed but were not necessarily seen by respondents as being a large problem. The variation also indicates that there are differences in counselling conditions between schools.

The results are consistent with an ecological interpretation of school counselling. Counselling occurs in the context of a network of institutional and interpersonal relationships, and the support of administrators, parents and other stakeholders can influence the context in which counselling

services are offered. Evidence from Kenya also points to collaboration among counsellors, parents and school stakeholders as an element of school guidance and counselling programmes (Majimbo et al., 2023).

4.7 Referral Services

Inadequate referral services recorded the lowest mean, 2.87 (SD = 1.04), which was below the neutral midpoint. This indicates that respondents did not identify referral inadequacy as a prominent challenge relative to the other indicators measured. This result should not be interpreted as evidence that referral systems are universally adequate. Rather, within the specific set of challenge indicators, referral inadequacy received the lowest rating.

4.8 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative interviews generated a theme concerning challenges encountered by school counsellors. Participants identified heavy workloads, limited counselling time, inadequate resources, insufficient professional development and stigma associated with seeking counselling services. The findings are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Qualitative Challenges Identified by School Administrators

Challenge	Illustrative evidence	Relationship with quantitative findings
Heavy workload	One counsellor may be expected to serve the entire school population, making follow-up difficult.	Complements E1 (M = 3.13).
Limited counselling time	Large student caseloads can make continuous follow-up difficult.	Converges with E6 (M = 3.22).
Inadequate resources	Participants identified resource limitations as affecting counselling provision.	Converges with E2 (M = 3.15).
Professional development	Participants identified the need for continuing professional preparation.	Converges with E7 (M = 3.15).
Stigma	Some students associate	Converges with E3 (M =

Challenge	Illustrative evidence	Relationship with quantitative findings
	counselling with punishment or disciplinary action.	3.15).

Source: Field Data (2026)

The qualitative findings offer context to the quantitative results. While the quantitative composite mean was close to the neutral center, administrators provided more detailed descriptions of certain operational and attitudinal barriers. It is NOT a contradiction since the strands of quantitative and qualitative study focus on different components of the research question. Each interview offers an in-depth account of a different context while the survey gives an overview of the patterns across 68 counsellors.

4.9 Integrated Discussion

The results show that the challenges faced by school counsellors are multi-faceted. The most frequently identified specific quantitative issues were counselling time, resources, stigma and professional development. The results of these findings suggest that the capacity for counselling relies in the presence of counsellors as well as the conditions of the organization in which they practice.

The results concerning workload and counselling time are similar to Gachenia and Mwenje (2021). Findings also align with those that focus on the importance of collaboration, organizational support, and the integration of school-based mental health services (ASCA, 2019; Majimbo et al., 2023; Weare & Nind, 2011).

There is an interpersonal and socio-cultural angle in the stigma finding. If students have a negative experience with counselling, they are not entitled to use the counselling service without having to request it. This gives further evidence of the importance of Person-Centred Theory, and trust, acceptance and psychological safety. Concurrently, Ecological Systems Theory contributes to the understanding of the role of counselling issues beyond the competence of the

individual counsellor, as time, workload, resources, administration, parents and referrals are all a part of the broader context of counselling.

In conclusion, the results suggest that the enhancement of school counselling should be targeted at certain operation barriers, not simply on the existence of people who are in charge of counselling. The aggregate mean also needs to be used with caution. It is a reflection of the general trend of the responses and not a sign that individual challenges are not being seen. The higher ratings for counselling time, resources, stigma and professional development, as well as the qualitative accounts, help to identify areas for attention.

5.0 Conclusion

This study focused on the challenges faced by school counsellors as they try to attend to the mental health problems of students in senior secondary schools in Kericho County. The quantitative results yielded a mean score of 3.10 (SD = 1.17) giving an overall perceived level of challenge not far from the neutral middle point. However, some special difficulties stood out. The highest specific challenge mean was insufficient counselling time (M = 3.22), followed by inadequate counselling resources (M = 3.15) and stigma (M = 3.15) and lack of continuous professional training (M = 3.15). The mean (M = 2.87) for inadequate referral services was the lowest.

These findings were further supported by qualitative evidence which included descriptions of heavy workloads, counselling time limitations, lack of resources, professional development requirements, and stigma. Hence, the study concludes that school counselling problems are interrelated and multidimensional: operational,

professional, institutional and socio-cultural. How much each challenge is experienced differs from school to school.

6.0 Recommendations

- Schools should protect designated counselling time and minimise competing responsibilities that interfere with counselling sessions and follow-up.
- School authorities and education stakeholders should consider strengthening counselling staffing where student populations create high counsellor workloads.
- Schools should allocate adequate resources and provide appropriate counselling materials and environments to support confidential and organised counselling.
- Continuous professional development should be strengthened to equip counsellors with current knowledge and skills relevant to adolescent mental health and complex psychosocial concerns.
- Schools should implement mental health awareness and stigma-reduction activities so that students understand counselling as a supportive service rather than a disciplinary mechanism.
- Collaboration with parents, teachers, administrators and relevant health professionals should be strengthened to support students who require continuing or specialised assistance.
- Functional referral pathways should be maintained and strengthened for students whose needs exceed the scope of school-based counselling.

7.0 Limitations

The findings were confined to the senior secondary schools in Kericho County and represent the situation during the study period in 2026. Quantitative data was self-reported by school counsellors, and may have response bias. The qualitative component consisted of seven

school administrators who were there for the purpose of obtaining a non-statistically generalizable picture. This study failed to directly assess the clinical mental health status of students and did not include students, parents, teachers or mental health professionals as respondents. The results are thus largely based on counsellors' perceptions, with a few administrators' perspectives added in.

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