**Article type** – Original Research Article

**ASSESSING COUNSELLING AND MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN UGANDA: A MULTICULTURAL SETTING**

***Abstract***

*This study examined counsellors' counselling and multicultural competence in Ugandan secondary schools* using a *quantitative one-group post-test-only* *design to provide evidence-based recommendations for effective counselling practices. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. A total of 139 participants—63 male and 76 female senior men/women—from 76 randomly selected secondary schools in Kampala, Uganda's capital city, formed the sample. The design was a one-group post-test-only approach. The Counselling and Multicultural Competence Questionnaire (CMCQ) was used as the instrument. The validity of the CMCQ was 0.85, and its reliability was 0.88. Results revealed that most counsellors lacked core counselling competence (59.5%), although they demonstrated moderate multicultural awareness (50.4%). There was a significant difference in multicultural competence between private and public schools’ counsellors t(137) = 2.455, p = .015 (p < 0.05), but not between professionals and non-professionals t(137) = 1.408, p = .161 (p> 0.05). The study recommends increased training, hiring of qualified counsellors, and enhanced oversight by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES).*

**Keywords:** counselling, culture, multicultural counselling competence, religion, secondary schools.

**Introduction**

Counselling is a helping profession aimed at ensuring the well-being of all. It involves a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to achieve mental health, wellness, education, and career goals (American Counselling Association, 2012). A counsellor is expected to provide suitable and adequate counselling tailored to the developmental needs of society at large, thereby supporting the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS), Goal Three, the Ugandan Vision 2040, and the Culturally Responsive Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program **(**CR- CGCP) model of multicultural counselling. SDG Goal Three focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at every age. Vision 2040 seeks to transform Uganda into a prosperous and modern society, which can only be achieved when its citizens are in good health and well-being. The CR- CGCP is a multicultural counselling model for 21st-century counsellors (Coleman & Lindwall, 2008). CR- CGCP is a school-wide intervention for social, emotional, and behavioural issues, ensuring educational equity and promoting social and academic competence of all students. CR- CGCP equips students with skills to function effectively as citizens in a global economy.

Uganda, being a multicultural society with 17 ethnic tribes, several foreign communities, and diverse religions (Senyonyi et al., 2012), necessitates diverse and responsive counselling, especially for secondary school counsellors whose clients are mainly adolescents. Adolescents aged 13-18 years make up 34. 8% of the country's population, with 78% attending school (UNICEF, 2019). This means that Uganda's secondary school counsellors must be equipped to address the challenges faced by adolescents and to manage a multicultural school environment. Such an environment values, respects, and accommodates people from different backgrounds and cultures, often described as an inclusive or diverse society. Multicultural competence is a dynamic quality that every counsellor must develop. It is characterised by contextual sensitivity- the ability to handle individuals from diverse backgrounds with the utmost consideration and respect for cultural differences. School counsellors working with adolescents are expected to demonstrate a high level of counselling competence to effectively help adolescents navigate the challenges of adolescence within a culturally diverse setting.

Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood that is often characterised by several challenges demanding counselling interventions. Developmentally, adolescents experience physical, social and cognitive changes, which in turn influence behaviour due to variations in the rate of development; the emergence of the growth spurts differs among individuals. Hence, adolescence is associated with several risky and antisocial behaviours such as sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, abortion, pregnancy, alcoholism, eating disorders, rape and suicide to adolescence. Variations in the rate of development for adolescents are either encouraging or embarrassing. Adolescents who develop faster or slower than their peers may be comfortable or not with their appearance, which result in self-destruction or pride. Fast development usually instils pride, confidence, and self-esteem. A boy or girl whose growth is more rapid than that of the peers may become popular, have more friends and consequently develop self-acceptance and its attendant effects while a boy or girl with slow or distorted growth may develop a negative self-concept and its attendant effect (Graber, 2013; Paris et al., 2019; Sulaiman, 2010). Appearing conspicuously different from peers due to early/late maturity is a huge psychosocial challenge, resulting in several risky and anti-social behaviours that call for counselling.

Statistics generated by UNICEF (2019) in Uganda indicated that yearly, 9,600 adolescents are newly infected with HIV, one in four is pregnant or has had a child, which is unwanted, and 60% have experienced a form of gender-based violence. In addition, studies ([Abbo et al., 2016](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666560323000476#bib6); Kaggwa et al., 2022; Mabanja & Matovu, 2024) revealed an increase in the abuse of drugs and substances by adolescents in Uganda. Mabanja and Matovu (2024) found rampant use of alcohol among Muslim students in Nakaloke secondary schools in Uganda. Furthermore, another important challenge of adolescents, which requires counselling interventions and counsellors ‘competence, is the high prevalence of mental health issues in Uganda and specifically among adolescents. Opio et al. (2022) in their review of several studies in Uganda found mental health disorders to be 22.9% prevalent among children below the age of 18, with depression and anxiety disorders being the most common. Precisely, the prevalence of depressive disorders was 22.2%, anxiety disorders were 14.4% and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was the most common type of anxiety disorder for children of the same age group. Having PTSD as the most common type of anxiety disorder was not surprising, based on the population of refugees 67% residing in Uganda (Opio et al., 2022). The various challenges of adolescence call for constant and appropriate guidance and counselling to facilitate worthwhile decision-making and meaningful adjustments.

The school counsellor is expected to skilfully develop a comprehensive school guidance and counselling programme that competently attends to the developmental, educational, personal, and psychosocial needs of students and all individuals within the school environment (American School Counsellor Association (ASCA), 2022). The core counselling skill expected of a counsellor is communication; the counsellor’s ability to effectively convey and receive messages from clients during counselling sessions. Communication could be verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communication in counselling is usually dependent on non-verbal communication; a smile accompanied by a “thank you” is more pleasant than an ordinary “smile” or an ordinary “thank you”. Skills of verbal communication include rapport, interviewing, questioning, paraphrasing/reframing and summary, while some essential non-verbal communication skills are listening, empathy, humour, and warmth. Rapport, for example, is an important counselling skill used to establish confidentiality, build relationships with clients and ensure appropriate counselling interventions (Sulaiman, 2015). In developing a relationship, the client is informed of the whole counselling process, the benefits, potential risks, ethics such as (1) not having intimate relationship with client, (2) not hiding mistakes made during counselling, (3) confidentiality – keep the secrets secret within the rule of the thumb; *warn, protect, and report*and(4) must not assume responsibility for the client or take decisions for him/her and the client’s consent to counselling must be established (ASCA, 2022). It is imperative for counsellors to competently utilise counselling skills to facilitate effective counselling (Sulaiman, 2015).

Therefore, to adequately provide appropriate interventions required in a diverse school environment, school counsellors in Uganda must be multiculturally competent and skilled in counselling. The pioneers of multicultural counselling competence, Sue and Sue (1977) contended in their article, *Barriers to Effective Cross-Cultural Counselling* that communication in any counselling relationship is ineffective if the counsellor is unable to understand the client's cultural messages and adequately communicate cultural information to the client. Hence, emphasising the importance of multicultural counselling competence in any counselling relationship and the counselling profession.

Acknowledging the need for multiculturally competent counsellors, the Uganda government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) have ensured the availability of human and capital resources required to facilitate high counselling competence. Two counsellors are to be placed in each school (Government of Uganda, 1992). Knettel et al. (2019) found the placement of counsellors in schools to be more effective in private schools. Respondents in their study stated that private schools’ counsellors more than public schools were dedicated to their duties because they were specifically employed as either full/or part-time counsellors, unlike in public schools where they were just selected to act as counsellors in addition to teaching and without remuneration. Further, MoES and the Uganda Counselling Association (UCA) assumed the responsibility of ensuring that the senior men/women were trained in basic counselling skills (Otwine et al., 2018). Kassan and Sinacore (2016) reported that counsellors’ skills and multicultural competencies are vital when counselling female adolescents. This implies that senior men/women in schools should be more sensitive in providing individualised counselling interventions for female clients. This is imperative because of the vulnerability of females, especially adolescents to several sociocultural issues (American Psychological Association APA, 2007). Unfortunately, despite these efforts, counselling services were largely not provided by skilled counsellors (Auf & Arinaitwe, 2022; Kigongo, 2018; Kabunga, 2020; Otwine et al., 2018; Senyonyi et al., 2012). Most of those serving as counsellors in many Ugandan schools are school administrators, teachers, religious leaders, matrons, senior men/women, and sometimes student leaders, who are not trained(Otwine et al., 2018).

Multicultural competence requires the counsellor to consciously develop the awareness, knowledge and skills to function effectively with culturally diverse populations (Ivey et al., 2018). Ivey et al. (2018) argued that multicultural counselling competence is ascertained from the micro level; the possession of different counselling skills. When the skills of rapport, listening and confidentiality, for example, are adequately utilised, the upper level of competence would emerge. ASCA (2022) stated that school counsellors provide multiculturally responsive school counselling by enhancing their cultural competence and facilitating the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills of all schools’ personnel. Counselling competence impacts multicultural competence; hence, the concern of this study is whether Ugandan counsellors are faring well. Barden et al. (2017) found that professional counsellors were unprepared to work with culturally diverse clients.

Multicultural Competence Awareness ***-*** demands that counsellors become aware of (a) their cultural background; who they are as cultural beings (b) their own potentially biased attitudes; have an understanding of cultural dynamics and how they may influence the client’s worldview, (c) the cultural background of the client; an understanding of their client’s worldview and its effect on well-being and (d) how these affect the counselling relationship (Sue et al., 2019; Lee, 2019). Counsellors who are aware of themselves would assist their clients to understand themselves, their culture, and others.

Multicultural Competence Knowledge - means counsellors are (a) well informed of their clients’ cultural diversity; adequate knowledge of Islamic principles and practices for example, will impact on counselling transference or countertransference (Ahmed & Amer, 2012), (b) knowledgeable about discrimination and marginalisation against certain groups within the community and the consequences on their client’s behaviour, for example, educational marginalisation of Muslims (Dawood, 2017; Kasule 2022; Musisi & Kiggundu, 2018;) and discrimination against non-indigenous communities of Uganda (The Uganda National Culture Policy, 2006) will form the basis for effective interaction, (c) possession of specific knowledgeand understanding of the generic characteristics of counselling; establishing rapport, confidentiality and effective communication, and (d) knowledgeable about community barriers that prevent some diverse clients from accessing counselling services such as a younger person should not counsel an older person, and a woman should not counsel a man (Senyonyi et al., 2012).

Multicultural Competence Skills ***-*** involves the counsellor’s ability to (a) utilise different verbal and nonverbal communication skills, (b) apply appropriate counselling skills for effective interventions*,* and (c) anticipate the impact of the counsellor’s therapeutic styles on the client and the counselling process. Theoretically, fruitful skills develop from appropriate multicultural counselling relationships: (a) a greater sense of enthusiasm, (b) an increased self-worth; (c) a better understanding of self and others in the context of relationships; (d) elevated levels of productivity and creativity; and (e) a desire for more connection (Miller & Taylor 2016). On the other hand, isolation is the result of inappropriate multicultural counselling relationships, a significant source of developmental suffering (Jordan, 2018), and a worthless relationship. The incompetence of the counsellor may lead to shame, withdrawal, and disempowerment of the client, for example, a handshake to establish rapport with a female Muslim client. Multicultural counselling competence assists clients in overcoming their problems and acquiring different techniques of worthwhile decision-making and adjustment, while incompetence results in isolation and developmental disaster.

**Problem Statement**

Uganda is a multicultural society with different religions, and a quarter, 34.8% of the population, are adolescents (United Nations Population Fund UNFPA, n.d). This suggests diverse and responsive counselling for secondary school counsellors whose clients are adolescents. The challenges of adolescence require the school counsellor to be professionally and multiculturally competent. In addition, Ugandan school counsellors are expected to be sensitive to the needs and culture of their clients to effectively facilitate the achievement of SDG Goal Three and Uganda’s Vision 2040. Unfortunately, studies (Auf & Arinaitwe, 2022; Kabunga 2020; Kiweewa et al., 2018; Kigongo, 2018; Senyonyi et al., 2012; Otwine et al., 2018) indicated that most Ugandan counsellors are not professionals and are unskilled. In addition, professionals were not prepared to practice multicultural counselling (Barden et al., 2017).

As earlier noted, the Uganda Government through MoES had acknowledged the need for multiculturally competent counsellors and has facilitated the provision of the required human and capital resources, which unfortunately were inadequate and not skilled. These inadequacies in the face of the booming problems of adolescents in a diverse cultural environment call for appropriate interventions (Coleman & Lindwall, 2008), which can only be provided when there is sufficient information and understanding of the current situation on counselling and multicultural competence in Ugandan schools. Hence, the need for this study.

**Research Questions and Hypothesis**

1. To what extent do secondary school counsellors in Uganda demonstrate core counselling competencies?
2. To what extent are secondary school counsellors in Uganda multiculturally competent?
3. There would be no statistically significant difference in the multicultural counselling competencies between counsellors in government-aided and private secondary schools.
4. There would be no statistically significant difference in multicultural counselling competence between professional and non-professional school counsellors.

**Methodology**

*Research Design*

The design of this study was a randomised one-group post-test-only design **(**R X 01). The researchers randomly selected the secondary schools and examined their counsellors’ multicultural counselling competence. De Vos et al. (2005) averred that a randomised one-group post-test-only design is the most suitable quasi-experimental design when the research cannot have a comparison pre-test or a control group. Hence, the choice of this design.

*Sample*

The sample for the study consists of all 139 counsellors, 63 male and 76 female in 76 randomly selected secondary schools in Kampala City, Uganda. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, 76 secondary schools were randomly selected from the 93 accredited secondary schools in Kampala city (DIT, Uganda). Of the 76 secondary schools, 62 were private and 14 were public. 80 counsellors were in private schools while 59 were in public schools, indicating that the 1992 policy of placing two counsellors in one school was strictly implemented in public schools. The choice of Kampala city was based on its demographic advantage and suitability for the study. Kampala is the largest city and the capital of Uganda. It is also the commercial hub of the country with diverse ethnic groups from within and outside the country, and 52% secondary net enrolment (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Hence, counsellors in Kampala schools demographically represent counsellors from other regions in Uganda, with several culturally diverse students.

*Instrument*

The Counselling and Multicultural Competence Questionnaire (CMCQ) was used to gather data for the study. CMCQ is a 28-item self-developed instrument with some sections adapted from the Multicultural School Counselling Behaviour Scale (Greene, 2019). CMCQ has four sections of expected school counselling and multicultural competence behaviours: counselling skills, interventions, psychoeducation, and leadership(ASCA, 2022; Greene, 2019; Ivey et al., 2018; Sulaiman, 2015). Respondents were requested to agree or disagree with each statement by ticking Yes or No. In each section, the higher the total score of respondents, the higher the competence level. The expected total score of each participant in each section ranges from 6-8, Section A = 8, B and C = 7, and D = 6. A test-retest reliability of CMCQ at two-week intervals with a sample different from the study sample yielded 0.88, and a content validity index of 0.85 was derived for the instrument. Responses to CMCQ were voluntary, and participants had the option to withdraw.

*Methods of Data Analysis*

Data was analysed with simple counts and the independent sample t-test at a 0.05 level of significance. The choice to use an independent sample t-test was based on Pallant (2016) recommendation that the independent sample t-test is an appropriate tool to ascertain the differences between two groups of participants.

**Results**

Results presented in Table 1 show the demographic data of respondents. Most respondents (67.6%) were not professionals and were mostly in private schools 57.6%. Notwithstanding, compared to the number of schools, 14 schools, public schools appeared to be more compliant with the Government of Uganda's (1992) policy of having two counsellors in a school. There were more female counsellors than male counsellors in this study.

**Table 1**

Distribution of Respondents by Demographic Characteristics

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Status** | **Frequency (%)** |
| Professional Counsellor | 45(32.4) |
| Senior Man/Woman | 57(41) |
| Career Master/Mistress | 37(26.6) |
| **Sex** |  |
| Male | 63(45.3) |
| Female | 76(54.7) |
| **School Type** |  |
| Private | 80(57.6) |
| Public | 59(42.4) |

**Table 2**

Respondents’ Level of Counselling Competence

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Total Skills Score** | **Frequency (%)** |
| 1.00 | 12(8.6) |
| 2.00 | 8(5.8) |
| 3.00 | 62(44.6) |
| 4.00 | 35(25.2) |
| 5.00 | 12(8.6) |
| 6.00 | 10(7.2) |
| **Competence Level** |  |
| Low | 82(59) |
| High | 57(41) |

Results displayed in Table 2 are the responses generated for research question one, which sought to examine the counselling competence of secondary school counsellors in Uganda secondary schools. Results show a high level of counselling competence for a few counsellors; Most of the respondents lack the skills required to be competent counsellors. None of the respondents had the highest score on the counselling skills section. The expected total score for the section is 08, but the maximum score of respondents was 06; none of the respondents scored 08. Most of the respondents 59% scored below 04 (1-3), which is low competence.

The results presented in Table 3 are the responses to research question two, which aimed to determine counsellors' multicultural competence in Uganda secondary schools. Results revealed a marginal multiculturally competence of 50.4% for respondents, most of the respondents lacked the skills of multicultural intervention 82% but were knowledgeable multiculturally 82.7%.

**Table 3**

Respondents' Multicultural Competence Level

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Competence Level** | **Intervention** | **Leadership** | **Psychoeducation** | **Multicultural**  **Competence** |
| Low | 114(82) | 88(63.3) | 24(17.3) | 69(49.6) |
| High | 25(18) | 51(36.7) | 115(82.7) | 70(50.4) |

\*\*Numbers in parentheses are percentages

Results presented in Tables 4 and 5 are the independent t-test scores of the differences in the multicultural counselling competence of public/private secondary school counsellors and professional/non-professional counsellors. While there was a statistically significant difference between private and public counsellors’ multicultural counselling competence, *t* (137) = 2.455, *p* = .015 < 0.05, there was no statistically significant difference between professional and nonprofessional counsellors’ multicultural counselling competence, *t* (137) = 1.408, *p* = .161 > 0.05.

**Table 4**

T-test of Public and Private Counsellors’ Multicultural Competence

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of School** | **N** | **Mean** | **Mean diff.** | **T** | **df** | **Sig** |
| Private | 80 | 3.3375 |  |  |  |  |
| Public | 59 | 2.8644 | .47309 | 2.455 | 137 | .015 |

**Table 5**

T-test of Professional and Non-Professional Multicultural Competence

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Status** | **N** | **Mean** | **Mean diff.** | **T** | **df** | **Sig** |
| Professional | 45 | 3.3333 |  |  |  |  |
| Nonprofessional | 94 | 3.0426 | .29078 | 1.408 | 137 | .161 |

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study examined counsellors' counselling and multicultural competence in private and public secondary schools in Uganda. The results confirmed the position of previous studies (Auf & Arinaitwe, 2022; Kigongo, 2013; Kabunga, 2020; Otwine et al., 2018; Senyonyi et al., 2012) on counsellors' status in Ugandan secondary schools. Few counsellors in this study possessed the different counselling skills required to provide effective interventions to alleviate students' challenges; most counsellors were not skilfully trained. This finding supports that of Ivey et al. (2018), who argued that multicultural counselling competence is ascertained from the micro level. The ability to effectively utilise the micro-level counselling skills of rapport, listening and confidentiality (Sulaiman, 2015) will facilitate higher-level competence. Miller and Taylor (2016) stated that multicultural counselling skills involve the counsellor’s ability to (a) utilise different verbal and nonverbal communication skills, (b) apply appropriate counselling skills for effective interventions*,* and (c) anticipate the impact of the counsellor’s therapeutic styles on the client and the counselling process. The overwhelming 82% low-level intervention explained the marginal 50.4% high multicultural counselling competence, suggesting that the counselling needs of students, particularly those requiring individualised interventions such as female vulnerable adolescents, as reported by Kassan and Sinacore (2016) may be at stake.

Although, by training, professional counsellors were expected to be more multiculturally competent than non-professionals, in this study, there is no significant difference between the multicultural counselling competencies of professionals and non-professionals. That the two groups lacked multicultural counselling competence further confirmed Ivey et al. (2018)’s argument and Barden et al. (2017)’s assertion that professionals were not ready to work with culturally diverse clients. Professionals in the current study were probably not willing to work with culturally diverse students. Hence, the high 82.7% score in psychoeducation, which showed they were knowledgeable in cultural competence but lacked multicultural intervention practices, therefore, the 82% low score in the intervention section of CMCQ. Multicultural competence, according to Ivey et al. (2018), Sue et al. (2019), and Lee (2019), requires the counsellor to consciously develop the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to function effectively with culturally diverse populations. The result of inappropriate multicultural counselling relationships is developmental suffering; incompetence of the counsellor leads to shame, withdrawal, and disempowerment of the client (Jordan, 2018).

The statistically significant difference shown in Table 4 regarding the multicultural counselling competence of counsellors in public and private schools suggests that the quality of services offered by these counsellors varies between school types. Counsellors in private schools exhibited greater dedication than those in public schools. Knettel et al. (2019) attributed this disparity to differences in role definitions and financial support. Respondents in the study by Knettel et al. (2019) indicated that private school counsellors were employed either full-time or part-time and were compensated accordingly for their counselling services. In contrast, public school counsellors were typically appointed to serve as counsellors alongside their initial duties within the school. Additional factors contributing to the disparity include monitoring, commitment, and workload. Counsellors in private schools remained committed due to consistent monitoring, financial benefits, and clear role definitions, whereas public school counsellors' commitment was hindered by excessive workload and role conflict (Knettel et al. 2019; Otwine et al., 2018).

The thesis of this study has been completed. The study examined the counselling and multicultural competence of counsellors in Ugandan schools, providing sufficient knowledge and understanding of these aspects. However, less focus has been given to studying the counselling and multicultural competence of counsellors in Ugandan secondary schools. Since Uganda is a multicultural society, this study played a vital role in exploring these competences among secondary school counsellors. Additionally, the study offers practical implications for effective counselling for counsellors, school management committees, government, and policymakers to facilitate comprehensive improvements in counselling practices in Ugandan secondary schools.

**Recommendations**

To ensure that the government’s goals and efforts are effectively achieved, the government, through MoES, should employ more trained counsellors with clearly defined roles in secondary schools. In addition to acting as a counsellor, having other duties is a challenging task that must be alleviated to encourage commitment, facilitate effectiveness, and promote best counselling practices.

The school management should not be left with the prerogative of selecting just anybody from the school to take up the responsibility of counselling. If the school must appoint a counsellor, the selection should be strictly based on possessing certain counselling skills training.

The government should also through MoES in conjunction with the Counselling Association of Uganda, intensify efforts in continuous training of both senior men/women and professional school counsellors to enhance counselling and multicultural competence.

MoES, in collaboration with CAU, should increase efforts in monitoring counselling services in public schools to ensure commitment and utmost competence.

As noted earlier, further studies should examine the influence of multicultural counselling competence on secondary school students' adjustment and well-being.

This study provides information on the multicultural counselling competence of counsellors in secondary schools; further studies should be conducted to establish the challenges of counsellors in this regard and how best to facilitate positive change. Finally, a more comprehensive design with either a control group or an experimental design could be explored to generate more robust results.

**Disclaimer** **(Artificial intelligence)** - Authors hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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