The Role of School-Based Counselling Programs on Social Cohesion among Secondary School Students in Nigeria

Florence Omumu, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6393-1107
Department of Educational Foudations, University of Delta, Agbor Delta State, Nigeria

*Olufunke Chenube, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1184-6517
Department of Educational Foudations, University of Delta, Agbor Delta State, Nigeria

Aderinola Abidoye, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8927-5902
Department of Educational Foundations, National Open University, Lagos, Nigeria

Olujide Adekeye, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7412-0131
Department of Psychology, Covenant University, Nigeria

Oyaziwo Aluede, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1667-9954
Department of Guidance & Counselling, Ambrose Alli University, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author: olufunke.chenube@unidel.edu.ng

Abstract
This discourse examined the often-neglected yet crucial function of school-based counselling in enhancing social cohesion and fostering national unity within the Nigeria's culturally and religiously diverse secondary education system. Utilizing the Social Identity Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Cultural Competence Theory, the study contends that school-based counselors possess a distinct capacity to bridge divides by cultivating inclusive environments that promote a collective sense of belonging, mutual respect and civic engagement among students. The study discusses how specific counselling interventions can alleviate prejudice, diminish identity-based conflicts and foster attitudes consistent with the Nigeria's national integration objectives. This discourse advocates for a revitalized national agenda that emphasizes capacity development, ongoing investment, contextually appropriate counselling methodologies and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems.

Keywords: School-based counselling; national values; social cohesion; multicultural education.

Introduction

In Nigeria's increasingly multicultural and dynamic society, fostering national values and social cohesion among high school students is critical to building a peaceful and unified nation.

National values, defined as the core ethics, principles, and ideals that reflect the cultural, social, and political identity of a country, are foundational to the development of a shared national consciousness (Ismail, 2018). For

Nigeria—a country with over 250 ethnic groups, more than 500 languages, and significant religious diversity—these values are crucial in bridging differences and fostering a sense of belonging among its citizens (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Social cohesion, which refers to the capacity of diverse groups to coexist harmoniously while contributing to societal well-being, complements national values by encouraging unity in diversity (Bouma, 2016). This synergy is essential for a nation like Nigeria, where diversity is both a strength and a challenge.

Nigeria's high school population represents a microcosm of this diversity, that is, a smaller scale With approximately 28.6 million students enrolled in secondary schools across the country (National Population Commission, 2023), the student body is a rich tapestry of ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. High schools, particularly in urban centers, such as Lagos, Abuja, Kano and Port Harcourt, are home to students from across the country, many of whom come from vastly different cultural settings. These students bring with them a variety of perspectives, customs and values that reflect the Nigeria's multifaceted identity. This diversity provides an unparalleled opportunity to cultivate national values that promote unity, tolerance, and respect for others. It is within these educational spaces that the future of Nigeria's national identity is shaped, making schools critical arenas for promoting both social cohesion and national values (Chan & Islam, 2015).

Social cohesion in the Nigerian context is particularly important, given the historical and ongoing challenges related to ethnic, religious and regional conflicts. Nigeria has experienced significant episodes of violence rooted in these divisions, from the Biafra Civil War to more recent clashes between herders and farmers, and the rise of insurgent groups such as Boko Haram (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2019). The consequences of these conflicts are felt acutely in schools, where tensions between students from different backgrounds can sometimes mirror broader societal divides. Schools thus play a crucial role not only in academic instruction but also in peace building by fostering an environment where students learn to live and work together despite their differences (Lee & Horsley, 2017).

Promoting national values, such as respect for diversity, justice and equality within the educational curriculum helps mitigate these divisions. Educational institutions serve as vital spaces for teaching the younger generation about Nigeria's rich cultural heritage and the importance of unity. Studies have shown that students exposed to curricula that emphasize national values and social cohesion are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward people from different ethnic or religious groups, reducing prejudice and fostering inter group harmony (Hörnsten et al., 2014). Furthermore, students who engage in activities that promote civic engagement, such as community service or inter school collaborations, are more likely to develop a strong sense of national pride and responsibility (Lu et al., 2021).

High school students in Nigeria, who are at a critical stage of identity formation, and the integration of national values into their educational experience can have profound long-term effects on their sense of self and their role in society. During adolescence, students are particularly sensitive to issues of belonging, fairness and justice, and schools provide a unique opportunity to shape their understanding of these concepts. Promoting national values that emphasize inclusivity, democracy and respect for human rights, schools can help cultivate a generation of Nigerian citizens who are not only aware of their rights and responsibilities but also committed to contributing to the country's socio-economic development This is especially important as Nigeria continues to grapple with issues such as political instability, corruption, and economic inequality, which can be exacerbated by divisions within the population.

The secondary school system in Nigeria reflects the country's ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversity, functioning as a microcosm of its diversified society (Adewale, 2020; Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). This diversity enhances the learning environment but may also lead to tensions, discrimination and peer disputes, if not well managed (Eremie & Chikweru, 2022). Incidents of bullying, cultism, inter-group rivalries and discrimination among students underscore the pressing necessity for proactive initiatives to cultivate inclusive and harmonious educational environments (Nwankwo, 2023).

School-based counselling programs have been acknowledged as an effective means of addressing students' psychological needs and fostering positive peer interactions (Egbo, 2015; Odebunmi & Adedokun, 2020). When properly executed, counselling services can foster mutual respect, empathy, conflict resolution abilities, and a sense of belonging among kids from varied backgrounds (Okoye, 2021). Despite national policies requiring the establishment of counselling units in secondary schools (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), their effectiveness in promoting social cohesion remains under-explored, inconsistently executed, and frequently inadequately funded (Eremie & Chikweru, 2022; Uba, 2018).Therefore, there is an urgent want for systematic investigation into the enhancement of school-based counselling treatments to promote social cohesion in Nigerian schools. This is necessary because addressing this information gap is essential for developing evidence-based methods, shaping legislative frameworks and providing school counselors with pertinent tools to foster peaceful cohabitation and national unity.

Guided by the identified problem, this study examined the importance of school based counselling, theoretical framework, the current state of school-based counselling services in Nigerian secondary schools, with particular emphasis on how these programs contribute to promoting social cohesion among students from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, the review explored what existing evidence reveals about the effectiveness of counselling approaches, strategies, and interventions in nurturing tolerance, empathy, positive peer relationships, and peaceful conflict resolution within the school setting. It further considers the practical and systemic barriers that limit the implementation and impact of such programs and highlights persistent gaps in knowledge that require further empirical investigation and policy attention

Methods
This study employed the systematic review technique to collect, analyse, and synthesise the latest and pertinent information about the impact of school-based counselling programs on promoting social cohesiveness among secondary school students. This methodology was used to guarantee that the evaluation process remained systematic, transparent and replicable, offering an objective and thorough comprehension of how counselling interventions foster social harmony in varied educational environments.

To maintain academic rigour, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. Studies eligible for inclusion were published over the past two decades to reflect the current dynamics of school counselling and its influence on social cohesion. Data sources comprised prominent academic databases like ERIC, Scopus, PubMed and Google Scholar. A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was utilized, incorporating concepts, such as "school-based counselling," "social cohesion," "peer mediation," "conflict resolution," "secondary school students," and "Nigeria." Alongside peer-reviewed articles, pertinent grey literature from organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF and national educational agencies, was included to furnish policy context and practical insights tailored to the Nigerian secondary school environment.

Importance of National Values and Social Cohesion
Individual identities are built on the foundation of national values, which give people a strong sense of purpose and belonging (Van der Merwe & Morelli, 2022). National values serve as a uniting thread in the complex mosaic of various cultures and beliefs, tying a nation's common goals and aspirations together. They provide people with a framework for understanding the world, influencing their moral compass, attitudes, and behaviors. People who share these ideals become proud and devoted to their country, strengthening the bonds that bind it (Szeto, 2022). This develops a strong sense of patriotism, a sense of unity among the populace and a dedication to preserving the principles that characterize the country's culture. As the glue holding together the many facets of a community, social cohesiveness fortifies the ties that connect disparate groups and promotes collaboration, mutual respect and trust (Marja et al., 2020). People in socially cohesive societies are likelier to work together, share resources and support one another (Alhusban et al., 2019). In this connection, fewer conflicts result from misconceptions, biases or cultural differences. Societies foster situations where discourse and empathy

triumph over dispute and animosity by promoting social cohesion (Acosta & Chica, 2018). Social cohesion shields communities from the forces of division, making them resistant to adversity and outside influences (Gordeev & Egan, 2015).

The symbiotic relationship between social cohesiveness and national ideals is essential to creating a cohesive and peaceful community (Boran, 2021). The basis for common standards and goals is established when people and communities embrace and assimilate national ideals (Anam et al., 2019). Under this shared vision, various communities live in mutual respect and understanding, valuing the diversity of customs and viewpoints. Social cohesiveness is a link between diverse groups and social cohesiveness promotes an environment of acceptance and tolerance (Watters et al., 2020). This makes people from diverse backgrounds connect, work together and co-create while overcoming social and cultural barriers. A peaceful society is built on the interaction of social cohesiveness and national values (Cross & Angelo 1988). Upholding and advancing these principles, societies create an atmosphere where people feel empowered, communities are resilient and a common feeling of belonging is prevalent (Engel et al., 2014). In the modern world, peaceful coexistence is essential since it improves people's lives and makes a significant difference in the advancement, stability and prosperity of entire nations. Previous research findings (Engel et al., 2014; Mayes & Byrd, 2022) examined school counselling from various angles, including how it affects social integration, academic achievement and mental health. Although the current body of research offers a strong basis, there is still a significant knowledge vacuum regarding how these programs support students' development of national values and social cohesiveness (Mayes & Byrd, 2022).

Theoretical Framework on National Values and Social Cohesion

To understand the interplay between national values and social cohesion, this study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how students classify themselves into groups, derive a sense of belonging and develop attitudes that influence in-group harmony or out-group prejudice — showing how national values are internalized through group affiliations. Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1993) emphasizes the role of trust, networks and reciprocal relationships in fostering supportive peer interactions that strengthen collective well-being and shared civic values (Gundelach & Traunmüller, 2014). Cultural Competence Theory Cross & Angelo 1988) highlights the importance of equipping students to understand and respect cultural diversity, thereby promoting inclusion and reducing prejudice (Leyerzapf & Abma, 2017). Together, these frameworks provide an integrated lens for examining how school-based counselling programs can nurture group belonging, build trust, and develop intercultural understanding — all essential for embedding national values and enhancing social cohesion in diverse school settings.

School-based counselors are essential in influencing students' social, emotional and academic growth, particularly in Nigeria's varied educational settings. In addition to offering emotional support, counselors cultivate a sense of belonging, respect and common values among students from diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds (Harrison, 2019). They tackle issues, such as bullying, prejudice and conflict through individual and group counselling while imparting empathy, communication skills, and conflict resolution tactics that enhance peace within the school community (Killen & Rutland, 2022; Levitt et al., 2023). By establishing secure environments for discourse and comprehension, counselors effectively mitigate bias and promote inclusive attitudes that foster a harmonious educational setting.

Key theoretical frameworks, including Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) and Cultural Competence Theory Cross et al., 1989) serve as essential instruments for the development of effective treatments. Utilizing Social Identity Theory, counselors assist students in developing a positive self-concept and a collective national identity; Social Capital Theory guides initiatives that enhance trust and supportive peer networks (Zihnioğlu & Dalkıran, 2022); Cultural Competence Theory prepares students to appreciate and navigate cultural disparities (Gray & Rubel, 2018). Peer mentoring, family-school collaborations and

culturally attuned programs further bolster these objectives (Chan & Islam, 2015; Sink, 2016). Utilizing these frameworks, counselors facilitate the bridging of cultural barriers, advocate for national ideals, such as tolerance and civic duty, and equip students to be active participants in fostering social cohesion within the Nigeria's diverse community.

State of School-Based Counselling Services in Nigerian Secondary Schools

The present condition of school-based counselling services in Nigerian secondary schools indicates a scenario characterized by both policy dedication and practical deficiencies. The Federal Government, via the National Policy on Education, requires that each secondary school construct an operational guidance and counselling unit to cater to students' academic, vocational, and socio-personal development needs (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This strategy illustrates national acknowledgement of counselling significance in enhancing students' well-being and social adaptation; yet, its execution has frequently been inconsistent and inadequately funded (Uba, 2018; Eremie & Chikweru, 2022).

In numerous public schools, appointed counselors are often burdened with substantial teaching loads or administrative duties, hence constraining their ability to deliver specialized counselling services (Egbo, 2015; Odebunmi & Adedokun, 2020). The absence of specialized counselling offices, insufficient money for resources and programs, and restricted possibilities for professional development have further impeded the efficacy of these units (Okoye, 2021; Nwankwo, 2023). Where therapy services are available, they frequently adopt a reactionary stance—tackling behavioral issues only after they intensify—rather than proactively fostering societal cohesiveness, tolerance and constructive peer connections (Adewale, 2020). Promising approaches are emerging in several urban and private schools, where structured peer counselling programs, conflict resolution clubs and group guidance sessions are increasingly employed to manage disputes and promote inclusive student interactions (Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). Notwithstanding these isolated achievements, the general condition of school-based counselling in Nigeria remains indicative of a considerable disparity between policy objectives and actual implementation, with profound consequences for the aim of fostering socially cohesive school communities.

School-Based Counselling Programs and Promotion of National Values and Social Cohesion

Counselling programs offered in schools provide students with a transforming experience by teaching them to understand and appreciate the experiences and viewpoints of others. Learners cultivate profound empathy through facilitated dialogues, role-playing activities and authentic case studies. In addition to actively combating prejudices, stereotypes and biases, counselling interventions promote a climate of tolerance. Students learn to respect and value the diversity of cultures, religions, and traditions when safe spaces for open discussion are provided, establishing the groundwork for a community where differences are valued rather than used as a source of division (Gray & Rubel, 2018). Counselling programs use multicultural counselling approaches, narrative therapy, and cognitive-behavioral strategies. Through self-reflection, these techniques help students become aware of their prejudices and presumptions, fostering empathy for others. Counselling programs emphasize the common humanity among varied people and provide students with the emotional intelligence to negotiate difficult social environments. This promotes national ideals that are based on empathy and understanding (Engel et al., 2014).

Counselling programs offered in schools are essential for helping students feel like they belong. Counselors encourage students to explore their identities, including their cultural backgrounds and national heritage, through individual and group counselling sessions (Szeto, 2022). Counselors offer affirmation, guaranteeing that each student's individuality is recognized and valued. Self-worth and self-esteem are raised by this validation, which fosters a keen sense of community inside the school and in society (Ibili & Billinghurst, 2019). Counselling programs encourage conversations on common national stories and historical occurrences so that students can make the connection between their identities and the larger national identity (Tum, 2020). When children understand their contributions to the national fabric, they also grow to feel a strong

sense of pride and belonging. This blending of national and personal identity strengthens national ideals that place a premium on solidarity and pride in the country. It also fosters a sense of shared purpose.

School-based counselling programs include workshops, joint projects and multicultural activities to foster beneficial inter group interactions. Students from all backgrounds participate in meaningful exchanges and learn from one another experiences and viewpoints through these activities. These exchanges destroy preconceptions and stereotypes, promoting respect and understanding among people (Leyerzapf & Abma, 2017; Qazi & Shah, 2019). Counselling programs foster a sense of camaraderie among students by encouraging collaborative participation in extracurricular activities, academic projects and community service, regardless of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Counselling programs facilitate peaceful coexistence, ensuring that differences do not cause division but add to the school community's richness. Counselling interventions include teaching students effective communication skills and negotiation techniques and providing them with the tools to navigate disagreements respectfully (Liaga & Wielenga, 2020). A key element of counselling programs offered in schools is conflict resolution. Counselors resolve interpersonal disputes by addressing underlying problems from prejudice or cultural misunderstandings. Conflicting parties are encouraged to voice their opinions and feelings through facilitated dialogues, which develop empathy and advance understanding between the parties. These mediation sessions not only settle issues right away but also provide students with the tools they need to resolve conflicts positively in the future (Acosta & Chica, 2018; Boran, 2021).

Counselling programs include diversity and cultural competency education modules. These programs dispel myths, offer factual knowledge about many cultures and inspire students to recognize the importance of diversity. Counselling programs build a foundation of understanding and acceptance, promoting social cohesion (Chan & Islam, 2015; Anyi, 2017). They enable students to accept the cause of inclusivity and actively participate in building a cohesive and peaceful community. School-based counselling programs develop empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity while helping students feel like they belong and have an identity. As a result, they function as catalysts for advancing national ideals (Borg & Borg, 2015). These programs handle problems, foster understanding among varied student populations and facilitate positive inter group relationships, improving social cohesion. Using these many strategies, counselling programs help people become more well-rounded and essential in creating a society where social cohesion and national values are lived realities rather than just ideas (Lee & Horsley, 2017).

Effective Counselling Strategies for Promoting Social Harmony and Peaceful Peer Interaction

Numerous counselling techniques, approaches and program elements have been found in Nigeria's expanding body of research and practice-focused reports to be beneficial in fostering social harmony, tolerance and amicable peer relationships among secondary school pupils. A recognized approach is peer counselling, which enables designated students to act as trained peer facilitators, offering initial conflict mediation, support and advice to their peers (Egbo, 2015; Odebunmi & Adedokun, 2020). Peer counselling facilitates the connection between students and professional counselors, enhancing accessibility to support while promoting empathy and mutual respect among students (Okoye, 2021).

Group therapy and guiding sessions have been beneficial, particularly when tailored to tackle prevalent drivers of conflict, including tribal prejudice, religious intolerance, bullying and adverse peer influence (Nwankwo, 2023). These sessions generally emphasize the instruction of conflict resolution skills, the cultivation of empathy, assertive communication and emotional control, all of which are essential for fostering strong peer relationships (Eremie & Chikweru, 2022).

Conflict resolution clubs and peace education workshops are progressively being implemented in certain urban and private schools as co-curricular activities alongside formal counselling services (Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). These clubs offer practical training in mediation and negotiation skills, urging students to engage actively in dispute resolution and fostering a culture of communication and inclusivity. A further

promising strategy is value clarification and moral education, administered via counselling units in conjunction with civic education instructors. This technique aims to assist students in comprehending and assimilating shared values, including respect, justice, tolerance and cooperation, which are vital for social cohesion in multi-ethnic educational environments (Adewale, 2020).

Furthermore, several schools have used collaborative treatments, including parents and counselors, wherein counselors conduct sensitization workshops for parents to promote the reinforcement of positive values at home and to assist their children's social and emotional growth (Odebunmi & Adedokun, 2020). These programs integrate school-based counselling objectives with familial and communal expectations, so enhancing their efficacy. Nevertheless, research continually indicates that the efficacy of these tactics is significantly contingent upon the presence of qualified, motivated counselors, institutional backing, sufficient financing and a school culture that prioritizes conversation and inclusivity (Uba, 2018; Okoye, 2021). Notwithstanding these hurdles, evidence indicates that systematic implementation of such components can markedly diminish occurrences of peer conflict and foster safer, more cohesive school communities.

Factors Affecting the Implementation and Impact of School-Based Counselling for Social Cohesion

Despite the acknowledgement of school-based counselling programs as essential in fostering social cohesion in Nigeria's increasingly diverse secondary schools, numerous structural and contextual obstacles persist, hindering their efficacy and sustainability. The ongoing deficiency of professionally trained school counselors continues to be a significant concern. Notwithstanding the National Policy on Education's directive, numerous secondary schools, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions, continue to function without designated counselors, depending instead on classroom teachers who possess insufficient counselling expertise (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013; Uba, 2018). The shortfall is exacerbated by elevated student-to-counsellor ratios at schools with counselling personnel, hence diminishing the quality of services rendered (Egbo, 2015; Nwankwo, 2023).

Secondly, inadequate financing and infrastructural shortcomings hinder program implementation. Numerous educational institutions lack specialized counselling offices, private areas or essential resource materials required for efficient individual and group therapy (Odebunmi & Adedokun, 2020; Levitt et al., 2023). Restricted budgets result in counselling units frequently lacking operational money for outreach, peer group training, or conflict resolution workshops—activities essential in fostering social cohesion (Kay et al., 2019).

Third, adverse cultural attitudes and stigma associated with counselling services persist in deterring student participation (Okoye, 2021; Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). In some societies, therapy is predominantly perceived as a punitive action for 'troublesome children' or as an acknowledgement of personal frailty, rather than a standard developmental support service (Harrison, 2019). Such beliefs engender hesitance among children and parents to pursue therapy, and in certain instances, prompt school administrators to diminish the prioritization of investment in comprehensive counselling facilities.

Fourth, contextual and cultural insensitivity of program design constitutes a significant obstacle. Numerous school counselling interventions in Nigeria are derived from or modified versions of generic Western models that inadequately address the nation's distinctive cultural, theological, and socio-political intricacies (Gray & Rubel, 2018; Tum, 2020). Consequently, these programs may fail to align with local reality, diminishing their capacity to address culturally embedded roots of bias or inter-group conflict. The inadequate integration of indigenous knowledge and community-oriented conflict resolution methods diminishes the cultural significance of counselling treatments (Brannon & Lin, 2021).

Fifth, insufficient collaboration among schools, families and communities impedes the extensive reach and adoption of counselling activities (Chan & Islam, 2015). For counselling to effectively foster social cohesiveness, it must correspond with ideals upheld at home and within the broader society. Nevertheless,

inadequate collaborations and ineffective communication among counselors, parents and community leaders can lead to disjointed initiatives that do not address the underlying causes of student conflict and discrimination (Maleku et al., 2019).

Sixth, inadequate institutional support and irregular policy oversight persist as structural impediments. Despite national education policies acknowledging the significance of counselling, there exists insufficient accountability to guarantee that schools comprehensively execute and maintain successful programs (Eremie & Chikweru, 2022). Numerous educational institutions lack explicit operational rules, implementation frameworks or consistent oversight to evaluate the quality and efficacy of counselling services (Kay et al., 2019). This results in data deficiencies, inadequate assessment of program efficacy and lost chances for evidence-based enhancements.

Emerging social realities, such digital bullying and online peer conflict, pose new difficulties that many counselling units are not equipped to handle due to insufficient training in digital literacy and online risk management (Levitt et al., 2023; Nwankwo, 2023). The swiftly evolving social landscape necessitates that counselors consistently enhance their knowledge and skills; nonetheless, opportunities for professional development remain few and inadequately financed in numerous areas.

Gaps in the Literature and Areas for Further Research

While the significance of school-based counselling in promoting students' social development and emotional well-being is well-recognized, the current literature regarding its impact on national unity and social cohesion in Nigeria is fragmented and insufficiently developed (Eremie & Chikweru, 2022; Uba, 2018). Current research predominantly examines the overarching functions of guidance and counselling, with few empirical studies investigating the impact of specific counselling interventions on inter group attitudes, prejudice reduction or the enhancement of students' commitment to shared national values (Tum, 2020; Levitt et al., 2023). There is a deficiency of longitudinal studies that examine how ongoing counselling programs influence students' social identity

development and perspectives on cultural and religious diversity over time (Gray & Rubel, 2018).

Moreover, although peer counselling, conflict resolution clubs and value clarification activities are often advocated as effective strategies (Okoye, 2021; Odebunmi & Adedokun, 2020), systematic assessments of their effects on tangible outcomes like reductions in bullying, tribal bias or religious intolerance are infrequent. Numerous research depend on anecdotal or descriptive narratives instead of utilizing rigorous mixed-method or experimental designs to determine causal correlations between counselling practices and quantifiable indices of social cohesion (Maleku et al., 2019). This methodological deficiency constrains policymakers' capacity to expand successful models or distribute resources based on unequivocal evidence of efficacy (Kay et al., 2019).

The literature infrequently discusses the customization of counselling services to the distinct socio-cultural contexts of Nigeria's many regions, where ethnic, religious and linguistic dynamics uniquely influence inter group relations (Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). There is a necessity for additional context-specific research that examines the integration of indigenous conflict resolution techniques, local community norms and traditional values into counselling frameworks to enhance their cultural relevance and efficacy (Brannon & Lin, 2021). From a policy standpoint, there exists a paucity of scholarship investigating the structural and institutional circumstances that facilitate or impede the incorporation of counselling programs within national educational policies for peacebuilding and unity (Egbo, 2015). Enquiries regarding finance structures, counsellor recruitment and retention, training requirements and accountability procedures are frequently neglected; however they are essential for converting policy pledges into practice (Eremie & Chikweru, 2022).

In light of these deficiencies, next research should emphasize longitudinal and comparative studies to assess the enduring effects of school-based counselling on students' attitudes, behaviors, and civic involvement. There is a significant necessity for participatory research that prioritizes the lived experiences of students and counselors to create culturally

relevant, context-specific models in fostering national cohesion inside educational institutions (Gray & Rubel, 2018; Tum, 2020). Furthermore, additional policy-oriented research is required to evaluate how national and sub-national education systems might integrate counselling as a strategic instrument for promoting societal harmony and unity in alignment with Nigeria's overarching nation-building objectives.

Conclusions

This discourse underscored the pivotal role of school-based counselling programs in cultivating social cohesiveness and promoting national values among students. The discussion highlighted several crucial aspects of counselling programs in multicultural school settings, emphasizing their significance in fostering tolerance, empathy and respect for diversity. The paper illustrated how counselling programs facilitate constructive inter group contacts, bridging cultural divides and promoting social cohesion among student groups. To address these challenges, strategic recommendations are proposed for policymakers, educators and stakeholders, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts and evidence-based approaches.

Recommendations

Based on the discourse in this paper, it is suggested that schools establish effective counselling centers managed by professionals with experience in evidence-based programs that teach societal values and social cohesion. These professionals should possess skills in counselling interventions sensitive to cultural differences, enabling them to connect with pupils from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, policymakers must acknowledge the critical role of school-based counselling programs in fostering social harmony and allocate sufficient funds and institutional support to integrate them into the curriculum. Collaboration between stakeholders, including government agencies, ministries of education, educators, parents, counselors and community leaders, is crucial to ensure the success of these programs.

References

Acosta, P. and Chica, N. (2018). Psychosocial support to foster social cohesion between refugee and host communities in Jordan. Intervention Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict-Affected Areas, 16(2), 147-153.

Adewale, A. A. (2020). Diversity Management in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Challenges and Prospects. Journal of Educational Policy and Development, 12(2), 55–66.

Akinyemi, J. O. and Isiugo-Abanihe, U. C. (2019). Household environment and child well-being in sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for Sustainable Development Goals. Children and Youth Services Review, 100, 147–155. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.02.042.

Alhusban, A. A. A., Alhusban, S. A. and Al-Betawi, Y. N. (2019). Assessing the impact of urban Syrian refugees on the urban fabric of Al Mafraq city architecturally and socially. International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment, 10(2/3), 99–129. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijdrbe-09-2018-0039.

Anam, S., Degeng, I. N. S., Murtadho, N. and Kuswandi, D. (2019). The Moral Education and Internalization of Humanitarian Values in Pesantren: A Case Study from Indonesia. Journal for the Education of Gifted Young Scientists, 815–834. https://doi.org/10.17478/jegys.629726.

Anyi, E. M. E. (2017). The Role of Guidance and Counselling in Effective Teaching and Learning in Schools: The Cameroonian Perspective. International Journal of Educational Technology and Learning, 1(1), 11–15. https://doi.org/10.20448/2003.11.11.15.

Boran, G. (2021). The Role of National Unity under Psychological Vision in the Realisation of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. Journal of Sociology and Ethnology, 3(2), 111–114. https://doi.org/1 0.2 3977/jsoce.2021.030214.

Borg, E. and Borg, B. (2015). New perspectives on counselling in audiological habilitation/rehabilitation. International Journal of Audiology, 54(1), 11–19. https://doi.org/10.3109/14992027.2014.92133.

Bouma, G. D. (2016). The role of demographic and socio-cultural factors in Australia's successful multicultural society: How Australia is not Europe. Journal of Sociology, 52(4), 759–

771.https://doi.org/10.1177/144078331558421
0.

Brannon, T. N. and Lin, A. (2021). "Pride and prejudice" pathways to belonging: Implications for inclusive diversity practices within mainstream institutions. American Psychologist, 76(3), 488–501. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000643.

Chan, A. T. and Islam, S. (2015). State, religion, and environmentalism: fostering social cohesion and environmental protection in Singapore. Environmental Sociology. https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2015.104526 3.

Cross, K. P. and Angelo, T. A. (1988). Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty. Ann Arbor: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Cross, T. L., Bazron, B. J., Dennis, K. W. and Isaacs, M. R. (1989). Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care (Vol. 1). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.

Egbo, J. O. (2015). The Role of Guidance and Counselling in Effective Teaching and Learning in Schools. African Journal of Educational Research and Development 8(1), 34–42.

Engel, L. C., Rutkowski, L. and Rutkowski, D. (2014). Global mobility and rising inequality: A cross-national study of immigration, poverty, and social cohesion. Peabody Journal of Education, 89(1), 123-140. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2014.862480

Eremie, M. D. and Chikweru, A. E. (2022). Counselling for Social Cohesion in Nigeria: The Role of School Counsellors. International Journal of Innovative Psychology and Social Development, 10(4), 22–28.

Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2013). National Policy on Education (6th ed.). Lagos: NERDC Press.

Gray, T. and Rubel, D. J. (2018). "Sticking Together": The Adolescent Experience of the Cohesion Process in Rural School Counseling Groups. The Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 43(1), 35–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2017.1370049.

Gordeev, V. S. and Egan, M. (2015). Social cohesion, neighborhood resilience, and health:

evidence from New Deal for Communities programme. The Lancet, 386, S39–S39. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(15)00877-6.

Gundelach, B. and Traunmüller, R. (2014). Beyond Generalised Trust: Norms of Reciprocity as an Alternative Form of Social Capital in an Assimilationist Integration Regime. Political Studies, 62(3), 596–617. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12064.

Harrison, M. (2019). Relationship in context: Processes in school-based counselling in Hong Kong. Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 19(4), 474–483. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12234.

Hörnsten, Å., Lindahl, K. B., Persson, K. E. M. and Edvardsson, K. (2014). Strategies in health-promoting dialogues - primary healthcare nurses' perspectives - a qualitative study. Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences, 28(2), 235–244. https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.12045.

Ibili, E. and Billinghurst, M. (2019). The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Social Network Loneliness: A Study of Trainee School Counsellors. Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Technology, 7(3), 39-56.

Ismail, A. S. (2018). Representation of National Identity in Malaysian State Mosque Built Form as a Socio-cultural Product. International Journal of Built Environment and Sustainability, 5(1). https://doi.org/10.11113/ijbes.v5.n1.243.

Kay, J. J., Muola, J. M. and Ondima, P. C. (2019). Influence of Guidance and Counselling Programmes on Secondary School Students Academic Engagement in Nyamira County, Kenya. Journal of Education and Practice. https://doi.org/10.7176/jep/10-29-13.

Killen, M. and Rutland, A. (2022). Promoting fair and just school environments: Developing Inclusive Youth. Policy Insights from the Brain and Behavioral Sciences, 9(1), 81–89.

Lee, A. R. and Horsley, J. S. (2017). The role of social media on positive youth development: An analysis of 4-H Facebook page and 4-H'ers' positive development. Children and Youth Services Review, 77, 127-138.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.04.014.

Levitt, G., Grubaugh, S., Maderick, J. and Deever, D. (2023). The Power of Passionate

Teaching and Learning: A Study of Impacts on Social Science Teacher Retention and Student Outcomes. Technium Social Sciences Journal, 41, 82–85. https://doi. org/10.47577/tssj.v41i1.8484.

Leyerzapf, H. and Abma, T. A. (2017). Cultural minority students' experiences with intercultural competency in medical education. Medical Education, 51(5), 521–530. https://doi. org/10. 1111/medu.13302.

Liaga, E. A. and Wielenga, C. (2020). Social Cohesion from the Top-Down or Bottom-Up? The Cases of South Sudan and Burundi. Peace & Change, 45(3), 389–425. https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12424.

Lu, Z., Tan, S. J., Tan, C. C., Ng, M. C. H., Lim, K. Y., Tan, L. H. E., Ong, Y. T., Cheong, C. W. S., Chin, A. M. C., Chiam, M., Chia, E. W. Y., Lim, C. S., Wijaya, L., Chowdhury, A. R., Kwek, J. W., Fong, W., Somasundaram, N., Ong, E. S., Mason, S. and Krishna, L. K. R. (2021). A systematic scoping review of approaches to teaching and assessing empathy in medicine. BMC Medical Education, 21(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-02697-6\.

Maleku, A., Kim, Y. H. and Lee, G. (2019). Social cohesion and immigrant health: does language-efficacy matter? International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care, 15(1), 17–30. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijmhsc-02-2018-0007.

Marja, N., Maryna, D., Lidia, S. and Olena, Y. (2020). Trust as a cognitive base of social cohesion in the university communities. International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education, 8(1), 15-23. https://doi.or g/10.5 937 /ijcrsee2001015n

Mayes, R. D. and Byrd, J. A. (2022). An antiracist framework for evidence-informed school counseling practice. Professional School Counseling, 26(1a), 2156759X221086740.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Annual Abstract of Statistics 2023. Abuja, Nigeria: National Bureau of Statistics.

National Population Commission. (2023). Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2023: Key Indicators Report. Abuja, Nigeria: NPC & ICF International.

Nwankwo, C. O. (2023). Bullying and Peer Conflicts in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Counselling Implications. Nigerian Journal of Educational Research, 19(1), 67–75.

Odebunmi, A. and Adedokun, A. (2020). School Guidance and Counselling Services: Pathway to Sustainable Peace Education in Nigeria. Journal of Education and Practice, 11(21), 50–56.

Okonkwo, I. R. and Eze, M. O. (2021). Managing Diversity for Effective School Administration in Nigeria. International Journal of Educational Administration, 15(2), 77–85.

Okoye, P. O. (2021). Guidance and Counselling as Tools for Conflict Resolution in Secondary Schools. African Journal of Teacher Education, 11(1), 102–112.

Putnam, R. D. (1993). Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Qazi, M. H. and Shah, S. (2019). A study of Bangladesh's secondary school curriculum textbooks in students' national identity construction in an overseas context. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 39(4), 501–516. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1671806.

Sink, C. A. (2016). Incorporating a Multi-Tiered System of Supports into School Counselor Preparation. The Professional Counselor, 6(3), 203–219. https://doi.org/10.15241/cs.6.3.20

Szeto, E. (2022). Social cohesion for societal prosperity: Teachers' inclusive development of career education for all students' growth in Hong Kong secondary schools. Teaching and Teacher Education, 115, 103722–103722. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103722.

Tajfel, H. andTurner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.) The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Tum, P. K. (2020). Role of Transition from Secondary to Tertiary Educational Institutions on the State of National Ethos, Social Cohesion and Integration among Students in

Kenya. International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies, 8(7). https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2020/v8/i7/hs2007-035.

Uba, A. (2018). Guidance and Counselling: An Overview of its Development and Practice in Nigerian Schools. International Journal of Education and Research, 6(5), 13–21.

Van der Merwe, L. and Morelli, J. (2022). Explaining How Community Music Engagement Facilitates Social Cohesion through Ritualised Belonging. Religions, 13(12), 1170–1170. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121170.

Watters, S. M., Ward, C. and Stuart, J. (2020). Does normative multiculturalism foster or threaten social cohesion? International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 75, 82–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2020.02.001.

Zihnioğlu, Ö. and Dalkıran, M. (2022). From social capital to social cohesion: Syrian refugees in Turkey and the role of NGOs as intermediaries. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 48(11), 2455–2472. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2022.2047908.