

Challenges and Barriers to Implementing Multicultural Counseling in Schools

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji berbagai kendala yang dihadapi dalam pelaksanaan konseling multikultural di lingkungan sekolah. Metode yang digunakan adalah *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) dengan menganalisis lima artikel dari jurnal nasional yang dipilih sesuai dengan kriteria yang telah ditentukan. Data dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk-bentuk tantangan serta alternatif solusi dalam pelaksanaan konseling multikultural. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa layanan konseling multikultural masih menghadapi berbagai hambatan, di antaranya keterbatasan kompetensi dan sensitivitas budaya konselor, lemahnya kemampuan komunikasi antarbudaya, munculnya stereotip dan prasangka, kecenderungan *counselor encapsulation*, serta adanya perbedaan bahasa, logat, nilai, dan norma budaya antara konselor dan konseli. Selain itu, peserta didik juga mengalami kesulitan beradaptasi, hambatan dalam komunikasi interpersonal, kecemasan sosial, dan rendahnya kepercayaan diri akibat perbedaan budaya. Hambatan lainnya berkaitan dengan faktor institusional, seperti belum tersusunnya program konseling multikultural secara sistematis, terbatasnya pemahaman guru BK tentang keberagaman budaya, serta minimnya dukungan dari sekolah, keluarga, dan masyarakat. Di sisi lain, perkembangan globalisasi dan teknologi turut memperluas keragaman budaya peserta didik sehingga meningkatkan kompleksitas layanan konseling. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa efektivitas konseling multikultural dapat ditingkatkan melalui penguatan kompetensi dan sensitivitas budaya konselor, pelaksanaan pelatihan secara berkelanjutan, peningkatan keterampilan komunikasi lintas budaya, serta kolaborasi yang lebih erat antara sekolah, keluarga, dan masyarakat. Oleh karena itu, pengembangan kompetensi multikultural konselor dan penciptaan lingkungan pendidikan yang inklusif perlu terus dilakukan agar layanan konseling mampu mengakomodasi keberagaman budaya secara optimal.

Kata Kunci: *konseling multikultural; tantangan implementasi; hambatan penerapan; bimbingan dan konseling sekolah; kompetensi multikultural konselor*

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the various challenges faced in the implementation of multicultural counseling in school settings. The method used was a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), which analyzed five articles from national journals selected according to predetermined criteria. The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach to identify the nature of these challenges and potential solutions for implementing multicultural counseling. The results of the study indicate that multicultural counseling services still face various obstacles, including limitations in counselors' competence and cultural sensitivity, weak intercultural communication skills, the emergence of stereotypes and prejudices, a tendency toward counselor encapsulation, and differences in language, dialect, values, and cultural norms between counselors and clients. Additionally, students also experience difficulties adapting, barriers in interpersonal communication, social anxiety, and low self-confidence due to cultural differences. Other barriers are related to institutional factors, such as the lack of a systematically structured multicultural counseling program, limited understanding among guidance counselors regarding cultural diversity, and minimal support from schools, families, and the community. On the other hand, the development of globalization and technology has further expanded the cultural diversity of students, thereby increasing the complexity of counseling services. Research findings indicate that the effectiveness

Keywords: multicultural counseling; implementation challenges; implementation barriers; school counseling; counselors' multicultural competence



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as a country characterized by extensive cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. Culture can be understood as the product of human thought, feeling, and creativity that develops within social life and is transmitted across generations as a reference for attitudes, behavior, and everyday practices. According to Nuzliah, as cited in Zuhroh et al. (n.d.), multicultural counseling is a helping process that takes cultural factors into account when understanding clients' behavior and determining appropriate forms of intervention. Within this approach, counselors do not focus solely on the problems experienced by clients but also seek to understand the cultural values that shape their lives.

In multicultural counseling, counselors are also expected to recognize their own assumptions, biases, and value systems so that personal perspectives do not dominate the counseling process. This requirement is particularly important in Indonesia, where clients may come from substantially different cultural backgrounds. Counselors therefore need to understand the cultural contexts of their clients so that counseling services can be delivered appropriately, respectfully, and responsively to differences in values, beliefs, and social practices. Multicultural counseling has emerged as a response to the growing recognition that counseling takes place within culturally diverse social contexts. The approach emphasizes the importance of understanding clients' cultural backgrounds so that the counseling process can be more relevant and meaningful. Derald Wing Sue, as cited in Alfaiz et al. (2022), described multicultural counseling as a counseling process involving individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This perspective implies that counselors need multicultural competence encompassing self-awareness, knowledge of cultural differences, and the ability to apply counseling strategies that are responsive to cultural contexts.

From this perspective, cultural differences should not be regarded merely as barriers to counseling but as important dimensions that need to be understood throughout the counseling process. Counselors are expected to recognize the values, norms, beliefs, traditions, and patterns of interaction that influence clients' experiences. Such understanding is important because cultural differences may shape how clients express problems, interpret events, respond to counseling, and define acceptable solutions. Without sufficient cultural awareness, counselors may be vulnerable to cultural bias, misinterpretation of client behavior, or the use of interventions that are less appropriate to clients' contexts. In contrast, culturally informed counseling may facilitate communication, strengthen the counselor-client relationship, and improve the contextual relevance of the assistance provided. Therefore, multicultural competence is not merely an additional professional skill but an important aspect of effective counseling practice in culturally diverse settings.

In school settings, multicultural counseling also plays an important role in supporting inclusive, safe, and harmonious learning environments. School counselors are not only responsible for assisting students with personal, social, academic, and career-related concerns but may also contribute to the development of mutual respect, tolerance, empathy, and constructive interaction among students from different backgrounds. Culturally responsive counseling services may help reduce misunderstandings and conflicts associated with cultural differences while strengthening social relationships among students. Through counseling and guidance activities, students can be encouraged to develop greater awareness of diversity and learn to interact respectfully across differences in ethnicity, religion, language, customs, and social background. In this sense, multicultural counseling has potential relevance not only for individual intervention but also for preventive and developmental services within the school community.

Despite its importance, the implementation of multicultural counseling in schools continues to face various challenges, particularly in Indonesia, where student diversity is extensive and culturally complex. Differences in cultural background require counselors to understand the values, norms, traditions, communication patterns, and everyday practices that influence each student. However, in practice, several barriers may hinder the effective implementation of multicultural

counseling. These barriers may include limited multicultural competence among counselors, cultural bias, differences in worldview between counselors and students, insufficient understanding of students' cultural characteristics, and difficulties in adapting counseling approaches to diverse cultural contexts. Such conditions may affect the quality of communication, the accuracy of problem assessment, the selection of interventions, and the overall effectiveness of counseling services.

The challenge becomes more complex when counselors rely primarily on their own cultural frameworks in interpreting students' behavior. What is considered appropriate, respectful, expressive, passive, or problematic in one cultural context may be interpreted differently in another. Therefore, culturally insensitive assessment and intervention may lead to misunderstanding, stereotyping, or inappropriate counseling responses. Another challenge concerns the practical implementation of multicultural principles within school counseling programs. Although multicultural competence is widely acknowledged as important, its application may be constrained by limited professional training, inadequate culturally relevant counseling resources, high counselor workloads, and insufficient institutional support. These challenges indicate that implementing multicultural counseling requires not only individual counselor awareness but also systematic support from schools and professional development systems.

Based on these conditions, examining the challenges involved in implementing multicultural counseling in schools is important. A clearer understanding of these challenges can provide a basis for strengthening counselor competence, improving culturally responsive counseling practices, and developing school counseling services that are more inclusive and sensitive to student diversity. Accordingly, this study focuses on identifying and analyzing the challenges encountered in the implementation of multicultural counseling in school settings. By examining these challenges, the study is expected to contribute to the development of counseling practices that are more culturally responsive, reduce the risk of cultural bias and misunderstanding, and support the creation of school environments characterized by inclusion, tolerance, mutual respect, and harmonious social interaction.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to identify and examine the challenges associated with the implementation of multicultural counseling in school settings. The SLR method is used to systematically identify and review previous studies related to a particular topic (Lusiana & Suryani, 2018). Through this approach, researchers can identify, analyze, evaluate, and interpret existing research findings concerning a phenomenon of interest (Triandini et al., 2019; Amam & Rusdiana, 2022).

In the present study, published scientific articles addressing challenges in the implementation of multicultural counseling in schools were collected and systematically reviewed according to the research focus. The literature review process involved selecting relevant studies, analyzing their findings, and identifying recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across the included articles. The synthesis was used to develop a broader understanding of the factors that challenge multicultural counseling implementation and the possible strategies proposed to address these challenges in culturally diverse school environments. The review procedures followed the stages proposed by Francis and Baldesari (2006, as cited in Rahmawati et al., 2022), as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Systematic Literature Review Procedures

Research Steps According to Francis and Baldesari (2006)	Procedures Conducted in the Present Study
Formulating the review question	The initial stage involved formulating a research question focused on identifying the challenges associated with the implementation of multicultural counseling in school settings.
Conducting a systematic literature search	The literature search was conducted systematically across relevant scientific publications, with particular attention to national journals in guidance and counseling and education that addressed multicultural counseling in school contexts.
Screening and selecting relevant articles	Articles were screened and selected according to their relevance to the research objectives and the predefined review focus.
Analyzing and synthesizing qualitative findings	The findings of each selected study were identified and categorized. Similarities and differences across studies were then compared and integrated to develop a comprehensive synthesis of the challenges and possible responses associated with multicultural counseling implementation.
Maintaining quality control	Quality control was supported through academic consultation with the research supervisor during the review and manuscript development process.
Presenting findings	The final stage involved organizing the findings into a scientific article presenting the results of the systematic review.

The study selection process was guided by predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria were established to ensure that the included studies were directly relevant to the implementation of multicultural counseling in educational settings and specifically addressed the challenges associated with its application.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Exclusion Criteria	Inclusion Criteria
Systematic literature reviews and other secondary review studies	Articles published between 2015 and 2026
Studies that did not examine multicultural counseling in schools	Studies addressing challenges in the implementation of multicultural counseling
Studies conducted outside educational settings	Scientific journal articles indexed in Google Scholar
Studies that did not focus on school-based contexts	Studies conducted in school environments

The study selection process consisted of several stages. First, potentially relevant articles were identified through searches of scientific publications indexed in Google Scholar. Second, the titles and abstracts of the identified articles were screened to determine their relevance to multicultural counseling implementation in schools. Third, the full texts of potentially eligible studies were reviewed according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis. Findings from the selected studies were extracted and grouped according to recurring themes related to implementation challenges. These themes included counselor competence, cultural bias, differences in values and worldviews, communication barriers, limited cultural understanding, institutional constraints, and other contextual factors identified across the studies.

The identified themes were then compared and synthesized to determine patterns across the literature and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the barriers affecting multicultural counseling practice in schools. Where available, proposed strategies and recommendations for addressing these challenges were also examined as part of the synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the analysis of five studies, several recurring challenges were identified in the implementation of multicultural counseling in schools. These challenges included differences in language and accent, variations in cultural values, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, limited cultural sensitivity among counselors, and insufficient understanding of clients' diverse cultural backgrounds. Student-related challenges were also reported. These included difficulties in adapting to culturally different environments, barriers to interpersonal communication, social anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, limited multicultural competence among counselors and insufficient support from the school environment were identified as factors that may hinder the implementation of multicultural counseling.

The reviewed studies also indicated that multicultural counseling can contribute to addressing these challenges by promoting cultural awareness, empathy, tolerance, openness, and culturally sensitive communication. The quality of multicultural counseling services may be strengthened through multicultural competence training for counselors, stronger collaboration among schools, families, and communities, and the development of inclusive school environments that respect cultural diversity. Taken together, the findings suggest that multicultural counseling may support students' adjustment, improve cross-cultural communication, reduce stereotypes and prejudice, and promote more constructive social interaction in school settings. Multicultural counseling may therefore function not only as an approach for addressing students' personal and social concerns but also as a means of supporting more inclusive and harmonious school climates.

In culturally diverse schools, counselors are expected to understand students' cultural characteristics, values, communication patterns, and worldviews so that counseling services can be adapted to their needs. Strengthening counselors' multicultural competence through training, continuing professional development, reflective practice, and sustained field experience is therefore an important consideration. With stronger competence, counselors may be better prepared to provide equitable services, respect cultural differences, and encourage positive relationships among students from diverse backgrounds.

Table 3. Characteristics and Main Findings of the Reviewed Studies

No.	Study Title	Author(s) and Year	Main Findings
1	The Counselor Multicultural Competence: An Exploration Study of Counselor Competence in the Counseling Process	Alfaiz et al. (2022)	School counselors continued to face challenges related to understanding cultural values and cross-cultural communication. Limited ability to understand cultural differences between counselors and students could affect the counseling process. The study emphasized the need for multicultural competence training and professional development to support more inclusive and culturally sensitive services.
2	Barriers to Multicultural Counseling in the Twenty-First Century	Sholeha (2024)	Major barriers included cultural gaps between counselors and clients and insufficient counselor competence in understanding cultural diversity. The study also highlighted the influence of globalization and technological change on the increasingly complex characteristics and expectations of contemporary clients.
3	Counselor Encapsulation: A	Masturi (2015)	One major challenge was counselor encapsulation, namely the tendency of counselors to interpret clients' experiences

	Challenge in Cross-Cultural Counseling Services		through their own cultural values and perspectives. Other challenges included stereotyping, prejudice, racism, language differences, and differences in cultural values and norms.
4	Identification of Barriers in Multicultural-Based Guidance and Counseling Services	Saud et al. (2025)	Multicultural guidance and counseling services at SMAN 1 Jayapura were constrained by the absence of structured programs, limited counselor understanding of multicultural counseling, insufficient school management support, and limited involvement of parents and the wider community.
5	Cross-Cultural Counseling Strategies for Addressing Students' Interpersonal Communication Barriers Caused by Cultural Differences	Salsa and Yusri (2026)	Reported challenges included language differences, accents, communication styles, adjustment difficulties, low self-confidence, social anxiety, cultural stereotypes, and interpersonal communication barriers. Cross-cultural counseling was reported to support student adjustment and improve communication and social interaction.

Discussion

The review of the five included studies indicates that the implementation of multicultural counseling in schools continues to face a range of individual, interpersonal, professional, and institutional challenges. The most frequently identified barriers involved differences in language and cultural values, stereotyping, prejudice, limited cultural sensitivity, adjustment difficulties, and insufficient understanding of students' cultural backgrounds.

These challenges may influence communication between counselors and students, the interpretation of presenting concerns, the establishment of counseling relationships, and the appropriateness of interventions. Therefore, multicultural counseling requires more than general counseling skills. Counselors also need cultural self-awareness, knowledge of diverse cultural contexts, and the ability to adapt communication and intervention strategies to the needs of culturally diverse students.

Counselor Multicultural Competence

Alfaiz et al. (2022) identified counselor competence as one of the central issues in the implementation of multicultural counseling. School counselors were reported to face difficulties in understanding students' cultural values and in developing effective cross-cultural communication. Differences in cultural backgrounds between counselors and students may influence how problems are expressed, understood, and addressed. When counselors have limited knowledge of students' cultural contexts, there is a risk that behaviors or experiences will be interpreted using assumptions that are more consistent with the counselor's own cultural background. The findings therefore highlight the importance of developing multicultural competence through continuous training and professional development. Such competence includes awareness of one's own cultural assumptions, knowledge of cultural differences, and the practical ability to establish counseling relationships that are respectful and responsive to diversity.

Language, Communication, and Student Adjustment

Salsa and Yusri (2026) identified language, accent, communication style, and emotional expression as important challenges in cross-cultural counseling. These differences were associated with difficulties in student adjustment, feelings of inferiority, social anxiety, limited self-confidence, and interpersonal communication problems. These findings suggest that communication barriers in multicultural school settings are not limited to differences in vocabulary or language proficiency. Cultural backgrounds may also influence tone of voice, eye contact, emotional expression, levels of directness, and expectations regarding respectful interaction.

As a result, counselors need to interpret student communication within its cultural context. Communication patterns that appear passive, avoidant, overly direct, or emotionally restrained should not automatically be understood as problematic without considering the cultural meanings attached to those behaviors. Cross-cultural counseling may help students develop greater confidence in social interaction, improve communication across cultural differences, and adapt more constructively to culturally unfamiliar environments. However, the effectiveness of such support depends on counselors' ability to create psychologically safe spaces where students can express cultural concerns without fear of judgment.

Counselor Encapsulation and Cultural Bias

Masturi (2015) highlighted counselor encapsulation as a major challenge in cross-cultural counseling. Counselor encapsulation refers to the tendency of counselors to rely excessively on their own cultural perspectives when interpreting clients' experiences. This tendency can create significant problems in culturally diverse counseling relationships. Counselors who assume that their own values or behavioral norms are universal may unintentionally misinterpret students' attitudes, family relationships, communication patterns, or coping strategies.

The study also identified stereotyping, prejudice, racism, differences in language, and variations in cultural norms as factors that may disrupt the counseling process. These findings indicate that multicultural competence requires continuous critical reflection. Counselors need to examine their assumptions and remain open to cultural perspectives that differ from their own. The challenge is not simply to acquire factual knowledge about cultural groups. Excessive reliance on generalized cultural knowledge can itself reinforce stereotyping. Therefore, culturally responsive practice requires counselors to combine cultural awareness with individualized understanding of each student's experiences.

Globalization and Changing Counseling Contexts

Sholeha (2024) emphasized that the challenges of multicultural counseling have become more complex in the twenty-first century. Globalization and technological development have increased cultural interaction and changed how individuals communicate, form identities, and respond to problems. Contemporary students may simultaneously be influenced by local traditions, family values, peer cultures, global media, and digital communities. Consequently, cultural identity should not be interpreted as fixed or determined solely by ethnicity or geographic origin. For counselors, this complexity requires flexibility and continued professional development. Counseling approaches need to remain sensitive to rapidly changing social conditions while avoiding assumptions that all students from the same cultural group share identical experiences.

Institutional and Environmental Challenges

Saud et al. (2025) demonstrated that barriers to multicultural counseling are not limited to counselor characteristics. Institutional factors also influence implementation. The study identified several challenges, including the absence of structured multicultural counseling programs, limited understanding among school counselors, inadequate school management support, and insufficient collaboration with parents and communities. These findings indicate that improving multicultural counseling cannot rely solely on individual counselor competence.

Effective implementation requires institutional commitment. Schools need clear programs, professional development opportunities, supportive leadership, relevant counseling resources, and opportunities for collaboration with families and communities. Without such support, counselors may find it difficult to translate multicultural principles into consistent practice. Therefore, multicultural counseling should be integrated into broader school policies and programs rather than implemented only as an individual counselor initiative.

Thematic Synthesis of Implementation Challenges

The findings from the five studies can be synthesized into four major categories of challenges. The first category concerns counselor-related challenges, including limited multicultural competence, low cultural sensitivity, inadequate understanding of students' cultural backgrounds, and counselor encapsulation. The second category involves communication and relational challenges, including language differences, accents, differences in communication styles, difficulties in expressing emotions, and challenges in building trust across cultural differences. The third category includes psychosocial challenges among students, such as adjustment difficulties, social anxiety, low self-confidence, fear of interaction, stereotypes, and prejudice.

The fourth category concerns institutional and environmental barriers, including the absence of structured multicultural counseling programs, limited school support, insufficient professional development, and weak collaboration among schools, families, and communities. This synthesis indicates that the challenges of multicultural counseling are multidimensional. They cannot be addressed by focusing only on counselor skills or student behavior. More comprehensive responses are required at the individual, relational, professional, and institutional levels.

Implications for Multicultural Counseling Practice

The findings indicate that strengthening multicultural counseling requires sustained attention to counselor competence. Professional development should include cultural self-awareness, critical reflection on personal bias, culturally sensitive communication, understanding of diverse value systems, and adaptation of counseling strategies.

Schools also need to create more supportive institutional conditions. This may include developing structured multicultural counseling programs, strengthening collaboration with parents and community representatives, providing ongoing training, and integrating diversity-related issues into preventive and developmental counseling services. In addition, counselors should create opportunities for students to develop empathy, tolerance, openness, and cross-cultural communication skills. These goals can be supported through individual counseling, group counseling, classroom guidance, peer-based activities, and collaborative school programs.

Overall, the review suggests that multicultural counseling has the potential to support student adjustment and promote more inclusive school relationships. However, its implementation remains influenced by counselor competence, communication barriers, student adjustment challenges, and institutional support. Accordingly, improving multicultural counseling in schools requires a comprehensive strategy involving continuing counselor development, stronger culturally sensitive communication skills, structured program planning, and collaboration among counselors, school leaders, families, and communities. Through such efforts, multicultural counseling may become more inclusive, responsive, and relevant to the cultural diversity of students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the Systematic Literature Review of five studies, the implementation of multicultural counseling in schools continues to face several challenges. These include limited multicultural competence and cultural sensitivity among counselors, inadequate cross-cultural communication skills, stereotyping, prejudice, counselor encapsulation, and differences in language, cultural values, and social norms between counselors and students. Students may also experience adjustment difficulties, interpersonal communication barriers, social anxiety, and low self-confidence when interacting in culturally diverse environments. In addition, institutional factors, such as the absence of structured multicultural counseling programs and limited support from

schools, families, and communities, may further constrain the implementation of effective multicultural counseling services.

The findings imply that guidance and counseling teachers and school counselors need to strengthen their multicultural competence, cultural sensitivity, and cross-cultural communication skills in order to provide services that are more inclusive and responsive to students from diverse cultural backgrounds. School counselors also need to develop counseling programs that explicitly recognize and respect diversity while strengthening collaboration with school leaders, families, and local communities. For students, multicultural counseling may contribute to the development of tolerance, openness, mutual respect, and adaptive interaction in culturally diverse environments. However, these outcomes depend on the quality of counseling implementation and the broader support provided by the school environment.

Future research should employ empirical quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs to examine the implementation and outcomes of multicultural counseling across different educational levels and cultural contexts. Further studies are also needed to investigate specific intervention models, counselor competence development, institutional support mechanisms, and culturally responsive counseling strategies in greater depth. Such research may contribute to the advancement of both theory and practice in multicultural counseling in Indonesia.

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