

Research Article

Availability, Professional Capacity, and Barriers to the Effective Delivery of Guidance and Counselling Services in Selected Secondary Schools in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This study examined the availability, professional capacity, and barriers to the effective delivery of guidance and counselling services in secondary schools in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone. A mixed-methods cross-sectional design was employed. The study targeted 1,208 individuals from four senior secondary schools and selected 128 respondents, comprising 4 principals, 4 counsellors, 8 teachers, and 112 pupils, using the 10% sampling recommendation of Mugenda and Mugenda. Principals and counsellors were purposively selected, while teachers and pupils were selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and interview guides. Content validity was established through expert review, and the questionnaire demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression, while qualitative data provided contextual explanations. Findings revealed limited availability and delivery of counselling services. Only 32.7% reported the availability of dedicated guidance offices, 27.3% reported access to career resources, and 34.3% reported regular career guidance sessions. Although student participation (57.0%) and academic/vocational focus (54.7%) were relatively stronger, none of the availability and delivery variables significantly predicted pupils' career development ($p > .05$). Professional capacity was also uneven, with communication and interpersonal skills strongest (58.6%), but formal career-counselling training (22.6%), professional development (24.2%), labour-market knowledge (29.0%), and career assessment skills (29.7%) relatively weak. The strongest professional-capacity association was monitoring and follow-up ($\beta = 0.165$, $p = .073$), although it was not statistically significant. Major barriers included inadequate materials/resources (74.2%), high pupil-counsellor ratios (71.8%), lack of trained counsellors (69.4%), socioeconomic constraints (68.0%), and limited technology and assessment tools (67.2%). The study concludes that counselling services exist but remain under-resourced and inconsistently delivered. It recommends recruiting trained counsellors, strengthening professional development, improving facilities and career resources, reducing pupil-counsellor ratios, integrating counselling into the curriculum, and strengthening monitoring and referral systems.

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Keywords

Guidance and Counselling, Professional Capacity, Service Availability, Career Development, Barriers, Secondary Schools, Sierra Leone

1. Introduction

Guidance and counselling services are essential in secondary schools because adolescents face diverse academic, career, social, emotional, and personal challenges [1, 2, 14]. Effective services provide academic and career guidance, psychosocial support, decision-making skills, and appropriate referrals [15, 16]. Globally, schools are increasingly recognised as important platforms for adolescent well-being [17]; however, counselling services are often constrained by inadequate resources, limited facilities, shortages of trained personnel, high student-to-counsellor ratios, and weak integration into school programmes [18, 19]. Therefore, effective guidance and counselling requires accessible, adequately resourced, professionally competent, student-centered, and well-integrated services that can respond effectively to adolescents' changing educational and psychosocial needs [20, 21].

In sub-Saharan Africa and West Africa, guidance and counselling is particularly important because students face educational, economic, social, cultural, and health-related challenges [22, 23]. Nevertheless, counselling services are often constrained by shortages of trained personnel, large student populations, inadequate facilities and materials, limited career information, and weak referral systems [24, 25]. Poverty, gender norms, cultural expectations, and stigma may further discourage students from seeking support [26, 27]. Strengthening counsellors' professional capacity, career knowledge, assessment skills, and access to appropriate resources is therefore critical to improving service delivery [28, 29].

In Sierra Leone, guidance and counselling is formally recognised within the education system, including provision for guidance and counselling departments in senior secondary schools [30, 31]. However, formal recognition does not necessarily guarantee effective implementation [32]. Schools may experience shortages of trained counsellors, inadequate resources, limited counselling time, high pupil-counsellor ratios, and weak curriculum integration [33]. Students also face academic pressures, career-choice challenges, socioeconomic constraints, and social and gender-related difficulties that increase the need for effective counselling services [34, 35].

The effectiveness of guidance and counselling cannot be assessed solely by whether services exist. It is necessary to examine how available services are delivered, whether teachers and counsellors possess adequate professional capacity, and what barriers constrain their effectiveness [36, 37]. This study therefore examines the availability and delivery mechanisms of guidance and counselling services, the preparedness and

professional capacity of teachers and counsellors, and the institutional, resource-related, socioeconomic, cultural, and policy barriers affecting service delivery in secondary schools. The findings can inform improvements in counselling infrastructure, professional development, career resources, student access, and integrated support systems in Sierra Leonean secondary schools [38, 39].

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods cross-sectional research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches [3, 40]. The quantitative component assessed the availability, professional capacity, perceived barriers, and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services, while the qualitative component provided deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of pupils, teachers, counsellors, and school administrators. The study was conducted in selected senior secondary schools in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone, which was purposively selected due to concerns about its relatively low student population and poor performance in the WASSCE, as reported in the MBSSE School Census Report (2021) [31] and WAEC External Examiner's Report (2024) [32]. The study therefore sought to examine whether the availability, capacity, and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services may be associated with students' educational and career outcomes in the district.

2.2. Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study targeted four senior secondary schools in Pujehun District, comprising two co-educational schools, one boys' school, and one girls' school. A total sample of 128 respondents was selected from the four schools. The sample comprised four principals, four guidance counsellors, eight teachers, and 112 pupils. This distribution ensured representation of the different stakeholder groups involved in the provision and utilisation of guidance and counselling services. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the principals and guidance counsellors because of their direct administrative and professional responsibilities for guidance and counselling services within the schools. Accordingly, one principal

and one guidance counsellor were selected from each of the four schools, giving a total of four principals and four counsellors. For teachers and pupils, simple random sampling was employed to provide each eligible participant with an equal opportunity of selection. Specifically, two teachers and 28 pupils were selected from each school, resulting in eight teachers and 112 pupils across the four schools. Thus, the final sample consisted of 4 principals, 4 guidance counsellors, 8 teachers, and 112 pupils, yielding a total of 128 respondents [4].

2.3. Instruments for Data Collection, Validity and Reliability

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and interview guides to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information [41]. The questionnaire contained closed-ended items, including multiple-choice, yes/no, and Likert-scale questions, as well as open-ended questions. To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by three experts in guidance and counselling, child education, and research methodology. A pilot study was conducted to assess clarity, sequencing, and administration time. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which produced an overall coefficient of 0.84 [5], indicating good internal consistency and confirming the suitability of the questionnaire for the main study.

2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data was coded, entered, cleaned, and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise respondents' characteristics and patterns of responses concerning guidance and counselling service availability, professional capacity, and barriers. At the pupil level, multiple linear regression was used to examine the relationship between service availability and delivery characteristics and pupils' career-development outcomes. Results were reported using unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), standardised coefficients (β), t-statistics, p-values, and 95% confidence intervals, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Confidence intervals containing zero were interpreted as indicating no statistically significant association. Professional-capacity measures obtained from teachers and counsellors were analysed descriptively and interpreted alongside the qualitative findings because the study did not establish a direct pupil-to-staff linkage. Regression analyses were interpreted with consideration of assumptions including linearity, independence, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and influential observations. Given the inclusion of only four schools, particular caution was exercised regarding independence and potential school-level clustering.

Qualitative interview data was analysed thematically through familiarisation, coding, categorisation, and development of themes aligned with the study objectives. The analysis examined participants' perspectives on service availability

and accessibility, professional preparedness, counselling resources, institutional support, barriers to service delivery and access, and the contribution of guidance and counselling to pupils' educational and career development. Qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative results to provide contextual explanations and identify areas of convergence or divergence. They were not intended for statistical generalisation, and any reported quotations were presented using anonymous identifiers and drawn directly from the interview data.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights, privacy, and welfare [42]. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by excluding personal identifiers and securely storing all collected data. The information was used strictly for academic purposes, and the findings were reported accurately, objectively, and in accordance with established research ethical standards.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The respondents represented diverse demographic and professional characteristics (Table 1). Males were slightly more represented (54.7%) than females (45.3%), while the largest age group was 16-18 years (39.1%) (Table 1). Pupils constituted the largest respondent category (50.0%), followed by teachers (25.0%), counsellors (12.5%), and head teachers/principals (12.5%). Among staff, those with 4-6 years of experience were most represented (21.9%), while those with less than one year were least represented (3.1%). JSS 3 pupils formed the largest grade group (15.6%), while SSS 3 had the smallest (10.9%). Among teachers and counsellors, Bachelor's degree holders predominated (62.5%), with Diploma and Master's holders each accounting for 18.8% [43, 44]. The sample provided a balanced representation of pupils and school staff, with varied age, experience, grade levels, and educational qualifications, supporting diverse perspectives on the study subject.

The predominance of the 16-18 age group is consistent with studies from Uganda and Nigeria, which found this cohort to be at a critical juncture of academic and vocational decision-making, making effective career guidance particularly essential [28, 36]. The near-equal gender distribution across the sample reflects broader trends in secondary school enrolment in Sierra Leone following post-war education reform, although gender disparities remain in rural districts [30, 34].

Table 1. Socio-Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Respondents (N = 128).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	70	54.7
	Female	58	45.3
	Total	128	100.0
Age Group (Years)	12-15	35	27.3
	16-18	50	39.1
	19-22	25	19.5
	23+	18	14.1
	Total	128	100.0
Role	Pupils	64	50.0
	Teachers	32	25.0
	Counsellors	16	12.5
	Head Teachers/Principals	16	12.5
	Total	128	100.0
Years in Role (Staff Only)	< 1 Year	4	3.1
	1-3 Years	18	14.1
	4-6 Years	28	21.9
	7+ Years	14	10.9
	Total (Staff)	64	50.0
Grade/Form (Pupils Only)	JSS 3	20	15.6
	SSS 1	15	11.7
	SSS 2	15	11.7
	SSS 3	14	10.9
	Total (Pupils)	64	50.0
Highest Qualification (Teachers/Counsellors)	Diploma	12	18.8
	Bachelor's Degree	40	62.5
	Master's Degree	12	18.8
	Total (Staff)	64	100.0

3.2. Availability and Delivery Mechanisms of Guidance and Counselling Services

The findings indicate mixed availability and delivery of guidance and counselling services (Table 2). The strongest area was student participation, with 57.0% agreeing or strongly agreeing, followed by an academic and vocational focus (54.7%). However, major gaps were identified in access to career resources, where only 27.3% agreed or strongly agreed, and in the availability of dedicated guidance offices

(32.7%). Regular career guidance sessions, workshops, curriculum integration, and multiple delivery formats also received relatively low levels of agreement [6, 7].

These findings align with those of Otwine et al. [28], who reported that while student awareness of guidance services in Uganda was high, structural constraints limited actual utilisation. Similarly, Anane-Kumi [24] found that in Ghana, counselling offices were available in most schools but were inadequately equipped with career materials. The low rates of curriculum integration observed in Pujehun District are consistent with Kiggundu and Nayimuli [33], who argued that

school counselling in many African systems remains extracurricular rather than embedded in teaching and learning frameworks. Such marginalisation limits access for pupils who do not self-refer [8, 19].

The finding that only 32.7% of respondents reported access to a dedicated guidance office reflects a broader infrastructure deficit in Sierra Leone's secondary schools [30, 31]. Without a designated physical space, confidentiality a cornerstone of effective counselling practice—cannot be guaranteed [15, 16].

Moreover, the low rates of accessible scheduling (43.0% agreement) and regular workshops (27.3%) suggest that counselling is largely reactive rather than proactive, which is inconsistent with the comprehensive school counselling models advocated by Gysbers and Henderson [20]. Overall, the findings suggest that although counselling services promote student participation and academic/vocational development, inadequate facilities, resources, and regular programming limit their effectiveness [13].

Table 2. Availability and Delivery Mechanisms of Guidance and Counselling Services (N = 128).

Statement (Summarised)	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	A+SA%
Dedicated guidance office/unit available	22.7	26.6	18.0	21.9	10.8	32.7
Regular career guidance sessions held	18.8	25.0	21.9	23.4	10.9	34.3
Multiple delivery formats used	20.3	27.3	19.5	22.7	10.2	32.9
Integrated into school curriculum	24.2	28.1	17.2	20.3	10.2	30.5
Access to career resources provided	26.6	29.7	16.4	18.0	9.3	27.3
Accessible scheduling of sessions	14.8	21.9	20.3	29.7	13.3	43.0
Regular workshops/seminars conducted	23.4	30.5	18.8	19.5	7.8	27.3
Academic and vocational focus maintained	10.9	15.6	18.8	34.4	20.3	54.7
Students encouraged to participate	9.4	14.1	19.5	36.7	20.3	57.0
Services responsive to individual needs	17.2	24.2	21.1	26.6	10.9	37.5

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree.

The qualitative findings from interviews provided contextual explanations for the observed patterns of service availability and delivery. Participants described guidance and counselling provision in relation to the availability of counselling facilities, access to career information and materials, frequency of counselling activities, integration of guidance into school activities, and the ability of schools to respond to pupils' individual needs.

The interviews indicated that the presence of guidance and counselling services did not necessarily correspond to the availability of adequate facilities and resources for their effective delivery. Participants also highlighted challenges associated with the regular organisation of counselling activities and the provision of career-related information. These accounts suggest that counselling services were available within the schools but were constrained by institutional and resource limitations.

Qualitative accounts further indicated that guidance and counselling tended to focus substantially on pupils' academic and vocational concerns. However, opportunities for continuous and individualised counselling were affected by limitations in resources, time, and programme organisation. Participants also described the importance of making counselling

more accessible and integrating it more systematically into school activities. Taken together, the qualitative evidence suggests that the effectiveness of guidance and counselling was influenced not only by whether services existed, but also by the quality of the supporting infrastructure, availability of resources, regularity of delivery, and institutional integration of counselling activities. These qualitative findings provide contextual understanding of the quantitative patterns reported in Table 2.

3.3. Multiple Regression Analysis of Availability and Delivery Mechanisms and Pupils' Career Development

The regression results indicate that none of the examined guidance and counselling service characteristics significantly predicted pupils' career development at the 5% significance level (Table 3). All predictors had p-values greater than .05, and their 95% confidence intervals included zero. Among the predictors, curriculum integration had the strongest negative standardised effect ($\beta = -0.059$, $p = .383$), while academic/vocational focus had the largest positive standardised effect ($\beta = 0.059$, $p = .393$). However, neither association was statistically

significant [45, 46]. Responsiveness to individual needs showed a small positive relationship ($\beta = 0.052$, $p = .438$), while dedicated guidance offices showed a small negative association ($\beta = -0.083$, $p = .202$).

The non-significant findings should be interpreted cautiously. The absence of statistically significant predictors may reflect the multidimensional nature of career development, which is unlikely to be explained by any single service variable in isolation [36, 47]. This interpretation is consistent with the ecological systems theory framework, wherein adolescent

career development is shaped by interactions across microsystem (school), mesosystem (family-school), and macrosystem (policy-culture) levels [48]. Whiston et al. [37] similarly found that the effectiveness of school counselling interventions depended on combined and coordinated delivery rather than on individual programme components. The relatively narrow confidence intervals around the estimates suggest that the observed individual effects were genuinely small, and that a larger, longitudinal sample might be needed to detect meaningful patterns [3, 40].

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis of Availability and Delivery Mechanisms and Pupils' Career Development.

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	3.955	0.126	—	31.34	<.001	[3.705, 4.205]
Dedicated guidance office/unit	-0.031	0.024	-0.083	-1.28	.202	[-0.079, 0.017]
Regular guidance sessions	0.015	0.025	0.040	0.59	.557	[-0.035, 0.064]
Multiple delivery formats	0.004	0.024	0.011	0.16	.873	[-0.044, 0.052]
Curriculum integration	-0.022	0.025	-0.059	-0.88	.383	[-0.070, 0.027]
Career resources	-0.019	0.024	-0.053	-0.77	.441	[-0.067, 0.029]
Accessible scheduling	-0.016	0.025	-0.044	-0.63	.529	[-0.066, 0.034]
Workshops/seminars	0.016	0.025	0.043	0.63	.529	[-0.034, 0.066]
Academic/vocational focus	0.022	0.025	0.059	0.86	.393	[-0.029, 0.072]
Student participation	0.011	0.027	0.029	0.41	.682	[-0.042, 0.064]
Responsiveness to individual needs	0.019	0.025	0.052	0.78	.438	[-0.030, 0.069]

3.4. Preparedness and Professional Capacity of Teachers and Counsellors

Table 4 shows mixed levels of preparedness and professional capacity among teachers and counsellors. The strongest area was communication and interpersonal skills, with 58.6% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, indicating relatively good capacity to interact with and support students [9, 10]. This was followed by the ability to advise on subject selection (46.1%) and support from school management (42.2%). In contrast, the least favourable area was formal training in career counselling, where only 22.6% agreed or strongly agreed, while 59.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, participation in professional development was limited, with only 24.2% reporting agreement [29].

Knowledge of labour-market trends (29.0%) and the ability to use career assessment tools (29.7%) were also relatively weak. Adequate time for individual counselling was reported by only 29.6%, while monitoring and follow-up of students

was limited (31.2%). These findings are consistent with those of Baggerly and Osborn [38], who noted that counsellor professional development and specialized training are among the most critical determinants of service quality. The weak labour-market knowledge observed in Pujehun is particularly concerning given Sierra Leone's rapidly evolving post-conflict economic landscape and the need for youth to make informed vocational choices [30, 34].

Young and Kaffenberger [29] demonstrated that counsellors who engage in ongoing professional development are significantly more effective in using data-driven approaches to guide students. The low rates of professional development participation found in this study (24.2%) suggest that school counsellors in Pujehun District may be practising in relative isolation from contemporary advances in guidance theory and career development models, such as Super's life-span, life-space theory [49] or Gottfredson's circumscription and compromise framework [50]. Without exposure to these frameworks, counsellors may be limited to informal, experience-based approaches that are inconsistently applied and difficult to evaluate [20, 51].

Table 4. Preparedness and Professional Capacity of Teachers and Counsellors (*N* = 128).

Statement (Summarised)	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	A+SA%
Formal training in career counselling	28.9	30.5	18.0	15.6	7.0	22.6
Participation in professional development	26.6	29.7	19.5	16.4	7.8	24.2
Knowledge of career development theories	20.3	25.8	21.1	22.7	10.1	32.8
Knowledge of labour-market trends	23.4	28.1	19.5	20.3	8.7	29.0
Ability to use career assessment tools	24.2	27.3	18.8	20.3	9.4	29.7
Communication and interpersonal skills	9.4	14.8	17.2	36.7	21.9	58.6
Adequate time for individual counselling	22.7	29.7	18.0	21.1	8.5	29.6
Ability to advise on subject selection	14.1	20.3	19.5	30.5	15.6	46.1
Monitoring and follow-up of students	21.9	28.1	18.8	22.7	8.5	31.2
Support from school management	16.4	21.9	19.5	28.9	13.3	42.2

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree.

The qualitative findings indicate that teachers and counsellors in Pujehun District have relatively strong interpersonal and communication skills, enabling them to establish relationships with students and identify their academic, behavioural, and personal needs. However, these strengths are undermined by limited formal training in career counselling and inadequate continuous professional development, resulting in reliance on informal, experience-based approaches.

Participants also reported limited knowledge of labour-market trends and career assessment tools, restricting their ability to provide individualized and evidence-based career guidance. Insufficient time for individual counselling and follow-up was another major constraint due to competing teaching and administrative responsibilities. In addition, institutional support varied across schools, with counselling often receiving less priority than teaching and examination activities.

3.5. Regression Analysis of Teacher/Counsellor Preparedness and Professional Capacity and Pupils' Career Development

The regression results indicate that none of the professional capacity variables significantly predicted pupils' career development at the 5% significance level, as all *p*-values were greater than .05 and the 95% confidence intervals included

zero (Table 5). The strongest positive predictor was monitoring and follow-up of students ($\beta = 0.165$, $B = 0.044$, $p = .073$), followed by knowledge of career development theories ($\beta = 0.137$, $p = .140$) and ability to advise on subject selection ($\beta = 0.114$, $p = .214$). Although these variables showed positive associations, none reached statistical significance [36, 37].

The strongest negative association was observed for participation in professional development ($\beta = -0.164$, $B = -0.045$, $p = .075$), followed by formal training in career counselling ($\beta = -0.134$, $p = .145$). These counterintuitive negative associations may reflect the cross-sectional nature of the design, where counsellors who lack training and development may be those operating in schools with particularly challenging contexts, creating a confounding effect [3, 40]. The near-significant trend for monitoring and follow-up ($p = .073$) is theoretically meaningful and aligns with evidence from Suvedi et al. [52], who found that structured follow-up of students was among the most consistent predictors of positive counselling outcomes. The weakest relationship was observed for communication and interpersonal skills ($\beta = 0.019$, $p = .839$), indicating virtually no independent association with the outcome in the multivariable model, consistent with the view that interpersonal skills are necessary but not sufficient for effective career guidance without complementary technical competencies [9, 10, 29].

Table 5. Multiple Regression Analysis of Teacher/Counsellor Preparedness and Professional Capacity and Pupils' Career Development.

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	3.695	0.215	—	17.20	<.001	[3.270, 4.121]
Formal training in career counselling	-0.036	0.025	-0.134	-1.47	.145	[-0.086, 0.013]

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Professional development participation	−0.045	0.025	−0.164	−1.80	.075	[−0.095, 0.005]
Career development theories knowledge	0.036	0.024	0.137	1.49	.140	[−0.012, 0.085]
Labour-market knowledge	−0.016	0.025	−0.062	−0.66	.511	[−0.065, 0.032]
Career assessment tools ability	−0.014	0.024	−0.054	−0.59	.560	[−0.061, 0.033]
Communication and interpersonal skills	0.005	0.025	0.019	0.20	.839	[−0.044, 0.055]
Time for individual counselling	0.015	0.024	0.055	0.63	.532	[−0.032, 0.062]
Ability to advise on subject selection	0.030	0.024	0.114	1.25	.214	[−0.018, 0.077]
Monitoring and follow-up of students	0.044	0.024	0.165	1.81	.073	[−0.004, 0.092]
Support from school management	0.020	0.024	0.076	0.84	.404	[−0.027, 0.067]

3.6. Barriers Limiting the Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling Services

Respondents generally perceived multiple structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges affecting guidance and counselling services (Table 6). The highest levels of agreement were recorded for inadequate materials/resources (74.2%), followed by a high pupil-counsellor ratio (71.8%) and lack of trained counsellors (69.4%) [11, 12]. These findings suggest that resource constraints and insufficient counselling personnel are major barriers to effective service delivery. The least frequently endorsed challenge was weak policy enforcement (57.8%), while low pupil awareness of counselling services attracted 61.7% agreement and poor curriculum integration was identified by 60.1% of respondents [22, 23].

The high pupil-counsellor ratio identified in this study (71.8% agreement) is a pervasive challenge across sub-Saharan Africa. Kiggundu and Nayimuli [33] and Egbo [27] both noted that ratios often far exceed the 1:250 benchmark recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) [53], making meaningful one-on-one guidance sessions practically impossible. Similarly, the finding that 69.4% of respondents

identified a lack of trained counsellors as a major barrier corroborates observations by Bangura [32], who found that Sierra Leone's secondary schools have historically lacked qualified counselling professionals, relying instead on classroom teachers with minimal counselling preparation.

Pupils' socioeconomic constraints (68.0%), cultural norms and gender stereotypes (64.1%), and limited technology and assessment tools (67.2%) reflect the broader socio-ecological context in which school counselling operates in Pujehun District. These findings resonate with Patel et al. [17], who argued that poverty and cultural stigma are among the most significant barriers to adolescent help-seeking behaviour in low- and middle-income countries. Cultural norms that discourage girls from accessing certain vocational pathways further compound the impact of limited counselling on gender equity in educational outcomes [26, 34]. The high agreement on limited technology and assessment tools (67.2%) also echoes the findings of Egbo [27], who demonstrated that ICT-enabled career guidance can significantly expand access to labour-market information in contexts where printed resources are limited, but that infrastructure investment is a prerequisite. Collectively, these findings underscore that the barriers to effective counselling in Pujehun District are systemic and multi-layered, requiring coordinated policy, institutional, and community responses rather than isolated interventions [35, 39, 54].

Table 6. Barriers to Effective Guidance and Counselling Services (*N* = 128).

Statement (Summarised)	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	A+SA %
Lack of trained counsellors	6.3	10.2	14.1	39.1	30.3	69.4
High pupil-counsellor ratio	5.5	9.4	13.3	41.4	30.4	71.8
Inadequate materials/resources	4.7	8.6	12.5	42.2	32.0	74.2
Irregular counselling sessions	7.8	12.5	15.6	36.7	27.4	64.1
Poor curriculum integration	8.6	14.1	17.2	35.9	24.2	60.1

Statement (Summarised)	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	A+SA %
Pupils' socio-economic constraints	6.3	10.9	14.8	40.6	27.4	68.0
Cultural norms and gender stereotypes	7.0	12.5	16.4	38.3	25.8	64.1
Weak policy enforcement	9.4	15.6	17.2	33.6	24.2	57.8
Limited technology and assessment tools	6.3	11.7	14.8	39.8	27.4	67.2
Low pupil awareness of services	8.6	13.3	16.4	37.5	24.2	61.7

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree.

The qualitative findings indicate that guidance and counselling services are limited by multiple interconnected institutional, human-resource, material, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers. Key challenges include a shortage of trained counsellors, high pupil-to-counsellor workloads, inadequate counselling materials and technology, and insufficient time for regular individual counselling and follow-up. Participants also reported weak integration of counselling into the school curriculum and competing academic responsibilities that reduce its priority. In addition, poverty, cultural norms, gender stereotypes, low pupil awareness, and weak implementation of counselling policies were identified as barriers to effective service use.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that although guidance and counselling services exist in selected secondary schools in Pujehun District, they are under-resourced, inconsistently provided, and constrained by inadequate professional capacity. Major challenges include shortages of trained counsellors, high pupil-counsellor ratios, inadequate facilities and career resources, limited labour-market knowledge and technology, and socioeconomic, cultural, and gender-related barriers. While individual service and professional-capacity factors did not independently predict career development, their coordinated provision remains important. The study recommends recruiting and training qualified counsellors, strengthening professional development, improving counselling facilities and career resources, and providing regular guidance and career counselling activities. It further recommends integrating counselling into school curricula and development plans, strengthening monitoring and student follow-up, and increasing collaboration with parents, communities, universities, TVET institutions, employers, and NGOs. Future research should use larger, multi-district, and longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of guidance and counselling on students' academic, career, and psychosocial outcomes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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