



## CHALLENGES FACED BY UNTRAINED SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN PRACTICING SUBSKILLS OF COUNSELLING ON THEIR LEARNER CLIENTS

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of the study was to examine the challenges faced by untrained school counsellors in practicing sub-skills counselling on their pupil-clients. This study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, and in keeping with the research paradigm, a qualitative case study design was employed. Techniques within qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews and non-participant observation checklists, were used and provided important insights into individuals' attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. Given such qualities, this approach became important, especially when aiming to understand the challenges experienced by counsellors utilizing specific sub-skills when counseling pupils. The sample of this study comprised 15 untrained school counsellors by using typical case purposeful sampling, consisting of 3 untrained school counsellors who are members of the school guidance and counselling committees who were selected from each of the 5 schools in Lundazi District. Data from the semi-structured interviews and non-participants observation checklist were triangulated to enhance the trustworthiness of the study findings. Data were analysed by thematic analysis. The study revealed that untrained counselors' experiences challenges in practicing these sub-skills, including struggles with maintaining an open posture, natural abilities to lean towards the client, cultural sensitivity in maintaining eye contact, and the impact of posture on counseling effectiveness. In addressing these challenges, the study showed potential solutions, including effective sitting arrangements, developing an open posture, appropriate leaning, balanced eye contact, and achieving a relaxed posture. Addressing the challenges faced by untrained counselors, the discussions underscored a collective awareness among participants regarding the physical aspects inherent to their role.

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However, a recurring theme surfaced despite this recognition, counselors frequently found themselves lacking the necessary training needed for the effective practice of sub-skills. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the school should provide specialized training for school untrained counselors and should also establish a mentorship program with qualified counselors where untrained counselors can work under the guidance of qualified professionals.

**Keywords:** untrained school counsellors, sub-skills counselling, learner clients

## 1. Introduction

Counselling in educational settings is crucial for student well-being and success. The holistic development of pupils addresses not only their academic needs but also their socio-emotional challenges (Whiston and Quinby, 2019). Hence, school counsellors play an important role in providing this support. The quality and effectiveness of counselling are significantly influenced by the training and expertise of the counsellors (ASCA, 2012). In many parts of the world, including Zambia, there has been a rise in the demand for school counsellors to address the increasing socio-emotional and psychological challenges among pupils (Chireshe and Shumba, 2011).

As societal challenges evolved, including factors like poverty, increasing mental health issues, and societal changes, the importance of well-rounded counselling in schools became more evident (Chireshe, 2011). However, as the need for counselling expanded, so did the gap between the required professional support and available trained counsellors. Zambia, like many other nations, experienced this widening gap. Initiatives to provide formal training in counselling to educational professionals were slow to develop, resulting in many schools relying on untrained or inadequately trained staff to fulfill counselling roles (Chireshe and Shumba, 2011). The experiences of these untrained school counsellors, especially in regions like Lundazi District, provide important insights into the challenges faced by schools and the potential risks to student well-being. Additionally, again, not all school counsellors have formal training in counselling sub-skills, raising concerns about the quality and effectiveness of counselling offered (Jordaan and Fourie, 2018).

Studies have shown the importance of trained school counsellors in improving student well-being, academic achievements, and overall socio-emotional development (Whiston and Quinby, 2019; ASCA, 2012). The practice of counselling is different and consists of various sub-skills such as active listening, empathy, connection building, and problem-solving, among others (Egan, 2013). These skills are developed and based on serious training and practice. However, untrained school counsellors might find it challenging to employ these sub-skills effectively, possibly compromising the quality of counselling provided (Ng'andu, 2010). In the absence of proper training, untrained counsellors might unknowingly employ techniques that are not productive or even harmful. For instance, Rogers (2016) showed the role of unconditional positive regard

and empathy as fundamental to therapeutic relationships. Without understanding these, counsellors might misguide pupils, leading to potential harm.

Several more areas of concern arise when considering untrained school counsellors: considering untrained school counselors, several more areas of concern emerge beyond the challenges related to practicing sub-skills. One significant concern revolves around the lack of formal training, which may leave counselors unaware of the ethical guidelines that govern the profession. Situations involving confidentiality breaches, navigating dual relationships, or managing potential harm to pupils can present profound ethical dilemmas for untrained practitioners. The absence of formal training puts untrained counselors at risk of misinterpreting or misunderstanding ethical standards, leading to unintended breaches or violations. Furthermore, without adequate training, counselors may struggle to recognize and address cultural differences sensitively, inadvertently causing harm or offense to pupils from diverse backgrounds.

Remley and Herlihy (2016) underscore the critical importance of formal training in ethical decision-making and cultural competence within the counseling profession. Without proper training, counselors may lack the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate complex ethical scenarios effectively, leading to potential legal repercussions and emotional distress for both counselors and their clients. The absence of formal training poses significant risks for untrained school counselors, including ethical breaches, cultural insensitivity, and legal liabilities. Addressing these concerns requires a comprehensive approach to counselor education, encompassing not only technical skills but also ethical principles and cultural competence training to ensure the well-being of both counselors and their clients. In light of the above, this research sought to address the problem of inadequate training and its impact on the practice of school counselling in Lundazi District. Looking into the experiences of these counsellors, the study aimed to unearth both the challenges faced by them.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Various authors have studied problems faced by untrained school counsellors. Untrained school counsellors have challenges like being self-critical in practice and having troubling reactions to clients (Hill, 2007). Untrained counsellors experience stress, experience anxiety and counter-transference management (Skovholt, 2014). If untrained counsellor do not fully use sub-skills in counselling they may experience an impasse and that they react with negative emotions because they do not know what to do in session (Remley, 2016). Untrained counsellors experience various difficulties and challenges in the session, in the organization, and in counselling (Duggal & Rao, 2016). Counsellors who have difficulty with interpersonal skills may also experience difficulty in establishing counselling presence which supports counselling relationships (Nweze, T., & Okolie, U.C., 2013). From these studies done the researcher wonders how untrained school counsellors practice sub-skills (sitting, open posture, leaning towards the client, eye contact and relaxed body language skills) of counselling to their pupils in the Lundazi

district. Using the hermeneutic phenomenology, the study looked at challenges faced by untrained school counsellors in practicing sub-skills counselling on their pupil-clients. Exploring the challenges faced by untrained school counsellors in practicing sub-skills of counselling may provide a roadmap for understanding the limitations of the current system

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the Phenomenology theory that was founded by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who sought to make philosophy "*a serious science*" by returning its attention "*to the things themselves*" (zu den Sachen selbst). Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience. Using phenomenology as a theoretical framework for studying the challenges faced by untrained school counselors practicing counseling sub-skills provides a meaningful approach to understanding their lived experiences. Phenomenology, especially within educational and counseling contexts, aims to explore and interpret individuals' subjective experiences, emphasizing the essence and meaning of these experiences. By focusing on how untrained school counselors perceive and navigate their challenges in practicing counseling sub-skills, phenomenology helps to capture the personal insights and feelings of inadequacy, resource constraints, and coping mechanisms they might have. In this type of study, the phenomenological approach allows researchers to identify common themes related to the counselors' experiences, such as: the emotional and mental strain of working without formal training, the pressures and expectations from both students and administrators, and the strategies used to address student needs despite lacking certain skills. These themes contribute to understanding the complexities and limitations untrained counselors face, offering a foundation for developing targeted support systems or training programs. Phenomenology is a powerful theory that is well suited for exploring the experiences of untrained school counsellors in practicing sub-skills of counselling in selected public secondary schools: a case of Lundazi district, Zambia.

### **4. Geographical Location of Study Sites**

A research site serves as the foundational setting where scholarly investigation is conducted (Baggins, 2015). In this study, 5 secondary schools were selected. The 5 schools were selected on the basis that they have untrained school counsellors and they can be easily accessed as they are in the district where the researcher is the district guidance and counselling coordinator.

### **5. Literature Review**

The effective practice of counselling sub-skills, such as active listening, empathy, and creating a supportive environment, plays a crucial role in the holistic development of

pupils within educational settings. These skills are fundamental not only for addressing the immediate emotional or psychological needs of students but also for fostering their long-term well-being and personal growth. In environments where counselors are often the first point of contact for students experiencing difficulties, the ability to effectively utilize these sub-skills can significantly impact the students' academic performance, social interactions, and overall school experience. Untrained counselors often express concerns about navigating personal space in counseling sessions, particularly regarding the potential impact on the client's comfort and trust. The concerns voiced by untrained counselors align closely with the findings of Anderson and White's (2018), highlighting the widespread nature of this challenge across counseling contexts. Regardless of training or experience level, counselors may grapple with understanding and respecting personal space boundaries, particularly in culturally diverse settings where norms and expectations may vary. Anderson and White's (2018) study highlights the universal challenge faced by counselors in understanding and respecting personal space boundaries in counseling sessions. By addressing this challenge through targeted training and support programs, counselors can enhance their ability to foster trust and connection with clients, ultimately leading to more positive counseling outcomes.

The challenges faced by untrained counselors also extend to the broader educational ecosystem (Mitchell, 2022). These include limited access to professional development opportunities, a lack of peer support and supervision, and insufficient resources to engage in ongoing learning. Such constraints not only hinder the counselor's ability to provide quality support but also impact their confidence and professional identity.

A study by Mitchell (2022) was entitled *Navigating the Storm: Barriers to Effective Counselling in UK Secondary Schools*. In her groundbreaking research from the UK, Mitchell (2022) adopts a qualitative method, engaging in semi-structured interviews with 40 untrained school counsellors across various cities. Her objective is to uncover the inherent and external challenges they face. Mitchell's 2022 study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by school counselors, particularly those without formal training. These challenges range from internal conflicts, such as the difficulty in recognizing and adhering to the boundaries of their professional capabilities, to external pressures that include a lack of institutional support, overwhelming caseloads, and a scarcity of resources for continuous professional development. Such a combination of factors significantly hampers the ability of counselors to provide the level of care and support necessary for the holistic development of pupils.

Internally, untrained counselors often grapple with understanding the limits of their expertise, which can lead to an overextension of their services beyond what is professionally advisable or personally sustainable. This internal struggle is compounded by external pressures that further strain their capacity to function effectively. The lack of institutional support manifests in various ways, including insufficient acknowledgment of the counselors' needs for professional development, inadequate funding for counseling resources, and a general underestimation of the importance of mental health

services in educational settings. Moreover, the challenge of managing overwhelming caseloads without the requisite training or resources leads to counselor burnout, reduced efficacy in handling individual cases, and, ultimately, diminished quality of support available to students. The absence of opportunities for continuous professional development and access to up-to-date counseling resources further exacerbates these issues, leaving counselors ill-equipped to address the evolving needs of their students or to employ the latest evidence-based practices in their counseling sessions.

Recognizing these profound challenges, Mitchell (2022) proposes several recommendations aimed at enhancing the support system for untrained counselors. One key suggestion is the establishment of a structured peer-support system. Such a system would provide untrained counselors with a platform for sharing experiences, offering mutual support, and exchanging knowledge and strategies for coping with the demands of their roles. This peer-support system could serve as a vital resource for emotional support, professional guidance, and the sharing of best practices among counselors.

In addition to advocating for the creation of peer-support networks, Mitchell emphasizes the importance of stronger advocacy for professional training within school settings. This involves lobbying for the recognition of counseling as a critical component of student welfare and the allocation of resources towards the training and development of school counselors. By investing in professional training programs, schools can ensure that their counselors are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and competencies to support the diverse needs of their student populations effectively. Mitchell's findings and recommendations highlight the urgent need for systemic changes to address the challenges faced by untrained school counselors. By implementing structured support systems and advocating for professional training, educational institutions can significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of counseling services, thereby contributing to the betterment of student welfare and educational outcomes.

Braun (2021) did a study on *Between Knowledge and Application: Untrained Counsellors in the German Education System*, study emerges from the German context, employing a mixed-methods approach. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, Braun masterfully navigates the complexities inherent in the practice of counseling without formal training. Through the deployment of surveys that reached over 200 untrained counselors, complemented by the qualitative insights gathered from focus groups, the study offers a rich, multifaceted perspective on the day-to-day realities of these practitioners. One of the key findings from Braun's research is the significant impact of cultural values and the diverse backgrounds of students on the practice of counseling. These factors introduce a layer of complexity to the counseling process, as counselors must navigate not only the individual needs of students but also consider the broader cultural and societal contexts that shape these needs. The diversity of student backgrounds in Germany, characterized by a wide range of ethnicities, religions, and cultural norms, poses a particular challenge for untrained counselors who may not have the tools or knowledge to address such variety effectively.

Another critical issue highlighted in the study is the struggle untrained counselors face in maintaining neutrality during counseling sessions. This challenge is particularly pronounced when counselors are confronted with cases that either challenge their personal beliefs or are deeply entwined with cultural perspectives different from their own. The effort to remain neutral, a cornerstone of effective counseling practice, becomes a daunting task without the foundational training to guide their approach.

In exploring the challenges faced by untrained school counselors in three different African nations, this review aims to uncover the common threads and distinct differences that characterize their experiences. For instance, in countries with a strong emphasis on communal and familial ties, counselors may lean heavily on these networks for support in their roles. However, they may also grapple with issues such as stigma associated with mental health, which can hinder open discussions about emotional well-being. Furthermore, economic constraints and political instability can impact the availability and accessibility of formal training opportunities for counselors, as well as the resources available to them for supporting students. In such contexts, untrained counselors might rely more on indigenous knowledge systems and community-based approaches to counseling, which, while valuable, may also pose challenges in addressing complex psychological issues that require specialized interventions.

This review will also consider the impact of historical contexts on the practice of counseling in these countries. For example, post-conflict nations may see a higher prevalence of trauma among students, requiring counselors to navigate the delicate process of supporting individuals with experiences of violence and loss. By delving into the specific challenges faced by untrained school counselors in African educational settings, this review seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the global landscape of school counseling. It aims to highlight the importance of developing adaptable, context-sensitive training and support mechanisms that recognize the unique cultural, economic, and historical contexts in which these counselors operate. Through this exploration, the review will underscore the critical need for innovative solutions that enhance the effectiveness of counseling efforts, ultimately supporting the holistic development of students across the continent.

Njoroge (2022) brought out unique challenges that counselors encounter, particularly the task of integrating local customs and values into the counseling process while also contending with external factors such as community influences and sometimes outdated or rigid beliefs. These challenges highlight the delicate balance counselors must strike between respecting cultural heritage and adapting to the modern demands of their profession. Njoroge's findings underscore the necessity for a counseling framework that is both responsive to and respectful of the rich tapestry of Kenyan cultural norms while being equipped to address the challenges posed by changing societal dynamics.

Another study by Belkacem (2022) highlights the significant linguistic barriers counselors encounter, given Algeria's linguistic diversity, including a range of Berber dialects alongside Arabic and French. This linguistic diversity presents a unique challenge in the counseling process, as effective communication is foundational to

understanding and addressing clients' needs. The complexity is further compounded when attempting to integrate modern therapeutic methods with traditional Bedouin conflict resolution strategies, which are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of many Algerian communities. Belkacem's study (2022) noticed the absence of culturally relevant resources and materials. This scarcity impedes counselors' capacity to deliver effective services that resonate with the Algerian context, posing significant challenges to the counseling process.

Adom (2018) identified the complex interplay of rapid urbanization, societal expectations, and emerging youth cultures. The influx of digital technologies adds another layer, with counsellors often feeling ill-equipped to deal with cyberbullying and online peer pressures. In her recommendations, Adom (2018). Stresses the integration of digital literacy within the counselling paradigm. Additionally, she highlights the value of collaborative workshops where counsellors can share insights and develop strategies relevant to urban Ghanaian youth.

Mwila (2022) highlighted the counselors' need to balance respect for these traditional practices with the application of modern psychological methods that may not always align with local cultural expectations. Mwila's research sheds light on a critical issue plaguing rural Zambian schools: the severe shortage of counseling resources. This scarcity extends beyond mere physical items like books, training materials, and psychological tools it encompasses the dearth of internet access, a vital gateway to online resources and professional development opportunities. In essence, the scarcity of counseling resources in rural Zambian schools presents a formidable barrier to the delivery of quality mental health support and the professional development of counselors. Addressing this challenge requires concerted efforts to improve access to physical resources, expand internet connectivity, and facilitate meaningful professional development opportunities tailored to the unique needs and constraints of rural contexts. Only through such holistic interventions can counselors in rural Zambian schools be empowered to fulfill their vital roles in supporting the well-being and academic success of their students.

Nalumango (2017) advocated for innovative strategies to empower counselors and enhance their effectiveness. One such forward-thinking recommendation is the establishment of a digital helpline tailored specifically for counselors. This digital helpline serves as a practical solution to address the pressing need for immediate and accessible support and guidance, particularly in handling complex cases exacerbated by digital challenges like cyberbullying. By providing counselors with a dedicated platform for seeking assistance, advice, and resources, this helpline offers a lifeline in moments of crisis or uncertainty. Chanda (2017) study delves into the nuanced challenges faced by counselors operating within the unique ecosystem of boarding schools. These institutions, while offering a structured environment for education and personal development, also present specific obstacles that impact the effectiveness of counseling services. Among these challenges, the study highlights the pervasive issue of homesickness and the emotional turmoil it generates among students. This condition,



characterized by feelings of grief, sadness, and anxiety due to separation from family and familiar environments, places a significant emotional burden on students, necessitating adept handling by counselors.

Another critical challenge identified is the lack of privacy within boarding school settings, which can severely hamper the confidentiality of counseling sessions. The communal living arrangements typical of boarding schools, while fostering a sense of community and belonging, often limit the availability of private spaces conducive to confidential conversations. This lack of privacy can deter students from seeking counseling services, fearing exposure of their personal issues to peers. In light of the challenges unearthed within the boarding school landscape, Chanda proposes a series of targeted interventions designed to bolster the support framework for students navigating this distinctive educational milieu. Foremost among these recommendations is the call for specialized training programs tailored specifically for boarding school counselors. Recognizing the distinct demands of the boarding school environment, Chanda underscores the importance of equipping counselors with the requisite skills and expertise to effectively address the multifaceted challenges encountered by students in this setting. Such specialized training initiatives would offer counselors comprehensive guidance on navigating the unique dynamics inherent in boarding school life. Recognizing the challenge posed by the communal living environment in maintaining confidentiality during counseling sessions, Chanda suggests the establishment of dedicated spaces within the boarding facilities. These private counseling nooks would offer students a secure and confidential setting in which to engage in counseling sessions, free from the prying eyes and ears of their peers. By ensuring privacy and confidentiality, these designated spaces would alleviate concerns about the exposure of personal issues and encourage greater utilization of counseling services among students.

Patel and Kumar's (2019) study conducted in India underscored the significance of mindfulness techniques, particularly breathing exercises, in bolstering counselors' well-being and enriching their capacity to foster a conducive counseling environment. In their study conducted in South Korea, Lee, Kim, and Park (2020) emphasized the critical role of cultural sensitivity in counseling practices, particularly regarding variations in eye contact norms across different cultures. The findings underscored the necessity for counselors to be attuned to cultural nuances and adapt their approach to eye contact accordingly. This recognition of cultural diversity is essential for establishing rapport, building trust, and facilitating effective communication with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In their study, Smith and Brown (2021) shed light on the significance of addressing challenges related to counselor behavior, particularly focusing on the aspect of emotional regulation. The findings underscored how internal pressures and expectations associated with the counseling role contribute to difficulties in effectively managing emotions during counseling sessions. The study highlighted the importance of targeted training and support programs aimed at enhancing counselors' emotional regulation skills and overall well-being. Smith and Brown's (2021) study highlights the importance of

providing targeted training and support programs, counselors can develop the skills and strategies necessary to manage their emotions effectively, ultimately enhancing the quality of counseling services and promoting positive outcomes for both counselors and their student-clients. Lopes and Rodriguez (2021) noted the need to focus on the development of targeted training programs that are both accessible and relevant to the needs of school counselors. These programs aim to equip counselors with a solid foundation in psychological principles and intervention strategies tailored to the educational setting.

Lee *et al.* (2020) conducted a study in South Korea, highlighting the importance of utilizing visual aids in counseling sessions. The research emphasized the practical benefits of incorporating visual reminders, such as posters or images, to promote positive counselor behaviors. The study suggested that these visual cues play a significant role in reinforcing desirable behaviors, particularly in encouraging counselors to adopt open body language throughout their sessions.

Thornton (2022) argued the need to foster collaboration between experienced teachers and external counsellors, peer mentoring provides a valuable mechanism for sharing knowledge, insights, and best practices, thereby empowering untrained counsellors to navigate their roles more effectively. Thornton's research not only unveils the pressing need for enhanced resources but also outlines practical steps to address this gap and bolster support for untrained counsellors in UK schools. Central to her recommendations is the proposal for the creation of a national mentoring program, envisioned as a cornerstone of professional development for untrained counsellors. Mulenga's study (2015) proposed the need for the integration of traditional counseling methods to foster cultural continuity and resilience, empowering students to draw upon their cultural heritage as a source of strength and resilience in the face of adversity. By equipping counselors with the tools and resources they need to thrive, the research can contribute to creating more inclusive, supportive, and empowering educational environments for all pupils in Zambia.

## 6. Material and Methods

For the purposes of this investigation, the researcher used a constructivist epistemological stance. This research employed a case study research design. Given the inherent nature of the study problem, a qualitative methodology was chosen. Techniques within qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews and non-participants observation checklists provided important insights into individuals' attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. Given such qualities, this approach became important, especially when aiming to understand the challenges experienced by counsellors utilizing specific sub-skills when counseling pupils. The sample of this study comprised of 15 untrained school counsellors 15 consists of 3 untrained school counsellors who are members of the school guidance and counselling committees who were selected from each of the 5 schools in other words, each of the 5 schools contributed 3 members to the study from selected

secondary schools in Lundazi District. A typical case purposeful sampling procedure was used to select the sample. In this case, untrained school counsellors who are members of the school guidance and counselling committees for the 5 selected schools. The actual sample size was determined at data saturation.

Data from the semi-structured interviews and non-participants observation checklist were triangulated to enhance the trustworthiness of the study findings. The data was analysed manually to answer the research questions on challenges faced by untrained school counsellors in practicing sub-skills counselling on their pupil-clients., using six major stages that include familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and report writing and where possible, verbalisms were used to indicate actual voices of the participants (Saldaña *et al.*, 2014).

## 7. Results

The study examined the challenges faced by untrained school counsellors in practicing sub skills counselling on their pupil-clients. The main finding is that untrained school counselors often face difficulties in effectively practicing these sub-skills, data was collected from fifteen (15) participants. The study used interviews to probe the participants. This is evident in several thematic observations: The findings of the discussion with three untrained counselors from five different schools showed different challenges faced when practicing subskills by untrained counselors. The sub-skills in question include sitting, open posture, leaning towards the client, eye contact, and relaxed posture. These are important for building effective communication during counseling sessions.

### 7.1 Challenge of Sustaining Open Posture

In the discussion, untrained counselors revealed their struggle in consistently maintaining an open posture during counseling sessions. This particular sub-skill, though essential in improving a welcoming environment for pupils, posed a significant challenge for many.

As one counselor clearly pointed out, *"I often catch myself crossing my arms unconsciously, especially when discussions become intense or emotionally charged."* Another counselor came in, sharing a similar experience: *"I've noticed that I tend to embrace my hands when I'm unsure about what to say next. It's like a safety net for me."*

### 7.2 Struggle with Appropriate Eye Contact

In the interesting discussion, several counselors voiced their unease regarding the practice of maintaining appropriate eye contact during counseling sessions. One counselor clearly admitted: *"I often find it challenging to know how much eye contact is the right amount. There are moments when I intentionally look away because I don't want to stare and potentially make my pupils uncomfortable"*.

### **7.3 Managing Body Language While Leaning Towards the Client**

In the insightful discussion, counselors collectively acknowledged the challenge of managing their body language when attempting to lean towards their clients. One counselor articulated their experience, stating, *"When I consciously lean in, I'm often unsure if I might be invading my student's personal space."*

### **7.4 Difficulty Adopting a Relaxed Posture**

During the discussion, the counselor's testimony highlights a common struggle the internal pressure to excel and provide effective support to their student-clients. One counselor noted that: *"I'm often so focused on what to say next, I don't realize I'm stressing up. This tension can be communicated to the pupil-client, creating a less conducive environment for open discussion."*

### **7.5 Challenges with Physical Setting for Effective Sitting**

The discussion with untrained counselor's uncovered issues related to the physical arrangement of seating, which in turn impacted the effectiveness of the counseling process. As one counselor explained, *"Our chairs are fixed to the floor, so I can't adjust them to sit properly facing my pupils."*

However, a follow-up question was asked on how to address challenges faced by untrained school counsellor in practicing subskills of counselling on their pupil-clients. It was found that certain practical strategies can be used to overcome challenges. These included: implementing adjustable furniture, using visual reminders, engaging in role-playing, applying the 'three-second rule' for eye contact, and conducting pre-session relaxation exercises. The findings are presented in emerging themes and verbatim, when the question was asked, the following were the emerging emerging themes.

### **7.6 Effective Sitting Arrangements**

During the discussion, the counselors acknowledged that effective sitting arrangements were essential in creating a conducive counseling environment. One counselor clearly pointed out, *"Sometimes I feel like we're not on the same level, literally. Finding the right chair is a small thing that makes a big difference."*

### **7.7 Developing an Open Posture**

In the discussion, counselors openly acknowledged the challenge they faced in maintaining an open posture during counseling sessions. One counselor reflected on their efforts, stating, *"I've started using reminders around the room to uncross my arms. It's about becoming self-aware."*

In addition to visual aids, the counselors suggested the implementation of role-playing exercises during staff meetings. One counselor suggested that, *"Through role-playing, we can simulate real counseling events, providing an opportunity to fine-tune their posture and develop a heightened sense of self-awareness"*.

### **7.8 Appropriate Learning**

The discussion led to a positive solution for addressing the challenge of appropriate learning. The counselors recognized the effectiveness of mirroring body language but emphasized the need for guidance and training to refine this skill. A counselor also suggested that: *“Through role-playing and practical exercises, we can enhance the ability to naturally and effectively mirror the clients’ body language. This can contribute to a more empathetic and engaged counseling experience”*.

### **7.9 Balanced Eye Contact**

In the discussion, several counselors opened up about their struggle with maintaining appropriate eye contact during counseling sessions. One counselor shared a specific technique, saying, *“I use the ‘three-second rule’ — look, hold for a moment, then look away. It’s less intense.”*

### **7.10 Achieving a Relaxed Posture**

In the discussion, counselors shared their challenges in maintaining a relaxed posture during counseling sessions. One counselor described their approach, saying, *“Breathing exercises before sessions help me relax, so my posture is more natural and less forced.”*

## **8. Discussion**

The findings from the discussion shed light on the significant challenge untrained counselors face in maintaining an open posture during counseling sessions. This sub-skill, crucial for fostering a welcoming environment, proved to be a common struggle among participants. The experiences shared by the counselors resonate with existing research on the impact of body language in counseling. Harris and Davis (2018) conducted a study in the United Kingdom, emphasizing the role of a relaxed posture in creating a positive counseling atmosphere. The challenges expressed by untrained counselors align with Harris and Davis's findings, highlighting the global nature of this issue. The counselor's acknowledgment of unconsciously crossing arms during intense discussions resonates with findings from Smith and Wilson's (2021) research in the United States. Smith and Wilson highlighted the significance of addressing challenges related to emotional regulation and avoiding inappropriate postures to ensure effective counseling outcomes. The struggles described in the study align with the emotional dimension revealed by Smith and Wilson, illustrating a universal concern among untrained counselors.

Overall, the parallels between the counselor's experiences and Smith and Wilson's research highlight the universal nature of challenges faced by untrained counselors in regulating their emotions and maintaining appropriate postures during counseling sessions. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential for counselors to provide effective and empathetic support to their clients. The acknowledgment that adopting closed postures, such as clasping hands, might be unconscious reactions reflects

the interplay between physical and emotional states, as identified by Anderson and White (2018) in Australia. Anderson and White emphasized the impact of eye contact and counselor behavior on the client's experience, highlighting how non-verbal cues can shape the counseling environment.

The unconscious adoption of closed postures by counselors may unknowingly signal a lack of openness and approachability, aligning with the potential consequences highlighted in Anderson and White's research. Closed postures can create barriers to effective communication and rapport-building with clients, hindering the counseling process and potentially impacting the client's experience and outcomes. Anderson and White's findings underscore the importance of counselors' awareness of their non-verbal behaviors and their potential impact on the counseling dynamic. By recognizing and addressing unconscious reactions, such as adopting closed postures, counselors can create a more welcoming and supportive environment for their clients, facilitating meaningful therapeutic interactions and promoting positive outcomes. Overall, the insights from Anderson and White's research resonate with the experiences shared by counselors regarding the unconscious adoption of closed postures. These findings highlight the importance of counselors' self-awareness and intentional efforts to convey openness and approachability through their body language during counseling sessions. The findings from the discussion shows the challenges untrained counselors face in maintaining appropriate eye contact during counseling sessions. This particular sub-skill, crucial for conveying attentiveness while respecting individual boundaries, emerged as a common struggle among participants. The counselor's admission of finding it challenging to know the right amount of eye contact aligns with existing research on the impact of non-verbal aids in counseling. Miller and Harris (2019) conducted a study on the effect of eye contact in counseling, emphasizing the importance of striking a balance between engagement and respect for personal space. The challenges expressed by untrained counselors regarding eye contact align with the findings of Miller and Harris, highlighting the universal nature of this issue. Miller and Harris's research underscores the complexity of eye contact as a non-verbal aid in counseling. While maintaining appropriate eye contact can enhance client engagement and convey attentiveness, excessive or prolonged eye contact may lead to discomfort or feelings of intrusion. Untrained counselors may struggle to navigate this delicate balance, as they grapple with determining the appropriate duration and intensity of eye contact during counseling sessions.

The challenges expressed by counselors in knowing the right amount of eye contact reflect the nuanced nature of non-verbal communication in counseling. Counselors must be attuned to individual client preferences and cultural norms while also considering the therapeutic context and goals of the session. Miller and Harris's findings highlight the importance of providing training and support to help counselors develop the skills needed to effectively manage non-verbal communication, including eye contact, in counseling settings. Overall, the experiences shared by counselors regarding the challenges of knowing the right amount of eye contact align with Miller

and Harris's research, emphasizing the need for ongoing training and professional development to support counselors in mastering this essential aspect of the counseling process.

The intentional act of looking away to avoid potentially making pupils uncomfortable reflects the counselor's genuine concern for respecting individual boundaries. This practice, however, can be misinterpreted as a lack of engagement, as noted by Garcia and Martinez (2021) in their research on non-verbal aids. Garcia and Martinez emphasized the importance of understanding the nuances of non-verbal communication to avoid misinterpretations, supporting the relevance of the struggles identified in the study. Garcia and Martinez's research highlights the complexity of non-verbal communication in counseling settings. While counselors may intentionally avert their gaze to respect pupils' boundaries or provide them with space, this behavior may inadvertently convey disinterest or detachment. The findings underscore the importance of counselors being mindful of the potential impact of their non-verbal cues on client perceptions and experiences.

The struggles identified in the study regarding the intentional act of looking away align with Garcia and Martinez's research, highlighting the need for counselors to navigate the delicate balance between respecting boundaries and maintaining engagement during counseling sessions. Providing training and support to help counselors develop awareness of their non-verbal behaviors and their potential effects on clients can empower them to communicate effectively and build trustful therapeutic relationships. The intentional act of looking away to avoid discomfort reflects the counselor's commitment to respecting pupils' boundaries. However, this behavior may pose challenges in maintaining engagement and connection during counseling sessions. Garcia and Martinez's research underscores the importance of counselors being mindful of the nuances of non-verbal communication to ensure that their actions align with their intentions and support positive therapeutic outcomes.

Essentially, the findings from the discussion align with existing research, highlighting the global nature of challenges related to maintaining appropriate eye contact in counseling sessions. The struggle to strike a valid balance between engagement and respecting personal space underscores the complexity of this sub-skill, which is crucial for building rapport and trust with clients. To address this challenge, it is imperative to recognize the need for comprehensive training programs aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of untrained counselors globally. These training programs should provide counselors with the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary to navigate the nuances of non-verbal communication, including eye contact, in diverse cultural and contextual settings.

Incorporating modules specifically focused on non-verbal communication and the importance of eye contact in counseling, training programs can help counselors develop a deeper understanding of how their behaviors impact client perceptions and experiences. Practical exercises, role-plays, and feedback sessions can further reinforce learning and facilitate skill development in this area. Moreover, ongoing supervision and

mentorship opportunities can provide counselors with valuable guidance and support as they navigate the complexities of maintaining appropriate eye contact in real-world counseling scenarios. By creating a supportive environment for counselors to reflect on their practice and receive constructive feedback, training programs can help them enhance their competence and confidence in this essential aspect of counseling.

Addressing the challenges related to maintaining appropriate eye contact requires a multifaceted approach that includes comprehensive training programs, practical skill-building activities, and ongoing support mechanisms. By equipping untrained counselors with the necessary knowledge and resources, we can empower them to communicate effectively and build meaningful therapeutic relationships with their clients, ultimately enhancing the quality of counseling services provided globally. The collective acknowledgment of the challenge of managing body language while leaning towards the client emerged as a significant theme during the discussion. Untrained counselors shared their experiences, with one counselor expressing uncertainty about potentially invading the student's personal space when consciously leaning in. This challenge resonates with existing research on non-verbal communication in counseling. Anderson and White (2018) conducted a study focused on building trust in counseling sessions, where they emphasized the significance of understanding and respecting personal space boundaries. The concerns expressed by untrained counselors regarding the potential impact on personal space align with the findings of Anderson and White, highlighting the universal nature of this challenge.

In their research, Anderson and White likely explored how counselors' behaviors, including their use of personal space, can influence clients' perceptions of trust and safety within the counseling relationship. The counselors' concerns about unintentionally invading personal space or making clients uncomfortable reflect a genuine desire to establish rapport and create a supportive counseling environment, mirroring the emerging themes identified in Anderson and White's study. Acknowledging and addressing these concerns, training programs can help untrained counselors develop a better understanding of the nuances of non-verbal communication and its impact on the counseling process. Through targeted education and practical exercises, counselors can learn to navigate personal space boundaries respectfully while still fostering meaningful connections with their clients. This aligns with the broader goal of promoting culturally sensitive and client-centered counseling practices, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of counseling services provided.

The sub-skill of leaning towards the client, while demonstrating attentiveness and empathy, introduces a valid balance that requires a different understanding of personal boundaries. The counselor's dedication to respecting their client's space while striving for engagement and support reflects the complexities inherent in this aspect of counseling. The finding regarding the challenges related to managing body language in counseling, particularly when leaning towards the client, aligns with existing research on cultural aspects of personal space in counseling. Patel and Kumar (2019) conducted research in India, focusing on the cultural dynamics influencing counseling practices. Their study



likely explored how cultural norms and values impact individuals' perceptions of personal space and appropriate interpersonal distance in counseling interactions.

Similarly, the challenges identified in the discussion reflect a global phenomenon, highlighting the universal nature of difficulties that counselors may encounter in navigating non-verbal communication cues, such as maintaining appropriate distance from clients. Across diverse cultural contexts, counselors must negotiate the delicate balance between demonstrating empathy and respect for clients' boundaries. Recognizing the cultural nuances inherent in counseling interactions, training programs can better equip counselors to navigate these challenges sensitively and effectively. Providing education on cross-cultural communication and encouraging counselors to reflect on their own cultural biases can enhance their ability to establish rapport and build trust with clients from diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, this contributes to the delivery of culturally competent and client-centered counseling services, fostering positive therapeutic outcomes across different cultural contexts. The valid balance between conveying engagement and respecting personal space highlights the complexity of this sub-skill. To address the challenge, drawn from various scholars, underscore the need for comprehensive training programs to address this challenge and enhance the effectiveness of untrained counselors globally.

The challenge in difficulty in adopting a relaxed posture emerged as a critical challenge faced by untrained counselors during the discussion. This challenge signifies the nature of managing body language during counseling sessions, as a relaxed posture is considered an essential sub-skill contributing to the creation of an open and welcoming counseling atmosphere. The counselor's testimony during the discussion sheds light on a common struggle faced by untrained counselors—the internal pressure to excel and provide effective support to their student-clients. The counselor admitted being so focused on what to say next that they unconsciously tensed up. This tension, when communicated to the pupil-client, has the potential to create a less conducive environment for open discussion. The difficulty in adopting a relaxed posture underscores the internal challenges and expectations placed on counselors, impacting their ability to maintain a calm and composed development during sessions.

The challenges highlighted in the findings resonate with broader literature on counselor behavior and its impact on the counseling process, as demonstrated by Harris and Davis (2018) in the United Kingdom. Their research emphasizes the pivotal role of counselors' personal development in shaping the counseling atmosphere, emphasizing the importance of creating a positive and empathetic environment for clients. The challenges identified in the study underscore the complexity of counselor behavior and its implications for the counseling relationship. Counselors' demeanor, communication style, and ways of interacting with clients profoundly influence the therapeutic experience and outcomes. Issues such as maintaining open posture, managing eye contact, and navigating cultural differences in personal space require counselors to possess self-awareness, cultural competence, and interpersonal skills.

Recognizing these challenges and addressing them through ongoing training, supervision, and professional development, counselors can enhance their effectiveness and provide more supportive and empathetic counseling experiences for their clients. Moreover, research in this area contributes to a deeper understanding of the nuances of counselor behavior and its impact on the therapeutic process, ultimately improving the quality of counseling services provided to individuals seeking support.

The difficulty in adopting a relaxed posture not only reflects the counselors' commitment to delivering high-quality counseling but also points to the need for addressing the stress and expectations associated with their role. This finding aligns with the recommendations of Smith and Brown (2021), who emphasized the importance of addressing challenges related to counselor behavior, including emotional regulation, to ensure effective counseling. The internal pressures and expectations associated with their role contribute to this difficulty, underscoring the need for targeted training and support programs. Addressing this challenge is crucial to creating a conducive counseling environment and promoting positive outcomes for both counselors and their student-clients.

The counselors experienced challenges with the physical setting for effective sitting which emerged from the discussion with untrained counselors, shedding light on the impact of the physical environment on the effectiveness of the counseling process. One counselor expressed this challenge, stating, "*Our chairs are fixed to the floor, so I can't adjust them to sit properly facing my pupils.*" This statement underscores the significance of having a flexible physical setting that accommodates proper counseling posture and fosters better engagement. The counselor's statement draws attention to a tangible challenge in the physical setting, specifically the fixed chairs, which directly hinders their ability to sit properly while facing their pupil-clients. Effective sitting posture is a crucial aspect of counseling, as it reflects attentiveness, openness, and engagement. The inability to adjust the chairs creates a barrier to achieving an optimal sitting posture, potentially impacting the quality of the counseling interaction. This challenge highlights the importance of providing untrained counselors with a conducive physical environment that supports their counseling practice. A flexible setting with movable chairs allows counselors to adapt their positions to face their student-clients comfortably. This adjustment is essential for conveying openness and engagement, key elements in establishing a positive counseling relationship. The significance of the physical environment in counseling aligns with the research conducted by Anderson and White (2018) in the United States, emphasizing the role of eye contact in building trust.

The counselors' struggle with maintaining an open posture during sessions is seen through the lens of phenomenology. Each counselor's approach is shaped by their subjective experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attach to this sub-skill. This challenge is understood as an embodiment of the counselors' personal and professional anxieties, reflecting phenomenology's focus on the experience being an "in-relation-to" phenomenon. The counselors' difficulty in balancing the right amount of eye contact reflect their subjective experiences. Phenomenology helps to understand these challenges

as personal interpretations of how to convey attentiveness while respecting individual boundaries. This resonates with Husserl's concept of experience being shaped by personal perceptions and the contextual relationship between counselor and client. Counselors' concerns about invading personal space while leaning in highlight the phenomenological aspect of their subjective experiences. This reflects their understanding and interpretation of empathy and engagement within the counseling context. This theme showcases how counselors' experiences, especially their approaches to leaning in, are deeply connected to their interactions with clients, echoing the phenomenological idea of "Being-in-the-World."

The challenge of maintaining a relaxed posture during sessions is seen through a phenomenological lens as a reflection of the counselors' internal pressures and self-perception. This challenge is understood as part of their lived experience, influenced by their personal and professional expectations. This difficulty aligns with the phenomenological view that experiences are defined by individual contexts, including the counselors' own beliefs, emotions, and the counseling environment. The challenge presented by the physical setting, particularly the presence of fixed chairs, can be understood phenomenologically as an integral aspect of the counselors' professional environment. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding human experiences as they are lived and perceived by individuals, acknowledging the interconnectedness between external realities and internal perceptions.

In this context, the physical constraints imposed by fixed chairs in counseling spaces influence counselors' ability to engage effectively with pupils. These environmental factors shape the counselors' experiences and interactions during counseling sessions. For instance, fixed chairs may limit the counselors' mobility or ability to adjust their position, potentially impacting their non-verbal communication with pupils. Furthermore, the challenge with the physical setting underscores the interplay between the external environment and the counselors' psychological state. The counselors' experiences within the physical space are intertwined with their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, all of which contribute to their overall engagement and effectiveness in counseling. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, we recognize that counselors' experiences are multifaceted, influenced not only by external factors like the physical setting but also by their internal perceptions and interpretations. Addressing challenges related to the physical environment requires an understanding of how these factors intersect and impact the counseling process, ultimately informing strategies to optimize the therapeutic environment for both counselors and pupils.

However, phenomenology offered a profound lens through which to comprehend and analyze the challenges encountered by untrained school counselors. Rather than merely considering these challenges as technical hurdles, phenomenology encourages us to explore them as intricate experiences molded by the counselors' personal perceptions, interactions, and contextual factors. Adopting a phenomenological approach, we delve into the lived experiences of untrained counselors as they navigate the complexities of their roles. This involves examining how their individual perceptions and interpretations

shape their understanding and practice of counseling sub-skills. For instance, the struggle to maintain open posture or eye contact may not solely stem from a lack of technical skill but could also be influenced by the counselors' internal thoughts, emotions, and past experiences.

Moreover, phenomenology prompts us to consider the interpersonal dynamics at play within the counseling context. The interactions between counselors and their clients, as well as the broader organizational and cultural contexts, contribute to the counselors' experiences and challenges. Understanding these dynamics requires a deep exploration of how counselors perceive and navigate their interactions with clients, colleagues, and the environment in which they work. In essence, phenomenology offers a rich framework for uncovering the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by untrained school counselors. By delving into the counselors' lived experiences and the intricate interplay of internal and external factors, phenomenology facilitates a deeper understanding of their struggles and paves the way for more nuanced and effective interventions and support mechanisms. Garcia and Martinez (2021) emphasized that when counselors and pupils are not seated at the same level, it can inadvertently create discomfort or a sense of imbalance in the interaction dynamics. They further noted that by incorporating visual aids and role-playing exercises, counselors aim to create a culture of continuous improvement. These approaches facilitate hands-on learning and provide counselors with practical tools to enhance their non-verbal communication skills. Visual aids serve as reminders to maintain open body language, while role-playing exercises offer opportunities for counselors to practice and refine their techniques in a supportive environment. Overall, these strategies demonstrate the counselors' commitment to providing empathetic and supportive counseling experiences for their pupil-clients. By proactively addressing challenges related to non-verbal communication, counselors strive to create a welcoming and inclusive counseling environment where students feel heard, understood, and valued. Anderson and White (2018) emphasized the impact of mirroring on building trust in counseling, highlighting that mirroring creates a sense of rapport and connection between counselors and clients. By adopting mirroring techniques, counselors can establish a deeper level of empathy and understanding with their clients. Mirroring involves subtly mimicking the client's body language, such as leaning forward when they do, which helps create a sense of resonance and mutual understanding. This approach fosters trust and facilitates open communication, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the counseling process. Additionally, the emphasis on training sessions reflects a commitment to continuous learning and improvement among counselors, ensuring they possess the skills and knowledge necessary to provide high-quality counseling services to diverse populations. It also underscores the importance of incorporating cultural competence into counselor training programs to equip counselors with the tools they need to navigate cultural differences sensitively and effectively. The counselors' collective acknowledgment of the need for more in-depth training reflects the sentiments expressed by Johnson and Brown (2018) in the United Kingdom.

Patel and Kumar (2019) in India. Their study emphasized the importance of mindfulness techniques, including breathing exercises, in promoting counselors' well-being and enhancing their ability to create a positive and supportive counseling environment.

## 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research abilities into the challenges, untrained school counselors' experiences of as they practice sub-skills in counselling within selected public secondary schools in the Lundazi District, Zambia. The counselors acknowledged the significance of their physical presence in counseling sessions, understanding that body language plays a pivotal role in fostering trust and rapport with clients. Yet, they expressed frustration at their inability to consistently embody these desired behaviors due to a lack of formal training and guidance. Sustaining an open posture was identified as a challenge, with counselors noting difficulties in maintaining a relaxed and receptive stance throughout counseling sessions. Many confessed to feeling self-conscious or uncertain about the appropriate degree of openness, highlighting the need for structured training to develop and refine this skill. Similarly, managing appropriate eye contact emerged as a common struggle among counselors. While they recognized the importance of eye contact in establishing connection and conveying empathy, many admitted to feeling unsure about the duration and intensity of eye contact, leading to feelings of discomfort and inadequacy. Additionally, counselors expressed challenges in achieving a relaxed and approachable demeanor during sessions. Despite their best intentions, they found themselves tensing up or adopting closed body language, inadvertently signaling disengagement or defensiveness to clients. Overall, the discussions revealed a keen awareness among untrained counselors of the physical dimensions of their role and the importance of body language in counseling interactions. However, the lack of formal training hindered their ability to effectively practice these sub-skills, underscoring the need for comprehensive and tailored professional development opportunities to address these challenges effectively. Addressing the challenges faced by untrained counselors, the discussions underscored a collective awareness among participants regarding the physical aspects inherent to their role. However, a recurring theme surfaced despite this recognition, counselors frequently found themselves lacking the necessary training needed for the effective practice of sub-skills. Based on the results on challenges, untrained school counselors' experiences of as they practice sub-skills in counselling within selected public secondary schools in the Lundazi District, Zambia, the study recommends the following:

- The schools to provide specialized training for school untrained counselors, establish short-term training programs to equip untrained school counselors with foundational counseling skills. This training can focus on essential counseling techniques, ethical practices, and crisis management to better prepare them for real-life situations in schools. By enhancing their competency, they will be better equipped to support students effectively.

- The schools should establish a mentorship program with qualified counselors, introduce a mentorship or supervision program where untrained counselors can work under the guidance of qualified professionals. This mentorship can help them gain practical insights, improve skill application, and build confidence in delivering counseling services. Such a program could also provide continuous feedback, which is essential for skill development and effective counseling practices.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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CHALLENGES FACED BY UNTRAINED SCHOOL COUNSELLORS  
IN PRACTICING SUBSKILLS OF COUNSELLING ON THEIR LEARNER CLIENTS

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