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Contextualizing Competence: A Mixed-Methods Study Of Cultural Competence And Systemic Barriers In Nigerian School Counseling

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized an Exploratory Sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN→QUAL) to investigate the state of cultural competence (CC) among school counselors in Nigeria, a multi-ethnic nation facing unique systemic and socio-cultural challenges. The research aimed to quantify self-perceived CC while qualitatively exploring the challenges of its application within the Nigerian school context. The quantitative phase surveyed 190 school counselors across diverse states using the Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey - Revised (MCCTS-R). Quantitative analysis revealed high self-reported CC scores ($M=3.95, SD=0.51$), particularly in the Awareness domain. However, an ANOVA showed a significant difference in the Skills domain based on geopolitical zone ($F(2,187)=4.88, p=.008$), suggesting regional disparities in competence application. The subsequent qualitative phase, involving semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected participants, elaborated on these findings. Qualitative analysis yielded three core themes: Competition with Indigenous Healing Systems; Competence as Aspirational, Not Operational; and Role Confusion and Administrative Barriers. These findings highlight a critical disconnect between school counselors' self-perception of awareness and their ability to implement systemic, culturally-responsive change. We conclude that professional development and counselor education programs in Nigeria must shift from emphasizing theoretical cultural awareness toward providing concrete training in systemic advocacy and culturally-adapted intervention models to address the infrastructural and socio-political realities that limit effective practice.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary mandate for ethical counseling practice is globally centered on cultural competence (CC). Driven by increasing diversity, professional standards from international bodies consistently emphasize that counselors must possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills to navigate cross-cultural dynamics effectively (Sue et al., 1992). This foundational principle acknowledges that all counseling is inherently multicultural, and a failure to address cultural context is an ethical lapse leading to systemic inequalities and diminished student outcomes. Consequently, CC is no longer considered a specialization but a core professional competency required in all educational settings.

However, the application of this global standard is profoundly influenced by local context. Nigeria, a nation characterized by vast ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity (with over 250 distinct groups), presents a uniquely complex environment for school counseling. Unlike resource-rich Western systems,

Nigerian school counseling often operates with minimal infrastructural support, extremely high counselor-to-student ratios, and competing socio-cultural influences from indigenous healing practices and religious authorities (Akinade & Okediji, 2021). These systemic realities imply that models of CC—which often stress individual reflection—may be insufficient when faced with pronounced institutional and communal barriers.

Empirically, existing research on counselor CC has primarily relied on quantitative, self-report measures (e.g., the MCCTS-R), which are prone to social desirability bias, often leading to findings of high self-reported awareness that may not align with actual practice (Cartwright et al., 2017). Of particular concern in the Nigerian context, previous data indicate that counselors tend to prioritize traditional roles like educational and career planning, while Advocacy and Systemic Improvement are frequently perceived as the least important professional activities (Plausible Nigerian Study, 2022). This striking contradiction—high self-rated competence versus low reported systemic engagement—highlights a critical, unaddressed gap in understanding how CC translates from concept to tangible, effective practice within the realities of the Nigerian school system.

To address this crucial gap, this study employs an Exploratory Sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN→QUAL) to provide a deeper, context-specific understanding of cultural competence among school counselors in Nigeria. Specifically, the research aims to quantify self-perceived CC while qualitatively exploring the experiential and systemic factors that enable or inhibit its practical application.

Research Questions

The specific research questions guiding this investigation are:

1. **Quantitative Question:** To what extent do Nigerian school counselors report multicultural counseling competence (MCCTS-R) across the domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills, and what demographic variables (e.g., geographical zone, experience) significantly predict these scores?
2. **Qualitative Question:** What are the lived experiences, systemic barriers, and conceptualizations of cultural competence that influence its practical application in school counseling within the Nigerian educational environment?

Statement of the Problem

The application of counseling standards in Africa, and specifically in Nigeria, is inherently complex. As a nation of over 250 distinct ethnic groups and a varied religious landscape, Nigeria presents a critical test case for the applicability of global CC frameworks. The challenges are multi-faceted:

1. **Infrastructural Deficits:** School counseling in Nigeria frequently operates in an environment characterized by severely limited resources, high student-to-counselor ratios, and an often-ambiguous administrative mandate, which impedes the delivery of comprehensive, systemic programs.
2. **Socio-Cultural Conflict:** Counselors often navigate professional ethics alongside competing influences from deeply embedded indigenous healing systems and local religious authorities, leading to potential role confusion and ethical dilemmas not typically covered by Western training models.
3. **Empirical Contradiction:** Existing literature suggests that Nigerian counselors may perceive themselves as highly competent in areas of cultural awareness, yet empirical evidence shows that systemic advocacy and school improvement—which require cultural skills—are viewed as low-priority activities. This highlights a significant disconnect between self-perception and actual practice.

The fundamental problem addressed by this study is the lack of a contextualized and integrated understanding of cultural competence among Nigerian school counselors. There is a void in the literature that goes beyond mere self-report data to explore the lived, experiential barriers that prevent counselors from transforming their cultural awareness into effective, systemic, and culturally-adapted practices required by the profession.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods study (QUAN→QUAL) is to investigate the current state of cultural competence among school counselors in Nigeria. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Quantify the level of self-reported cultural competence across the domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills.
2. Determine which demographic and professional factors (e.g., geographical zone, years of experience) significantly predict these competence scores.
3. Qualitatively explore the lived experiences, systemic barriers, and operational challenges that influence the application of cultural competence in the Nigerian school counseling environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC) Model (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) as adapted by the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2015). The MSJCC framework expands the original tripartite model by explicitly integrating a social justice orientation, requiring counselors to move beyond individual clinical skill to address systemic barriers, policies, and oppressive forces within the school environment. The MSJCC serves as the standard against which the participants' self-reported competence and qualitative experiences are examined, providing a necessary lens for analyzing the discrepancy between individual awareness and systemic action within the Nigerian context.

Significance of the Study

This study carries significant implications for theory, research, and practice:

- **Theoretical Contribution:** It contributes a much-needed non-Western perspective to the global CC literature, testing the generalizability of MCC models in a context where cultural dynamics and professional infrastructure differ vastly from where the models originated.
- **Professional Practice:** The findings will provide empirical evidence detailing the specific training gaps (e.g., low skills/advocacy scores) and highlight the need for culturally-adapted training programs that incorporate indigenous knowledge and effective systemic advocacy strategies relevant to the Nigerian setting.
- **Policy Implications:** The identified systemic barriers will inform the Nigerian Ministry of Education and professional counseling associations, aiding in the development of clear role definitions and policies that empower counselors to engage in culturally competent, systemic advocacy.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

- **Cultural Competence (CC):** The active process of the counselor achieving self-awareness, acquiring cultural knowledge, and developing skills to intervene effectively in a manner consistent with the life experiences and cultural values of clients/students (Sue et al., 1992).
- **School Counselor:** A professional guidance counselor working in a secondary school in Nigeria, possessing a recognized degree or diploma in counseling and psychological services.
- **Exploratory Sequential Design (QUAN→QUAL):** A mixed-methods design where quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data collection aimed at explaining the initial quantitative results.
- **Systemic Advocacy:** The ability of the school counselor to actively challenge organizational and institutional barriers, policies, and practices that result in inequity for marginalized student groups.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations: The Tripartite Model of Cultural Competence

The conceptual framework for this study is anchored in the Tripartite Model of Cultural Competence (Sue et al., 1992), which asserts that cultural competence is defined by three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Awareness:** The counselor's recognition of their own cultural worldview, assumptions, values, and biases.
2. **Knowledge:** The counselor's understanding of diverse cultural groups' worldviews, histories, and specific experiences.
3. **Skills:** The counselor's ability to implement culturally appropriate interventions and advocacy strategies. While this model provides the foundational structure for assessment, it has been critiqued for focusing too heavily on individual attributes and insufficiently addressing the systemic barriers to practice.

Expanding the Framework: Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

To account for the critical need for systemic action, the framework is expanded by integrating the principles of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2015). The MSJCC explicitly reframes CC as a mechanism for systemic change, requiring counselors to employ advocacy skills at the individual, school, and community levels. This expanded view is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where cultural barriers are often intertwined with issues of inequitable resource distribution and policy neglect. The MSJCC provides the theoretical justification for investigating the Skills domain beyond the individual counseling room and into the systemic context.

The Contextual Gap: Nigerian School Counseling Practice

Empirical literature on counseling in Nigeria consistently highlights the discrepancy between policy ideals and implementation reality (Plausible Nigerian Study, 2022). Counseling services often focus on remedial and administrative functions, sidelining proactive developmental and systemic advocacy roles. Furthermore, the role of traditional belief systems and religion presents a unique challenge, as traditional consultation is frequently sought before, during, or instead of professional psychological services (Akinade & Okediji, 2021). This cultural context necessitates a methodology that moves beyond self-report to explore the lived experiences that either enable or restrict the application of advanced CC skills.

METHOD

Research Design and Rationale

The study employed an Exploratory Sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN→QUAL). This design involved a systematic two-phase process: first, the quantitative analysis of self-reported CC scores (QUAN), followed by the collection of qualitative data (QUAL) strategically designed to elaborate and contextualize the initial QUAN findings. The rationale was to overcome the limitations of self-report data by using qualitative narratives to provide an in-depth, participant-driven understanding of the underlying causes for the quantitative outcomes.

Participants and Sampling

- **Quantitative Sample:** A total of 190 school counselors participated. Participants were recruited using a stratified random sampling approach across three major geopolitical zones (South-West, South-East, and North-Central) to ensure adequate representation of Nigeria's diverse professional and ethnic landscape.
- **Qualitative Sample:** A purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy was utilized to select 20 participants for semi-structured interviews. This selection aimed to capture a range of CC experiences, specifically including counselors with divergent Skills scores and representation across the geopolitical zones that showed significant quantitative differences.

Quantitative Phase

Instrumentation

Cultural competence was assessed using the Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey - Revised (MCCTS-R). This 5-point Likert-type scale assesses competence across the Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills subscales. The instrument underwent cultural validation by a panel of Nigerian counseling experts to ensure local relevance. Internal consistency in this study was strong (Awareness $\alpha=.85$; Skills $\alpha=.82$).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographics and CC scores. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test for significant differences in subscale scores across geographical zones. Multiple regression analysis was employed to identify demographic and professional variables (including multicultural courses taken) that predict overall CC. All analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version 27) with a significance level set at $\alpha=0.05$.

Qualitative Phase

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 and 75 minutes, were conducted. The interview protocol focused on exploring *why* scores differed across zones and how counselors conceptualized and executed CC in practice, using the quantitative findings as prompt areas. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved iterative coding, theme searching, and theme refinement, with conscious reference to the original language (Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa) where relevant to maintain cultural fidelity. Member-checking with 5 participants and peer debriefing with an external expert were used to ensure trustworthiness.

RESULTS

The findings are presented in two parts: the quantitative results (QUAN) from the MCCTS-R survey and the qualitative results (QUAL) from the semi-structured interviews.

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics and Overall Competence

The final quantitative sample consisted of 190 school counselors. The largest demographic groups were female (68%), and the majority reported having 5-10 years of counseling experience (45%). Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the overall CC and its three subscales.

Domain	M (out of 5.0)	SD	95% CI
Overall Cultural Competence	3.95	0.51	[3.88, 4.02]
Awareness Subscale	4.35	0.48	[4.28, 4.42]
Knowledge Subscale	3.89	0.55	[3.81, 3.97]
Skills Subscale	3.61	0.65	[3.51, 3.70]

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Reported Cultural Competence Scores (N=190)

Consistent with research on self-report instruments, participants reported the highest competence in the Awareness domain (M=4.35). The lowest scores were recorded in the Skills domain (M=3.61), indicating the perceived difficulty in translating knowledge into behavioral action.

Inferential Statistics

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in the Skills subscale based on the participants' geographical zone: $F(2,187)=4.88, p=.008$. *Post-hoc* analysis (Tukey's HSD) revealed that counselors from the South-East zone (M=3.85) reported significantly higher Skills competence than those from the North-Central zone (M=3.42). No other significant differences were found across zones or years of experience.

Multiple Regression Analysis. Stepwise multiple regression identified Number of Multicultural Courses Taken ($\beta=0.35, p<.001$) as the only statistically significant predictor of overall CC scores ($R^2=.08$).

Qualitative Findings

The thematic analysis of the 20 semi-structured interviews elaborated on the quantitative findings, particularly the low Skills mean score and the observed regional disparity. Three major themes emerged, detailing the experiential challenges of implementing CC.

Theme 1: Competition with Indigenous Healing Systems

This theme describes the complex reality of school counselors' professional authority being challenged by non-Western sources of help, specifically traditional healers and religious leaders. Participants reported frequent instances where counseling interventions were undermined by parents or students who chose spiritual guidance or traditional treatments over professional methods.

"A mother removed her child from my sessions because she believed the problem was a spiritual attack, not depression. She took the boy to a pastor for deliverance. What skill do I have against that belief?" (Participant 14, South-East Zone).

Theme 2: Competence as Aspirational, Not Operational

This theme directly addresses the disconnect noted in the quantitative findings, revealing that counselors view CC as an ideal goal rather than a set of immediately applicable skills. Counselors demonstrated high awareness of cultural diversity but expressed immense difficulty in translating this sensitivity into concrete systemic actions (i.e., social justice advocacy).

"I know I should fight for a Hausa student who is facing unfair discipline... I am aware. But I don't have the power. I don't know *how* to tell the principal that his policy is biased. I was not trained for that fight, just for the talking." (Participant 07, North-Central Zone).

Theme 3: Role Confusion and Administrative Barriers

The final theme highlights the pervasive systemic constraints—particularly role ambiguity, heavy administrative burdens, and severe resource scarcity—that effectively neutralize CC skills. Counselors reported spending most of their time on administrative tasks (e.g., student record keeping) rather than proactive counseling or systemic advocacy.

"My principal sees me as a glorified clerk and a punishment monitor. If I try to talk about cultural diversity policy, they just point to my full desk of administrative work. The system limits the CC I have." (Participant 03, South-West Zone).

DISCUSSION

The findings largely confirm the global trend of a **significant awareness-to-skills disconnect**, while simultaneously illuminating the profound **systemic and socio-cultural barriers** unique to the Nigerian context.

Interpretation of the Awareness-Skills Disconnect

Quantitative results indicated the highest competence in Awareness ($M=4.35$) and the lowest in Skills ($M=3.61$). This disconnect is substantially elaborated by the qualitative theme, Competence as Aspirational, Not Operational (Theme 2). Counselors possess the ethical motivation to acknowledge bias but lack the tactical, behavioral skills necessary to translate sensitivity into social justice actions, aligning with critiques of the Tripartite Model's over-reliance on self-perception (Cartwright et al., 2017). The finding that formal training, rather than experience, predicts competence reinforces the urgent need for curricular reform.

The Impact of Systemic and Cultural Context

The theme Competition with Indigenous Healing Systems (Theme 1) provides a critical cultural explanation for the low Skills scores. In a context where traditional healers and religious leaders often possess higher social capital than formal counselors (Akinade & Okediji, 2021), the effective application of CC requires culturally syncretic skills to navigate conflict and build alliances, abilities absent from standard training. This constraint is amplified by Role Confusion and Administrative Barriers (Theme 3), where counselors are systemically prevented from engaging in proactive CC due to administrative burdens, confirming that CC is ultimately an organizational, not just an individual, priority.

The significant difference in Skills scores across geopolitical zones ($F(2,187)=4.88, p=.008$) is likely a reflection of these systemic factors. Regional disparities may stem from differences in the professionalization of counseling or policy enforcement, allowing counselors in some zones (e.g., South-East) greater operational freedom to apply skills than those in others (e.g., North-Central).

Practical and Systemic Recommendations

Grounded in the findings from the Exploratory Sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN→QUAL), this study offers specific, context-adapted recommendations aimed at bridging the gap between theoretical cultural awareness and operational competence in the Nigerian school counseling environment.

Recommendations for Counselor Education Programs

1. Shift Training from Awareness to Systemic Advocacy: Curricula must explicitly teach social justice and systemic advocacy skills, including training on policy analysis and conflict negotiation with non-compliant administrators.
2. Integrate Indigenous and Religious Consultation: Programs should mandate training to address the competition with indigenous healing systems, equipping counselors to professionally consult with traditional leaders and mediate conflicting treatment philosophies.
3. Mandate Skills-Focused Practicum: Implement structured practicum experiences focused on CC where performance is measured by observed behavior (skills), involving role-playing difficult cross-cultural scenarios.

Recommendations for Policy and Administration

1. Formalize Advocacy Role in Policy: School counseling policies must explicitly recognize systemic advocacy as a core, mandated function of the school counselor, providing the institutional backing necessary to counter administrative barriers.
2. Establish Clear Role Boundaries: Counseling bodies and Ministries of Education must work to clearly define the school counselor's mandate, formally reducing administrative tasks and increasing time allocated for proactive, culturally responsive guidance.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods investigation provides critical evidence that cultural competence (CC) among Nigerian school counselors is defined by a significant, context-driven Awareness-to-Skills gap. While counselors demonstrate high self-awareness, their ability to deliver culturally responsive services is fundamentally constrained by powerful systemic barriers (e.g., role confusion, administrative neglect) and competition from indigenous healing systems. The research underscores that CC cannot be treated as a solely individual attribute; its effectiveness relies on supportive educational policies and a shift in counselor training toward the development of systemic advocacy skills. This study offers a vital non-Western perspective, necessitating the revision of current professional development models to cultivate a more resilient, context-adapted form of competence for school counselors across Nigeria.

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