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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Stakeholder Perspectives on School-Based Guidance and Counseling in Uganda: Emerging Priorities for Student Support and Teacher Training

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**Abstract**
School guidance and counseling services in Uganda are limited, but are gradually gaining traction despite resource constraints. We conducted qualitative interviews with 22 counselors, school administrators, and government officials involved in secondary school counseling in the Kampala district to assess future needs. Interview data focused on three central domains: existing guidance and counseling efforts, barriers to providing effective services, and the future outlook of the profession. As school counseling gains support, counselors require new resources and training to support effective and sustainable practice. Future efforts must appeal to school and government leaders with a return on investment demonstrated through academic and broader student success.

**Keywords** Consensual qualitative research · Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs · East Africa · Uganda · School counseling · Teacher training

## Introduction

Contemporary scholars have identified the development of school-based counseling on all seven continents (Hohenshil et al. 2013). Despite its disproportionate uptake in Western and industrialized contexts, there has been increased recognition of the importance of the internationalization of school guidance and counseling programs globally (Goodrich et al. 2014; Stanard 2013). As a result, researchers and practitioners alike have answered the call by

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examining the social, political, and economic factors facilitating and impeding the development of the profession (Goodrich et al. 2014; Lorelle and Guth 2013). Common challenges to this work have included a lack of consensus about what defines counseling services and its goals (Luke 2018), as well as how competent counseling service provision and treatment success are measured (Hinkle 2014). Although it has been estimated that the extant literature includes representation from only one-third to one-half of the almost 200 countries worldwide, in many global contexts the literature focused on school counseling has grown faster than its clinical and community counterparts (Luke 2018). The increase in school counseling literature appears linked to greater recognition of the importance of counseling within national governments, particularly in East Africa (Kiweewa et al. 2018).

One example of educational infrastructure that has promoted the development of counseling in East Africa is educational policy. While East African policies have long recognized guidance and counseling services as valuable components of education, implementation has been slow due to insufficient support for the establishment of dedicated counselors, lack of opportunities for training teachers and existing counselors, a lack of understanding of the dangers and challenges students face every day, and insufficient teacher training related to guidance and counseling throughout much of East Africa (Goodrich et al. 2014; Kiweewa et al. 2018; Okech and Kimemia 2012). Furthermore, Western and Eurocentric counseling theories (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral, Humanistic) dominate the literature (Alvarez and Lee 2012; Fezler and Brown 2011; Moodley et al. 2015), leading to concerns about whether interventions are appropriately informed by, or effectively adapted to, new cultural settings (Goodrich et al. 2014; Kiweewa et al. 2018). Scholars have come to agreement that without systematic sensitivity and cultural competence, previously developed counseling theories and practices will remain questionable in such contexts (Luke et al. 2015; Moodley et al. 2015).

## Lack of Progress in Implementation

In an early formative study with 20 school counselors in Malawi, the profession was described as being "in its infancy," where counselors were simply teachers assigned to the role with no formal training (Maluwa-Banda 1998). A study highlighted the lack of school-based services in 12 nations in sub-Saharan Africa, including Uganda (Mpofu et al. 1997). Surveys with educators in those nations showed that, although school counseling was a recognized profession and government policies for the profession did exist, professional standards were unclear and unregulated. Participants unanimously agreed that there was a need for guidance and counseling services in the region; however, counselors were few in number and the public awareness of the profession was low (Mpofu et al. 1997). Despite these concerns, the authors expressed optimism that programs would become more widespread in the region. However, they also encouraged patience due to the expected "lag between intention and practical reality" (Mpofu et al. 1997, p. 394), including the lack of resources dedicated to education more broadly, which would certainly create challenges in adding new services within school systems that were already overburdened.

Unfortunately, 20 years later, the situation remains largely unchanged (Goodrich et al. 2014; Kiweewa et al. 2018; Nyamwaka et al. 2013; Songok et al. 2013). Outside of a small number of university training programs, which are typically centered in major cities, training for guidance and counseling is most often provided by short-term external projects (Kutcher et al. 2016; Ssewamala et al. 2009). Dedicated school counselors are rare, except in schools that

primarily serve high-income families (Spaull 2013), while schools with fewer financial resources remain underserved (Goodrich et al. 2014).

In Uganda, the Ministry of Education established a dedicated Department of Guidance and Counselling in 2008 and an accrediting body for the profession in 2010. The Department has worked to develop and disseminate booklets on Guidance and Counseling (Republic of Uganda, 2017), Career Guidance (2011), and Sexuality Education (2018), but there are still major shortfalls in counselor training and preparation (Senyonyi et al. 2012). In school settings, the role of counselor typically falls to teachers with little formal training in counseling who are assigned to the role by school leadership (Kamau et al. 2014).

## Promising Results in Small-Scale Programs

Despite the broader lack of progress in formalizing the school counseling profession in East Africa, small programs have been successfully implemented in several settings in the region. In Uganda, Ssewamala and colleagues (Ssewamala et al. 2009) conducted a randomized trial of a school-based counseling intervention for 267 adolescents, which focused on life planning and economic empowerment. At a ten-month follow-up, intervention participants reported significantly better physical, mental, and financial well-being (Ssewamala et al. 2009). While these results point to the promise of guidance and counseling models, programs require broader, national and governmental support to impact more students in the region.

In qualitative interviews with 13 teacher-counselors in Kenya, Goodrich and colleagues (Goodrich et al. 2014) noted that participants appreciated that their work was embedded within the broader school curriculum in a systemic way. Specifically, their primary roles as teachers allowed them to incorporate the counseling aspects of their role more seamlessly and effectively into classroom activities. In the absence of formal training, standards, or professional development opportunities, the participants also emphasized the importance of peer mentorship and collaboration. Despite participants attempts at developing and improving professional competency, they were often underprepared when students presented with complex concerns (Goodrich et al. 2014).

Additionally, Kutcher and colleagues (Kutcher et al. 2016) conducted a brief intervention aimed at improving mental health literacy among Tanzanian teachers, demonstrating that the program contributed to positive growth in teachers' mental health knowledge and reductions in stigmatizing beliefs. At the conclusion of the study, the majority of teachers reported high self-efficacy in recognizing mental health problems, providing basic support, and connecting students with appropriate referrals.

## Need for New Counseling Research in the Region

Research on school-based guidance and counseling has also been slow to develop and has been poorly disseminated in East Africa (Kiweewa et al. 2018; Senyonyi et al. 2012). The majority of mental health research in the region is conducted in hospitals and clinics, while studies in schools are rare and most published manuscripts are derived from small programs conducted outside of Uganda (Kamau et al. 2014; Kutcher et al. 2016; Nyamwaka et al. 2013). Although some research has focused on the professionalization and training of school counselors in East Africa (Wambu and Wickman 2016), it has been difficult to measure any progress in the

development of school counseling on a larger scale. The limited research base also means that schools wishing to implement guidance and counseling programs often lack appropriate guidelines or frameworks to inform them (Goodrich et al. 2014; Senyonyi et al. 2012).

## Purpose of the Current Study

Teacher-counselors are eager to advance their knowledge of guidance and counseling topics, and can improve their competency with minimal investment of resources (Goodrich et al. 2014; Kutcher et al. 2016). However, additional formative research is needed to ensure that new training efforts are appropriately informed by the needs and priorities of governments, school leaders, and the counselors themselves. Further, it is vital that interventions are specifically tailored to meet those needs, as well as the cultural settings where they will be delivered.

In an effort to inform future training programs, we conducted in-depth interviews with secondary school educators in the Kampala region of Uganda to (1) explore the current state of guidance and counseling services in Ugandan secondary schools, (2) assess needs to improve training and practice in the future, and (3) examine the future outlook for the school guidance and counseling profession in Uganda.

## Methods

This study consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with participants involved in secondary school guidance and counseling efforts in the greater Kampala metropolitan area of Uganda. Participants ($N = 22$) were recruited through announcements at local training workshops for school counselors and via personal contacts of the researchers. They included 11 professionals currently working full-time as a school counselor, 3 working as teacher-counselors, 5 secondary school head teachers (the Ugandan equivalent of a school principal), and 3 government officials from the Department of Guidance and Counseling housed within the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports. Participants were eligible if they were 18 years of age, currently working in a school or government setting, or were working as a counselor or administrator of a counseling program. Counselor and head teacher participants were purposively recruited to represent schools that were diverse in their size, location within the region, type (public, private), and level of resources.

Interviews were conducted in English by one of the researchers in a private office, either at the participant's place of work or a neutral site (e.g., a training workshop). All interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30–40 min. Participants provided signed informed consent prior to completing the interview and received compensation of 40,000 Ugandan schillings (equivalent to approximately $10 U.S.) or a similarly valued gift of thanks. The study received ethical approval from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology and the institutional review boards of Makerere University School of Social Sciences and Duke University.

### Participants

The participants ranged in age from 26 to 55 years old, with an average age of 41. A majority ($n = 15$, 68.2%) were women, although 4 of the 5 head teachers were men. More than two-thirds of participants (n = 15, 68.2%) held a Master's degree in Education, Counseling, or Counseling Psychology, and five others (22.7%) held a post-baccalaureate certificate in

counseling or were currently enrolled in a Master's program. The remaining two held a Bachelor's degree in education. Among the 14 counselors, 11 were in this role full-time while 3 also filled the role of teacher. On average, they had 7 years of experience as counselors.

Nearly all of the counselors' schools enrolled both boys and girls ($n = 17$, 89.5%), although two were girls-only. A majority ($n = 13$, 68.4%) were purely secondary schools, while the remainder ($n = 6$, 31.6%) served both primary and secondary students. Schools served a range of 400 to 4100 students, with a mean of 1300 students. All schools either had options for students to board at the school or to stay with nearby host families, and four were dedicated boarding schools. Twelve were private, five were public/government-supported, and two were administered by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The reason for lower representation among government schools was that few of these schools had counseling or guidance programs. Twelve of the nineteen schools were affiliated with a Christian denomination.

## Researcher Positionality

The seven-person research team was intentionally developed to reflect multiple identities, experiences, and positionalities in an effort to serve as checks and balances for potential biases. The team included four men and three women, of whom three identified as Caucasian, three as East African, and one as West African-American. At the time of the study, four of the researchers worked as counselor educators (two in the United States and two in Uganda), one was completing a post-doctoral fellowship, and two were graduate students (one in counseling and one in cultural studies). Four members of the research team had conducted previous research in East Africa and three had taught and counseled in Uganda. Although each member of the research team shared an interest in counseling in international global contexts, researchers held differing levels of familiarity with the literature on international school counseling, the Ugandan school counseling context, intervention frameworks for counselor training, and familiarity with CQR research methodology. The intentional maintenance of insider-outsider perspective across the research team, including one researcher serving as an auditor, offered increased objectivity, as well as increased opportunities for continued dialogue about expectations, observations, and reactions that influenced how we approached the study.

According to recommended CQR practice (Hill et al. 2005), at the start of the study, the team conducted Skype meetings wherein each explored their positionality, anticipated challenges, mechanisms to bracket potential bias, as well as process questions and reactions as they arose (Hill 2012). Throughout the project, the team continued such discussions, sometimes as a group, and other times in dyads or triads, dependent on the focus of work. Discussions included how to manage differing perspectives and discord, power dynamics based on professional roles and identities, procedural mechanisms to guard against groupthink and bias, as well as ways to promote the ability for research team members to challenge each other's assumptions, particularly related to the data.

## Instruments

### Interview Guide

Consistent with Hill (2012), researchers collaboratively constructed a semi-structured interview guide. The overarching area of research inquiry that guided the process of developing individual questions was "What is happening in Uganda related to school-based guidance and

counseling that may inform student support and teacher training?" Open-ended questions were constructed with the intent that the guide was flexible, but that each of the general areas would be queried and probed for detail. Sample questions included "What do you see as the main challenges that guidance counselors currently face in schools?" and "What types of training would be helpful for school counselors in Uganda?", while a typical probe included "Tell me more about that?" or "Please provide an example to illustrate what you just described."

### Qualitative Analysis

Analysis of the interview data was completed according to CQR protocol (Hill 2012; Hill et al. 2005), which emphasizes rigor and reproducibility in qualitative research. First, research team members independently reviewed the raw data to identify preliminary reactions and potential ways to organize the information. To do so, the first author began within-case analysis from the audio recordings and research field notes using a thematic analysis approach (Guest et al. 2011). Next, the preliminary observations and coding structure were brought back to the research team for review. In two cases where there were audio-recording errors, only detailed interview field notes were used for analysis. Researchers reviewed the audio files and field notes, shared their individual perspectives, challenged each other's biases, and developed the preliminary codebook (Hays and Singh 2012; Neal et al. 2015). At this point, three members of the research team coded the audio file of one interview using NVivo 12 software (QSR International 2018) and met with a fourth member of the team who, as auditor (Hill et al. 2005), remained intentionally naive to the data prior to reviewing the coding. The team then discussed codings to pursue consensus. The initial domain list continued to be revised, and the codebook developed, repeating the process with new data until all were accounted for.

A subset of seven interviews were selected to check for intercoder agreement according to established guidelines and a pre-established threshold of 80% (Campbell et al. 2013). Agreement on these interviews ranged from 87.7% to 96.6% with a combined total agreement of 94.0%. The final step in analysis involved *cross-analysis* (Hill 2012) by the research team, examining resultant domains and the data excerpts within, discussing varied perspectives, and returning to the data as needed for clarification.

## Results

Results of the qualitative analysis are detailed in the text that follows and in Table 1 (see below), with the headings representing broader domains and the categories of responses presented from most to least frequently occurring (i.e., number of interviews where a theme was present). Responses are separated by professional group for themes where differences across groups were observed.

### Participants' Past Training

When asked about training they had received in guidance and counseling, a majority of counselors and all of the government officials referred to their original degree program as the primary/sole source of training on the topic. None of the head teachers had received formal training in guidance and counseling. Many participants, including those who had formally studied counseling, described gaps in their training. For example, several counselors indicated

**Table 1** Summary of key domains and categories from the qualitative interviews

| Domains and categories | Frequency ($N = 22$) |
|---|---|
| Description of the Participants | |
| *Training Received* | |
| Degree or post-Bachelor's certificate in counseling | 15 (Typical) |
| Seminars or workshops | 10 (Variant) |
| Self-study, Internet resources, books | 6 (Variant) |
| *Perceived Gaps in Training* | |
| Over-emphasis on theory, lack of practical skills | 11 (Typical) |
| Lack of training in career and vocational counseling | 9 (Variant) |
| Lack of training specific to working with children/adolescents | 6 (Variant) |
| Current State of the Counseling Profession | |
| *Student challenges, reasons students seek counseling* | |
| Family challenges/conflict | 16 (Typical) |
| Peer and romantic relationship challenges | 13 (Typical) |
| Academic performance | 9 (Variant) |
| Questions related to adolescent development and sexuality | 7 (Variant) |
| Drug and alcohol use | 4 (Variant) |
| *Students' hesitancy to use counseling services* | |
| Lack of knowledge, understanding of counseling | 9 (Variant) |
| Concerns about confidentiality, lack of trust | 8 (Variant) |
| Stigma of seeking counseling among students/peers | 8 (Variant) |
| Challenges Faced, Barriers to Growth of the Profession | |
| *General barriers* | |
| Role confusion, lack of clear professional role, boundaries | 8 (Variant) |
| Prioritization of academic performance over emotional health | 6 (Variant) |
| *Resources, support needed* | |
| Lack of dedicated time to fulfill counseling duties | 11 (Typical) |
| No dedicated office for counseling | 3 (Rare) |
| *Training resources needed* | |
| Lack of training opportunities, workshops | 16 (Typical) |
| Lack of training materials, resources, booklets | 8 (Variant) |
| Future Outlook of the Profession | |
| *Anticipated changes in next 5 years* | |
| Increased acceptance/advocacy for counseling profession | 9 (Variant) |
| Improved understanding of role of counselors among students | 5 (Variant) |
| Increased demand/need for counseling services | 2 (Rare) |

Frequency refers to the number of interviews where the theme was present. Only the most frequently occurring categories are listed. General = all or all but one participants; Typical = half or more participants; Variant = more than three, but fewer than half; Rare = two to three participants

that their training focused primarily on adults, was not tailored to the skills needed in school settings, and did not include practical skills or supervision that would have been helpful for teaching them to navigate the complex interactions that often arise in their work. One participant felt that training programs needed to be more engaging and interactive, stating that counseling trainees learn the theoretical and didactic aspects of the work, but "genuinely don't know counseling" in practice and lack the skills to adapt to challenging interactions with students.

With regard to ongoing professional development, participants noted that there were occasional seminars and workshops offered by the Uganda Counseling Association, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, universities, NGOs, or private counselors. However, participants noted that trainings were expensive, and given that their schools were unwilling to assist with funding, they were required to pay out of pocket or were unable to attend. About half of all counselors interviewed indicated that they relied entirely on self-study

for their professional development, including Internet sources and books. Government officials acknowledged this lack of training opportunities and indicated that key goals of their department were to develop new training programs and increase the reach of existing training resources.

## Current State of the Guidance and Counseling Profession in Uganda

### Decision-Making Related to Counseling Personnel

When asked about the process of determining the number and type of counselors employed in schools, participants nearly universally stated that decision-making lies in the hands of the head teacher or school leadership. Although there is government guidance that there should be a counselor in every Ugandan school, this intention is not monitored or enforced. Additionally, schools typically consider this requirement to be met by assigning a teacher, school nurse, or other staff person the supplementary title of "counselor," even if that person has not received training for the role and does not receive any dedicated time, funding, or resources for the role. Many participants pointed to this lack of role clarity as being one of the many factors hindering service usage. One counselor said, "There is a lack of clarity regarding the role, and how it is seen within the school system. School services are then not prioritized by staff and faculty because there is confusion surrounding the purpose." In some cases, the teacher-counselor is also responsible for student discipline, which can lead to role confusion or conflict, as well as hesitation among students to go to this person, for fear of being reprimanded or labeled as a "problematic child." This lack of trust from students stemming from fear of punishment can be hard for counselors to overcome. A teacher-counselor from a Christian private school said, "Some students are hesitant to talk to me because they think I will tell administration. They trust me but do not trust the new people who might come to know about their problems."

Generally, the head teachers interviewed said they believed in the importance of counseling. Those who had hired dedicated counselors or supported teacher-counselors in their roles expressed that students had benefited greatly from the service. School leaders who did not employ a dedicated school counselor expressed disappointment at this situation, often citing a lack of financial resources and lack of support from school leadership or the government to add such a service. These school leader participants noted that private schools were most likely to have a dedicated school counselor, or to hire an external contract counselor in a part-time role, as these schools had more financial resources to support such services. Several school leaders indicated that inquiries from parents about the availability of counseling services, including parents interested in enrolling their children in the school, had influenced school leadership to add counseling services. For schools without dedicated counselors, both school leaders and teacher-counselors indicated that they would be eager to incorporate dedicated counseling services if additional funding became available. However, counselor participants expressed concern over the perceived lack of priority given to counseling services for school resources and within the national government.

### Student Challenges and Reasons for Seeking Services

When asked to describe the most common challenges facing students, and their primary reasons for seeking services, counselors most often listed family challenges, difficulties in peer or romantic relationships, and issues with academic performance. Family challenges

included conflict or violence within the family, frustration about lack of family involvement, divorce/separation of parents, sexual abuse, and high pressure to succeed. One participant recalled a particular session where a student came forward to report that she had been raped by her sibling and was too afraid to report the incident. She stated, "she could not come out and tell a counselor; she had to keep it to herself."

Counselors reported that students also frequently cite poverty and finances as a key source of stress, including challenges in paying their school fees. Difficulties in peer relationships, including romantic relationships, were another common reason for students seeking counseling. Finally, students commonly approached counselors to discuss academic challenges, including low marks in class and conflicts with teachers or parents about their school performance. One counselor working at a school for vulnerable children such as orphans and children of sex workers, expressed his belief that "if they were going to get training sessions as counselors, at least one of them should focus on career development."

### Student Comfort with Services

When asked about student comfort with counseling, nearly all of the counselors described students as hesitant to seek out counseling services. The primary reasons they cited for this discomfort were a perceived lack of confidentiality among counselors, teachers, and other school personnel, a lack of knowledge or familiarity with counseling, and perceived stigma among their peers for seeking counseling. Regarding confidentiality, participants described the culture of communication within Ugandan schools as being very open, where student challenges and successes are shared freely among staff and between staff and students. As a result, the concept of confidentiality is difficult for many to grasp, despite the efforts of some counselors to create a new culture where confidentiality is understood and respected.

This concept of confidentiality was closely related to a perception that students avoided seeking the counselor due to unfamiliarity with what counseling entails and how it may help them. Several counselors described efforts at outreach to educate other teachers about their role, giving talks and student assemblies, and engaging in student education in the classrooms to dispel these misconceptions, with mixed results. Finally, many counselors identified that there is substantial stigma among students related to counseling, which prevents many students from seeking services. For example, they fear judgment from their peers that they must be "troubled", come from a bad family, or have a serious mental health issue if they seek counseling. As one counselor shared, "Students think that it's only those people with complicated issues who really need counseling." Students also fear that there will be a perception among their teachers that because they are receiving counseling, they are a "bad" or troublesome student.

### Barriers to Growth of the Profession

When discussing obstacles to the growth of the profession of school counseling and guidance in Uganda, participants' responses described a lack of resources, lack of trained counselors, lack of dedicated physical space to complete their work, and limited training for school-based counseling skills. Many of these challenges stemmed from a lack of financial support from school leadership. As one counselor noted, "They would rather spend money on other things. They don't consider (counseling) as a priority. Their focus many times is how to make sure our school is one of the top schools that's performing academically. They're concerned about

grades and whether students have pushed themselves to the highest level of learning." Head teachers often described this same perceived conflict between focusing on academics versus focusing on the emotional well-being of students. As a result, counselors perceived their work as being a lower priority for school and government leaders, which they attributed to the lack of financial support and resources for counselors to carry out their work effectively.

### Resources Needed

Counselors discussed a wide variety of resources that they felt were needed in order to meet the needs of the growing profession. These included financial resources, which would allow for the purchase of materials such as books for self-study, educational materials to provide to students, and supplies for their daily work. Additionally, financial support could be used to transition part-time teacher-counselors into a full-time counseling role or to hire new counselors. Some of these additional needs included a dedicated physical space for counseling, which would legitimize their role and be a private space for students to seek services. When asked about services that counselors needed, one government official stated, "They need good offices. You know, counseling is very confidential, so they need a private place for that." Counselors also identified a need for increased access to technology, supplies for students (e.g., educational materials), and training materials or booklets for self-study.

In addition to new funding and resources, some participants highlighted the need for mentorship, supervision, and case consultation with colleagues doing similar work. When asked about resources needed, one teacher-counselor replied that she needed "support systems and supervision, including ongoing supervision, especially for those [of us] who are employed straight out of school."

### Training Needed

The majority of participants expressed that additional training and workshop opportunities were necessary for continued growth of the profession. However, the suggested content areas for training varied. Many participants agreed that there was an overarching need for more applied training and practical skills, with most centered around specific competency areas that would help individuals prepare to meet the needs of the students they interacted with. These topics included management of crisis and trauma (e.g., suicidality, sexual abuse), the impact of family and social issues on academic performance, career counseling, adolescent development, and substance abuse. One participant shared the need for training on "dealing with adolescents or teenagers and handling addiction. There are so many forms of addiction coming up and we (counselors) are not prepared to help." Another participant, a teacher-counselor, explained that counselors need training related to various types of crises to best meet student needs. "We need trainings in such things like crisis - we are having children who are from war ravaged areas, from traumatized families, there's a lot of domestic violence, there's a lot of separation and divorce, so we need to have knowledge to know how to handle these kinds of trauma from the different areas and the different sources."

Several participants noted the need for training specific to working with children and child development, including issues around adolescence and puberty, as well as reproductive health and relationships. There was a prevailing theme of effectively supporting students who are experiencing life challenges in order to improve their academic performance, which was stated as both a goal of the counselors and a way to build support among school leadership. For example, one

head teacher noted that it would be helpful to have training on "how to help kids overcome their social problems in order to pursue academic excellence." Additionally, some participants noted the need for teacher training as well, to provide them with a better understanding of how academics can be negatively affected by these life events. Other areas that arose included the need for training on how to advocate for the profession and the importance of having counselor-led trainings, especially within primary and secondary school settings.

## Future Outlook

When asked to describe the future outlook of the profession, including anticipated changes in the coming five years, participants frequently cited a perceived increase in the need for counseling services, driven by the difficult circumstances of students' lives and the social challenges they face. Despite these increased challenges, participants were universally hopeful about the growth of the profession, often citing the positive progress they had already observed over the course of their careers. This included the expectation of (a) increased understanding and support among students' families about the role of counseling and its benefits, (b) increased support from school leadership, and (c) increased government support for the profession. With this growth, several participants cited the need for advocacy to increase public acceptance of counseling and the visibility and viability of counseling as a desirable career in Uganda.

### Support from Student Families

Reports of family support for counseling were mixed, with some counselors identifying a lack of family support for counseling as a barrier to students seeking out services, while other counselors indicated that parents were the ones to refer their children and were advocates to school leadership about the importance of counseling. However, nearly all participants agreed that the general public was becoming more aware of counseling services and that this would likely lead to improved acceptance of, and support for, the profession in the future.

### Support from School Leaders and Colleagues

Counselors' responses related to their expectations of future support from school leadership generally mirrored the responses of head teachers. They believed that the profession would continue to grow through increased financial support and the hiring of new counseling personnel. However, to achieve these aims, the profession would require current counselors to become advocates for the profession, whether within their current institutions, in the local community, or with the national government. As one counselor shared, there is a strong need "to encourage the government to start the work of supporting counseling immediately, and not some time off in the future." Counselors expressed optimism that the growth of the counseling profession in the coming years would lead to greater training opportunities and peer networks where they could share their experiences and learn from other professionals.

### Support from Government

School leaders and counselors were often aware of the Ministry policy that each school should have a counselor. Additionally, many had been provided copies of the Ministry's policy

booklets on Guidance and Counseling, Career Guidance, and Sexuality Education. In general, participants were in agreement on the challenges that students face, the value of guidance and counseling in addressing student needs, and the need for a scaling up of counseling services. However, there was a strong perception among school leaders and counselors that the government was not doing enough to improve counseling services.

In discussing their efforts, Ministry officials acknowledged the great needs in Ugandan schools, and agreed that they felt under-resourced and over-extended in their efforts to support schools in implementing guidance and counseling policy. In addition to preparing and disseminating the National Guidelines, Sexuality Education Framework, and Career Guidance Handbook, they reported that they engage in advocacy for additional resources from the larger government and the improvement of university teacher training related to counseling. They choose a small number of schools each year for closer follow-up and conduct personal visits to encourage scaling up of services. They also attend larger events organized by school organizations and PTAs. However, with a small staff to serve thousands of schools, government officials acknowledged that they were only able to directly interface with a small number of schools each year and that these were often larger schools in urban centers.

To address these challenges, school leaders suggested that the Ministry, or other NGOs or professional organizations, should employ "creative and innovative" strategies for reaching a larger number of schools and counselors in the country. This may include use of social media to create a network of school counselors, an updated website with a discussion board for correspondence with other professionals, and online training videos or other materials for professional development. When presented with these ideas, Ministry officials agreed that this emphasis on online outreach would be a helpful direction for the future.

## Discussion

This study utilized qualitative interviews with 22 counselors, head teachers, and government officials to explore the current state of guidance and counseling services in Ugandan secondary schools, assess needs to improve training and practice in the future, and examine the future outlook for the profession in Uganda. Participants' perceptions supported past literature pointing to the absence of specialized training in school counseling (Kiweewa et al. 2018; Nyamwaka et al. 2013; Senyonyi et al. 2012). Participants described a work environment where (1) counselors play multiple, sometimes incongruent roles, which adversely impacts students' comfort with services, (2) appointment decisions are made by head teachers with little regard to past counseling training or experience, and (3) work is done with few dedicated resources and little or no dedicated time to provide counseling services. Despite these challenges, participants felt that school counseling was gradually becoming more accepted in Uganda and would continue to gain support in the future.

All participants in this study, particularly the head teachers, underscored the need for counseling and guidance services in schools due to the difficult contexts of many students' lives, marked by peer and family conflict, developmental challenges, academic pressure, and broader social issues (e.g., poverty). In addition, participants in this study identified lack of support, enforcement, or follow-up by the government related to policy directives (e.g., having a dedicated counselor in every school) as a major barrier to growth of the profession. The Ugandan Ministry of Education has made an effort to develop and disseminate policy materials related to guidance and counseling, but offers few resources to implement these policies. Indeed, Ministry

officials in the Department of Guidance and Counselling reported being under-resourced and, consequently, spending much of their time and effort lobbying for additional resources.

Similar to formative research conducted in other East African settings, there is a clear need for formal training and professional support for counselors through workshops, access to training materials, peer support, and clinical supervision (Goodrich et al. 2014). For participants in this study, such training workshops would be particularly beneficial if centered on competencies in crisis and trauma, career guidance, and family-related challenges. The identification of "family challenges" as a primary reason that many students seek counseling services underscores the bidirectional interaction between home and school microsystems described elsewhere (Kiweewa et al. 2018; O'Malley et al. 2015). There is ample evidence, for instance, of the impact of family conflict on children and youths, including physical health, emotional well-being, and academic outcomes (Harold et al. 2007; O'Malley et al. 2015). While it is encouraging that the school counseling profession is gaining acceptance in Uganda, counselors may not be equipped with the skills needed to address complex family challenges and issues related to adolescent development.

The lack of requisite skills among those providing counseling and guidance in schools is compounded by role conflict, which reportedly interferes with students' counseling-seeking behaviors due to uncertainty about confidentiality, a general lack of familiarity with counseling, and stigma among peers. The finding about students' confidentiality is particularly important due to previous suggestions that such concerns are rooted within Western-derived approaches to counseling and, as such, may be difficult to apply in African contexts (Goss and Adebowale 2014). Future studies may seek to gain the perspectives of Ugandan educators on how to balance the benefits of confidentiality for student access to treatment with cultural norms, or could examine the outcomes of separating the roles of teacher and counselor. Dedicated counselors trained in the ethics of the profession may be less prone to role conflict and more confident in managing ethical dilemmas.

Several authors have also examined challenges associated with lack of familiarity with counseling and provided frameworks to overcome them in new settings (e.g., Bird et al. 2011; Ssebunnya et al. 2009; Senyonyi et al. 2012). It might be fruitful for both advocacy and outreach efforts for the Ministry of Education or individual schools to publish clear role descriptions of school counselors and career guidance teachers in Uganda, which could be made available to both student and school personnel.

Ssebunnya and colleagues (Ssebunnya et al. 2009) found stigma against mental health (and counseling) to be a deeply entrenched phenomenon in many low- and middle-income settings, cutting across social and economic classes. Nevertheless, more research is needed to explore from students themselves how their perceptions of confidentiality and stigma impact their counseling-seeking behaviors. Such research is critical to informing counseling and guidance program designs and delivery.

The results of the current study should be interpreted in light of some key limitations. For example, we utilized convenience sampling in the broader urban region of Kampala, relying on the availability and willingness of identified stakeholders to participate in the study. This form of sampling inevitably limits the generalizability of study results and we did not collect the views of stakeholders from other regions of the country, including more rural areas. Additionally, several members of the research team self-identified as being outsiders to the Ugandan cultural context. While we attempted to implement robust methods to recognize bias and limit cultural misunderstanding, such outsider status may have influenced cross-cultural communication and other dynamics across all levels of data collection and analysis.

Perhaps more importantly, student voices and experiences in this study are only presented through secondary sources. While the voices of the counselors, head teachers, and government officials who participated in this study are important to understanding school-based counseling and guidance in Uganda, students are indispensable stakeholders and, as such, future research should examine the perspectives of students to corroborate and evaluate these findings. Similarly, Ugandan counselor educators were not included in the current sample and will be important to include in future studies to provide perspectives on training gaps. These may include formal courses in school counseling to be included in counselor education programs, the addition of experiential and skills-based components to existing courses, and in-service or workshop offerings for counselors outside of formal training programs.

Future research should also seek to understand the impact of guidance and counseling on student outcomes in Uganda. Given the fledgling status of the counseling profession in this country, there is ample opportunity to examine the longitudinal impact of adding new resources or programs to schools. Outcomes of such research should include measures of physical well-being, emotional health, and academic/vocational performance, all of which have been shown to benefit from counseling in other settings (Carey and Dimmitt 2012; Lapan et al. 2012; Wilkerson et al. 2013). Results are available from high-income settings, but will be more effective at changing school leaders' perspectives if replicated in local lower-income settings. Based on the results of the current study, academic performance and student conduct may be especially important markers to build support for school counseling among Ugandan school leaders and government officials.

## Conclusion

Findings from the current study highlighted emerging priorities for guidance and counseling programs in Ugandan schools, as well as the implications of these priorities on teacher and counselor education. Study participants agreed that current support for counseling is sorely lacking, but that there is growing acceptance of the profession and, therefore, a strong need for new resources, including the advancement of teacher training and advocacy in guidance and counseling. The study underscores that future programs must promote counseling models that will appeal to school leaders and governments with a return on investment through academic and broader student success.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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