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Guidance and Counseling Practices and Student Discipline in Malawian Secondary Schools: A Comparative Case Study of Selected Community Day Secondary Schools in Kasungu District

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ABSTRACT

Student indiscipline remains a persistent challenge undermining academic achievement, school climate, teacher morale, and learner well-being in many Malawian secondary schools. Despite the introduction of guidance and counseling (G&C) services, disciplinary problems such as absenteeism, bullying, substance abuse, aggression, disrespect toward authority, and examination malpractice continue to escalate. The research gap lies in the lack of proper disciplinary measures by school authorities, compromised monitoring systems by management and lack of management to student disciplinary coordinating activities as well as the lack of proper reinforcement of school policies and outlined regulations. This qualitative comparative case study examined the influence of G&C practices on student discipline in two selected Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Kasungu District, Malawi. Drawing on Self-Efficacy Theory, Bandura (1977), Incentive Theory, Hull (1943); Ningjian (2024), and the Socio-Ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner (1979), the study employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observation to generate data from 30 purposively selected participants, comprising 12 students, 8 teachers, 2 head teachers, 4 PTA representatives, and 4 Mother Group members. Thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns across participant categories. Findings revealed that G&C services remain largely informal, reactive, and inconsistently implemented, with limited stakeholder coordination and minimal professional training for teacher-counselors. Participants reported significant awareness gaps, confidentiality concerns, and a lack of specialist counseling professionals. Nevertheless, schools with stronger counseling systems reported improved learner engagement, reduced disciplinary incidents, and better school climates. The study recommends institutionalizing structured, timetabled G&C programs; building counselor capacity; strengthening stakeholder engagement; and integrating incentive-based, restorative discipline approaches that align with Malawi's rights-based policy framework.

INTRODUCTION

Student discipline is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective education. Schools characterized by disciplined environments demonstrate improved academic performance, positive teacher-student relationships, reduced violence, and enhanced psychosocial well-being among learners, Allen *et al.*, (2023). Conversely, indiscipline disrupts classroom instruction, increases dropout rates, and contributes to emotional distress among both students and teachers, Trach *et al.*, (2018). Despite growing policy recognition of G&C as a behavioral support mechanism, a critical empirical gap persists: there is insufficient context-specific evidence on how G&C services are implemented, experienced, and perceived within rural Malawian CDSSs, and whether they produce measurable improvements in student discipline outcomes at the school level.

This study therefore examines the effectiveness of G&C interventions in promoting behavioral change and ethical decision-making among learners in two CDSSs in Kasungu District. Specifically, it investigates: (1) the nature and frequency of G&C services offered; (2) the perceived impact of these services on student moral development and discipline; and (3) the roles of

school stakeholders (including PTAs, Mother Groups, and Boards of Governors) in supporting behavioral interventions.

Background of the Study

Globally and across Africa, punitive discipline approaches have been increasingly critiqued for exacerbating student disengagement rather than fostering behavioral transformation, Rodriguez & Welsh (2022); Fronius *et al.*, (2019). Guidance and counseling services have emerged as preventive and developmental alternatives designed to address the root causes of misconduct by building emotional regulation, decision-making skills, and self-efficacy, Schunk (1991). Schools that implement structured counseling programs often experience improved student behavior, school belonging, and learner engagement, Allen & Vella-Brodrick, (2018).

While the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) has revised student conduct guidelines to incorporate counseling components (MoEST, 2008), empirical evidence regarding the implementation, accessibility, and impact of G&C measures at the school level in Malawi remains limited. Existing literature indicates that G&C in African secondary schools often

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prioritizes academic and career guidance over moral, social, and behavioral support, while emotional and behavioral counseling remains underdeveloped and inconsistently delivered, Arfasa & Weldmeskel, (2020); Szeremley, (2025).

In Malawi, secondary schools, particularly Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in rural and semi-urban contexts, continue to face significant disciplinary challenges, including absenteeism, bullying, drug and substance abuse, vandalism, academic dishonesty, and disrespect toward authority. Recent incidents of vandalism, arson, and student unrest, including the premature closure of Robert Blake, Nachitheme, St. John Bosco, and Mzuzu Government Secondary Schools in late 2023, Salima (2023), have raised urgent questions about the efficacy of existing behavioral support frameworks.

The education system in Malawi has undergone numerous reforms aimed at improving access, equity, and quality. However, disciplinary challenges continue to threaten the effectiveness of secondary education. Traditionally, discipline relied heavily on punitive approaches such as corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, and public humiliation. Although these methods were intended to deter misconduct, evidence suggests they may worsen aggression, resentment, school dropout, and psychological distress among students, Trach *et al.*, (2018). Guidance and counseling programs emerged as policy alternatives designed to support learners emotionally, socially, academically, and behaviorally. In Malawi, CDSSs play a critical role in expanding secondary education access but are frequently under-resourced and inadequately staffed. Despite policy recognition of counseling services, many schools struggle to operationalize effective G&C programs due to inadequate staffing, limited training, poor infrastructure, insufficient funding, and the absence of monitoring systems. As a result, the full potential of counseling in promoting discipline has not been realized, Szeremley, (2025); Arfasa & Weldmeskel, (2020). Banda *et al.* (2025, advance online publication) similarly found that psychosocial, economic, and social challenges significantly constrain learner participation and educational success in Malawian secondary schools, underscoring the urgency of comprehensive learner support systems, including G&C services.

Problem Statement

Student indiscipline remains a persistent challenge in Malawian secondary schools despite the existence of guidance and counseling structures. Incidents involving bullying, violence, absenteeism, substance abuse, early marriages, teenage pregnancies, and disrespect toward school authority continue to affect educational outcomes and school environments. Many schools rely predominantly on punitive disciplinary measures that fail to address the underlying psychosocial causes of student misconduct, Slocum *et al.*, (2017).

Furthermore, G&C services in many schools are inadequately resourced, poorly coordinated, and

implemented by untrained personnel. Students demonstrate limited awareness of G&C services, and many express reluctances to seek help due to confidentiality concerns and trust deficits. Empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of counseling practices in strengthening student discipline within the Malawian context, particularly in rural CDSSs, remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the influence of G&C practices on student discipline in selected CDSSs in Kasungu District.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine the influence of guidance and counseling practices on student discipline in selected Community Day Secondary Schools in Kasungu District, Malawi.

Specific Objectives

- To identify guidance and counseling practices implemented in selected CDSSs in Kasungu District.
- To assess the level of student discipline and prevalent disciplinary challenges in selected CDSSs.
- To examine the relationship between guidance and counseling practices and student discipline outcomes.
- To identify challenges affecting the effective implementation of guidance and counseling programs.
- To propose evidence-based strategies for strengthening G&C services in Malawian secondary schools.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives that explain the relationship between guidance and counseling interventions and student discipline outcomes.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory posits that individuals' beliefs in their own capabilities fundamentally influence their behavior, persistence, emotional regulation, and motivation. Students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate discipline, self-control, and academic resilience, Schunk, (1991); Gist & Mitchell, (1992). Counseling programs strengthen self-efficacy by assisting learners to build confidence, develop problem-solving skills, and cultivate positive self-perceptions. Through mentoring, emotional support, and behavioral coaching, counselors help students develop healthy coping mechanisms that reduce disruptive behavior and enhance school engagement. The testimonies gathered in this study revealed that students with limited self-efficacy were more susceptible to peer pressure, bullying, and disruptive conduct.

Incentive Theory

Incentive Theory explains behavior as a product of both

internal drives and external environmental rewards ,Hull, (1943); Ningjian, (2024). The theory suggests students are more likely to adopt positive behaviors when schools create systems that recognize and reinforce desirable conduct. In Malawian secondary schools, incentive-based approaches may include recognition awards, leadership opportunities, certificates of good conduct, praise, mentorship roles, and public acknowledgment of positive behavior. Such strategies motivate students toward self-discipline and academic commitment without relying on fear-based enforcement, Cherian & Jacob (2013).

Socio-Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Socio-Ecological Model provides a robust framework for understanding student behavior as shaped by interacting individual, relational, institutional, community, and broader societal factors. This perspective is highly relevant in the Malawian context because learner behavior cannot be separated from social contexts such as poverty, family instability, peer pressure,

and school climate, Patton *et al.*, (2013). The model justifies examining G&C effectiveness not only at the individual student level but also through the lenses of classroom practice, school leadership, family engagement, and community norms, requiring coordinated efforts across these multiple levels, Mpaso & Xuefu, (2025), advance online publication; Swearer & Espelage, (2011). Ghasemi (2025, advance online publication) further demonstrates through a socio-ecological lens that systemic risk factors, including institutional pressures and inadequate support, profoundly constrain practitioners' capacity to deliver effective psychosocial services, a finding directly applicable to the G&C implementation challenges documented in this study. The PTA voices and Mother Group perspectives captured in this study confirm that stakeholder collaboration is a critical ecological layer for promoting positive student conduct. The conceptual model synthesizing these three theoretical perspectives is presented in Figure 1 below.

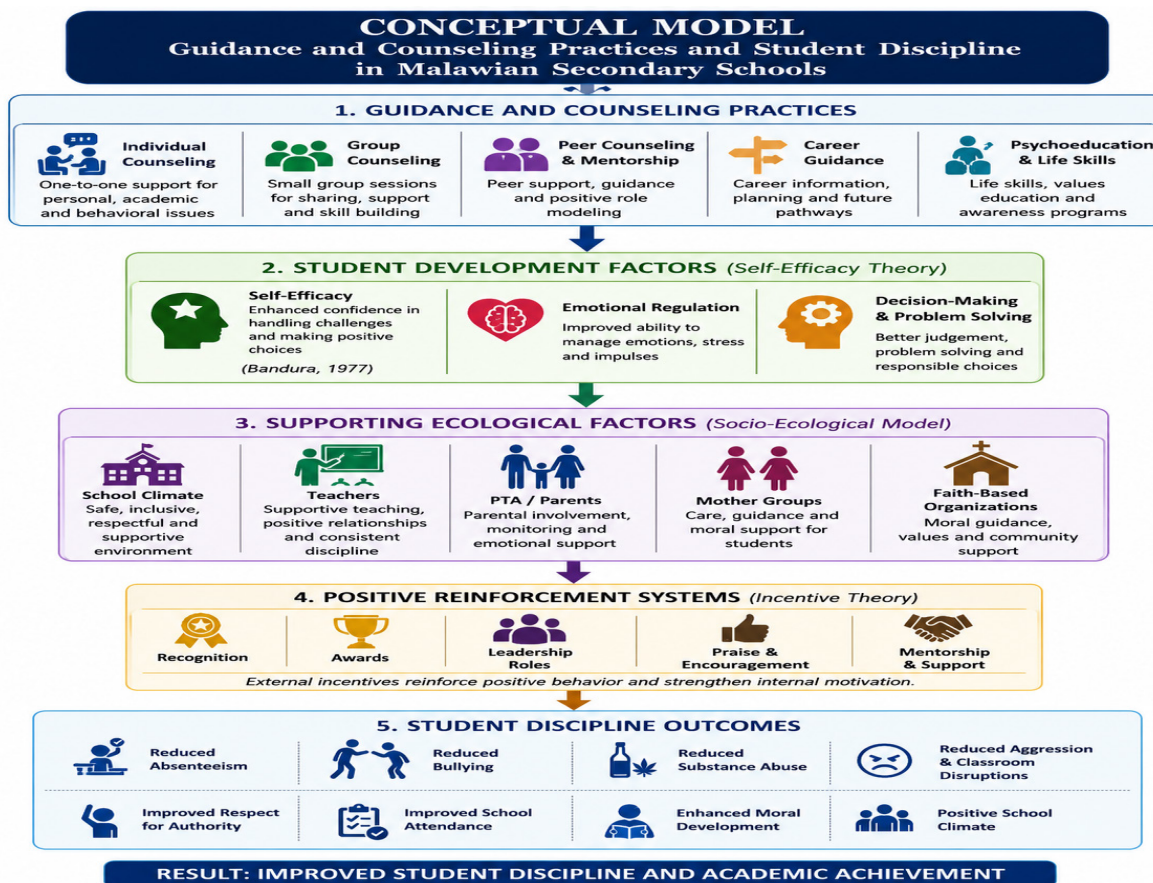


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Influence of Guidance and Counseling Practices on Student Discipline in Malawian Secondary Schools

Note: The model proposes that G&C practices (individual counseling, group counseling, peer counseling, mentorship, and career guidance) contribute to student discipline through the development of self-efficacy, emotional regulation, decision-making skills, and problem-solving abilities. Socio-ecological factors, including school climate, teachers, parents, PTAs, Mother Groups, and faith-based organizations, strengthen intervention effectiveness. Incentive mechanisms such as recognition, praise, and leadership opportunities further reinforce positive conduct. Theoretical foundations: Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977); Incentive Theory, Hull, (1943); Ningjian, (2024); Socio-Ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner (1979).

This conceptual model integrates three theoretical perspectives underpinning the study. First, Self-Efficacy Theory, Bandura (1977), explains how counseling enhances students' confidence and ability to regulate their behavior. Second, Incentive Theory, Ningjian (2024) highlights the role of positive reinforcement in encouraging desirable conduct. Third, the Socio-Ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) demonstrates that student discipline is influenced not only by individual factors but also by interactions among family, school, community, and institutional systems. The model therefore conceptualizes student discipline as an outcome of coordinated counseling interventions, supportive environments, and positive behavioral reinforcement mechanisms

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Counseling: From Reactive Advice to Structured Support

Contemporary scholarship positions school counseling not as occasional moral advice but as a comprehensive, data-driven support system addressing academic, social, emotional, and behavioral domains simultaneously, Carey & Dimmitt (2012); Whiston *et al.*, (2009). Evidence indicates that schools adopting preventive, restorative, and socio-emotional learning frameworks experience significant reductions in disruptive behavior and improved student decision-making, Erford & Crockett (2023). In Malawian CDSSs, where teacher-counselor capacity remains limited and G&C is often delivered informally, this literature supports the argument for institutionalizing structured counseling programs with trained personnel, clear protocols, and regular monitoring, Szeremley (2025); Arfasa & Weldmeskel, (2020). Mpaso *et al.* (2025), advance online publication, similarly found that the absence of professional development and adequate resources critically constrains effective educational program implementation in Malawian secondary schools.

Student Discipline: Beyond Punishment Toward Restoration

Student discipline refers to behaviors that align with school rules, social expectations, and ethical standards, contributing to effective learning environments, safety, and psychosocial well-being, Allen *et al.*, (2023). Research increasingly critiques punitive and exclusionary approaches for exacerbating student disengagement rather than fostering behavioral transformation, Rodriguez & Welsh (2022); Fronius *et al.*, (2019). Studies show that schools with active counseling programs experience lower levels of violence, bullying, substance abuse, and learner misconduct, Slocum *et al.*, (2017). Lim and Hoot (2015) further demonstrate through socio-ecological analysis that bullying in diverse school populations is shaped by multiple intersecting systemic factors, underscoring the limitations of individualistic, punitive responses and the necessity of school-wide, multi-stakeholder behavioral support frameworks. Restorative

practices, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and counseling-integrated discipline frameworks demonstrate greater efficacy in promoting accountability while preserving students' sense of belonging, Bradshaw *et al.*, (2012).

Adolescent Development: Understanding Behavior Through a Developmental Lens

Adolescent psychology reframes "indiscipline" not as moral failure but as a neurodevelopmental stage characterized by heightened peer sensitivity, emotional volatility, and risk-taking, Blakemore (2018); Steinberg, (2014). This perspective supports interventions that build emotional regulation, decision-making skills, and self-efficacy rather than relying solely on external control, Crone & Dahl (2012). In Kasungu CDSSs, where students cited peer pressure and substance abuse as primary drivers of misconduct, this developmental framing strengthens the case for G&C programs that address underlying psychosocial needs alongside behavioral expectations. Students with higher levels of self-efficacy demonstrate better self-control and academic engagement, Bandura (1977); Bosacki *et al.*, (2023). Banda *et al.* (2025, advance online publication) further demonstrate that psychosocial, economic, and intersectional vulnerabilities disproportionately affect girls' educational participation, reinforcing the need for gender-sensitive counseling approaches.

School Climate and Discipline

Positive school climates are associated with improved discipline, learner belonging, academic engagement, and psychological well-being, Allen & Vella-Brodrick (2018); Allen *et al.*, (2016); Bartley, (2024). Socio-ecological studies emphasize that supportive relationships among teachers, students, families, and communities contribute significantly to positive learner behavior. Schools characterized by fairness, respect, inclusion, and emotional safety tend to report lower disciplinary problems, Thapa *et al.*, (2013); Wang & Degol, (2016). When teachers model professional conduct consistently and school leadership visibly champions G&C, students internalize behavioral norms more readily. The PTA testimonies in this study confirm that perceived inadequate care for student welfare directly weakens school climate and undermines learner confidence in school systems.

Stakeholder Involvement in Behavioral Support

Evidence indicates that discipline and counseling initiatives are more sustainable when parents, teachers, school leaders, and community members collaborate to reinforce consistent behavioral messages (Henderson *et al.*, (2016); Mahabbati *et al.*, (2023). In Malawian contexts, PTAs, Mother Groups, and Boards of Governors play formal roles in school governance and could provide structured mechanisms for stakeholder engagement in G&C, such as regular forums, joint planning, and capacity-building workshops, to ensure alignment between home,

school, and community expectations (Henderson *et al.*, (2016); Mahabbati *et al.*, (2023). Valencia-Arias *et al.* (2025), advance online publication) further confirm that psychosocial, academic, and economic factors collectively drive student dropout, reinforcing the critical need for multi-level intervention frameworks that address both school-level and community-level determinants of learner retention.

Confidentiality and Trust in Students' Help-Seeking Behavior

A critical yet underexplored dimension of G&C effectiveness in secondary schools is the role of trust and confidentiality in students' willingness to seek help. Effective counseling relationships depend upon students' confidence that sensitive disclosures will be handled with discretion and professionalism, Erford & Crockett (2023). Where peer counselors or untrained teachers serve as primary counselors, students may be reluctant to disclose personal difficulties. This study found that students' reluctance to seek counseling was significantly shaped by concerns about confidentiality, trust, and the availability of specialist professionals, consistent with findings from similar sub-Saharan African educational contexts, Arfasa & Weldmeskel, (2020); Szeremley, (2025).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to explore participants' lived experiences of

guidance and counseling in two CDSSs in Kasungu District, Creswell & Creswell (2023); Yin, (2018). Comparative case studies enable in-depth analysis of how contextual factors, such as leadership style, resource availability, and community norms, shape the implementation and perceived effectiveness of educational interventions across sites. A phenomenological orientation further strengthened the study by capturing the subjective meanings stakeholders attach to moral guidance, behavioral support, and decision-making processes, Malterud *et al.*, (2016).

Sampling and Participants

A total of 30 participants (15 per school) were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich data relevant to the research questions, Palinkas *et al.*, (2015). Purposive sampling identified teachers with disciplinary roles, PTA and Mother Group representatives, head teachers, and diverse student voices. The number of participants per category was determined by the goal of achieving thematic saturation across all key stakeholder groups. Qualitative research prioritizes thematic saturation over statistical representativeness, Guest *et al.*, (2006). Table 1 presents the distribution of participants across categories. The study involved 30 purposively selected participants drawn from two CDSSs in Kasungu District. Participants comprised 12 students, 8 teachers, 2 head teachers, 4 Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) representatives, and 4 Mother Group members. This distribution was designed to ensure representation of all

Table 1: Participant Distribution (N = 30)

Students	12	40.0
Teachers	8	26.7
Head Teachers	2	6.7
PTA Members	4	13.3
Mother Group Members	4	13.3
Total	30	100

key stakeholders involved in student discipline and G&C processes while achieving thematic saturation.

Data Collection

Data were generated through three complementary instruments: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observation. Semi-structured interviews and FGDs were conducted in Chichewa and Chitumbuka to ensure participant comfort and linguistic accuracy, Kothari & Garg (2021); Fraenkel *et al.*, (2020). Non-participant observation was conducted during school assemblies, classroom interactions, and disciplinary proceedings to triangulate self-reported data with observable behavioral patterns; observational field notes were specifically used to cross-verify claims about teacher modeling of conduct, the visibility of counseling spaces, and the nature of assembly-based interventions

described by Mother Group members. Interview and FGD guides aligned with the study's three objectives. All interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded (with informed consent), transcribed verbatim, and subjected to manual thematic content analysis, Burns & Grove (2003). Codes were developed inductively from the data, then grouped into themes reflecting patterns across participant categories.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was enhanced through four strategies. First, data source triangulation combined interview, FGD, and observational data to cross-verify emerging themes. Second, member checking ensured that preliminary findings were shared with key participants for validation and accuracy. Third, reflexive journaling allowed researchers to monitor positionality and minimize

interpretive bias throughout data collection and analysis. Fourth, prolonged engagement at both sites over multiple weeks strengthened the credibility of observations and the depth of thematic saturation. Researcher positionality is explicitly acknowledged: two of the three researchers are affiliated with Malawian higher education institutions and have prior professional familiarity with secondary school governance structures in Malawi. This insider positioning facilitated participant rapport and linguistic fluency but required active reflexive monitoring to guard against confirmation bias and over-identification with institutional perspectives. The use of member checking and cross-researcher coding discussions further mitigated these risks.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Emmanuel University's Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was secured from all adult participants; for students under 18, parental consent and student assent were obtained via school-administered forms. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonymization of names and schools in all reporting. All interactions respected participants' dignity, cultural norms, and time commitments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Limited Awareness of Guidance and Counseling Services

A striking and consistent finding across both schools was the very limited awareness of formal guidance and counseling among students. Most participants had not encountered G&C in any structured or labeled form. When asked about their knowledge of G&C services, students across both schools responded with candid unfamiliarity:

"I have never heard of a topic called guidance and counseling."

Student 1 (Mathandani CDSS)

"I have just heard of career counseling through a friend."

Student 3 (Milenje CDSS)

These testimonies expose a critical gap: G&C services, where they exist, have not been systematically communicated to students as a named, accessible support system. This absence of G&C literacy undermines uptake and reinforces reliance on informal, peer-based guidance that may be unreliable. This finding aligns with evidence from other African contexts where G&C operates silently in the background rather than as a visible, student-facing service, Arfasa & Weldmeskel, (2020); Szeremley, (2025).

Confidentiality Concerns and Trust Deficits as Barriers to Help-Seeking

Students across both schools expressed strong reluctance to seek guidance or disclose personal difficulties due to concerns about confidentiality and trust. The absence of a professionally trained, neutral counselor was identified as a central barrier:

"I cannot disclose sensitive issues to my friend."

Student 4 (Milenje CDSS)

"I cannot disclose sensitive issues to a person I do not trust."

Student 7 (Milenje CDSS)

"I have always been a victim of bullying."

Student 9 (Milenje CDSS)

These testimonies reveal that existing informal peer-based counseling arrangements fail to provide the psychological safety students require to engage meaningfully with G&C. The data suggest that without a trusted, professionally trained counselor who upholds confidentiality, students will continue to internalize difficulties or seek advice from peers, potentially reinforcing risky behaviors rather than addressing them. Erford and Crockett (2023) confirm that counseling effectiveness depends fundamentally on the therapeutic relationship and client confidence in professional boundaries.

Prevalent Disciplinary Challenges: Head Teacher and Teacher Perspectives

Head teachers at both schools described multifaceted and escalating disciplinary challenges that exceeded the current capacity of informal guidance measures to address:

"We have students who are troublesome. We have tried to talk to them and failed."

Head Teacher 1 (Mathandani CDSS)

"We have female students who have left school and gotten married while young, and for no apparent reason. We have students who have been impregnated. We have students who follow the wrong behaviors of others."

Head Teacher 2 (Milenje CDSS)

Teachers further elaborated on the complex behavioral dynamics present within classrooms:

"It appears some students are enrolled because their parents are overwhelmed by their conduct at home. These students disturb the peace, negatively influence peers, promote defiance, create parallel peer structures, persistently absent themselves from class, and prefer the company of peers in unsupervised spaces."

Teachers 1-5 (Mathandani CDSS)

These testimonies reveal that disciplinary problems in Kasungu CDSSs extend well beyond minor misconduct. They encompass early school dropout, teenage pregnancy, peer-induced delinquency, and systemic classroom disruption. The data confirm that existing punitive measures have failed to address these deep-rooted psychosocial challenges, underscoring the need for structured G&C interventions, Rodriguez & Welsh (2022); Banda *et al.*, (2025), advance online publication.

Informal and Reactive G&C Practices

Teachers across both schools acknowledged the importance of guidance and counseling but reported delivering services informally, typically in response to incidents of misconduct rather than as preventive, scheduled interventions. As one teacher noted:

"G&C services are supposed to be done like the way learning areas

are planned and taught. We would really be helping learners in good morals and proper decision-making since they will be reminded almost daily.”

Teacher 6 (Mathandani CDSS)

This finding aligns with regional literature indicating that African secondary schools often lack structured G&C frameworks, trained personnel, and dedicated time for behavioral support, Arfasa & Weldmeskel (2020); Mpaso & Xuefu, (2025), advance online publication). Common disciplinary challenges identified across both schools included absenteeism, bullying, fighting, substance abuse, classroom disruptions, and disrespect toward authority.

Stakeholder Engagement: Willing but Under-Resourced

Parents, PTA members, and Mother Group representatives expressed strong commitment to supporting student moral development but identified significant structural and knowledge gaps that constrained their effectiveness: *“We feel our children are not being taken care of.”*

PTA Member 1

“We are concerned with student welfare.”

PTA Member 2

“I wish I could know the counselor.”

PTA Member 3

“I wish the school could have caretakers to champion climate leadership in schools and provide checks and balances. Developing a strategy for student welfare can be a game changer.”

PTA Member 4

Mother Group members reported that direct engagement with students during school assemblies produced limited lasting behavioral change:

“We have tried to talk to students during assemblies. They seem to listen, but they end up repeating the same things we have condemned. They are arrogant when we talk to them. There is a need for a specialist to talk to students on topics relevant to present trends.”

Mother Group Representative

These testimonies reveal a stakeholder population that is motivated and aware of student welfare needs but lacks professional knowledge, institutional mechanisms, and consistent access to school counseling structures. The data confirm the Socio-Ecological Model’s proposition that behavioral support requires coordinated multi-level action, Bronfenbrenner (1979); Henderson *et al.*, (2016).

Student Perspectives: Knowledge Gaps, Peer Influence, and Protective Factors

Beyond awareness deficits, students identified peer pressure, substance abuse, and inconsistent adult modeling as the primary drivers of poor decision-making. A recurring concern was whether peers routinely disclosed personal matters to others within the school environment:

“Do people actually disclose their matters to other people here?”

Student (Milenje CDSS)

This rhetorical question reflects normalized silence and low expectation of support within the school environment. Students at Mathandani, however, highlighted faith-based groups (SCOM, YCS) as meaningful protective factors that provided moral and emotional guidance:

“The Word of God helped us to behave well. Any decision about to be made was aligned to what the Word said.”

Student 11 (Mathandani CDSS)

This finding underscores the potential of leveraging existing community assets, particularly faith-based organizations, to strengthen G&C delivery in resource-constrained settings, consistent with socio-ecological models of youth resilience.

The Role of School Climate and Leadership

Participants across all categories emphasized that effective G&C depends on a supportive school climate characterized by trust, fairness, and consistent adult modeling. When teachers were observed engaging in inappropriate conduct or enforcing rules inconsistently, student respect for authority diminished. Conversely, schools with visible leadership commitment to G&C, such as Mathandani’s sustained period without major unrest, demonstrated stronger behavioral norms. This aligns with international literature linking positive school climate to improved student engagement and reduced misconduct, Thapa *et al.*, (2013; Wang & Degol, (2016); Bartley, (2024).

The Role of Counseling Interventions in Discipline Outcomes

The study found that schools with stronger counseling systems reported better disciplinary outcomes. Individual counseling, peer counseling, career guidance, and mentorship programs were the most frequently identified counseling interventions. Participants reported that these interventions contributed to improved self-control, better school attendance, enhanced student-teacher relationships, and reduced disciplinary incidents. The findings support Self-Efficacy Theory: students who developed confidence through counseling were less likely to engage in misconduct or adopt fatalistic attitudes toward their futures, Bandura (1977); Schunk, (1991).

Punitive Discipline Alone Is Ineffective

Both student and teacher participants indicated that excessive reliance on punitive disciplinary approaches, such as suspension and exclusion, may worsen learner misconduct, emotional distress, and school disengagement. Preventive and restorative counseling approaches were found to be more effective in addressing the root causes of indiscipline, consistent with contemporary literature on restorative justice in education, Rodriguez & Welsh, (2022); Fronius *et al.*, (2019).

Discussion

G&C Awareness as a Prerequisite for Effectiveness

The finding that students had never encountered formal G&C reveals a foundational implementation failure. Guidance and counseling cannot fulfill its protective function if intended beneficiaries are unaware of its existence or scope. This reflects a broader pattern across sub-Saharan African secondary schools, where G&C operates as an administrative function rather than a visible, student-facing service, Arfasa & Weldmeskel (2020); Szeremley, (2025). For G&C to influence student discipline, it must be explicitly branded, regularly timetabled, and proactively communicated across the school community, Carey & Dimmitt, (2012).

Trust and Confidentiality as Non-Negotiable Conditions

The student testimonies regarding confidentiality represent a theoretically significant finding. Self-Efficacy Theory posits that emotional support and mentoring build students' confidence and self-regulation capacity, Bandura, (1977). However, this support can only be effective when students trust their counselor. The data reveal that in contexts where untrained peers or teachers serve as counselors, students consciously withhold sensitive information, rendering the counseling relationship therapeutically inert. This confirms that professionalizing G&C through trained, specialist counselors is not merely a resource issue but a precondition for any measurable disciplinary improvement.

The Complexity of Disciplinary Challenges and the Limits of Current Approaches

Head teacher and teacher testimonies paint a sobering picture of disciplinary challenges that include teenage pregnancy, early marriage, substance-influenced peer dynamics, and classroom disruption. These problems extend far beyond what reactive, informal G&C can address. The evidence confirms that schools functioning under resource constraints tend to default to punitive responses that may temporarily suppress problematic behaviors while failing to address underlying psychosocial determinants, Rodriguez & Welsh, (2022). Banda *et al.* (2025, advance online publication) demonstrate that similar psychosocial and structural factors drive girls out of school entirely, suggesting that counseling investments targeting discipline may simultaneously improve retention outcomes.

Stakeholder Potential and the Coordination Gap

The PTA and Mother Group testimonies reveal an important paradox: parents and community stakeholders are deeply concerned about student welfare and willing to engage, yet lack the professional knowledge, coordination mechanisms, and institutional support to do so effectively. Mother Groups' assembly-based interventions were reported as producing short-term compliance without lasting behavioral change. This aligns with the Socio-

Ecological Model's prediction that behavioral change requires sustained, multi-level intervention rather than episodic engagement, Bronfenbrenner (1979); Henderson *et al.*, (2016). The PTA member who called for "caretakers to champion climate leadership and provide checks and balances" articulates an intuitive demand for systemic behavioral governance that formal G&C frameworks are designed to provide.

Self-Efficacy, Incentives, and Behavioral Change

The positive relationship between counseling and discipline found in this study supports both Self-Efficacy Theory and Incentive Theory. Students who developed confidence in their ability to manage behavioral and academic challenges through counseling were more likely to engage in positive self-regulation, Bandura (1977); Gist & Mitchell, (1992). Similarly, positive reinforcement mechanisms, including recognition, mentorship, and encouragement, motivated students to adopt desirable conduct rather than comply merely out of fear, Ningjian, (2024); Cherian & Jacob, (2013).

Structural Barriers to G&C Effectiveness

Despite the evident value of G&C, several structural barriers constrained program effectiveness across both schools. These included lack of trained counselors, inadequate counseling infrastructure, heavy teacher workloads, limited financial resources, weak policy implementation, negative perceptions toward counseling among some students and parents, and the absence of monitoring and evaluation systems. These barriers are consistent with challenges reported across sub-Saharan African educational contexts, Arfasa & Weldmeskel, (2020; Mpaso *et al.*, (2025, advance online publication; Szeremley, (2025). Ghasemi's (2025), advance online publication) systematic review further demonstrates that institutional risk factors embedded in school systems, including excessive workloads and limited professional support, directly undermine practitioners' mental health and their capacity to deliver quality psychosocial services, reinforcing the urgent need for systemic policy investment rather than ad hoc solutions.

Comparative Insights: Mathandani and Milenje CDSSs

While both Mathandani and Milenje CDSSs shared common structural challenges, the comparative design revealed meaningful contextual differences in G&C climate and outcomes. Mathandani CDSS demonstrated relatively stronger informal behavioral governance, evidenced by its sustained period without major disciplinary unrest and the presence of active faith-based student groups (SCOM and YCS) that filled some of the moral guidance vacuum left by absent formal counseling. Students at Mathandani more readily referenced spiritual and community-based mentorship as protective factors, suggesting that when institutional G&C is weak, students leverage alternative ecological resources to navigate behavioral decisions.

Milenje CDSS, by contrast, presented a starker picture of student disengagement from help-seeking, with multiple student voices reflecting normalized silence and skepticism about whether peers or adults in school could be trusted confidants. The prevalence of early marriage and teenage pregnancy highlighted by the head teacher at Milenje further suggests that the psychosocial risks facing learners at that site are particularly acute and inadequately addressed by current informal measures. These comparative differences underscore that even within the same district and school type, contextual factors including school leadership, community networks, and the presence of supplementary support structures significantly mediate G&C effectiveness. A nuanced, context-sensitive approach to G&C implementation is therefore necessary, rather than a one-size-fits-all national model, Bronfenbrenner, (1979); Thapa *et al.*, (2013).

Study Limitations

This study was conducted in only two Community Day Secondary Schools in Kasungu District, and therefore findings cannot be generalized to all Malawian secondary schools or to CDSSs in different geographic or socioeconomic contexts. The use of purposive sampling and qualitative methods prioritized depth of understanding over statistical representativeness. Social desirability bias may have influenced participant responses, particularly among teachers and school leaders in the presence of researchers. Additionally, the study relied substantially on self-reported experiences, which may not fully capture institutional G&C practices as operationalized in formal policy documents. The citation of several advance online publications, Banda *et al.*, (2025); Ghasemi, (2025); Mpaso & Xuefu, (2025); Mpaso *et al.*, (2025); Valencia-Arias *et al.*, (2025) reflects the currency of this research area; readers are advised to consult final published versions for definitive details. Future studies may employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to strengthen generalizability and to track the long-term impact of specific G&C interventions on student discipline outcomes.

Recommendations

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology

- Develop and disseminate a secondary-school-specific G&C implementation framework that includes timetabled counseling sessions, clear role descriptions for teacher-counselors, and monitoring indicators to track program fidelity and impact.
- Recruit and professionally train school counselors and integrate foundational counseling skills and adolescent psychology into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs.
- Allocate dedicated funding for counseling infrastructure, materials, and professional development, and strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems to track G&C program outcomes.

School Administrators

- Establish dedicated, functional counseling centers staffed by professionally trained counselors, and institutionalize timetabled G&C sessions as core components of the school calendar.
- Actively communicate G&C services to students through assemblies, notice boards, classroom presentations, and peer ambassadors to address the awareness gap identified in this study.
- Promote restorative and incentive-based discipline approaches that move away from punitive responses and recognize positive conduct through awards, leadership opportunities, and public acknowledgment.

Teachers and Counselors

- Employ positive reinforcement strategies, identify at-risk students early, and provide individualized emotional and academic support to learners.
- Uphold professional confidentiality standards and communicate these standards clearly to students, to build the trust necessary for effective counseling relationships.
- Strengthen peer counseling programs and introduce age-appropriate self-monitoring tools, such as behavioral checklists and goal-setting journals, to build student self-efficacy and self-regulation.

Parents, Stakeholders, and Communities

- Participate actively and more frequently in student guidance processes beyond term-opening meetings, reinforcing positive values and behavioral expectations consistently at home.
- PTAs and Mother Groups should formalize their roles within school G&C committees, contributing to the development of contextually relevant behavioral support strategies.
- Schools should formally partner with faith-based organizations, traditional leaders, and youth groups to extend G&C reach and leverage existing community assets for mentorship and peer modeling.

Future Research

- Future studies should conduct longitudinal empirical investigations on counseling effectiveness, explore learner perceptions of G&C services, examine the relationship between school climate and discipline outcomes, and investigate the viability of digital counseling interventions among Malawian adolescents.
- Research should further examine gender-specific dimensions of G&C effectiveness, given evidence that girls face heightened psychosocial risks leading to dropout and early marriage (Banda *et al.*, 2025, advance online publication).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that guidance and counseling practices play a critical and largely underutilized role in strengthening student discipline in Malawian secondary

schools. The participant testimonies gathered across Mathandani and Milenje CDSSs reveal a consistent picture: students are largely unaware of formal G&C services, reluctant to seek help due to confidentiality concerns and trust deficits, and facing escalating disciplinary challenges that informal and punitive approaches have failed to resolve. PTA members and Mother Groups are motivated to support student welfare but lack the professional knowledge and institutional mechanisms to do so sustainably.

Effective counseling interventions promote emotional regulation, self-efficacy, moral development, school belonging, and positive behavioral transformation. Schools with stronger counseling systems reported fewer disciplinary incidents, improved learner engagement, and more positive school climates. However, the full potential of G&C has not been realized due to inadequate resources, insufficient professional training, weak policy enforcement, student awareness deficits, and limited stakeholder coordination.

Strengthening G&C services therefore requires systemic policy commitment, professional capacity development, deliberate student communication strategies, stakeholder collaboration, and sustained investment in psychosocial support infrastructure. Sustainable improvements in student discipline will depend on the extent to which Malawian schools, supported by national policy, adopt preventive, restorative, and learner-centered counseling approaches that address both behavioral symptoms and underlying psychosocial determinants of misconduct. By centering the authentic voices of teachers, students, parents, and school management, this research contributes contextually grounded, evidence-based insights for strengthening behavioral support systems in resource-constrained secondary education environments across Malawi and comparable Sub-Saharan African contexts.

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