



Counsellors' experiences of using school counselling to promote social and emotional learning among pupils in a private secondary school in Zambia: A hermeneutic study

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ABSTRACT

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is gaining ground as an important aspect of comprehensive education to develop pupils' skills in emotional regulation, positive relationships, and responsible decision making. The SEL skills of learners have been a focal point for school counselling. However, little is known about the experiences of Zambia's counsellors in applying counselling to promote SEL in secondary schools. Guided by the Social and Emotional Learning framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), this study examines the experiences of counsellors in a selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia, in promoting SEL among students. The methodology of the study was a constructivist paradigm, a hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological design, a purposive sample of six members of the school counselling committee and ten pupils who have received counselling. The data collection techniques used were semi structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observation. Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the four existential lifeworld dimensions: lived worlds, lived space, lived time, and lived relations were the focus. The results demonstrate that counsellors engaged in a variety of ways to teach the five components of SEL, which were: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills, and responsible decision making. Counselling was reported to improve the pupils' emotional regulation and interpersonal relationship, empathy, confidence and decision-making skills. However, factors like lack of resources, time and lack of institutional support were found to be obstacles in providing effective counselling. The study proposes that a school counselling programme is one of the most important enablers of SEL and ought to be boosted in secondary schools by improving the training, provision and policy support for school counsellors to promote better SEL outcomes.

Keywords: Counsellors' Experiences, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, School Counselling, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Secondary School Pupils

I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern educational world, it is understood that academic success is not enough to equip students to be active members of society. Schools are thus expected to promote integrated learning skills and develop cognitive, social and emotional abilities. Counselling has become an important support service that has helped pupils to develop their personal, social, emotional and academic growth. Pupils are guided and supported through counselling to learn and manage their emotions, develop positive relationships, make responsible decisions and learn skills which they will need in their adult life for lifelong success (Green et al., 2011; Steen et al., 2007).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a developmental process whereby knowledge, attitudes, and skills are learned and used to recognize and manage emotions, build positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, make responsible choices, and handle challenging situations effectively (CASEL, 2020). SEL comprises 5 core competencies: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making. These competencies are essential to a learner's wellbeing, academic success and ability to engage in society (Weissberg et al., 2015). Pupils who acquire good social and emotional skills have also been found to have better academic achievement, mental health, interpersonal relationships and lower behavioural issues in all research (Taylor et al, 2017).

SEL has emerged as an important part of global education reform efforts as numerous countries have embedded SEL in their education policies and/or school programmes. Internationally, the role of social and emotional health and wellbeing as a critical pillar of effective learning and positive life outcomes is recognised, with the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021) both stating that it is crucial. School counselling programmes have been effective in the United Kingdom, Finland, and



the United States to enhance students' SEL skills. School counsellor interventions, whether individual or group, work to support students to manage emotions, build social skills, and enhance resilience to support whole school outcomes (ASCA, 2019; Humphrey et al., 2018).

In Africa, increasing importance has been put on SEL and School Counselling as more Schools began acknowledging the challenges related to socioeconomic, cultural and individual psychological factors affecting their learners. Within Countries such as Kenya, South Africa and Ghana schools began the implementation of SEL into their classrooms as awareness increased regarding teaching social emotional skills needed to compete in rapidly evolving environments, however, there were a plethora of setbacks to implementing of SEL and counselling in classrooms, due to minimal training, limited resources, and scarce well-qualified counsellors in practice.

The need for counselling, especially in Southern Africa, has grown in significance in the context of pupils facing challenges of poverty, HIV/AIDS, violence, peer pressure and family instability that impact on their emotional wellbeing and engagement in learning. Some countries, like South Africa and Namibia, have established educational structures that include counselling and SEL as integral parts of their learner support systems. The programmes reflect the fact that fostering pupils' resilience, emotional control and interpersonal skills is a key part of building safe and supportive learning spaces (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, Namibia, 2021).

Counselling has risen to prominence in Zambia as an important educational support service which is used to respond to some of the social, emotional, academic and behavioural needs of pupils. According to the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) Counselling services in schools should be promoted to improve learners' all-round development and to foster supportive learning environments (MoGE, 2013). Research indicates that counselling has a positive impact on interpersonal skills, problem solving, academic performance and behavioural adjustment of pupils (Tuchili & Ndhlovu, 2016; 2017). In addition, it has been noted that counselling is an important tool in supporting pupils to cope with socioeconomic pressures, family issues, peer conflicts, and emotional issues that could affect their learning.

Although counselling is identified as a crucial component in supporting social and emotional learning, existing research about counsellor experiences with supporting SEL competencies in Zambian secondary schools is scarce. Most of the current research is centred on the results of counselling services and limited attention is given to the counsellor's perspective on promoting social and emotional learning. The experiences of investigating counsellors offer helpful information on the practicalities, obstacles, and possibilities in the implementation of counselling and SEL in the school setting. This study, which followed a hermeneutic approach, explored the experiences of counsellors in using counselling to facilitate social and emotional learning for pupils in the selected private secondary school in Lusaka District in Zambia, to further understanding of how social and emotional learning is promoted through counselling for pupils in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making.

1.1 Research Objectives

- i. Explore counsellors' experiences of using school counselling to promote pupils' self-awareness.
- ii. Examine counsellors' experiences of using school counselling to promote pupils' self-management.
- iii. Explore counsellors' experiences of using school counselling to promote pupils' social awareness.
- iv. Examine counsellors' experiences of using school counselling to promote pupils' relationship skills.
- v. Explore counsellors' experiences of using school counselling to promote pupils' responsible decision making.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was anchored on the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020). The framework identifies five interrelated competencies that learners need to acquire in order to manage their emotions, build positive relationships, show empathy and make responsible choices. These competencies, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, formed the conceptual basis upon which counsellors' experiences of promoting Social and Emotional Learning among pupils were examined in this study.

2.1.1 CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning by CASEL (2020), suggests that social and emotional competence is learned by providing clear opportunities for students to think about their own feelings, interact with others, and make responsible choices in positive school contexts. It emerged out of decades of research on the skills required to support the success of children and youth in school, work, and life, and has since been one of the most broadly adopted models to understand and support learners' social and emotional development (Weissberg et al., 2015). Especially, CASEL structures this development into five competencies that are interrelated and interdependent, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making that



represent a set of knowledge, attitudes and skills that every learner must develop to help them manage their own lives and to relate effectively with others.

This framework identifies self-awareness and self-management as elements of the intrapersonal aspect of SEL, which includes how a learner understands and manages his or her emotions and behaviors, and social awareness and relationship skills as elements of the interpersonal aspect of SEL, which involves how a learner understands and manages his or her interpersonal relationships and interactions with others. Responsible decision making engages both dimensions to help make ethical and constructive decisions (Weissberg et al., 2015). The framework is applicable for school counselling because it proposes that counsellors become key agents who bring these competencies to life in their schools through reflecting on them, doing group work, and providing individual support. The five competency domains served as the basis for exploring and interpreting counsellors' experiences in the present study: the framework.

2.2 Empirical Review

The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) values are broadly acknowledged as vital facets of pupils' wholesome growth and development. Counsellors can greatly contribute to the promotion of SEL by fostering the skills and abilities that define SEL including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Current published literature shows that counselling can play a critical role in the acquisition of these competencies but there is little evidence in the Zambian context.

2.2.1 Self Awareness

Self-awareness is the understanding of emotions, thoughts, strengths, weaknesses and values and how these affect actions (CASEL, 2020). By building pupils' self-awareness, they are better equipped to manage and control their feelings and make decisions (Weissberg et al., 2015). Reflective exercises, self-assessment activities and guided discussions can be used to promote pupils' self-awareness, which counsellors may use. In the Netherlands, Feron and Schils (2020) used a randomised field experiment to test whether a structured self-reflection intervention could help underperforming secondary school pupils reflect on their study behaviour and expectations, in collaboration with their teachers. The intervention was designed to support pupils' self-concept and school engagement rather than to operate as formal counselling, and the results were mixed, with pupils' engagement with the reflection exercise shaped by their existing motivation and self-concept. The findings suggest that structured self-reflection can be a plausible route to building self-awareness, though the effects are neither large nor uniform. This finding is broadly consistent with the wider SEL literature reviewed above, which similarly links structured reflective practice to improved self-understanding, suggesting some convergence across contexts on the value of guided self-reflection (Green et al., 2011). However, most of this evidence has been generated in well-resourced Western school systems, and very little is known about the use of counselling interventions to promote self-awareness in local schools by counsellors in Zambia, leaving open the question of whether the same approaches produce comparable outcomes in a differently resourced, socio-culturally distinct setting.

2.2.2 Self-Management

Self-management is the skill to manage emotions, as well as controlling impulses and handling stress and motivation in various situations (CASEL, 2020). It is an essential skill, and one which allows pupils to meet the demands of academic and personal difficulties (Steen et al., 2007). Counsellors use a range of methods to improve pupils' self-management such as mindfulness techniques, stress management and goal setting interventions. Liu et al. (2022) conducted a cluster randomised controlled trial in China to test the effect of a ten-week mindfulness-based intervention on middle school pupils' psychological stress, and found that the intervention significantly reduced stress, with psychological resilience partially mediating this effect. The results suggest that mindfulness-based approaches, delivered through structured school-based sessions, can support pupils' self-management. This is broadly consistent with Cohen et al. (2021), whose randomised feasibility study of a group mindfulness-based stress intervention for adolescents with early life stress found preliminary support for its use in reducing psychological symptoms, indicating that mindfulness approaches to self-management may be viable even among more vulnerable adolescent populations. However, there is limited information on the extent to which counsellors in the secondary schools in Zambia are using counselling practices to promote self-management, and how these practices are experienced and delivered within a school counselling setting rather than a clinical one has not yet been investigated.

2.2.3 Social Awareness

Social awareness involves awareness, understanding, empathy and appreciation of people of different backgrounds, cultures and communities (Green et al., 2011). This competency helps pupils to establish inclusive relationships and show respect for others (Humphrey et al., 2018). Social awareness is commonly promoted by counsellors in group discussion, peer counselling programmes, collaborative learning activities and diversity education



programmes. In Japan, Watanabe et al. (2021) examined whether a school-based life-planning lecture, which included an empathy and communication component, could enhance perspective-taking among first-year high school pupils. They found that pupils in the intervention group were significantly more likely to show gains in perspective-taking than those in the waitlist control group. This suggests that structured, school-delivered programmes, of the kind counsellors could plausibly adapt for group work, can support pupils' development of social awareness. This positive picture is not, however, uniform across the literature, as Avilés-Dávila et al. (2023) found that a coaching programme targeting personal and social competences among Spanish secondary school pupils produced only slight, non-significant gains relative to a control group, suggesting that short, structured group interventions do not always translate into measurable improvements in social competencies. Taken together, the findings show that counselling can be a means of raising social awareness among pupils, but its effectiveness may depend on factors that remain largely unexamined in the Zambian context.

2.2.4 Relationship Skills

Relationship skills include effective communication, working collaboratively with others, conflict resolution, and healthy interpersonal relationships (Steen et al., 2007). Pupils need to develop these skills to be effective in their social and school and community lives (Weissberg et al., 2015). Turnuklu et al. (2010) carried out a study on conflict resolution and peer mediation training in a high school in Turkey and found that the training had a significant positive effect on pupils' conflict resolution skills and reduced school-based aggression. The results highlight the value of structured peer mediation training in fostering healthier relationships among pupils. This finding is echoed by Latipun et al. (2012), whose quasi-experimental study of peer-conflict-resolution-focused counselling among senior high school pupils in Indonesia found that pupils receiving the counselling scored significantly higher on measures of peaceful behaviour than those in a control group, offering further evidence that structured, counselling-based approaches to conflict resolution can improve pupils' relationship skills. Although these are positive results, they focus narrowly on peer conflict, so how counsellors experience the broader task of building the full range of pupils' relationship skills in Zambia remains largely unexplored.

2.2.5 Responsible Decision Making

Responsible decision making is making ethical, constructive and informed decisions, taking into account the consequences of these choices, evaluating alternatives and considering social and moral standards (CASEL, 2020). Whiston et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analytic examination of school counselling outcomes across the United States and found an overall positive but modest average effect of counselling interventions on outcomes including pupils' decision-making and interpersonal skills. The results of this meta-analysis indicate that counselling can have a positive impact on the process of making responsible decisions, but the modest average effect size also suggests that gains are not guaranteed, and that the benefits of counselling for this competency vary considerably depending on the type and intensity of the intervention used (Taylor et al., 2017). There is, moreover, limited documentation around the extent of the counsellors' use of similar strategies in Zambia to assist pupils in making decisions, which is an important gap that needs to be explored.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm

This study was guided by the constructivist approach that aims to gain understanding of the human experience from the point of view of the person experiencing it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivism holds that reality is socially constructed as the individuals interact with their surrounding environment, experience and interpret the world (Guba & Lincoln, 2017). The paradigm was deemed suitable for the study as it allowed for a detailed examination of counsellors' experiences with the use of counselling for the promotion of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) with pupils. An epistemological perspective considers knowledge to be subjective and jointly constructed in an interaction between the researcher and the participants. Ontologically, the study used a multiple, context sensitive and individual or social constructionist perspective of reality (Moon & Blackman, 2014) as a starting point to examine the various pupils' and counsellor's experiences of counselling use for the development of SEL competencies.

3.2 Research Design

The study design used in this study was Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to interpret and understand the meanings that people give to their lived experiences and interpretation enables the researcher to explore participants' meaning making of lived experiences (Smith et al., 2021). The study aimed to investigate counsellors' perceptions of using counselling to enhance pupils' SEL competencies in a selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia, which made the design of the study appropriate. The



design provided the researcher with rich and detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and the meanings they identified in these descriptions, which enhanced her understanding of the role counselling plays in promoting self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making for pupils.

3.3 Study Site and Population

The study was carried out in a selected private secondary school at Lusaka District Zambia. The school was purposively chosen because it had a context in which to explore counsellors' experiences, structured counselling programmes, and was actively engaged in activities for the promotion of Social Emotional Learning among pupils. The study participants were members of the school counselling committee who provided counselling services and pupils who had received counselling services and felt the impact of counselling committee members on their social and emotional learning competencies. The participants were selected due to their firsthand knowledge and experience of the phenomenon being studied.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The study adopted a purposive sampling approach, drawing on six (6) school counsellor committee members and ten (10) pupils who had received counselling. Experts selected the school counsellor committee members based on their knowledge, experience and involvement in providing counselling services within schools. Grade Twelve pupils were purposively selected because they represent typical cases capable of offering rich insight into the impact of counselling on social and emotional development. Sample size was guided by data saturation, with data collection continuing until no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews (Guest & Mitchell, 2023).

3.5 Data Collection

Semi structured interview guides, document review checklist and a nonparticipant observation checklist were used to collect the data. Counsellors and pupils were interviewed using semi structured interview guides to gather detailed information about their experiences of counselling and SEL. The flexible design of the interviews allowed the researcher to go beyond the participants' surface expressions and to elicit further depth and clarification. School counselling reports, policies, programme records and other relevant documents relating to counselling services and SEL activities were reviewed using a document review checklist. The review of the documents served as further evidence and was helpful for the triangulation of the data. A non-participant observation checklist was used to document and identify observable behaviours, counselling practices and interactions related to the promotion of SEL competencies. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Zambia before the study began, while permission to carry out the study was sought and obtained from the school administration that was sampled.

3.6 Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proposed by Smith et al. (2009) was used for data analysis. IPA was chosen as it offers a systematic approach to exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of the participants. The analysis was carried out in 6 steps. The first step was immersion in the data by reading and rereading the interview transcripts to develop an overall picture and understanding of the participants' experiences. The second part was first note taking, in which important statements, phrases and observations were found. During the third stage, the relevant portions of the information were coded in reference to the patterns and meaning that emerged from it. The fourth stage entailed organizing the codes into more general themes and subthemes. In the fifth stage, interpretation and thematic development were conducted to clarify and deepen the understanding of the themes in terms of participants' experiences. Finally, a cross-case analysis was done for comparison between the participants as well as for finding points of similarity, differences and variations in experiences. The four existential lifeworld dimensions, lived body (corporeality), lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality) and lived relations (relationality), were used as a guide to interpretation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted following several ethical principles. All participants had the aim of the study clearly explained to them prior to their participation, and informed consent forms in a clear and comprehensible language were provided to all participants. All the participants volunteered and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty was ensured. Throughout the study confidentiality and anonymity was respected, in that participants were not referred to by their own names, but rather by pseudonyms during transcription, analysis and reporting of results. All data were properly collected and protected and it was only the researcher and supervisor who had access to it. Ethical approval was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Zambia before the study was conducted to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner with respect to human research participants.



IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Counsellors' Experiences in Promoting Social and Emotional Learning Competencies

This section reports on the experiences of counsellors in implementing counselling to increase pupils' competencies in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in a selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia. The interview data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) that yielded five major themes: Counselling as a Pathway to Self-Awareness; Counselling for Emotional Regulation and Self-Management; Counselling to Foster Social Awareness; Counselling as a Tool for Building Relationship Skills; and Counselling for Responsible Decision Making.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Counselling as a Pathway to Self-Awareness

The results showed that counsellors used a range of cognitive, reflective and creative strategies to encourage pupils to be aware of themselves. Participants explained how they employed the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques and brain-based models to teach pupils how thoughts, feelings and behaviours work together and pupils were able to identify negative thought patterns and how these things affected their feelings and behaviour. Counsellors also stated that they have utilised various self-reflective resources including sentence completion, self-esteem masks and journals to help pupils reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their emotions. Pupils used creative and expressive activities including art therapy resources including sandy trays, kinetic sand and art books to express feelings which were not easily verbally expressed. Selected readings were also used and these were designed to make students think, discover and grow in their personal lives, this was known as bibliotherapy.

Participants explained that emotional literacy was enhanced through colour coded bead activities, where colours represented different emotions, helping pupils identify and express their feelings more effectively. Mindfulness and deep breathing exercises were additionally used to encourage pupils to observe their emotions calmly and without judgment. One participant explained:

"I helped a child who thought she was ugly by using positive affirmations, mask art, and self-talk strategies to rebuild her self-image" (CCM 1, 15 July 2025).

Another participant stated:

"When a pupil sits down and begins to talk about what bothers them, they slowly discover who they are. Our role is to guide them into seeing both their strengths and weaknesses positively" (CCM 2, 15 July 2025).

The results of this investigation resonate with those of Feron and Schils (2020), whose randomised field experiment found that structured self-reflection on school behaviour could support pupils' self-concept, even though the effects were modest and uneven across participants. Their study similarly points to guided self-exploration as a plausible route to strengthening pupils' sense of self, understanding of emotions, and personal resilience, while cautioning that such gains are not guaranteed for every pupil.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Counselling for Emotional Regulation and Self-Management

The study identified that counsellors supported pupils to develop emotional regulation skills and resilience, and provided pupils with coping strategies relating to self-management. Participants reported practising anger management techniques that helped pupils become aware of emotional triggers, to understand signs of anger and how to respond using strategies. A range of emotional regulation strategies were used, such as coping skills boxes, bubble breathing, belly breathing, five finger breathing, flower and candle breathing, mindfulness and meditation exercises. Counsellors reported that these strategies helped pupils to deal with stress, anxiety, frustration and peer pressure more effectively. Memory and feeling games (such as Jenga) were also used to help develop patience, concentration and emotional control. Resilience-building activities helped pupils to think positively when facing up to problems and bounce back from failures. Counsellors emphasized the use of chill skills, which taught pupils practical methods of calming themselves and adopting solution focused thinking. One counsellor shared:

"A pupil who was always angry was helped through anger management sessions, breathing exercises, and the use of a coping skills box. Eventually, he learned to pause before reacting" (CCM 3, 25 September 2025).

The results are similar to those of Liu et al. (2022), whose cluster randomised controlled trial found that a school-based mindfulness intervention significantly reduced Chinese middle school pupils' psychological stress. The results align with the lived body, with pupils' breathing and emotional regulation having changed, and with lived time, as their resilience skills have grown over time as they engaged with counselling sessions over and over again. Cohen et al. (2021) offer a more cautious picture, their feasibility study of a group mindfulness-based stress intervention for adolescents with early life stress finding only preliminary support for its effectiveness, which suggests that intensity of need may limit how far mindfulness-based approaches generalise.



4.1.3 Theme 3: Counselling to Foster Social Awareness

Findings revealed the counsellors actively encouraged social awareness through group counselling, mentorship, peer interaction and empathy building exercises. Group counselling offered a safe and structured space where pupils were able to meet with others, exchange views and be sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. Counsellors described the role playing, story-telling and perspective taking activities that they used to gain an understanding and appreciate of different viewpoints and social situations. The peer mentorship programmes also contributed to raising social awareness by having older, more experienced students provide support for and guidance to younger students, thereby creating a culture of empathy and understanding in the school community.

One participant noted:

"During group sessions, pupils learn that they are not alone in their struggles, and they begin to respect each other's pain and differences" (CCM 4, 25 September 2025).

Another participant added:

"A student who once made fun of others for being different began apologizing and even standing up for classmates after just a few group sessions. Hearing someone else's story changed how quickly they judged." (CCM 1, 15 July 2025).

This finding was consistent with Watanabe et al. (2021), who found that a school-based lecture combining empathy and communication content significantly improved pupils' perspective-taking relative to a waitlist control group. The dimension of lived relations is especially relevant here, for social awareness was a product of the relational aspects of group interactions, peer engagement and shared counselling experiences. The results highlight the significance of social group-oriented strategies to cultivate pupils' empathic and social supportive functioning. Avilés-Dávila et al. (2023) offer a more cautious picture, finding that a school-based coaching programme targeting similar personal and social competences produced only slight, non-significant gains, suggesting that group-based approaches do not always translate into measurable improvements in empathy or social awareness.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Counselling as a Tool for Building Relationship Skills

Counsellors reported using communication training, role playing, conflict resolution exercises, and trust building activities to promote relationship skills among pupils. Participants noted that many pupils entered counselling with difficulties in expressing themselves, maintaining friendships, and managing interpersonal conflicts. Through structured counselling interventions, pupils gradually developed confidence in communication, learned to listen actively, and acquired skills for resolving disagreements constructively. Social skills training activities enabled pupils to practise assertive communication, boundary setting, and cooperative behaviours within safe counselling environments. Trust building exercises, including partner activities and collaborative group tasks, reinforced the importance of reliability, honesty, and mutual respect in relationships.

One participant shared:

"I use role-plays and group activities to help pupils practise how to communicate without aggression and how to solve conflicts peacefully among themselves" (CCM 5, 26 September 2025).

Another participant observed:

"Pupils who struggled to make friends began to reach out more after counselling. They learned how to initiate and maintain conversations" (CCM 6, 26 September 2025).

The results are similar to Turnuklu et al. (2010), who found that peer-mediation and conflict-resolution training significantly improved high school pupils' conflict resolution skills and reduced school-based aggression. This lived relations dimension is clearly reflected here, as developing relationship skills was inextricably linked with pupils' interactions inside and outside the counselling setting. Latipun et al. (2012) reinforce this picture, finding that senior high school pupils who received peer-conflict-resolution-focused counselling scored significantly higher on measures of peaceful behaviour than those in a control group, lending further support to structured, counselling-based approaches to building relationship skills.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Counselling for Responsible Decision Making

Findings revealed that counsellors employed problem solving models, rational thinking approaches, ethical dilemma discussions, and future oriented reflection to promote responsible decision making among pupils. Participants reported guiding pupils through structured decision-making frameworks that encouraged them to identify options, evaluate potential consequences, and consider the impact of their choices on themselves and others. Scenarios involving real life dilemmas were presented during counselling sessions, enabling pupils to practise ethical reasoning and critical thinking in a safe and supportive context. Counsellors also facilitated discussions on values, personal responsibility, and long-term goal setting to strengthen pupils' capacity to make constructive and informed decisions.

One counsellor explained:



"We use case studies and real-life scenarios during sessions to help pupils think before they act. We ask them, what are your options? and what will happen if you choose this path? to build their reasoning skills" (CCM 1, 15 July 2025).

Another participant noted:

"Pupils who used to make impulsive decisions gradually learned to pause, think, and choose wisely" (CCM 3, 25 September 2025).

The results of this study align in part with Whiston et al. (2011), whose meta-analytic examination of school counselling outcomes found an overall positive but modest average effect of counselling interventions on outcomes including pupils' decision-making and interpersonal skills. The dimension of lived time is relevant here, as responsible decision making was felt as a competency that was forward looking, and developmentally progressive, and which was developed by a long-term counselling engagement.

At the same time, the modest average effect size reported by Whiston et al. (2011) is a reminder that such gains are not guaranteed and vary considerably depending on the type and intensity of the intervention used, once pupils return to their everyday environments beyond the counselling setting.

4.2 Overall Interpretation of the Findings

The results indicate that counsellors followed an integrative and holistic strategy in their promotion of SEL competencies. Counselling was felt to be a transformative process which enabled pupils to grow in self-understanding, emotional regulation, empathy, interpersonal competence and responsible decision making. They are seen within the four-lifeworld existential lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relations, consistent with Van Manen's (2016) phenomenological perspective. Moreover, the results bring Smith et al.'s (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach to the understanding of the meaning made by counsellors and pupils in their counselling experiences into focus. Reflection, interpretation and interaction enabled counselling to be a powerful instrument for supporting pupils' holistic growth and enhancing SEL skills in the school environment. The findings also support the relevance of the framework of the CASEL (2020), where counselling work has a direct influence on the development of all five interrelated competencies, in a structured and intentional manner.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate counsellors' experiences of using counselling to promote Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies in the selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia. The study aimed to describe and to understand how pupils gain awareness of self, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making through the process of counselling within a constructivist paradigm and a hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological design. These results indicated that counsellors used a holistic and integrative strategy to teach SEL competencies through the use of CBT, mindfulness, reflective, art based, mentoring, group counselling, problem solving, and spiritual reflection to provide opportunities for pupils to understand themselves, manage their emotions, relate to others, engage in healthy relationships, and make responsible choices. The interventions had positive impact on pupils' personal and emotional development, their ability to relate to others and their resilience. The study also confirmed that counselling is not just for the treatment of immediate behavioural and emotional problems but that counselling is an important tool for total learner development. Although counselling has shown good results, the study has revealed some problems such as lack of resources, time and institutional support. The study suggests that counselling is a valuable and effective means of fostering SEL competencies amongst pupils, and that the contribution of counselling can be further improved if school counselling programmes are strengthened by providing policy support, professional development of counsellors, providing adequate resources and nurturing a partnership among stakeholders.

5.2 Recommendations

The study suggests that the policy framework for school counselling in Zambia should be strengthened to ensure that resources are adequately made available to school Counsellors, adequate training of Counsellors and institutional support for SEL focused school counselling programme. School leaders should focus on embedding counselling into the curriculum and provide opportunities for counsellors to be structured in SEL development activities. Further, counsellors should be provided with regular professional development training in evidence-based counselling techniques, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, mindfulness-based interventions and art therapy to build their ability to effectively support the development of SEL competencies. Future research should be undertaken in other secondary schools, public and private, to gain a wider picture on the role of counselling in SEL development in various educational environments in Zambia. Longitudinal designs should also be used to investigate the longer-term impact of counselling interventions on pupil social and emotional development, and multiple perspectives of those who interact with the pupils



(such as teachers, parents and school leaders) should be explored to gain a wider picture of counselling's contribution to promoting SEL in school communities.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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