

# Pupils' perspectives on how counselling promotes the development of social and emotional learning competencies: A hermeneutic phenomenological study at a school in Zambia

Elita Mvula\* and Daniel Ndhlovu

School of Education, University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia.

Accepted 12 October, 2026

---

## ABSTRACT

The study explored how pupils at a private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia, understood the role of counselling in developing their social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. Attention was given to five areas, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The research adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological design within a constructivist paradigm. Purposive sampling and individual interviews were used with 10 Grade 12 pupils, and the interviews were semi-structured. Non-participant observation and document analysis were used as methodological triangulation. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data, drawing on van Manen's four lifeworld existentials of lived body, lived space, lived time and lived relation. Pupils said that counselling gave them a space to reflect on their feelings, manage their reactions and understand the emotions of others. They also mentioned that they were able to build better relationships with the people around them and think more carefully about decisions in their daily lives. The results indicate that counsellors are important in supporting pupils' SEL skills in secondary school. The implications for school counselling practice, counselling policy and future research are discussed in the discussion and conclusion.

**Keywords:** Counselling, hermeneutic phenomenology, pupils' perspectives, social-emotional learning, Zambia.

---

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: emvulamainza@yahoo.co.uk.

---

## INTRODUCTION

School counselling is viewed more and more as a crucial avenue for promoting social-emotional learning (SEL) and helping children develop skills that are essential for SEL, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills and responsible decision-making. Pupils' mental welfare, social relationships and learning are dependent on these skills (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Self-awareness is linked to the ability of pupils to identify and understand their emotions, values and strengths, and self-management is linked to the ability of pupils to manage their emotions, build resilience and deal with stress, as suggested in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework (2020). Social awareness is evident in empathy and

knowledge of differences, relationship skills are evident in communication and cooperation, responsible decision-making is evident in ethical and reflective decision making (Mahoney et al., 2021). Counselling is therefore seen as a remedial process and a developmental and preventive learning process which helps to develop the whole learner (ASCA, 2019).

The social and emotional health of adolescents is increasingly recognized in the world and the need to bring counselling and SEL into the school is being echoed (Greenberg et al., 2017). According to WHO (2019), approximately 14% of adolescents aged 10-19 years have mental health disorders, and many more are suffering from persistent emotional and behavioural issues that are

negatively impacting their learning and wellbeing. There are still millions of children and adolescents who are not learning in a context where the provision of any organised psychosocial and emotional support systems is absent (UNESCO, 2021). Although psychosocial and mental health (PSMH) programmes have been introduced on a global scale, counselling services are not well developed and available in many low- and middle-income countries. The realities highlighted above indicate the need for developmentally responsive counselling interventions to focus on pupils' emotional, social and psychological needs in addition to their academic development.

The significance of counselling in promoting SEL competencies has been widely documented in international literature. In a review of 12 meta-analyses, Durlak et al. (2022) reported consistently significant effects of school-based SEL programmes on SEL skills, attitudes, prosocial behaviour and academic achievement, and reductions in conduct problems and emotional distress. Greenberg et al. (2017) further demonstrated that counselling interventions contributed to improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety among pupils. The evidence is not uniformly positive, however. In England, a cluster randomised trial of the PATHS curriculum found very small improvements in children's social skills and wellbeing, with no lasting differences at follow-up (Humphrey et al., 2018).

Recent studies published between 2022 and 2026 confirm both the promise and the limits of school counselling. Copeland et al. (2024) reviewed 54 studies of school and community counselling in the United Kingdom and found mixed evidence of effectiveness, high acceptability and persistent problems of implementation. Hewitt et al. (2024) argued that counselling and the school system around it are interdependent, so services cannot succeed without supportive structures. O'Donnell et al. (2025) interviewed 16 school staff in London, who described pupils becoming more open and putting counselling skills into practice. Duncan et al. (2025) found that young people aged 13 to 16 experienced counselling goals as motivating for some and discouraging for others. Bjereld et al. (2025) showed that the quality of the counsellor–student relationship shaped how bullied students experienced counselling, and that shame kept some of them from seeking it.

While international research offers valuable evidence on the effectiveness of counselling in SEL development, it also presents some methodological and contextual limitations. Much of this evidence comes from studies conducted in Western or well-resourced school settings, which limits its applicability to African schools, and to Zambia in particular (Greenberg et al., 2017; Humphrey et al., 2018; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). A considerable amount of this research has also relied on quantitative or mixed-methods designs that report outcome measures rather than pupils' experiences or how they make meaning

of counselling (Taylor et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2022). This suggests that the lived experiences of pupils receiving counselling services within culturally specific educational contexts remain insufficiently explored, signalling a need for qualitative and phenomenological studies in African contexts.

Schools in Africa have started to understand the importance of SEL and counselling in supporting learner wellbeing and success. In some countries, like Kenya, Ghana and South Africa, SEL is being integrated into education reform and competency-based curricula as part of lifelong learning skills. Despite such advances, African countries are still experiencing issues of limited counselling resources, weak institutional support, paucity of culturally responsive counselling models and shortage of trained counsellors. The Ministry of General Education (2018) in Zambia has advocated for a new approach to the integration of counselling services in schools to support learners' educational, career, social and emotional needs. Although counselling is recommended for its positive effect on the school environment, a high incidence of absenteeism, behavioural problems, peer conflict, stress and anxiety, and underachievement in academic performance in Zambia's urban secondary schools, especially in Lusaka, has been linked to unmet social and emotional needs.

Evidence from other low- and middle-income settings points in the same direction. Neelakantan et al. (2024) interviewed ten school counsellors in India and reported varied understandings of SEL, together with limited resources and training for delivering it. Panford-Quainoo et al. (2024) found that counsellors in Accra senior high schools in Ghana faced role conflict, work overload and deficient resources. Gyasi et al. (2025) reported, in a sample of 386 Ghanaian students, that mental health and health literacy mediated the link between school counselling services and academic performance. These studies focus on counsellors' practice or on measured outcomes rather than on how pupils themselves make sense of counselling in relation to the SEL competencies, and none was conducted in Zambia.

While the use of counselling is becoming accepted in the education sector in Zambia, there is a huge gap in research. Previous work has focused on institutional delivery of counselling services, counselling role, guidance programmes, or educational outcomes in general, with the focus on pupils' experiences of counselling being relatively underdeveloped. Relatively little qualitative research is available looking at pupils' perceptions of counselling as a catalyst for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Furthermore, there is a lack of research in the private secondary schools on counselling and SEL in Zambia. In this context, the current study employed a constructivist paradigm and a hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological design to accentuate the voices of

the pupils and create contextually rich insights regarding the role of counselling in the development of SEL competencies in the selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia.

### Statement of the problem

The social and emotional wellbeing issues that continue to affect Zambia's secondary schools, including absenteeism, conflict among pupils, behavioural problems, stress, anxiety and poor academic performance, are more prevalent in urban schools, especially in Lusaka District. The Ministry of General Education (2018) views counselling as a mechanism for addressing these challenges; however, the majority of studies on counselling focus on institutional provision and the role of counsellors rather than on pupils' actual experiences. There has been limited research on how pupils understand and internalise counselling as a means of building their social and emotional development. This gap runs counter to established professional counselling standards.

The Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016), the American Counselling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics, and the American School Counsellor Association (ASCA, 2019) National Model all highlight the importance of school counselling being responsive to how students experience and make sense of the support provided to them, rather than being judged solely from the counsellor's or institution's perspective on service provision. Given these expectations of counselling practice, counselling as characterised in much of the literature in Zambia and the region, being largely institutional or counsellor-centred, does not meet this professional expectation. The present study responded to this gap by exploring pupils' views on the role that counselling plays in developing social and emotional learning competencies in one selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia.

### Research objectives

To explore pupils' perspectives on how counselling facilitates the development of social-emotional learning competencies at a selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia.

Specifically, the study pursued five objectives, each aligned with a core CASEL (2020) competency:

- i. To examine pupils' perspectives on how counselling shapes their self-awareness.
- ii. To explore how counselling supports pupils' self-management of emotions and behaviour.
- iii. To assess pupils' perspectives on how counselling

develops their social awareness.

iv. To understand how counselling strengthens pupils' relationship skills.

v. To explore pupils' perspectives on how counselling guides responsible decision-making.

### Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. How do pupils describe the contribution of counselling to their self-awareness and self-management?
- ii. In what ways do pupils experience counselling as supporting their social awareness and relationship skills?
- iii. How do pupils understand the role of counselling in guiding their responsible decision-making?

### Theoretical framework

The study is grounded in two complementary frameworks. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) which positions counselling as a means to increase pupils' actual opportunities for development, and the CASEL competencies for SEL (2020) are specific competencies that operationalise this actual growth within the context of school counselling practice.

#### *The capability approach*

The present study draws on the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen (1999), which views development as an increase in the actual freedom and opportunities available to people to lead a flourishing life. In the school context, this approach to counselling shifts the focus from simply problem-solving to being a process that actually enhances pupils' capacities to reflect on their feelings, create positive relationships and make moral choices. This lens is very relevant to exploring the role of counselling in supporting pupils' SEL competencies given that it focuses on pupils' voice, lived experience and agency.

#### *CASEL's social and emotional learning framework*

The CASEL (2020) framework builds upon this theoretical foundation and categorises SEL into five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. While the Capability Approach gives the general philosophical underpinning of understanding counselling as a development of pupils' 'real freedoms and opportunities', the framework devised by CASEL operationalises this in terms of specific domains in which pupils' capabilities can be understood, observed and, in

this study, described in their own accounts of counselling.

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 shows how the three building blocks of the study fit together. The Capability Approach explains why counselling matters, because it can widen what pupils are able to do and be. Counselling is the school resource through which this happens, using a safe space, reflective dialogue and a

trusting relationship with the school counsellor. The CASEL competencies name the five areas in which pupils' growth can be seen, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Van Manen's lifeworld existentials provide the interpretive lens for reading what pupils say about their counselling experiences.

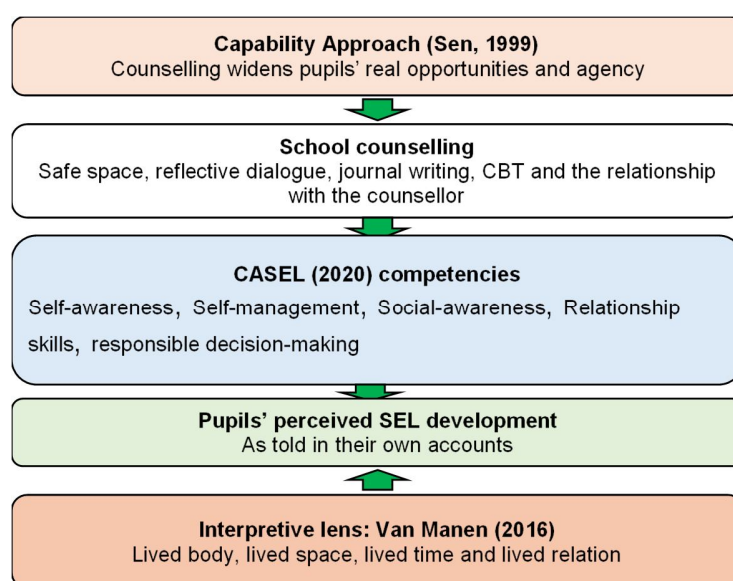


**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of the study.

Reading the figure from top to bottom, counselling is expected to expand pupils' opportunities and agency, and that expansion is expected to show up as growth in the CASEL competencies. The study does not assume that this growth happens automatically. Instead, pupils' own accounts are treated as the evidence of whether and how it occurred. The existentials sit beneath the outcome and point upward because they guide interpretation rather than cause change. The same logic shaped the research objectives and the order of the themes in the Results, so that each theme can be traced back to one CASEL competency.

### Empirical review

Counselling has been shown to be an effective strategy to facilitate core SEL skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills and responsible decision-making (Taylor et al., 2017). The literature reviewed is reported in the following order based on the five specific objectives of the study.

### Counselling and self-awareness

Domitrovich et al. (2017) reported that social-emotional competence, including the ability to recognise and understand one's own emotions, is linked to behavioural and academic outcomes and can be improved through feasible school-based interventions. The findings are significant because self-knowledge is fundamental to the other areas of SEL.

O'Donnell et al. (2025) interviewed 16 staff from London secondary schools and reported that staff saw pupils becoming more open and described counselling as a dedicated space in which pupils could open up. The staff also described pupils putting counselling skills into practice, which suggests that self-awareness gained in counselling may carry into everyday school life.

### Counselling and self-management

Greenberg et al. (2017) found that counselling interventions contributed to improved emotional regulation

and reduced anxiety among pupils. The findings suggest that counselling supports self-management by equipping pupils with practical strategies for regulating their emotions and behaviour.

Durlak et al. (2022) reviewed 12 meta-analyses and reported significant reductions in conduct problems and emotional distress across many countries, alongside gains in SEL skills. The review also found little consistency in the conditions or mechanisms through which SEL programmes work best. The self-management benefits of counselling may therefore depend on how systematically SEL is embedded within the wider school.

Duncan et al. (2025) interviewed 19 young people aged 13 to 16 who had set and monitored goals in school-based counselling. Goals were motivating and gave a tangible sense of progress for some pupils, whereas others felt stuck and discouraged when progress was not steady. Self-management gains from counselling therefore appear to depend on how goals are set and reviewed with each pupil.

### ***Counselling and social awareness***

Cipriano et al. (2023) reported significant improvements in peer relationships and school climate among pupils who took part in universal school-based SEL interventions.

Taylor et al. (2017) reported that school- and community-based SEL programmes designed to foster social awareness produced significant positive results for peer relationships and long-term positive youth development. Their meta-analytic findings indicated that structured activities developing pupils' perspective-taking skills led to measurable improvements that persisted well after the intervention ended. This body of work supports the view that counselling-based social awareness training can produce sustained, rather than temporary, changes in how pupils relate to others.

### ***Counselling and relationship skills***

Systemic approaches to SEL stress that supportive relationships in classrooms, schools and families are what allow pupils to practise the vulnerability that relationship-building demands (Mahoney et al., 2021). This indicates that the relationship skills developed in counselling are significantly shaped by the quality of the relationships within the counselling environment.

Bjereld et al. (2025) combined a survey of 1,091 students with interviews of 20 bullied students and found that the quality of the counsellor–student relationship shaped the counselling experience. Shame and other barriers kept some students away from counselling altogether, which suggests that a trusting relationship with the counsellor matters from the first contact.

### ***Counselling and responsible decision-making***

Responsible decision-making is treated in the SEL literature as a learnable competency that pupils build by considering consequences and thinking through situations before acting (Mahoney et al., 2021). The cumulative evidence indicates that counselling focused on SEL goals can have a significant, positive impact on pupils' development across all five competencies assessed in this study (Taylor et al., 2017).

### ***Counselling and SEL in the African and Zambian context***

In the African setting, some countries, such as Kenya, South Africa and Ghana, have begun to incorporate counselling into school programmes, but the success of these programmes is hindered by limited resources, insufficient counsellor training, and a lack of culturally responsive approaches (Akongo et al., 2025). In Zambia specifically, the positive impact of counselling on school climate, learner discipline and engagement has been documented, but very little attention has been paid to pupils' perceptions of how counselling has supported their social and emotional development. This is especially important because understanding what learners think and value can inform the development of counselling practices that are contextually relevant and truly responsive to pupils' developmental needs.

Counsellors who tailor their approach to pupils' cultural context are more likely to establish the trust and rapport needed for meaningful interaction (ACA, 2014). This underscores the importance of culturally responsive counselling practice in Zambia, since the extent to which SEL is genuinely internalised, rather than only superficially adopted, may depend on how well such programmes engage pupils' culture, identity and sense of belonging (Jagers et al., 2019).

Panford-Quainoo et al. (2024) interviewed 15 school counsellors in Accra and reported, according to the counsellors, pupils sought counselling for academic, home, peer and emotional concerns. The same counsellors reported role conflict, work overload, deficient resources and negative perceptions of counselling. Gyasi et al. (2025) surveyed 386 Ghanaian students and found that mental health and health literacy linked school counselling and psychological services to academic performance and physical health. Both studies come from West Africa, and neither explored how pupils make meaning of counselling in relation to SEL competencies, which leaves the Zambian experience open.

### ***Hermeneutic phenomenology and Van Manen's lifeworld existentials***

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as developed by Van

Manen (2016), offers a powerful lens for understanding the meaning individuals attach to their lived experiences. Van Manen identifies four lifeworld existentials, namely lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relations, as universal dimensions through which human experience can be interpreted. Applied to this study, these existentials illuminate how pupils experience counselling not merely as a procedural service, but as an embodied, relational, temporal, and spatial process of social–emotional growth. The lived body dimension captures how counselling shapes pupils' physical and emotional sense of self, while lived space addresses how pupils experience counselling environments as safe or constraining. Lived time reflects the developmental nature of SEL growth through counselling, and lived relations encompasses the relational dynamics between pupils, counsellors, and peers that give counselling experiences their deeper meaning.

### Research gap

Despite the growing body of literature on counselling and SEL globally, qualitative, phenomenological research examining pupils' lived experiences of counselling in Zambian secondary school contexts remains notably scarce. Most available studies focus on quantifiable outcomes, counsellor perspectives, or institutional evaluations, leaving pupils' subjective meaning-making processes underexplored (Durlak et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2017). Furthermore, research specifically examining counselling and SEL within private secondary schools in Zambia is virtually absent. The present study addresses these gaps by centring pupils' voices and applying hermeneutic phenomenology to generate contextually grounded insights into how counselling promotes SEL competencies in a Zambian private school setting.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research paradigm and design

The study was grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed, multiple, subjective, and context-dependent (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). Within this paradigm, knowledge is understood as a product of interaction and interpretation, which is appropriate for exploring pupils' lived experiences of counselling and SEL. The study's overall design was hermeneutic phenomenological, drawing on Van Manen's (2016) approach to understanding lived experience through language and interpretation, as a broad philosophical and methodological orientation.

Within this design, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as outlined by Smith et al. (2022), was adopted specifically as the analytic method. IPA is a distinct qualitative approach that integrates idiographic, hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions, and it was selected for its capacity to support an in-depth, case-by-case exploration of pupils' counselling experiences before patterns are drawn across cases. The double hermeneutic process enabled by using IPA as the analytic method allowed participants to make sense of their experiences while the researcher simultaneously interpreted those interpretations, thereby preserving the phenomenological focus on meaning-making while retaining the structured, systematic analytic procedure that IPA offers.

Recent school counselling research shows how the method has been used. Mackie et al. (2023) applied IPA to explore the experiences of transgender young people in school counselling, a topic close to the present focus on pupils' own accounts of being counselled. Duncan et al. (2025) analysed young people's experiences of school-based counselling through reflexive thematic analysis, which looks for patterns across a dataset rather than reading each case in depth first. The present study therefore chose IPA because it keeps each pupil's account in view before themes are drawn across cases.

### Study site and participants

The study was conducted in a selected private secondary school in Lusaka District, Zambia. The school was purposively selected because it had an established counselling programme and was actively engaged in SEL-related practices. Purposive sampling was used to identify 10 Grade 12 learners who had received counselling services and were able to critically reflect on their lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Grade 12 pupils were considered appropriate participants because of their prolonged engagement with the school's counselling programme and their developmental maturity. Participants were included if they were enrolled in Grade 12, had received counselling through the school's programme for at least one academic term, and were willing and able to articulate their counselling experiences verbally in an interview setting. The resulting sample of 10 participants is consistent with the idiographic aims of IPA, which prioritises depth of engagement with each individual account over generalisability to a larger population; Smith et al. (2022) note that IPA studies typically work with small, purposively selected samples for this reason. Sampling nonetheless continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no further new themes or insights emerged from the data (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022), providing a further, complementary basis for concluding that the sample was sufficient.

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document review were used to gather data, to enable methodological triangulation and enhance the depth and credibility of the findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were the main data-generating technique used in the study, allowing participants to communicate in their own words and share their experiences of counselling (Smith et al., 2022). Open-ended questions were asked to elicit detailed narration and reflection from the pupils. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees, conducted in confidential settings within the school, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Non-participant observation provided contextual understanding of the counselling environment and related SEL practices, while records of the counselling programme, guidance documents, school policies and SEL-related documents were reviewed to corroborate and contextualise the findings from the interviews.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using IPA, following the systematic and iterative procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2022). The six-stage analysis process involved repeated reading of transcripts for immersion, initial noting through descriptive and conceptual commentary, inductive coding grounded in participants' own words, clustering of codes into emergent themes, interpretation of themes in relation to Van Manen's (2016) four lifeworld existentials, and cross-case analysis to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across participants' experiences. This process ensured that meanings emerged from the data rather than being imposed through predetermined templates or frameworks, thereby preserving the phenomenological emphasis on openness to participants' lived realities.

## Ethical considerations

Data collection was conducted after obtaining ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Zambia. All participants gave informed consent, and parental consent was also obtained for participants who were minors. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and voluntary participation was maintained throughout. All data were stored securely, with access limited to the researcher and supervisor.

## RESULTS

The interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts, non-participant observations and document analysis revealed five interrelated and overlapping themes which can be seen as a whole to meet the research goal. These themes were part of a developmental continuum, and pupils' counselling experiences were connected with emotional awareness, self-regulation, social understanding, interpersonal relationships and decision-making capacities. The participants' voices were foregrounded in the analysis as the study was constructivist and phenomenological in nature, and each theme is presented below.

The five themes can be summarised before they are presented in detail. Table 1 links each theme to the CASEL competency it represents, lists the main ideas that pupils expressed and shows which participants' accounts illustrate each theme. The summary allows readers to see how the themes relate to one another and to the study objectives at a glance, while the sections that follow give the pupils' own words and the interpretation of each theme.

**Table 1.** Summary of themes, sub-themes and illustrative accounts.

| Theme and CASEL competency                                   | What pupils described                                                                                                                                    | Illustrative accounts |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Counselling as a mirror for self-awareness                   | Identifying and understanding feelings, strengths and areas for growth, and asking what lies behind a feeling, through dialogue, journal writing and CBT | P1, P2                |
| Counselling as a tool for self-management                    | Managing emotions and impulses through coping skills such as deep breathing, anger management and stress regulation, and pausing before reacting         | P3, P4                |
| Counselling as a lens for social awareness                   | Empathy, perspective taking and noticing others' needs. Respect for diversity was named but not illustrated in the extracts                              | P5, P6                |
| Counselling as a means for strengthening relationship skills | Communication, cooperation and conflict resolution, a safe space to open up, and respectful dialogue with teachers                                       | P6, P7                |
| Counselling as a guide for responsible decision-making       | Pausing, considering consequences before acting, and standing up to peer pressure                                                                        | P9, P10               |

Read together, the rows show that every theme was grounded in the pupils' own accounts and that one participant (P6) appears under two themes, which reflects how pupils' experiences crossed the boundaries between competencies. Social awareness is the thinnest row, because respect for diversity was mentioned by pupils but not illustrated in their extracts. The table therefore also points to where the evidence is stronger and where further data would be useful.

### Counselling as a mirror for self-awareness

Pupils regularly spoke of counselling as a 'reflective mirror' in which they identified and understood their feelings, strengths and things that needed to develop. Counselling was viewed as a safe environment where reflection could be facilitated using dialogue, journal writing, and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). One pupil spoke about this transition very vividly:

*"Prior to counselling, I didn't know why I felt certain ways or responded the way that I did, but now when I am feeling upset, I stop and question myself and ask myself what is really going on inside me, and I now see myself differently."* (P2, 15 July 2025)

Another pupil added:

*"When I talk to the counsellor, I discover things about myself I never noticed before, like my strengths and the areas where I still need to grow. It feels like someone is helping me see myself clearly for the first time."* (P1, 15 July 2025)

### Counselling as a tool for self-management

Pupils' self-awareness led them to recognise counselling as a key role in supporting their own self-management, in managing emotions and controlling impulses. Learning practical coping skills, deep breathing exercises, anger management, and stress regulation skills were described by participants. One pupil explained this change in terms of directness:

*"Prior to counselling, I used to act rashly when I was angry, without considering what would follow. Now I take the time to calm myself down, breathe and think it through before taking action so I don't make matters worse."* (P3, 15 July 2025)

Another participant shared a similar shift:

*"Counselling taught me how to control my temper, especially when disputes arise with my friends. Instead of shouting straight away, I now stop, think about the other person's side, and respond calmly, which has saved a lot of friendships."* (P4, 25 September 2025)

### Counselling as a lens for social awareness

Pupils perceived counselling as a critical avenue for developing social awareness, particularly in building empathy, perspective taking, and respect for diversity. Through counselling discussions and reflective exercises, pupils reported gaining insight into others' emotions and life circumstances. One participant explained how this played out for them:

*"The counsellor helped me see things from other people's side, not just my own. Now when a friend is upset, I try to imagine what they are going through instead of judging them straight away, and it has made me kinder."* (P5, 25 September 2025)

Another pupil reflected on the same shift:

*"Counselling made me realise that everyone has problems, not just me, and that changed how I treat people at school. I stopped assuming my classmates were fine and started noticing when someone quietly needed support."* (P6, 25 September 2025)

### Counselling as a means for strengthening relationship skills

Closely linked to social awareness, pupils described counselling as a means of strengthening relationship skills, particularly communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Participants reported learning how to engage in respectful dialogue, manage disagreements constructively, and repair strained relationships with peers and teachers. One pupil described what made the counselling space feel different:

*"In the classroom, you are afraid to show that you are struggling because others might laugh at you. But in the counsellor's office, you feel safe enough to open up and say exactly what is on your heart without being judged."* (P6, 25 September 2025)

Another participant described a similar change with

teachers:

*"The counsellor taught me how to talk respectfully with teachers instead of arguing whenever I disagreed with them. Now I explain my side calmly and listen to theirs, and our conversations end with understanding rather than conflict."* (P7, 26 September 2025)

### **Counselling as a guide for responsible decision-making**

Pupils identified counselling as a guide for developing responsible decision-making. Counselling was described as an opportunity to reflect on oneself, stand up to peer pressure and consider the consequences of one's actions before acting, and this was supported by documentary evidence of ethical reasoning, and counselling sessions that involved discussion of problems and their solutions. This change was described by one pupil as:

*"I made a lot of bad decisions last year because I just acted without thinking. Counselling did not fix me overnight, but slowly I started thinking about what could go wrong before I did anything. Now I actually pause before I respond to things."* (P9, 26 September 2025)

Another pupil described the same shift in their own words:

*"The counsellor helped me think, judge, and act before making a choice, instead of jumping straight into decisions the way I used to. Now I picture what could happen next, and that has kept me out of a lot of trouble."* (P10, 26 September 2025)

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings reveal that pupils saw counselling as a reflective mirror in which they came to recognise and understand their own emotions, and they moved beyond naming a feeling to asking what lay behind it. Consistent with this finding, Domitrovich et al. (2017) reported that social-emotional competence of this kind can be strengthened through school-based intervention. Furthermore, Cipriano et al. (2023) found significant gains in skills and attitudes among pupils who took part in universal school-based SEL interventions across 53 countries. Nonetheless, the evidence that such gains hold in everyday school settings is less certain, because the conditions under which a programme is delivered affect its

results. In this regard, Wigelsworth et al. (2016) cautioned that trial stage, developer involvement and the country of implementation all shaped the outcomes of SEL programmes, so gains seen under supported conditions may not carry over to routine practice. Even though pupils valued the reflection, the study found that the counsellor guided it closely through dialogue, journal writing and CBT. Consequently, the study cannot show whether pupils would keep up the same self-questioning once that support ends.

The study found that pupils used counselling to manage their anger and behaviour, giving concrete examples such as breathing, pausing and calming down before answering in anger. In support of this finding, Greenberg et al. (2017) argued that well-implemented SEL programmes can reduce conduct problems and promote desirable behaviour. Likewise, Durlak et al. (2022) reviewed 12 meta-analyses and reported reductions in conduct problems and emotional distress alongside gains in SEL skills. Findings from a large cluster randomised trial in England were, however, more cautious, since Humphrey et al. (2018) found only very small improvements in children's social skills and wellbeing, and no lasting differences at follow-up. Notwithstanding the concrete examples pupils gave, their accounts were mainly about anger and quarrels with friends and say little about other pressures, such as examinations or problems at home. In addition, claims that counselling saved friendships rest on pupils' own reports, which the observation and document review could not confirm outside the counselling room.

The results show that pupils developed social awareness, imagining what a friend is going through and noticing classmates who quietly needed support. In keeping with this result, Cipriano et al. (2023) found that SEL interventions improve peer relationships. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2017) found positive effects that persisted after interventions ended, which supports pupils' descriptions of a lasting change in how they treat others. On the other hand, Jagers et al. (2019) argue that SEL must attend to culture, identity and belonging if it is to promote equity. In this respect, although pupils described empathy towards friends and classmates, the accounts do not show whether this concern reaches beyond those groups. Moreover, respect for diversity is named in the theme as an aim of counselling, yet none of the extracts reported here illustrates it, so that part of social awareness remains thin in the data.

The findings reveal that pupils felt safe in the counsellor's office and had calmer conversations with teachers, whereas the classroom remained a place where pupils feared being laughed at for struggling. In relation to this finding, Mahoney et al. (2021) describe systemic SEL as an approach that builds supportive relationships and coordinates school, family and community efforts rather than leaving SEL to isolated activities. Oberle et al. (2016) similarly frame schoolwide implementation as a

coordinated effort across classroom, school, family and community. The pupils' accounts support this position, because counselling helped them cope with a classroom climate that had itself not changed. Accordingly, gains made in counselling may not carry over into ordinary lessons unless teachers and peers also help to build that safety. Nevertheless, the evidence for such whole-school approaches is less settled than for classroom curricula, and Wigelsworth et al. (2022) noted ambiguity about what counts as a whole-school approach.

The study found that pupils slowly began to think about what could go wrong before acting, although they noted that counselling did not bring change overnight. Consistent with this gradual pattern, Taylor et al. (2017) found that the positive effects of SEL persisted after interventions ended, which suggests that such change builds over time. At the same time, pupils described decisions mainly as pausing and thinking about consequences and said much less about judging right from wrong or resisting peers, despite peer pressure being part of the theme. Ecological theory, however, offers one explanation for this gap, since behaviour is shaped by interacting systems such as families, peer groups and communities that counselling cannot easily change (Eriksson et al., 2018). The study did not follow pupils into those settings, and the influence of these systems therefore remains untested.

The findings show that pupils' experiences cut across the five themes, with some pupils describing controlling anger and taking the other person's side in one breath. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) sets out five competencies, and the five themes follow them, although pupils' accounts did not respect the boundaries between them. Therefore, the order from self-awareness to decision-making is an analytic convenience more than a sequence pupils lived through. In a similar vein, Domitrovich et al. (2017) treat social-emotional competence as a single construct rather than five separate skills. The study also found that no pupil described counselling as unhelpful, embarrassing or stigmatising, and Kabamba et al. (2020) reported significantly positive attitudes towards guidance and counselling services among pupils in Zambian public secondary schools. By contrast, Radez et al. (2021) described a different picture in their review of help-seeking studies, where stigma, limited mental health knowledge and negative perceptions of help-seeking were common barriers for young people. Notwithstanding the positive reports, participants here were chosen for their long experience of the programme and their ability to reflect on it, which may have favoured pupils who benefited most.

The findings show that pupils experienced counselling as helpful across all five competencies. Supporting this conclusion, Cipriano et al. (2023) found that school-based SEL improves skills, behaviour and school functioning. Akongo et al. (2025) likewise concluded from a review of 27 intervention assessments in sub-Saharan Africa that

school-based programmes showed positive outcomes, especially when grounded in local relevance. Nonetheless, the evidence has clear limits. Even though the findings were consistently positive, only ten Grade 12 pupils from one private school with an established programme took part, and Kabamba et al. (2020) identified a lack of funding, trained personnel and counselling facilities in Zambian public secondary schools. Consequently, many of those schools are unlikely to share the conditions found here. Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2017) drew on follow-up data from 82 school-based programmes to test whether SEL benefits last, whereas a single round of interviews cannot do this. Counselling appeared to widen what pupils were able to do and be. However, whether those gains become real freedoms depends on the conditions around them (Sen, 1999).

## **Implications of the study**

### ***Theoretical implications***

The study extends the Capability Approach into school counselling by showing, through pupils' own words, how counselling can widen what pupils feel able to do and be. The findings also suggest that the five CASEL competencies overlap in lived experience rather than forming a fixed sequence, which invites researchers to treat SEL as a connected whole. Applying Van Manen's lifeworld existentials offered a way of reading counselling as a bodily, spatial, temporal and relational experience, and future phenomenological work in African schools can build on this approach.

### ***Practical implications***

Counsellors can draw on the practices that pupils valued, namely reflective dialogue, journal writing, breathing and pausing exercises, and a confidential space in which pupils felt free from judgement. Counsellors can also help pupils practise new skills beyond the counselling room by working with teachers, because pupils described the classroom as a place where they still feared being laughed at when they struggled.

### ***Managerial implications***

School leaders and education authorities should treat counselling as part of whole-school planning rather than an isolated service. Timetabled sessions, trained counsellors, private counselling rooms and referral routes to specialised mental health services all depend on management decisions about staffing and resources. Kabamba et al. (2020) reported shortages of funding,

trained personnel and counselling facilities in Zambian public secondary schools, so the Ministry of General Education may need to prioritise these resources if the benefits reported here are to reach other schools.

### Limitations of the study

Several limitations should be considered when reading the findings. Only ten Grade 12 pupils from one private school with an established counselling programme took part, so the findings cannot be generalised statistically and may not reflect public, rural or less resourced schools. Participants were chosen for their experience of counselling and their ability to reflect on it, which may have favoured pupils who benefited most. The accounts are self-reported and were gathered in a single round of interviews, and the observation and document review could not confirm changes outside the counselling room. The study also did not follow pupils beyond the counselling setting, so the durability of the reported changes remains untested. The interpretation reflects the researchers' own sense-making, although methodological triangulation and verbatim transcription were used to strengthen credibility.

### Conclusion

The study demonstrates that school counselling functions as a consequential practice through which pupils develop core social-emotional competencies aligned with the CASEL (2020) framework and interpreted through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens. Pupils' accounts reveal that SEL is experienced as a relational and developmental process across Van Manen's (2016) four lived worlds. Counselling shaped pupils' embodied emotional experiences by enhancing self-regulation and confidence through the lived body; provided safe and supportive spaces enabling openness and reflection through lived space; supported temporal growth through reflection on past experiences and anticipation of future development through lived time; and strengthened interpersonal relationships characterised by empathy, communication, and mutual understanding through lived relations. Alongside these consistent findings, the integration of contrasting scholarly evidence reveals important boundaries to counselling's effectiveness: gains are mediated by cultural norms, unequally distributed across pupil profiles, and dependent on institutional conditions that many Zambian schools do not currently possess. These limitations do not negate the value of counselling but rather specify the conditions under which it can be made most effective, providing a more considered evidence base to inform policy, practice, and future research.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and the critical engagement with contrasting evidence, the study makes the following recommendations:

- i. Embed SEL-focused counselling frameworks across all secondary schools through the Ministry of Education, supported by trained counsellors, dedicated timetabling and referral pathways to specialised mental health services for pupils with severe emotional difficulties.
- ii. Integrate SEL across the whole school so that counselling gains are reinforced through classroom practice, peer support structures and community partnerships rather than remaining confined to the counselling office.
- iii. Provide continuous professional development for counsellors, with targeted training in culturally responsive counselling, hermeneutic listening and evidence-based SEL facilitation.
- iv. Train counsellors specifically in group composition and facilitation, given evidence that poorly structured group counselling can reinforce peer conflict rather than build empathy.
- v. Conduct longitudinal, multi-site studies covering public and rural schools to examine whether counselling-based SEL skills transfer beyond the school context, addressing the ecological limitations identified in this study.

### REFERENCES

- Akongo, S. R., Ariapa, M., and Giacomazzi, M. (2025). What works in 21st century skills education in sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1619154. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1619154>
- American Counselling Association (ACA) (2014). *ACA Code of Ethics*. Alexandria, VA: American Counselling Association.
- American School Counsellor Association (ASCA) (2019). *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counselling Programs*. 4th Ed. Alexandria, VA: American School Counsellor Association.
- Bjereld, Y., Thornberg, R., and Hong, J. S. (2025). "I can move on": Exploring bullied students' perspectives on speaking to a school counselor—a mixed methods study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 179, 108585. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108585>
- Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L. H., Ha, C., Kirk, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., Zieher, A. K., Eveleigh, A., McCarthy, M., Funaro, M., Ponnock, A., Chow, J. C., and Durlak, J. (2023). The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development*, 94(5), 1181-1204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020). *What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?* Chicago, IL: CASEL. Retrieved from <https://casel.org>
- Copeland, L., Willis, S., Hewitt, G., Edwards, A., Jones, S., Page, N., Murphy, S., and Evans, R. (2024). School- and community-based counselling services for children and young people aged 7-18 in the UK: A rapid review of effectiveness, implementation and acceptability. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 24(2), 419-458. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12688>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2016). *2016 CACREP Standards*. Alexandria,

- VA: CACREP.
- Creswell, J. W., and Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 4th Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Domitrovich, C. E., Durlak, J. A., Staley, K. C., and Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Social-emotional competence: An essential factor for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in school children. *Child Development*, 88(2), 408-416. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12739>
- Duncan, C., Hayes, J., and Cooper, M. (2025). Young people's experiences of setting and monitoring goals in school-based counselling: A thematic analysis. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 98(3), 663-682. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12581>
- Durlak, J. A., Mahoney, J. L., and Boyle, A. E. (2022). What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents: A review of meta-analyses and directions for future research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 148(11-12), 765-782. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000383>
- Eriksson, M., Ghazinoor, M., and Hammarström, A. (2018). Different uses of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory in public mental health research: What is their value for guiding public mental health policy and practice? *Social Theory and Health*, 16(4), 414-433. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41285-018-0065-6>
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., and Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning as a public health approach to education. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 13-32. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0001>
- Gyasi, P. A., Sun, B., Zhou, L., Dwumfour, C. O., and Darko, P. A. (2025). Impact of school counselling and psychological services on students' academic performance through health indicators. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 35(2), 181-197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20556365251339704>
- Hennink, M., and Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science and Medicine*, 292, 114523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Hewitt, G., Copeland, L., Murphy, S., Jones, S., Edwards, A., and Evans, R. (2024). Understanding school-based counselling services in complex systems: Developing a whole system approach. *Health Education Journal*, 83(6), 609-623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00178969241263189>
- Humphrey, N., Hennessey, A., Lendrum, A., Wigelsworth, M., Turner, A., Panayiotou, M., Joyce, C., Pert, K., Stephens, E., Wo, L., Squires, G., Woods, K., Harrison, M., and Calam, R. (2018). The PATHS curriculum for promoting social and emotional well-being among children aged 7-9 years: A cluster RCT. *Public Health Research*, 6(10). Southampton: NIHR Journals Library. <https://doi.org/10.3310/phr06100>
- Jagers, R. J., Rivas-Drake, D., and Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 162-184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032>
- Kabamba, C., Mundende, K., and Simui, F. (2020). Exploring the status of guidance and counselling services in selected public secondary schools in Chilanga District, Zambia. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 7(6), 57-66. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0706007>
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., and Guba, E. G. (2018). *Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited*. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mackie, G., Patlamazoglou, L., and Lambert, K. (2023). The experiences of Australian transgender young people in school counseling: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 10(2), 292-303. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000544>
- Mahoney, J. L., Weissberg, R. P., Greenberg, M. T., Dusenbury, L., Jagers, R. J., Niemi, K., Schlinger, M., Schlund, J., Shriver, T. P., VanAusdal, K., and Yoder, N. (2021). Systemic social and emotional learning: Promoting educational success for all preschool to high school students. *American Psychologist*, 76(7), 1128-1142. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000701>
- Ministry of General Education (2018). *Guidance and Counselling Implementation Guidelines for Schools in Zambia*. Lusaka: Government of the Republic of Zambia.
- Neelakantan, M., Kumar, A. P., Sadana, A., and Alex, S. M. (2024). What has the pandemic aggravated? Views of school counsellors in India on the need for socio-emotional learning. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 34(3), 334-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20556365241273509>
- Oberle, E., Domitrovich, C. E., Meyers, D., and Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Establishing systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: A framework for schoolwide implementation. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46(3), 277-297.
- O'Donnell, J., Sumner, A. L., Smith, S., Eilenberg, J., Duncan, C., and Cooper, M. (2025). School staff perceptions of the impact of school counselling on young people, the school and integration into the school system. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 25(2), e12845. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12845>
- Panford-Quainoo, E., Asante, K. O., and Osei-Tutu, A. (2024). Practices and challenges of counselling in selected senior high schools in Accra, Ghana. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 34(2), 183-196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20556365231224478>
- Radez, J., Reardon, T., Creswell, C., Lawrence, P. J., Evdoka-Burton, G., and Waite, P. (2021). Why do children and adolescents (not) seek and access professional help for their mental health problems? A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative studies. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30(2), 183-211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-019-01469-4>
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., and Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. 2nd Ed. London: Sage.
- Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., and Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156-1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
- UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. 2nd Ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wigelsworth, M., Lendrum, A., Oldfield, J., Scott, A., Ten-Bokkel, I., Tate, K., and Emery, C. (2016). The impact of trial stage, developer involvement and international transferability on universal social and emotional learning programme outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46(3), 347-376.
- Wigelsworth, M., Verity, L., Mason, C., Qualter, P., and Humphrey, N. (2022). Social and emotional learning in primary schools: A review of the current state of evidence. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(3), 898-924. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12480>
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2019). *Mental Health Promotion and Prevention*. Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int>

---

**Citation:** Mvula, E., and Ndhlovu, D. (2026). Pupils' perspectives on how counselling promotes the development of social and emotional learning competencies: A hermeneutic phenomenological study at a school in Zambia. *African Educational Research Journal*, 14(4), 833-844.

---