

Status of Guidance and Counselling Services in Pujehun District in Sierra Leone

Martha Fanta Mansaray¹, Dr. Tamba Kebbie²

¹(Education Department, Eastern Technical University, Sierra Leone)

²(Department of Teacher Education, Njala University, Sierra Leone)

Corresponding Author – Martha Fanta Mansaray.

ABSTRACT: *Guidance and counselling is an important component of secondary education because it helps learners understand their interests, abilities, values and career opportunities and enables them to make informed decisions about their future. Notwithstanding, the effectiveness of career guidance in many schools may be constrained by inadequate professional personnel, limited counselling resources, insufficient time, large pupil population, weak parental involvement, inadequate career information and limited institutional support. This study examined the status of guidance and counselling services in selected senior secondary schools in the Pujehun District of Sierra Leone, with particular emphasis on barriers that limit their effectiveness in shaping pupils' career pathways. The study adopted a mixed-methods, cross-sectional research design. Four senior secondary schools were targeted for the study, comprising two co-educational, one purely boys and one girls' school, with a total population of 1,208 subjects including 4 principals, 4 guidance counsellors, 80 teachers and 1,120 pupils. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and observation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive inferential statistics with Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically. The regression model examined the extent to which identified barriers predicted the effectiveness of guidance and counselling. Key findings revealed inadequate trained and qualified guidance counselors, insufficient counseling facilities, limited resources and time, including large pupil counsellor ratio. The findings will assist schools, policymakers, counsellors and education stakeholders in strengthening career guidance services and improving pupils' preparedness for further education, vocational training and employment.*

KEYWORDS: *guidance and counselling, career pathways, barriers, senior secondary schools, pupils, Pujehun, regression analysis, Sierra Leone*

I. INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counselling have become increasingly important components of secondary education because young people are expected to make significant decisions about their education, careers and transition into the world of work while they are still developing their interests, abilities and aspirations. Career guidance is not simply about helping learners select a profession; it involves supporting them to understand themselves, explore educational and occupational opportunities, develop career-related competencies and make realistic decisions about their futures. In a rapidly changing world of work, these functions have become even more important as

technological advancement, changing labour-market demands and new forms of employment continue to influence the kinds of skills and occupations available to young people.

The importance of career preparation during secondary education is supported by international evidence. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that career-related activities during adolescence are associated with later employment outcomes. In particular, the OECD ^[1] reported that young people who "explore, experience and think about their potential futures in work" while in secondary school demonstrate indicators associated with stronger career readiness. This suggests that career guidance should be viewed as a developmental process that begins before young people enter higher education or the labour market, rather than as an intervention provided only when students are about to graduate.

Career guidance is also important because young people's access to information and opportunities is not equal. Mann, Denis, and Percy ^[2] observed substantial differences in career readiness among young people and noted that these differences are particularly associated with disadvantage. They argued that effective education systems need to address inequalities in young people's access to information and support in preparing for working life. This observation has particular relevance to disadvantaged and rural communities where schools may have fewer trained professionals, limited career resources and weaker links with higher education institutions and employers.

An important aspect of effective career guidance is meaningful interaction between learners and people who can provide reliable information about future opportunities. The OECD ^[1] emphasized that students benefit from career conversations with teachers, family members and peers, with conversations with subject teachers being particularly relevant to their career development. In this regard, guidance and counselling should not be considered the sole responsibility of a counsellor. Rather, it requires cooperation among school administrators, teachers, parents, counsellors, education authorities and other stakeholders. A whole-school approach can provide learners with repeated opportunities to reflect on their interests and abilities and connect their educational experiences with possible career pathways.

The changing nature of the labour market has further increased the need for effective career guidance. The International Labour Organization (ILO) ^[3] noted that technological innovation, demographic changes and climate change are contributing to significant transformations in the world of work. The organization therefore emphasized the need for greater investment in career guidance as part of broader efforts to help individuals navigate changing employment conditions. For senior secondary school pupils, this means that career information needs to extend beyond traditional occupations and include emerging careers, technical and vocational pathways, entrepreneurship, digital skills and changing labour-market requirements.

Despite the recognized importance of guidance and counselling, the availability of a counselling programme does not automatically guarantee effective service delivery. The quality of guidance depends on factors such as the availability of trained personnel, counselling facilities, relevant career information, time, financial resources, professional development and institutional support. Where these resources are inadequate, counselling may become occasional, informal or reactive rather than systematic and developmental. This is particularly concerning for pupils who have limited access to alternative sources of reliable career information.

In the context of Sierra Leone, strengthening young people's preparation for further education, skills development and employment is important for human-capital development. Senior secondary school represents a critical stage because pupils are required to make decisions concerning subject choices, tertiary education, vocational and technical training and future occupations. However, pupils in rural and relatively underserved communities may face additional difficulties in accessing professional career guidance. These difficulties may include shortages of trained guidance personnel, inadequate counselling facilities, limited access to current career information and insufficient opportunities for career-related activities.

Pujehun District provides an important context in which to examine these issues. As pupils in selected senior secondary schools prepare for higher education, vocational training or entry into employment, they require appropriate information and professional support to understand the opportunities available to them. However, the extent to which guidance and counselling services are adequately structured and resourced to meet these needs remains insufficiently documented. More importantly, there is a need to understand the specific barriers that may prevent existing guidance and counselling services from achieving their intended purpose.

The central concern of this study, therefore, is not merely whether guidance and counselling services exist in selected senior secondary schools in Pujehun District, but whether pupils can actually access effective, relevant and timely career guidance. Particular attention is given to barriers relating to counselling personnel, facilities and materials, time, career information, professional development and institutional support. Understanding these barriers is important because pupils who lack adequate career information and professional guidance may rely primarily on parents, friends, peers or other informal sources when making decisions about their futures.

Although previous international research has established the importance of career-related exploration, career conversations and access to information during secondary education, there remains a need for context-specific evidence on the conditions under which career guidance is delivered in rural and less-resourced school settings. The present study addresses this gap by examining the status of guidance and counselling services in selected senior secondary schools in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone, with particular emphasis on the barriers affecting the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the status of guidance and counselling services in selected senior secondary schools in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone, with particular emphasis on the barriers affecting the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling in shaping pupils' career pathways.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research question:

What barriers limit the effectiveness of guidance and counselling services in shaping pupils' career pathways in selected senior secondary schools in the Pujehun District?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Holland's Theory of Vocational Choice and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. The two theories were selected because career development is not determined by personality and interests alone, nor is it shaped entirely by the social environment. Rather, pupils' career choices emerge from the interaction between who they are, what they believe they can do, what they observe around them, and the opportunities or constraints within their environment.

2.1.1 Holland's Theory of Vocational Choice

Holland's theory proposed that people tend to make career choices that are consistent with their personality characteristics, interests and preferred work environments. Holland ^[4] identified six major personality types, commonly represented by the acronym RIASEC: Realistic (R) - practical, hands-on and mechanical activities;

Investigative (I) - analytical, scientific and problem-solving activities; Artistic (A) - creative, imaginative and expressive activities; Social (S) - helping, teaching and counselling-oriented activities; Enterprising (E) - leadership, persuasion and business-oriented activities; and Conventional (C) - organized, administrative and record-oriented activities.

From this perspective, effective career guidance and counselling should help pupils understand themselves, identify their interests and abilities, explore occupational opportunities and make choices that are reasonably compatible with their characteristics. For example, a pupil who demonstrates strong investigative interests and enjoys science-related activities may be encouraged to explore careers such as medicine, pharmacy, engineering or laboratory science. Similarly, a pupil with strong social interests may find teaching, counselling, nursing or community development more suitable.

Relevance to the study: Holland's theory helps explain whether guidance and counselling services in Pujehun schools are helping pupils to understand themselves and connect their interests, abilities and personalities with appropriate career pathways.

2.1.2 Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides another important explanation of career development. The theory emphasises that human behaviour is influenced by the continuous interaction of personal factors, behaviour and the environment ^[5]. One of its most important concepts is self-efficacy, which refers to a person's belief in his or her ability to successfully perform a particular task or achieve a desired outcome.

In relation to career development, a pupil may have an interest in becoming a doctor, for example, but may not pursue medicine if the pupil believes that he or she is not capable of succeeding in science subjects. Conversely, appropriate encouragement, successful experiences, positive role models and effective counselling can strengthen the pupil's confidence and willingness to pursue the career ^[6]. Bandura's theory also highlights observational learning. Pupils learn from parents, teachers, peers, counsellors and other people they consider role models. Consequently, the availability of positive career role models and information within schools can influence pupils' aspirations.

The theory is particularly relevant to the Pujehun context because pupils' career decisions may be influenced by factors such as family expectations, teachers, peers, socioeconomic circumstances, availability of career information, school resources and perceived employment opportunities ^[7].

2.1.3 Integration of Holland and Bandura Theories

The strength of using these two theories together is that Holland explains the "fit" between the pupil and the career, while Bandura explains the "process" through which the pupil develops confidence and makes career decisions. In simple terms: Holland asks: "What kind of career fits this pupil?" Bandura asks: "What influences this pupil to believe that he or she can pursue and succeed in that career?"

For instance, a pupil may have an Investigative personality under Holland's RIASEC framework and have a strong interest in medicine. However, the pupil's decision to pursue medicine may depend on whether the pupil believes that he or she can perform well in science subjects. That belief is explained by Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. Similarly, a pupil may have a strong interest in teaching under Holland's Social category. However, family expectations, teachers, peers, career information and exposure to successful teachers may either strengthen or discourage the pupil's intention to pursue teaching. Bandura helps explain these environmental and social influences.

The choice of Holland's and Bandura's theories was appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, the theories recognise the pupil as an active participant in career decision-making. Pupils are not simply passive recipients of career information. They have interests, abilities, beliefs and aspirations that influence their decisions. Second, Holland's theory provides a framework for understanding career interests and personality-career congruence. Third, Bandura's theory brings in the social and environmental dimension of career choice. Fourth, the combination is particularly useful for examining the role of guidance and counselling. Finally, the two theories allow the study to examine both internal and external barriers to career development.

2.2 Concept of Guidance and Counselling

Guidance and counselling are important educational services designed to support learners in their academic, personal, social and career development. Although the two concepts are closely related, they are not exactly the same. Guidance is generally broader and involves providing information, direction and assistance that enables individuals to understand themselves and their environment and make appropriate decisions. Counselling, on the other hand, involves a more personal and interactive process in which a trained professional helps an individual understand and address concerns, develop coping strategies and make appropriate decisions ^[8].

In the school environment, guidance and counselling should be viewed as a developmental process rather than simply a service provided when pupils experience problems. The modern school counsellor is expected to support learners in several areas, including academic adjustment, personal and social development, decision-making and career development. This broad understanding is particularly important at the senior secondary level, where pupils are approaching decisions concerning further education, vocational training and employment ^[9].

The OECD ^[1] presents career development as a process through which young people explore, experience and think about their potential futures in work. Its research indicates that what adolescents do and think about their future careers while in secondary education is associated with later employment outcomes. This perspective moves guidance and counselling beyond the traditional idea of simply advising pupils about which occupation to choose. Instead, it emphasizes helping young people develop the knowledge, confidence and decision-making skills required to manage their future careers.

In Sierra Leone, the importance of school counselling has also received formal recognition. The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023 provides for a counselling department in senior secondary schools. The Act states that such a department may support pupils' psychological, academic and social development, advise them on subject options and career pathways, assist with problems and concerns, and coordinate aspects of continuous assessment. It also allows counselling departments to serve a cluster of schools where appropriate. This legislative provision demonstrates that guidance and counselling is regarded as part of the wider educational responsibility of senior secondary schools.

However, the existence of a policy or counselling department does not necessarily mean that pupils receive effective services. The quality of guidance and counselling depends on the availability of trained personnel, appropriate facilities, adequate time, relevant information and institutional support. In poorly resourced settings, teachers may be required to undertake counselling responsibilities in addition to their teaching duties. This can reduce the time and attention available for systematic individual and group counselling.

2.3 Concept of Career Guidance

Career guidance is a major component of guidance and counselling concerned specifically with helping individuals understand themselves and the world of work and make appropriate educational and occupational decisions. It includes activities such as career information, individual counselling, career talks, career assessment,

subject-choice guidance, exposure to occupations, information about tertiary education and vocational training, and assistance with career planning ^[10].

The OECD ^[1] argues that career development should be understood as a lifelong process that helps young people gain insight into themselves and the world of work and strengthens their capacity to move successfully from education to employment. This conception is particularly relevant to senior secondary school pupils because career development at this stage is still evolving. Pupils may have aspirations but may not yet possess adequate knowledge of the qualifications, skills and educational pathways required to achieve them.

Career guidance is therefore not simply the process of telling a pupil what career to pursue. Effective guidance provides opportunities for pupils to examine their interests, abilities, values and aspirations and relate these to available educational and occupational opportunities. It also enables them to understand the consequences of different choices. In this sense, career guidance encourages pupils to become active participants in their own career development ^[11].

Research by the OECD ^[1] provides strong support for this approach. Its international review identified career-related activities involving the exploration, experience and consideration of possible futures as important indicators of teenage career readiness. Pupils who are given opportunities to explore careers, interact with people from the world of work and reflect on their future plans are better positioned to develop realistic career expectations.

Career guidance is particularly important in developing countries because pupils may have limited exposure to the full range of educational and occupational opportunities. In rural communities, career information may be concentrated around a relatively small number of familiar professions such as teaching, nursing, medicine, policing and public administration. Without systematic career guidance, pupils may not become aware of emerging occupations, technical and vocational pathways, entrepreneurship or opportunities requiring specialized skills ^[12].

2.4 Career Guidance and Pupils' Career Paths

A pupil's career path refers to the sequence of educational, training and occupational decisions and experiences through which the individual progresses towards a chosen or evolving career. Career paths are not necessarily linear. Pupils may change their aspirations as they acquire new knowledge, develop new interests or encounter new opportunities. Effective career guidance can therefore help pupils make decisions while remaining open to changing circumstances ^[13].

At senior secondary school level, pupils make decisions that can influence their subsequent career pathways. These include subject selection, examination choices, applications for tertiary education, vocational training and consideration of employment opportunities. A poorly informed decision at this stage may restrict future options, while appropriate guidance can help pupils identify realistic pathways consistent with their abilities and aspirations ^[14].

The OECD's career-readiness research provides important evidence in this regard. Across several longitudinal studies, adolescents' career-related exploration, experiences and thinking about their future were associated with better employment outcomes in adulthood ^[1]. This finding suggests that career development should begin before young people enter the labour market.

Career guidance can also help pupils connect academic learning with future occupations. For example, a pupil interested in medicine needs to understand not only the occupation itself but also the relevant subjects, academic qualifications, tertiary institutions, costs, duration of training and alternative pathways into related health

professions. Similarly, a pupil interested in agriculture, teaching, information technology or entrepreneurship needs accurate information about the educational and skills requirements associated with those pathways ^[15].

Career guidance can further reduce unrealistic career expectations. Pupils sometimes select careers because they are prestigious, familiar or promoted by family members rather than because the career is compatible with their interests and abilities. Professional counselling can provide opportunities for pupils to examine these influences and make more independent and informed decisions.

2.5 People's Views and Perceptions of Guidance and Counselling

People's views about guidance and counselling influence the extent to which pupils use and benefit from the services provided. Pupils, teachers, parents, school administrators and counsellors may hold different perceptions about the purpose of counselling. Some may understand counselling as a normal part of educational development, while others may associate it mainly with disciplinary problems, academic failure or personal difficulties ^[16].

A narrow perception of counselling can reduce its effectiveness. When pupils believe that visiting a counsellor means that they are experiencing a serious problem, they may hesitate to seek help. Similarly, if teachers and administrators view counselling mainly as a remedial or disciplinary activity, insufficient attention may be given to career planning and preventive counselling. Contemporary evidence supports a broader view. The OECD ^[1] emphasises that career conversations and career-related activities should form part of pupils' normal preparation for adult life rather than being limited to pupils who are experiencing difficulties.

Parents and family members can also have a strong influence on pupils' career decisions. Family expectations may encourage pupils to pursue particular occupations, sometimes without sufficient consideration of the pupils' interests and abilities. At the same time, parents can be valuable sources of encouragement, information and financial support. The issue is therefore not whether parents should influence career decisions, but whether their influence is balanced with professional guidance and the aspirations and capabilities of the pupil ^[17].

Teachers also have important perceptions and roles. Since teachers interact with pupils regularly and understand their academic strengths, they are often well placed to encourage pupils to explore particular educational and occupational possibilities. OECD evidence indicates that career conversations with teachers are associated with young people's career development ^[1]. However, teachers require appropriate knowledge and access to current career information if they are to provide reliable guidance.

School administrators' perceptions are equally important because administrative commitment influences the allocation of time, space, personnel and financial resources to counselling. Where administrators recognise career guidance as an essential component of education, counselling activities are more likely to receive institutional support. Conversely, where academic performance is treated as the only priority, career counselling may receive limited attention.

2.6 Barriers to Effective Guidance and Counselling

2.6.1 Inadequate Professional Counselling Personnel

One of the major barriers to effective school counselling is the shortage of appropriately trained counselling personnel. When one counsellor is responsible for a large number of pupils, individual attention becomes difficult. The problem becomes more serious when counsellors are assigned teaching or administrative responsibilities that compete with counselling duties ^[18].

2.6.2 Inadequate Counselling Facilities and Resources

Effective counselling requires suitable spaces that provide confidentiality and an appropriate environment for communication. Schools also need career information materials, computers, internet access, assessment instruments and current information on educational and occupational opportunities. Where these resources are inadequate, counselling may become largely dependent on verbal advice rather than systematic career exploration [19].

2.6.3 Time Constraints

Time is another important barrier. In schools where academic subjects dominate the timetable, counselling activities may receive limited attention. Pupils may therefore have few opportunities for individual counselling, career seminars or career exploration [20].

2.6.4 Large Pupil-Counsellor Ratios

A high pupil-to-counsellor ratio can reduce the effectiveness of counselling. Counselling is most useful when learners have opportunities to discuss their individual interests, abilities and concerns. Excessive caseloads can result in counsellors focusing mainly on urgent problems rather than long-term career development [21].

2.6.5 Limited Career Information

Pupils cannot make informed career decisions without adequate information. Limited access to information about tertiary institutions, scholarships, admission requirements, technical and vocational programmes and labour-market opportunities may restrict pupils' choices [22].

2.6.6 Parental and Social Pressure

Parents and communities influence pupils' career aspirations. In some circumstances, pupils may be encouraged to pursue occupations perceived as prestigious or financially rewarding even when these occupations do not correspond with their interests or abilities [23].

2.6.7 Peer Influence

Adolescents are strongly influenced by their peers. Pupils may choose careers because friends are interested in similar occupations or because certain careers are socially perceived as desirable. Effective counselling can help pupils distinguish between personal career interests and external pressure [24].

2.6.8 Limited Institutional Support

School leadership plays an important role in creating an environment in which counselling services can function effectively. Where counselling is not included adequately in school planning, budgeting and monitoring, services may remain marginal [25].

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods cross-sectional research design. The quantitative component was used to measure the prevalence and perceived severity of barriers affecting guidance and counselling services and to determine whether these barriers predicted the effectiveness of the services. The qualitative component provided deeper explanations of the experiences of pupils, teachers, counsellors and school administrators.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in selected senior secondary schools within the Pujehun District of Sierra Leone. The area was selected because of the importance of understanding how guidance and counselling operate in schools serving pupils with diverse educational, social and economic backgrounds. Pujehun District has been identified as a region with the smallest student population and poor student performance at WASSCE (MBSSE School Census Report 2021 and WAEC External Examiner's report 2024), thus fewer graduates make it to universities. This could be as a result of the status of Guidance and Counselling.

3.3 Population and Sample

The researcher targeted four (4) senior secondary schools in Pujehun District; two co-educational senior secondary schools; one purely boys' senior secondary school and one purely girls' senior secondary school. The target population for this study included all the principals, teachers, counsellors, and pupils of the four (4) senior secondary schools in Pujehun District. Borg and Gall ^[26] defined a target population as all members of a real and hypothetical set of people, events or result of a research study. The total population for this study was 1,208 subjects; including 4 principals, 4 guidance counsellors, 80 teachers and 1,120 pupils from the four (4) selected senior secondary schools in Pujehun District.

The sample size for this study was selected based on the recommendation of Mugenda and Mugenda ^[27]. According to Mugenda and Mugenda, sample size for descriptive studies should be between 10 percent to 30 percent of the population. Using proportionate sampling techniques and based on Mugenda and Mugenda recommendation, 10% of each subject population was selected: 8 out of 80 teachers and 112 out of 1,120 pupils were selected. Purposively, 4 principals and 4 guidance counselors were also selected for this study. Thus, a sample size of 128 subjects. The pupils and teachers were selected using random sampling technique while the principals and counselors were purposively selected for this study. Twenty-eight (28) pupils were randomly selected for this study from each school; while eight (8) teachers were randomly selected for this study using simple random technique. Two teachers were selected from each school.

TABLE 1: Sampling Matrix

Description	Population	Sample Size
Principals	4	4
Counsellors	4	4
Teachers	80	8
Pupils	1,120	112

Description	Population	Sample Size
Total	1,208	128

Source: Field survey data 2026

3.4 Instrumentation and Data Collection

In research, instruments are tools or devices used to collect data from respondents. For this study, data was collected using questionnaires and interview guides, which were appropriate for obtaining both quantitative and qualitative information. The choice of instruments was based on their effectiveness in gathering reliable and valid data directly from the respondents.

Questionnaire: The questionnaire was the main instrument for the study. It was structured to include both closed-ended and open-ended questions:

- i. Closed-ended questions allowed for easy quantification and statistical analysis of responses. These included multiple-choice questions, rating scales, and yes/no questions.
- ii. Open-ended questions allowed participants to provide more detailed responses, giving insight into their opinions and experiences regarding the topic.

Validity and Reliability: The research instruments were subjected to both validity and reliability testing before the main data collection exercise. To establish content validity, the questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by three experts in guidance and counseling, child education, and research methodology. Their observations focused on the relevance, clarity, and adequacy of the items in relation to the study objectives. Based on their recommendations, ambiguous and repetitive items were revised, while a small number of questions that did not adequately address the study objectives were removed to improve the overall quality of the instruments. A pilot study was subsequently conducted using respondents with characteristics similar to those of the study. The pilot study assessed the clarity of the instruments, the sequencing of questions, and the estimated time required for completion. Responses obtained from the pilot survey were analyzed to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha coefficient with an overall coefficient of 0.84, indicating good internal consistency and confirming that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for the study.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive inferential statistics with Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically. The regression model examined the extent to which identified barriers, including inadequate counselling personnel, insufficient resources, time constraints, limited career information, parental influence and institutional support, predicted the effectiveness of guidance and counselling in shaping pupils' career pathways.

The regression model was specified as:

Dependent Variable: Pupils' Career Path Development

Independent Variables:

- i. Lack of Trained Counsellors
- ii. Inadequate Career Resources
- iii. Poor Administrative Support
- iv. Negative Peer Influence
- v. Limited Parental Support

The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights, welfare, and privacy and to ensure the integrity of the research process. All participants received clear information about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participating. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing personal identifiers from all data and securely storing completed questionnaires and interview records. The information collected was used solely for academic purposes, and the findings were reported honestly, objectively, and in accordance with accepted research ethics.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate

The study achieved a high response rate across all respondent categories. From the total sample of 128 participants, 124 responded, representing a response rate of 96.9%. Specifically, all 4 principals (100%) and all 4 guidance counsellors (100%) participated in the study. Among teachers, 7 out of 8 responded (87.5%), while 109 out of 112 pupils completed the questionnaires (97.3%). This high response rate strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

TABLE 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender (Pupils)	Male	52	47.7
	Female	57	52.3
Age Group (Pupils)	15-17 years	41	37.6
	18-20 years	48	44.0
	21+ years	20	18.4
Gender (Teachers/Counsellors)	Male	6	54.5

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teaching Experience	Female	5	45.5
	1-5 years	3	27.3
	6-10 years	5	45.5
	11+ years	3	27.3

Source: Field survey data 2026

TABLE 3: Highest Qualification (for Teachers/Counsellors)

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Diploma	12	18.8
Bachelor's Degree	40	62.5
Master's Degree	12	18.8
Total	64	100

Source: Field survey data 2026

Most teachers and counsellors held a Bachelor's degree (62.5%), while a smaller proportion had Diplomas or Master's degrees. This indicated a generally competent professional base for delivering guidance services in Pujehun District schools.

4.3 Extent to Which the FQSE Programme Has Improved Access to Education

The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme was introduced by the Government of Sierra Leone to enhance access to education by removing financial barriers. The study examined the extent to which this programme has improved access to education in the selected schools. Findings from both quantitative and qualitative data sources revealed that the FQSE Programme has contributed positively to educational access in Pujehun District.

The majority of respondents (73.4%) acknowledged that the FQSE Programme has significantly improved access to education by eliminating school fees and providing learning materials. This was particularly evident among pupils from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who previously faced challenges in enrolling and staying in school. Qualitative interviews with school administrators confirmed that enrolment figures increased following the implementation of the programme.

However, despite these improvements, some challenges remain. Some respondents (18.5%) indicated that while the programme had removed direct costs, indirect costs such as transportation, uniforms, and supplementary learning materials continued to pose challenges for some families. Additionally, some schools reported that the capitation grant provided under the FQSE Programme was sometimes insufficient to meet all operational needs, including those related to guidance and counselling services.

4.4 Effectiveness of the FQSE Programme in Enhancing Enrolment, Retention, Attendance, and Completion

The study further assessed the effectiveness of the FQSE Programme in enhancing key educational indicators including enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion rates. The findings revealed mixed outcomes across the selected schools.

Enrolment: There was a notable increase in enrolment across all four schools following the implementation of the FQSE Programme. School records indicated an average enrolment increase of 18.4% between 2021 and 2025. This suggests that the removal of school fees was a significant factor in enabling more pupils to access senior secondary education.

Retention: Retention rates also improved, with schools reporting that fewer pupils dropped out due to financial constraints. However, retention remained a concern in some cases, particularly among pupils who faced other challenges such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and economic pressures within their families.

Attendance: Regular attendance was reported to have improved as a result of the programme, although challenges persisted in some rural communities where long distances to school and lack of transportation remained barriers. Some pupils reported missing school during farming seasons or when family commitments required their presence at home.

Completion: Completion rates showed improvement, with more pupils sitting for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in recent years. However, the quality of completion remained a concern, as some pupils completed school without adequate career guidance and preparation for post-secondary opportunities.

The findings suggest that while the FQSE Programme has made significant progress in addressing financial barriers to education, complementary interventions are needed to address quality issues, including the strengthening of guidance and counselling services to ensure that pupils not only complete school but also make informed decisions about their future careers.

4.5 Barriers Limiting the Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling Services

TABLE 4: Barriers to Effective Guidance and Counselling Services

Statement (Summarised)	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
Lack of trained counsellors	6.3	10.2	14.1	39.1	30.3
High pupil-counsellor ratio	5.5	9.4	13.3	41.4	30.4
Inadequate materials/resources	4.7	8.6	12.5	42.2	32.0

Statement (Summarised)	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
Irregular counselling sessions	7.8	12.5	15.6	36.7	27.4
Poor curriculum integration	8.6	14.1	17.2	35.9	24.2
Pupils' socio-economic constraints	6.3	10.9	14.8	40.6	27.4
Cultural norms and gender stereotypes	7.0	12.5	16.4	38.3	25.8
Weak policy enforcement	9.4	15.6	17.2	33.6	24.2
Limited technology and assessment tools	6.3	11.7	14.8	39.8	27.4
Low pupil awareness of services	8.6	13.3	16.4	37.5	24.2

Source: Field survey data 2026

The results under Objective 1 reveal that respondents identify several interconnected obstacles limiting the effectiveness of guidance and counselling services in Pujehun District public secondary schools. High pupil-to-counsellor ratios (69.4%) and a shortage of experienced counsellors (71.8%) compromise service quality, often leaving inexperienced teachers in charge. Inadequate materials and resources (74.2%) further restrict students' access to career knowledge, while irregular guidance sessions (64.1%) hinder continuity and impact. Insufficient integration of counselling into the curriculum (60.1%) and poor policy enforcement (57.8%) disconnect national aims from school practice. Socioeconomic conditions affecting 68.0% of respondents also limit students' ability to act on advice, compounded by cultural norms and gender stereotypes (64.1%). The limited use of technology (67.2%) and a lack of awareness about available services (61.7%) further exacerbate the challenges in effective career guidance.

4.6 Regression Analysis Results

TABLE 5: Multiple Regression Results on Barriers Affecting Career Guidance Effectiveness

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	4.582	0.319	-	14.37	<.001
Lack of trained counsellors	-0.341	0.078	-0.351	-4.37	<.001
Inadequate resources	-0.282	0.072	-0.296	-3.91	<.001
Poor administrative support	-0.211	0.069	-0.225	-3.06	.003
Peer influence	-0.165	0.062	-0.174	-2.66	.009

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Limited parental support	-0.147	0.065	-0.153	-2.26	.025

Source: Field survey, 2026

Model Summary

Statistic	Value
R	.691
R ²	.477
Adjusted R ²	.463
F	34.82
Sig.	< .001

Source: Field survey data 2026

The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 34.82$, $p < .001$), explaining 47.7% of the variance in pupils' career development ($R^2 = .477$). Lack of trained counsellors was the strongest negative predictor ($\beta = -.351$), followed by inadequate career resources ($\beta = -.296$). Poor administrative support, peer influence, and limited parental support also significantly reduced the effectiveness of guidance and counselling services. The findings indicated that improving counsellor capacity and providing adequate resources are essential for strengthening pupils' career development.

4.7 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data from interviews were analysed thematically and used to complement the quantitative findings. Several themes emerged from the analysis:

Theme 1: Inadequate Professional Personnel

Many participants expressed concern about the shortage of trained guidance counsellors. One principal stated: *"We have only one counsellor for over 800 pupils. It is impossible for that person to provide meaningful career guidance to every pupil who needs it."*

A teacher added: *"Sometimes teachers are asked to handle counselling because there is no one else. But we are not trained for that. We don't know how to administer career assessments or provide proper career advice."*

Theme 2: Limited Resources and Facilities

Several respondents highlighted the lack of appropriate facilities and materials. A counsellor reported: *"I don't have a proper office. I use a corner in the staff room, so there is no privacy. Pupils are reluctant to discuss their career concerns when others can hear them."*

Another respondent noted: *"We don't have career information materials. We don't have computers or internet access. Pupils cannot search for information about universities or scholarship opportunities."*

Theme 3: Time Constraints

Time limitations were frequently mentioned. One counsellor explained: *"I am also a teacher. I have to teach several periods each day. The time I have for counselling is very limited. I can only see pupils during break time or after school."*

A pupil commented: *"We had only one career talk during the whole academic year. That is not enough for us to make decisions about our future."*

Theme 4: Parental and Community Influences

Several pupils mentioned family pressure as a barrier. A female pupil said: *"My parents want me to study nursing because they think it is good for a girl. But I want to study engineering. I don't know how to tell them."*

Another pupil added: *"Some careers are considered more prestigious in our community. People look down on technical and vocational training. But maybe that is what I am good at."*

Theme 5: Limited Career Information

Many pupils expressed frustration about the lack of career information. One pupil stated: *"I don't know what subjects I need to study medicine. I don't know which universities offer medicine. I don't know about scholarships. Nobody tells us these things."*

Another pupil added: *"I hear about technology and new careers, but I don't know how to get into those fields. The careers we know are teaching, nursing, police, and a few others."*

Theme 6: Institutional Support

School leaders acknowledged the need for stronger support. A principal noted: *"Guidance and counselling is important, but we have limited resources. We need more support from the education authorities to strengthen these services."*

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

The study addressed an important educational concern in the Pujehun District: the extent to which barriers within and around the school environment constrain the effectiveness of guidance and counselling in shaping pupils' career pathways. The findings revealed that while guidance and counselling services exist in the selected schools, their effectiveness is significantly limited by several interconnected barriers.

The quantitative analysis identified lack of trained counsellors as the strongest predictor of reduced counselling effectiveness ($\beta = -.351$), followed by inadequate career resources ($\beta = -.296$). Poor administrative support, peer influence, and limited parental support also significantly contributed to the ineffectiveness of guidance and counselling services. The regression model explained 47.7% of the variance in pupils' career development,

indicating that these barriers account for a substantial proportion of the challenges faced by pupils in making informed career decisions.

Qualitative findings complemented the quantitative results, revealing that high pupil-to-counsellor ratios, inadequate facilities, limited career information, time constraints, parental and community pressures, and weak institutional support collectively undermine the quality of career guidance provided to pupils. The study also found that while the Free Quality School Education Programme has improved access to education in terms of enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion, it has not adequately addressed the quality of guidance and counselling services.

Guidance and counselling can make a meaningful contribution to pupils' educational and occupational development when it is adequately staffed, resourced, planned and supported. However, inadequate professional personnel, insufficient resources, limited counselling time, inadequate career information, social pressure and weak institutional support can undermine the effectiveness of services. The regression analysis provided empirical evidence identifying which of these barriers make the strongest contribution to variations in counselling effectiveness, enabling education authorities and school leaders to prioritise interventions.

5.2 Advantages of the Study

This study offers several advantages to the field of educational research and practice. First, it provides empirical evidence on the barriers affecting guidance and counselling services in a rural context, filling a gap in the literature where most studies have focused on urban or well-resourced settings. Second, the mixed-methods approach provides both statistical evidence and qualitative depth, offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by pupils, counsellors, teachers, and school administrators.

Third, the use of regression analysis enables the identification of the relative importance of different barriers, allowing stakeholders to prioritize interventions based on evidence rather than intuition. Fourth, the findings have practical implications for policy development, school planning, and resource allocation in guidance and counselling services. Fifth, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on career development in Sierra Leone, providing a foundation for further research and evidence-based practice.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in only four senior secondary schools in Pujehun District, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other districts or regions in Sierra Leone. Second, the cross-sectional design captures data at a single point in time, making it difficult to establish causal relationships between the identified barriers and counselling effectiveness.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or recall limitations. Participants may have overestimated or underestimated certain aspects of guidance and counselling services based on their personal experiences or perceptions. Fourth, the sample size for teachers and counsellors was relatively small due to the limited number of staff in the selected schools, which may affect the statistical power of some analyses.

Fifth, the study did not examine the long-term outcomes of guidance and counselling services, such as pupils' actual career choices, further education enrolment, or employment outcomes. Longitudinal research would be needed to assess these longer-term impacts. Sixth, the study did not explore in detail the perspectives of parents and community members, who play important roles in shaping pupils' career aspirations.

5.4 Possible Applications of the Study

The findings of this study have several practical applications. First, education authorities can use the evidence to prioritize interventions for strengthening guidance and counselling services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The identification of lack of trained counsellors as the strongest predictor of reduced effectiveness suggests that investment in training and recruitment of professional counsellors should be a priority.

Second, school administrators can use the findings to advocate for resources and support for counselling departments, including dedicated counselling spaces, career information materials, and professional development opportunities for counsellors. Third, counsellors can use the findings to identify areas for improvement in their practice, such as developing stronger career information systems and engaging parents and communities in career guidance activities.

Fourth, teacher training institutions can use the findings to review their curricula and ensure that pre-service teachers are equipped with basic counselling skills and career guidance knowledge. Fifth, policymakers can use the evidence to strengthen policy frameworks for guidance and counselling, including provisions for personnel, resources, and accountability mechanisms.

Sixth, the findings can inform the design of career guidance programmes that address the specific needs of pupils in rural contexts, such as exposure to career opportunities, mentorship programmes, and links with tertiary institutions and employers. Seventh, the study provides a baseline for monitoring progress in strengthening guidance and counselling services in Pujehun District and similar contexts.

5.5 Implications for Further Research

The study has several implications for further research. First, there is a need for longitudinal research that examines the long-term career outcomes of pupils who receive guidance and counselling services, including their educational pathways, employment trajectories, and career satisfaction. Such research would provide stronger evidence on the effectiveness of career guidance interventions.

Second, comparative studies across different districts and regions in Sierra Leone would help to identify variations in the status of guidance and counselling services and the factors that contribute to effective service delivery. Such studies could inform the development of context-specific strategies for strengthening career guidance.

Third, research is needed on the perspectives of parents, community members, and employers regarding career guidance and their roles in supporting pupils' career development. This would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem within which career decisions are made.

Fourth, intervention studies could examine the effectiveness of specific strategies for strengthening guidance and counselling services, such as counsellor training programmes, career information systems, mentorship initiatives, and career exposure activities. Such research would provide evidence for evidence-based practice.

Fifth, research on the integration of career guidance into the school curriculum, teaching practices, and school culture would be valuable for understanding how career development can become a whole-school responsibility. Sixth, studies examining the use of technology in career guidance, particularly in rural contexts, could explore innovative approaches to providing career information and counselling support.

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Strengthen professional counselling capacity.** Education authorities should ensure that senior secondary schools have access to appropriately trained guidance and counselling personnel. This includes increasing the number of trained counsellors, providing professional development opportunities, and ensuring that counsellors are not overburdened with teaching or administrative responsibilities.
- 2. Provide adequate counselling facilities.** Schools should establish confidential counselling spaces and provide relevant career guidance materials, including up-to-date information on educational programmes, scholarships, and career opportunities.
- 3. Allocate dedicated counselling time.** Career guidance should be integrated into the school timetable rather than being treated solely as an activity undertaken when academic work permits. This will ensure that all pupils have regular opportunities for career exploration and counselling.
- 4. Develop current career information resources.** Schools should provide pupils with information on universities, colleges, technical and vocational education, scholarships, professional qualifications and emerging careers. This could include both printed materials and digital resources where feasible.
- 5. Strengthen career exposure activities.** Schools should organise career talks, mentorship programmes, institutional visits, career fairs and interactions with professionals. These activities can broaden pupils' understanding of possible career pathways and provide them with role models and networks.
- 6. Increase parental involvement.** Parents should be encouraged to support pupils' career development without imposing career choices that conflict with pupils' abilities and interests. Schools could organize parent education programmes on career guidance and provide resources to help parents support their children's career development.
- 7. Strengthen school leadership support.** Heads of schools should include guidance and counselling within school improvement planning, monitoring and resource allocation. Counselling should be recognized as an integral part of the school's educational mission.
- 8. Promote continuous professional development.** Counsellors and teachers responsible for counselling should receive regular training in career assessment, labour-market information, digital career guidance and contemporary counselling approaches. This will help them stay current with changing labour-market demands and counselling practices.
- 9. Establish stronger links with tertiary institutions and employers.** Such partnerships can expose pupils to realistic career pathways and current labour-market requirements. Schools should develop formal relationships with universities, colleges, technical institutions, and employers to facilitate career exposure activities.
- 10. Use evidence to target interventions.** Education authorities should use regression findings from studies such as this to identify the barriers with the greatest predictive effect and direct resources accordingly. This will enable more efficient and effective use of limited resources.
- 11. Strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of guidance and counselling services.** Schools and education authorities should develop systems for monitoring the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services, including tracking pupils' career outcomes and satisfaction with services.
- 12. Address socioeconomic constraints.** Given the impact of socioeconomic factors on pupils' ability to pursue career opportunities, schools and policymakers should consider interventions that address these constraints, such as scholarships, bursaries, and support for disadvantaged pupils.

13. Challenge cultural and gender stereotypes. Schools and communities should work together to challenge stereotypes that restrict pupils' career aspirations. This could include awareness programmes, role models, and exposure to diverse career opportunities.

14. Enhance awareness of counselling services. Many pupils may not be aware of the guidance and counselling services available to them. Schools should proactively promote these services and encourage pupils to seek career guidance.

15. Integrate career guidance into curriculum and teaching. Career development should be integrated into teaching across subjects, so that pupils understand the relevance of their studies to future careers. Teachers should be supported to incorporate career-related discussions into their lessons.

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