



Cross-Cultural Counseling as a Catalyst for Inclusivity in Implementing the Independent Curriculum in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Implementing the Independent Curriculum in schools presents challenges in creating an inclusive environment and accepting cultural diversity. One solution to overcome these challenges is through the application of cross-cultural counseling which can act as a catalyst for inclusivity. Cross-cultural counseling helps students understand, appreciate and respond to cultural differences in a positive way, thereby creating a harmonious school atmosphere and supporting their academic and social development. This research aims to explore the role of cross-cultural counseling in building multicultural awareness and its impact on student learning outcomes and behavior at school. The research method used was a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, where interviews were conducted with Counseling Guidance Teachers (BK) from MAN 1 and MAN 2 Banyumas. The research results show that cross-cultural counseling has a significant influence in increasing students' cultural awareness and encouraging them to appreciate diversity more. In addition, school counselors play a role in resolving intercultural conflicts, integrating inclusive values in school programs, and providing academic assistance that is sensitive to students' culture. Evaluations of the impact of cross-cultural counseling have also shown improvements in learning outcomes, student engagement, and reductions in negative behaviors related to cultural differences. Overall, this research concludes that cross-cultural counseling plays an important role in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and creating an inclusive school environment.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is currently facing big challenges in managing the diversity that exists in society, which is reflected in the classroom. This diversity includes differences in ethnicity, religion, language, and various socio-economic backgrounds (Hasanah & Sukmawan, 2021). Indonesian society, which consists of hundreds of ethnic groups and more than a thousand languages, is a real portrait of diversity that must be managed in the education system (Fitriani, 2020). In this context, the Merdeka Curriculum exists as a step to provide freedom for students to learn according to their interests and talents, as well as creating an environment that is more inclusive and supports diversity (Barlian et al., 2022). However, even though the Independent Curriculum aims to provide freedom, the existing cultural diversity can actually be a big challenge in its implementation, especially if there is no systematic effort to manage and utilize these differences effectively.

A lack of understanding of cultural diversity among students and teaching staff can give rise to various problems, both in relationships between students and in the teaching and learning process (Amin, 2021). Cultural conflicts often occur in the classroom, especially when students from different cultural backgrounds do not understand each other or even perceive these differences as a threat (Ulum & Utami, 2022). This can hinder the learning process and create an atmosphere that is less conducive to student development. Therefore, it is very important for educational institutions to have the right approach in managing cultural diversity, so that all students feel valued, accepted, and can learn in a supportive environment (Aziz, 2020).

One approach that can be used to overcome this challenge is cross-cultural counseling. Cross-cultural counseling is a form of counseling service that involves understanding and respecting cultural differences, as well as the ability to adapt to intercultural dynamics in everyday life (Yanuarti, 2018). In an educational context, cross-cultural counseling aims to help students develop a better understanding of their own and other people's cultures, reduce stereotypes, and build the social skills necessary to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds (P. Sari & Bulantika, 2019). Cross-cultural counseling can function as a bridge to enrich students' learning experiences and prevent the emergence of conflicts caused by cultural differences (Ariantini et al., 2019).

Apart from that, cross-cultural counseling also has a strategic role in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which focuses on developing individual potential and creating a more flexible learning experience. The Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom for students to explore their interests and learn in a way that best suits their learning style (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). However, in heterogeneous classes, where there are students with diverse cultural backgrounds, the biggest challenge is creating an inclusive learning space where every student feels comfortable and has equal opportunities to develop (Kurniati et al., 2022). Cross-cultural counseling can help facilitate this process by ensuring that cultural differences are not an

obstacle, but rather a strength that can enrich students' learning experiences (Wulandari et al., 2022).

However, although cross-cultural counseling offers many benefits, this practice is still rarely implemented optimally in many schools. Many schools do not realize the importance of cross-cultural counseling in creating an inclusive environment. Teachers and school counselors often have difficulty handling cultural differences that arise in daily interactions in the classroom, because they do not have adequate training to manage this diversity (Yaniasti, 2020). In addition, many students are not used to this approach, so they may feel uncomfortable or not open to participating in the counseling process. Under these conditions, students who feel isolated or unappreciated because of their cultural background may experience difficulties in adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum, which in turn may affect their learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the major changes presented by the Independent Curriculum require greater adaptation from all elements of education, including students, teachers and parents. This curriculum, which is more flexible and based on individual understanding, requires a deeper understanding of cultural differences, as well as the ability to work together amidst diversity (F. F. K. Sari et al., 2023). This gives rise to the need for counseling services that not only help students in facing personal or academic challenges, but also in understanding and overcoming the cultural differences that exist around them. Without the right approach, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum could risk only benefiting certain groups of students who already have more access or understanding of cultural diversity, while students from less fortunate groups could feel left behind (Supriatna et al., 2023).

Cross-cultural counseling functions to identify and overcome psychological barriers faced by students in their adaptation process to the Independent Curriculum (Wathaniyah, 2018). In many cases, students may find it difficult to express themselves or interact with classmates who come from different cultural backgrounds (Justisia, 2017). This can be caused by feelings of anxiety, fear of judgment, or even uncertainty about how they should act or speak. Without appropriate psychological support, these students are at risk of experiencing social isolation which can disrupt their academic and social development (Zakiyah et al., 2022). Cross-cultural counseling can help overcome these problems by providing a safe space for students to express their feelings, while providing guidance on how they can interact with others from different backgrounds in more constructive ways (Yanuarti, 2018).

The role of cross-cultural counseling is also very important in developing students' social and emotional abilities (Prasasti, 2020). In an increasingly global and connected world, the skills to communicate and collaborate with people from different cultures are becoming increasingly important. Cross-cultural counseling can help students understand the differences in values, language, and social norms that exist between cultures. With this approach, students not only learn about cultural diversity, but also about how they can become individuals who are more sensitive, empathetic, and able to adapt to change.

This will certainly make a positive contribution to their social and emotional development, which in turn also supports academic achievement.

On the other hand, cultural diversity in schools often becomes a big challenge for teaching staff, especially teachers who do not have special training in managing diversity (Najmina, 2018). Teachers may find it difficult to understand heterogeneous classroom dynamics, and this can hinder their ability to create an inclusive learning atmosphere (Atmanto & Muzayanah, 2020). In this case, cross-cultural counseling can also act as a means of support for teachers. Counselors can provide training or guidance to teachers regarding effective ways to manage cultural diversity in the classroom, as well as ways to approach students more sensitively to existing cultural differences. Thus, cross-cultural counseling focuses not only on students, but also on improving the overall quality of teaching.

Apart from that, having cross-cultural counseling at school can help create a more harmonious relationship between students and parents. Parents who come from different cultural backgrounds may have concerns about how their children will be received in diverse schools. Cross-cultural counseling can provide a forum for parents to discuss and gain a better understanding of the ways schools manage cultural diversity. This can strengthen partnerships between schools and parents, which is very important to support the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Differences in perspectives on education can also arise due to cultural background (Graha et al., 2022). For example, in some cultures, education is highly valued as a path to success, while in others, the emphasis is more on developing social values or practical skills. Cross-cultural counseling can help bridge these differences by providing students and parents with a greater understanding of how an inclusive education system can appreciate and utilize this diversity. This is also important in supporting the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of respecting students' individual interests and talents in the learning process.

The intercultural dynamics that occur in schools not only include interactions between students, but also between various parties in the educational environment, such as teachers, parents and the surrounding community (Roqib, 2011). In this context, cross-cultural counseling plays an important role in creating better communication between all parties involved. For example, counselors can help identify potential conflicts that arise between parents from different cultures, and help find mutually acceptable solutions. With an approach based on respect for cultural differences, cross-cultural counseling can create a more positive climate and support the creation of a more inclusive educational environment.

In the end, cross-cultural counseling not only functions as a tool to overcome problems, but also as a means to develop the positive potential possessed by every student, regardless of their cultural background. Diversity in schools should be seen as a strength that can enrich the learning experience, not as an obstacle. Through cross-cultural counseling, schools can create a more inclusive atmosphere, where every student feels valued and able to develop

according to their potential. This is an important step in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum which is oriented towards learning that is more personal, inclusive and relevant for every student.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross Cultural Counseling

Cross-cultural counseling is a counseling approach designed to understand, respect, and handle cultural differences in the counselor and counselee relationship (Justisia, 2017). This approach aims to create an inclusive counseling relationship by considering the cultural background, values, beliefs and norms that influence individual behavior and experiences (Yusman et al., 2021). In practice, cross-cultural counseling focuses on building a deep understanding of the client's diverse perspectives, including differences in language, traditions, religion, and thought patterns, which can influence how individuals respond to their challenges or problems.

Cross-cultural counselors not only act as active listeners, but also as facilitators who help clients bridge cultural gaps, overcome intercultural conflicts, and find solutions that are relevant to the values they adhere to (Hilert & Tirado, 2019). This counseling has an important role in building inclusivity, especially in multicultural environments such as schools, companies, or communities, by helping individuals from diverse backgrounds feel accepted, understood, and supported in overcoming life's challenges.

Cross-cultural counseling also involves the counselor's awareness and sensitivity to the power dynamics and discrimination that clients from certain cultural groups may experience (Ridley et al., 2021). This approach not only focuses on cultural differences, but also on shared universal values that can be the basis for building empathetic and respectful relationships. Cross-cultural counselors need to have effective communication skills, including the ability to listen actively, avoid bias, and understand the cultural context that influences the client's experience. Additionally, cross-cultural counseling often requires flexibility in applying counseling techniques and strategies tailored to each client's unique needs.

In educational settings, cross-cultural counseling plays an important role in supporting student diversity and creating inclusive learning spaces. Counselors can help students from various cultural backgrounds to feel accepted, overcome cultural barriers in social interactions, and develop their potential optimally (Ratts et al., 2016). Cross-cultural counseling also serves as a catalyst for promoting equality, diversity, and inclusivity by strengthening interpersonal relationships between students, teachers, and the school community. Thus, cross-cultural counseling not only aims to deal with

individual problems but also to encourage social harmony and strengthen mutually supportive communities amidst cultural diversity.

Independent Curriculum

The Independent Curriculum is an educational policy designed to provide flexibility and freedom in the learning process, with the main aim of developing students' potential holistically according to their needs and interests (Suryaman, 2020). This curriculum focuses on a student-centered approach, where learning is designed to provide relevant, contextual, and immersive experiences. One of the main characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum is the reduction of material-intensive learning content, so that students have more time to explore concepts, explore knowledge and actively develop skills (Angga et al., 2022). This curriculum also provides flexibility for teachers to adapt teaching methods to student needs and local conditions.

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of developing the Pancasila student profile, which includes religious values, mutual cooperation, independence, global diversity, critical thinking and creativity. This approach aims to produce students who not only excel academically, but also have strong character and are ready to face global challenges (Kurniati et al., 2022). In addition, this curriculum supports the implementation of project-based learning (project-based learning) to improve collaboration, communication and problem solving skills (Lubis et al., 2023). By providing greater space for teachers, students and schools to innovate, the Merdeka Curriculum becomes the basis for creating education that is inclusive, relevant and in line with the dynamics of future needs.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this research is a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. This approach aims to describe in depth the role of cross-cultural counseling as a catalyst for inclusivity in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in schools. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with Counseling Guidance Teachers (BK) from two high schools in Banyumas, namely MAN 1 Banyumas and MAN 2 Banyumas. This interview was conducted with three sources at each school, namely Rokhedi, Dian Sa'bani, and Nur Farkhati from MAN 1 Banyumas, as well as Kasidan, Arina Cahya Wulan Suci Aprilia, and Ilma Diar Ratna from MAN 2 Banyumas. Resource persons were chosen because they have a deep understanding and experience regarding the implementation of cross-cultural counseling in their respective schools.

During the interview, the BK teachers were asked to provide their views regarding the implementation of cross-cultural counseling in supporting

inclusivity and implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This interview process was carried out with a focus on exploring their understanding of the challenges, strategies and impact of cross-cultural counseling on student attitudes and interactions between students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. The results of this interview will be analyzed thematically to illustrate how cross-cultural counseling contributes to the development of an inclusive and harmonious learning environment, as well as supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the two schools.

RESEARCH RESULT

The Role of Cross-Cultural Counseling in Building Multicultural Awareness in Schools

Cultural diversity is an inseparable part of everyday life, including in the context of education (Yaniasti, 2020). At school, students come from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, which include differences in ethnicity, religion, language, and social values. This diversity certainly brings challenges, but also great potential for creating a richer, more open and inclusive environment. Cross-cultural counseling exists as an approach to help students understand and appreciate these differences, as well as building multicultural awareness in schools (Hermino, 2015).

Kasidan said that cross-cultural counseling not only aims to provide emotional support to students, but also to increase their awareness and understanding of the cultural diversity around them. In this context, counseling serves as an effective tool for creating space for students to reflect, express their views, and learn how to interact with others from different backgrounds. Through structured counseling sessions, students are given the opportunity to explore their own cultural values, as well as understand and appreciate the cultural values of other people.

Rokhedi added that cross-cultural counseling can help reduce the tension that often arises due to a lack of understanding of different cultures. In many cases, cultural differences can be a source of conflict or misunderstanding between students. This can appear in various forms, ranging from differences in language, ways of communicating, to different social norms. Counselors can act as mediators to help students understand and appreciate these differences, and find solutions that are acceptable to all parties. With an approach based on mutual understanding and respect, cross-cultural counseling can create a more harmonious learning space (Latipun, 2015).

Apart from that, cross-cultural counseling also plays a role in overcoming stereotypes and prejudices that often arise due to ignorance about other cultures. Negative stereotypes against certain groups can be an obstacle to creating inclusivity in schools. Counselors can help students identify and dig deeper into their prejudices, and teach them to judge people based on their character and actions, not their cultural background. This process helps students to see that every individual, regardless of culture or ethnicity, has the same value and potential.

Ilma Diar Ratna said that cross-cultural counseling also supports more effective learning in the classroom. In many schools, students from different cultures may have different ways of learning. For example, some students may be more comfortable with a learning approach based on verbal interaction, while others may prefer a more visual or practical approach. By understanding these differences, counselors can help teachers be more sensitive to students' diverse learning needs. In addition, counselors can also help students to develop learning strategies that better suit their learning styles, which in turn will improve overall learning outcomes.

In the context of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes students' freedom to learn according to their interests and potential, cross-cultural counseling can make a very important contribution (F. F. K. Sari et al., 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum aims to give students freedom in choosing their learning path, but to achieve this goal, it is important for students to understand and appreciate the diversity that exists around them (Yasmansyah & Sesmiarni, 2022). Cross-cultural counseling can help create a more inclusive learning atmosphere, where every student feels valued and accepted, regardless of their cultural background.

Cross-cultural counseling also plays a role in developing students' social skills which are very important in an increasingly global world. The ability to interact with people from various cultures is a skill that is much needed in the future, both in social life and the world of work. Through cross-cultural counseling, students can be taught how to communicate effectively and sensitively to cultural differences, as well as how to build healthy and harmonious relationships with people from various backgrounds. Thus, cross-cultural counseling helps students to become individuals who are more open, empathetic, and able to work together in a pluralistic environment.

The role of cross-cultural counseling is also very important in creating a more inclusive environment for students from minority cultural backgrounds. Students from minority cultural groups often face additional challenges in adapting to more dominant school environments. They may feel isolated or unappreciated because of their different cultural background. In this case, counselors can help students overcome these feelings and develop self-confidence, so that they can feel more accepted and appreciated at school. Apart from that, counselors can also help teachers and school staff to be more sensitive to the needs of students from minority cultural groups (Justisia, 2017).

Thus, cross-cultural counseling has a very important role in creating more inclusive schools and building deeper multicultural awareness among students, teachers and the entire school community. This approach not only enriches students' learning experiences, but also helps them to become more open, empathetic individuals, and ready to live in an increasingly pluralistic world. Through cross-cultural counseling, schools can optimize the potential of cultural diversity as a strength to create a more positive and productive learning environment.

The Importance of Inclusive Education in the Independent Curriculum and Its Relationship with Cross-Cultural Counseling

Inclusive education is an important concept in modern education, which emphasizes the need to respect diversity and provide equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background (Dodego & Witro, 2020). This concept is very relevant in the context of education in Indonesia, considering the diversity of culture, ethnicity, religion and language that exists in society (Rofik & Misbah, 2021). In implementing the Independent Curriculum, inclusive education is an important foundation that must be implemented so that every student, regardless of background, can develop optimally. In this case, cross-cultural counseling plays a strategic role as a means of supporting the success of inclusive education in schools.

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to give students the freedom to choose an educational path that suits their interests, talents and potential (Barlian et al., 2022). While providing freedom, this curriculum must also ensure that all students, whether from dominant or minority cultural backgrounds, can access a quality education that meets their needs. Dian Sa'bani stated that inclusive education in the Merdeka Curriculum does not only include academic aspects, but also includes recognition of differences and efforts to provide the necessary support for each individual. This is where cross-cultural counseling is important as a companion that helps create an environment that is more open and responsive to the needs of diverse students.

Cross-cultural counseling serves as a tool to build awareness of diversity among students. In a school, diversity is not only visible in terms of students' cultural backgrounds, but also in the way they learn, interact, and view the world. Cross-cultural counseling helps students to understand these differences in a constructive and in-depth way. Counselors play an important role in facilitating discussions that motivate students to respect each other, not only physical differences such as skin color or language, but also ways of thinking and acting (Yurika & Nugroho, 2022). This will strengthen the inclusive values in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes adaptive learning for each individual.

Inclusive education in the Independent Curriculum requires a system that can adapt to the diverse characteristics of students. Students with special needs, whether physical, emotional, or cultural, require a more personalized and sensitive approach to their differences. Cross-cultural counseling can help in this process by providing insight to educators regarding the best ways to accommodate cultural differences in learning (Yanuarti, 2018). With the help of counseling, teachers can understand how students from different cultures learn and create more relevant learning experiences for them.

Cross-cultural counseling in inclusive education helps reduce problems arising from cultural differences, such as discrimination or marginalization, by providing emotional support and teaching social skills that foster acceptance and respect among students from diverse backgrounds. It encourages students to develop empathy, tolerance, and open-mindedness, helping them overcome prejudices and broaden their perspectives. Counseling also bridges gaps in

academic achievement by addressing how cultural backgrounds influence learning styles and communication, enabling educators to offer more tailored support. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, cross-cultural counseling plays a key role in adapting learning materials and facilitating inclusive study groups, promoting cooperation and mutual respect. It supports the development of students' cultural identity, boosts self-confidence, and ensures equal opportunities for success by addressing both academic and social barriers, thus contributing to a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

As part of inclusive education, cross-cultural counseling can also help bring students closer to their true potential. Cultural diversity is often seen as an obstacle to the learning process, but on the contrary, this diversity can be a source of great strength. Through counseling, students are invited to see the positive potential of the diversity that exists around them. They are taught to respect differences, understand each other's strengths, and work together to achieve common goals (Singh et al., 2020). Cross-cultural counseling guides students to develop positive attitudes towards differences, which in turn will improve the quality of interactions and learning in the classroom.

Cross-cultural counseling contributes to inclusive education by creating a space for open discussion of cultural differences. In diverse classrooms, there is often misunderstanding or even discrimination against certain cultural groups. Counselors have a role to facilitate discussions that lead to understanding and appreciation of other cultures (Ratts et al., 2016). These open discussions not only help students understand differences, but also encourage them to be more empathetic towards each other. This strengthens the value of inclusivity which is the basis of the Independent Curriculum.

Inclusive education in the Independent Curriculum requires ongoing support for students' adaptation process in facing cultural diversity. Cross-cultural counseling provides a space for students to talk about the challenges they face in interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds. The support provided through this counseling will ensure that each student can not only adapt to a diverse learning environment, but can also develop optimally within an inclusive educational framework. Thus, cross-cultural counseling is an important key in implementing the Independent Curriculum which focuses on justice, inclusivity and diversity.

The Role of School Counselors in Encouraging Inclusivity through a Cross-Cultural Approach

Helps build Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is crucial in schools with diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, as it fosters an inclusive and harmonious learning environment. School counselors play a key role in helping students understand, appreciate, and celebrate these differences by organizing activities like cultural events, using media such as films and books, and encouraging reflection through journals or essays. These efforts enrich students' perspectives and promote empathy and respect. Counselors also model open-mindedness and empathy, serving as role models and resources for students navigating cultural

differences (Fietzer et al., 2018). Collaboration with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders is essential to ensure a consistent message about cultural diversity, strengthening students' understanding and respect for differences both in school and at home.

Apart from that, Ilma Diar Ratna added that school counselors can use technology to broaden students' cultural insight. For example, they can use online learning platforms or applications that allow students to interact with peers from various cultural backgrounds around the world. This gives students the opportunity to learn first-hand about another culture, as well as practice the cross-cultural communication skills they learn. Technology can also be used to provide educational materials about culture that students can access at any time.

Counselors also have an important role in dealing with attitudes of intolerance or prejudice that arise among students. They can help students understand that prejudice often stems from ignorance or fear of the unknown. By providing a deeper understanding of different histories and cultural backgrounds, counselors can reduce fears and increase mutual respect among students.

Helps Resolve Intercultural Conflicts

Counselors can facilitate the conflict resolution process by holding mediation sessions between the parties involved in the conflict (Holman et al., 2019). During this session, the counselor acts as a neutral party who listens to the feelings and views of both parties. Counselors teach students to speak in a respectful manner and listen with empathy. This is an opportunity for students to recognize differences in perception and begin to understand how their attitudes can affect others. Through this mediation, students learn to find solutions that are acceptable to all parties, which strengthens their relationships and reduces the potential for future conflict.

Apart from that, counselors can also use a group discussion-based approach to resolve intercultural conflicts. In these discussions, students from various cultural backgrounds are given the opportunity to talk about their experiences and how they view the current situation. Counselors can guide these discussions in a way that ensures every voice is heard and valued, while encouraging students to think more openly and inclusively. In this way, counselors not only help resolve existing conflicts, but also provide opportunities for students to learn from each other's experiences.

It is important for counselors to teach students effective communication skills in cross-cultural contexts (K.Kim & Park, 2015). Many conflicts arise due to the wrong way of communicating, whether in terms of language, way of speaking, or way of conveying feelings. School counselors can teach communication techniques that respect cultural differences, such as how to speak politely, avoiding the use of stereotypes, and how to respond to other people's feelings in a constructive way. By equipping students with these skills, counselors can help them avoid future conflict and improve the quality of their social interactions at school.

Counselors play a crucial role in resolving intercultural conflicts by teaching students emotional management techniques, fostering empathy, and identifying early signs of conflict. They guide students in managing emotions through healthy responses like open communication and relaxation techniques, which help prevent escalation. By promoting empathy, counselors help students understand different perspectives and the impact of their actions on others. They also create a school culture that values inclusivity and peaceful conflict resolution, collaborating with teachers to establish clear guidelines. Through activities like student exchanges or cultural projects, counselors encourage positive interactions between students from diverse backgrounds, helping them understand and appreciate cultural differences. Additionally, counselors must consider group dynamics, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds when addressing conflicts, ensuring solutions are fair, sustainable, and tailored to the needs of all parties involved.

Integrating Inclusive Values in School Programs

School counselors play a key role in integrating inclusive values into school programs, leveraging their understanding of students' social and emotional dynamics to create a more inclusive environment. By collaborating with teachers, staff, and parents, counselors help design programs that reflect diversity and inclusivity. They facilitate workshops on cultural diversity, promote open discussions about differences, and organize extracurricular activities such as cultural festivals to encourage students to appreciate various cultures. Counselors also guide the development of school policies that support inclusivity, such as anti-discrimination rules and conflict resolution strategies, ensuring that all students feel valued and respected.

In addition to program design, counselors assist in developing culturally sensitive curricula and teach social skills essential for intercultural interactions. They act as mediators in conflicts, helping students understand each other's perspectives and find mutually beneficial solutions. Counselors also conduct ongoing evaluations of inclusive programs to assess their impact and make improvements. By gathering input from students, parents, and the broader community, they ensure that school programs meet the needs of all parties involved and foster a welcoming, diverse environment for everyone.

Providing Academic Assistance for Cultural Sensitivity

School counselors have an important role in ensuring that every student, regardless of their cultural background, has an equal and fair academic experience (Yurika & Nugroho, 2022). Culturally sensitive academic assistance is an important aspect in creating an inclusive and friendly school environment for all students. Each student brings different values, habits, and ways of learning based on their cultural background, so school counselors need to adapt their approaches to support each individual's academic success.

Students from different cultural backgrounds often face additional challenges in navigating an educational system that may not always accommodate their way of learning. Culturally sensitive academic mentoring helps counselors understand and respond to students' needs in a way that

honors and respects those cultural differences. This involves understanding how culture influences the way students interact with course material, communicate with teachers and classmates, and how they overcome challenges in learning.

Culturally sensitive counselors will identify learning difficulties that may arise due to cultural differences, such as differences in the way of thinking, the way of speaking, or even in the way of solving problems (Ariantini et al., 2019). Students from certain cultural backgrounds may feel inhibited from speaking in front of the class or participating in group discussions because of social norms that teach them to be more reserved or avoid confrontation. In cases like these, counselors can help students develop the skills necessary to participate more actively in learning, while respecting their culture.

Culturally sensitive academic assistance also includes providing support regarding teaching materials. Students from different cultures may need adjustments in the way the material is presented to make it easier to understand. Counselors can work with teachers to ensure that teaching materials reflect cultural diversity, as well as provide context that is relevant to students' lives and experiences. For example, in history or social studies lessons, counselors can encourage teachers to introduce topics related to local culture or history that are relevant to students, so that they feel the material is closer to their experiences.

One of the important roles of counselors in providing academic assistance is to help students understand how they learn on their own and identify strategies that are effective for them. Every culture has a different approach to education and learning. Some cultures emphasize the importance of individual hard work, while others emphasize group work or collaboration (Casmini, 2012). Counselors can help students identify their unique learning styles and provide strategies to optimize their academic abilities based on the cultural approaches they bring.

Counselors also have an important role in helping to overcome gaps that may exist between students from different cultural backgrounds and the existing education system. Students who come from families with different cultural backgrounds may not always have the same resources or support in their education. Counselors can help these families by providing information about how to support their child's learning at home, as well as providing information about scholarship opportunities or other educational support available outside of school.

Through culturally sensitive academic assistance, counselors also help build students' self-confidence. Students who feel that their culture is valued and understood tend to feel more valued and are more motivated to do well in school. Counselors can identify resources that can help students feel more confident in taking classes, such as study groups or mentors who understand their culture and can provide additional support.

Evaluation of the Impact of Cross-Cultural Counseling on Learning Outcomes and Student Behavior

Evaluation of the impact of cross-cultural counseling on learning outcomes and student behavior is critical in ensuring the effectiveness of these programs in increasingly diverse educational contexts. Cross-cultural counseling aims to help students overcome challenges that arise due to cultural differences and create an inclusive environment at school (Bahri, 2020). By analyzing its impact, we can understand the extent to which this approach is able to influence students' academic and social development.

One of the positive impacts often identified through cross-cultural counseling is improving student learning outcomes. When students feel that their values and cultural identity are valued and understood, they tend to feel more comfortable and motivated to learn. Counselors can help students to identify learning strategies that suit their learning styles, which are influenced by their cultural background. In the long term, this can increase their involvement in academic activities and facilitate the achievement of better results.

Apart from that, Kasidan said that cross-cultural counseling can improve students' ability to adapt to an education system that may be foreign to them. Many students from different cultural backgrounds face difficulties in understanding the academic norms implemented in school. Counselors who have a deep understanding of students' cultural backgrounds can provide support that helps them to navigate these challenges. This kind of support can contribute to better achievement, as students feel more confident in interacting with teaching materials and participating in class.

Student behavior can also be significantly affected by cross-cultural counseling. When students perceive support that is sensitive to their culture, they tend to demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school and their friends. This can be reflected in better social behavior, such as interacting with classmates from various backgrounds, working in teams, and respecting diversity. Conversely, without a culturally sensitive approach, students may feel alienated and isolated, which can negatively impact their behavior.

The impact of cross-cultural counseling on behavior can also be seen in the reduction of intercultural conflict in schools (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Conflicts that often arise due to cultural differences can affect the learning atmosphere in the classroom (Yurika et al., 2022). With counseling that emphasizes the importance of tolerance and understanding between cultures, students can learn to be more accepting of differences and work together more harmoniously. School counselors have an important role in providing mediation and conflict resolution strategies that involve culturally sensitive considerations.

Cross-cultural counseling also helps improve students' communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal (K.Kim & Park, 2015). Students who are accustomed to multicultural environments will develop the ability to communicate in a more inclusive way, which will be very beneficial in the learning context. They will learn to appreciate differences in the way people communicate and avoid misunderstandings that can arise due to cultural

differences. As a result, social interactions at school become more effective, and relationships between students become more positive.

Through cross-cultural counseling, students can also learn to recognize and manage any cultural biases they may have. These biases are often unconscious, but they can affect how students interact with others and understand course material (Wang, 2015). Counselors can help students identify discriminatory views or attitudes and provide ways to replace them with more inclusive perspectives. This change in attitude can in turn lead to more open and fair behavior towards their friends who come from different cultural backgrounds.

It is important to evaluate the extent to which cross-cultural counseling plays a role in reducing students' anxiety and stress. Many students feel stressed because of the cultural differences that exist in the school environment. With counseling support that is sensitive to their culture, students feel that they are not alone in facing these challenges. This emotional support can reduce the levels of anxiety and stress they experience, which in turn contributes to their psychological well-being and allows them to focus on learning.

Evaluation of the impact of cross-cultural counseling also includes analysis of changes in students' attitudes toward education. Arina Cahya Wulan Suci Aprilia said that students who previously may have felt less motivated or uninterested in learning can become more enthusiastic and active after receiving support that is sensitive to their culture. They feel more valued and acknowledged in the learning process, which strengthens their sense of ownership of the school and learning itself. Thus, cross-cultural counseling has the potential to increase students' levels of school attendance and their involvement in academic activities.

Evaluation also includes measuring the impact on the relationship between teachers and students (Lestari et al., 2019). Cross-cultural counseling not only provides support to students, but also to teachers in increasing their understanding of the needs and challenges faced by students from various cultural backgrounds (Bartholomew et al., 2021). With guidance from counselors, teachers can be more sensitive to cultural differences and adapt their teaching styles to meet the needs of all students. This contributes to creating a more positive relationship between teachers and students, which can improve the learning experience in the classroom.

Cross-cultural counseling plays a crucial role in improving students' perceptions of diversity, preparing them for global challenges by fostering appreciation for different cultures and enhancing their ability to work in multicultural environments. This approach also promotes parental involvement, bridging gaps for parents from diverse backgrounds, which can boost academic success. Additionally, it aids in developing leadership skills by teaching students to appreciate differences and work inclusively. Cross-cultural counseling improves students' social welfare by enhancing empathy, tolerance, and teamwork, contributing to better school dynamics and reducing bullying. It encourages participation in extracurricular activities, enriching students' learning experiences and fostering stronger connections to the school

community. Over time, the long-term impact of cross-cultural counseling helps students gain valuable life skills, preparing them for success in a global society. Overall, this approach has the potential to create a more inclusive educational environment and improve both academic and social outcomes for students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cross-cultural counseling plays a crucial role in building multicultural awareness and promoting inclusivity in schools. By helping students understand and appreciate cultural differences, counselors create a harmonious environment that fosters mutual respect and tolerance. This approach supports the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes diversity and the development of students according to their individual needs and potentials. Counselors not only provide emotional support but also facilitate the integration of inclusive values into school programs, resolving intercultural conflicts and ensuring academic assistance is culturally sensitive. This results in improved student involvement, better relationships, and a more inclusive school atmosphere.

The impact of cross-cultural counseling is evident in improved learning outcomes and positive behavior among students. Students who engage in cross-cultural counseling are more adaptable to a multicultural environment and exhibit reduced negative behavior linked to cultural differences. To optimize its effectiveness, schools should strengthen counselors' competencies through special training, integrate cross-cultural values into counseling programs, and create spaces for multicultural discussions. Collaboration with local communities and cultural experts can further enrich the counseling approach, while ongoing evaluations will ensure the success of these initiatives in supporting the Merdeka Curriculum and fostering an inclusive environment.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Further research could include exploring the most effective cross-cultural counseling methodologies, including empathy-based approaches, cross-cultural communication, and understanding local and global values. In addition, studies could also focus on developing special training modules for school counselors to strengthen their skills in dealing with cultural diversity issues, such as intercultural conflict, stereotypes, and prejudice, which can affect the success of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Further research could also expand the scope by evaluating the impact of cross-cultural counseling on increasing inclusivity in schools, such as participation of students from various cultural backgrounds, more harmonious interpersonal relationships, and improved student learning outcomes. By using quantitative and qualitative approaches, further studies can provide empirical evidence about how cross-cultural counseling can accelerate the creation of an independent, fair and inclusive educational environment. This research is also relevant for providing policy recommendations to the government and educational institutions regarding the importance of integrating cross-cultural counseling in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

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