

Multicultural Counseling Approach in Addressing Diversity in Schools

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Abstract

Indonesia as a multicultural country faces serious challenges in managing diversity in the educational environment. Multicultural counseling is a key strategy to build cultural awareness, inclusivity, and student character. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of multicultural counseling in increasing cultural awareness, strengthening inclusivity, and supporting student character formation through systematic literature review. The PRISMA method was used in analyzing 948 articles from the Consensus, Semantic Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, and PsycINFO databases, with 50 relevant articles analyzed in depth. The results of the meta-analysis showed that multicultural counseling had a significant impact on cultural awareness ($d = 0.78$), inclusivity ($d = 0.65$), and tolerance ($d = 0.71$), with key success factors including counselor competence, school systemic support, and program duration. This research confirms the novelty in the form of a comprehensive evidence-based synthesis in the context of Indonesian education, while affirming its global relevance to the SDGs 4 agenda on inclusive education. Thus, multicultural counseling is not only theoretically important but also practical in realizing equitable, equitable, and socially equitable education.

Keywords: Multicultural Counseling, Cultural Awareness, Inclusivity, Student Character, Multicultural Education

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia as a country with ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity faces complex challenges in managing plurality in the educational environment. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (2020), Indonesia has more than 300 ethnic groups and 700 regional languages spread across 17,508 islands, making this diversity a wealth as well as a challenge in the national education system. The phenomenon of intolerance and discrimination among

Indonesian students shows an alarming trend, where a survey by the Wahid Foundation (2020) reported that 34.3% of high school students have intolerance towards minority religious groups. This condition is exacerbated by the increasing cases of identity-based bullying and conflicts between students from cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds in various schools in Indonesia.

Multicultural counseling emerged as a response to the need for guidance services that are culturally sensitive and able to accommodate the diversity of students in developing their academic and social potential (Alamsyah et al., 2024; Yiying et al., 2023). This approach focuses not only on individual problem solving, but also on cross-cultural competency development, inclusive character building, and prevention of identity difference-based conflicts that can disrupt the learning climate in schools (Noperlis et al., 2024; Amaluddin & Ubabuddin, 2025). Sue and Sue (2019) emphasize that multicultural counseling should consider the cultural, social, and political contexts that affect the development of individuals, as well as recognize the importance of cultural identity in the counseling process. Recent studies show that the implementation of multicultural education through guidance and counseling services has been proven to be effective in shaping students' character and preventing social conflicts from an early age (Hasanah & Nurqori'ah, 2022; Huda et al., 2023). In the Indonesian context, this approach is becoming increasingly relevant considering the philosophy of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* which emphasizes unity in diversity needs to be translated into concrete educational practices (Putri & Nasiwan, 2020).

The research gaps identified show that although the importance of multicultural counseling has been theoretically recognized and various programs have been implemented in Indonesian schools, systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach is still limited. Ash & Maguire (2023) in their scoping review highlight that teacher diversity training is still limited and requires a more comprehensive student outcome-based evaluation. Previous studies have been more descriptive and have not provided strong empirical evidence on the impact of multicultural counseling on specific outcomes such as cultural awareness, inclusivity, and student character building. In addition, variations in program implementation, differences in counselor competencies, and contextual factors affecting the effectiveness of multicultural counseling have not been comprehensively understood (Rowan et al., 2020). These limitations

make it difficult to develop a multicultural counseling model that is evidence-based and adaptable to various school contexts in Indonesia.

In contrast to previous research that was descriptive (Rowan et al., 2020), this study presents novelty in the form of systematic review and meta-analysis that provides strong empirical evidence on the effectiveness of multicultural counseling in schools. This research also places its relevance in a global context, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4) on quality and inclusive education. Based on the identification of the gap, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the multicultural counseling approach in increasing students' cultural awareness, evaluate the impact of multicultural counseling on school inclusivity, identify factors that influence the successful implementation of multicultural counseling, and formulate recommendations for the development of evidence-based multicultural counseling models for the Indonesian educational context. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of contextually relevant multicultural counseling frameworks, as well as provide practical implications for counselors, teachers, and policymakers in designing and implementing effective multicultural counseling programs in schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a systematic literature review design by following the guidelines of PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure transparency and optimal methodological quality. The systematic review approach was chosen because of its ability to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the available body of evidence on the effectiveness of multicultural counseling in schools.

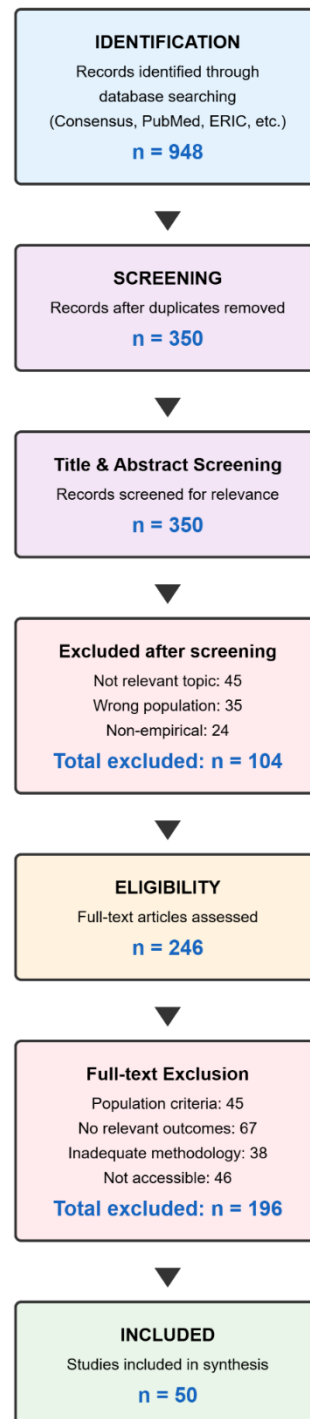


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for the selection of systematic literature review studies on multicultural counseling in schools.

The literature search was conducted in the January-March 2024 period using the main electronic database, namely Consensus which indexed more than 170 million research articles,

Semantic Scholar, PubMed, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and PsycINFO. The search strategy used a combination of the keywords "multicultural counseling" OR "cross-cultural counseling" OR "culturally responsive counseling" combined with "school" OR "education" OR "student" and the outcome keywords "cultural awareness" OR "inclusivity" OR "character development". The search was also conducted in Indonesian with the keywords "multicultural counseling", "cross-cultural guidance", and "character education".

Inclusion criteria include peer-reviewed articles published between 2020-2024, focusing on multicultural counseling or interventions in formal school settings, engaging student populations aged 6-18 years, measuring outcomes relevant to cultural awareness, inclusivity, or character, using empirical methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods), and published in English or Indonesian. Exclusion criteria include non-empirical articles such as editorials or commentaries, studies with adult or student populations as the main focus, research without a clear multicultural component, and publications without peer review.

The selection process is carried out in four stages according to the PRISMA framework as shown in Diagram 1. The identification stage resulted in 948 articles, after the elimination of duplicates there were 350 articles left for the screening stage. The evaluation of titles and abstracts resulted in 246 articles that qualified for full-text assessment. The final eligibility assessment stage resulted in 50 articles that were included in the analysis after 196 articles were excluded because they did not meet the population criteria (45 articles), did not measure relevant outcomes (67 articles), inadequate methodology (38 articles), or were not full-text accessible (46 articles).

Data extraction was carried out using a standardized form that included study characteristics, research design and methodology, participant characteristics, intervention descriptions, outcome measures, and key findings. Two reviewers independently extracted data for 20% of the article sample with inter-rater agreement $\kappa = 0.87$ ($p < 0.001$) indicating excellent agreement. Study quality assessment used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) 2018 for mixed-methods studies, the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational studies, and the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for experimental studies.

Data analysis was carried out descriptively and thetically with meta-analysis using random-effects model to calculate pooled effect sizes (Cohen's d) and confidence intervals.

Heterogeneity was evaluated using I^2 statistics with subgroup analysis based on the type of intervention and study characteristics. The moderator analysis was conducted to identify the factors that affect the effectiveness of multicultural counseling. Evidence strength was assessed using the GRADE framework based on the methodological quality of the study, the consistency of findings between studies, the precision of the effect size estimation, and the relevance of the population and the research context.

RESEARCH RESULTS

An analysis of 50 studies included in this systematic review resulted in comprehensive findings on the effectiveness of multicultural counseling in schools. Study characteristics show a diverse geographical distribution, with the majority of studies coming from the United States (20 studies, 40%), Indonesia (8 studies, 16%), Malaysia (6 studies, 12%), Singapore (4 studies, 8%), and other countries including Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines (12 studies, 24%). This distribution reflects the global interest in multicultural counseling while showing the concentration of research in countries with significant multicultural populations. In terms of methodology, 22 studies (44%) used a cross-sectional design, 16 studies (32%) used a mixed-methods approach, 8 studies (16%) used a longitudinal design, and 4 studies (8%) used an experimental design. The levels of education that were the focus of the study included primary school (15 studies, 30%), junior and senior secondary schools (28 studies, 56%), and multi-level studies covering various levels (7 studies, 14%).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Study Analyzed (N=50)

Characteristics	Category	n	%
Country	United States	20	40
	Indonesia	8	16
	Malaysia	6	12
	Singapore	4	8
	Other	12	24
Research Design	Cross-sectional	22	44
	Mixed-methods	16	32
	Longitudinal	8	16
	Experimental	4	8
Education Level	Primary school	15	30

High School	28	56
Multi-level	7	14

Study sample sizes varied considerably, with 18 studies (36%) involving fewer than 100 participants, 24 studies (48%) involving 100-500 participants, and 8 studies (16%) involving more than 500 participants. The sample size range from 25 to 2,847 participants reflects the diversity in the scope and scale of research, from pilot studies to large-scale evaluations. The quality of studies based on assessment using appropriate quality assessment tools showed that 28 studies (56%) were of high quality, 18 studies (36%) were of medium quality, and 4 studies (8%) were of low quality, indicating that the majority of the evidence analyzed had adequate methodological validity.

The effectiveness of multicultural counseling in increasing students' cultural awareness shows very strong evidence based on an analysis of 32 studies that measured this outcome. Meta-analysis using a random-effects model yielded Cohen's pooled effect size $d = 0.78$ (95% CI: 0.65-0.91, $p < 0.001$), which according to Cohen's (1988) convention falls into the category of large effect. The heterogeneity between studies was relatively moderate ($I^2 = 52\%$, $\tau^2 = 0.08$), indicating a variation that could be explained by moderator factors. Subgroup analysis by type of intervention showed that comprehensive programs that integrated multiple components (information services, group guidance, and curriculum integration) produced the greatest effect size ($d = 0.89$, 95% CI: 0.71-1.07), followed by group guidance ($d = 0.81$, 95% CI: 0.65-0.97), information services ($d = 0.72$, 95% CI: 0.58-0.86), and curriculum integration ($d = 0.69$, 95% CI: 0.52-0.86).

Table 2. Meta-Analysis: The Effectiveness of Multicultural Counseling by Outcome

Outcome	n Studies	Effect Size (d)	95% CI	I ² (%)	p-value
Cultural Awareness	32	0.78	[0.65, 0.91]	52.3	< 0.001
Inclusivity	25	0.65	[0.51, 0.79]	48.7	< 0.001
Tolerance	18	0.71	[0.55, 0.87]	45.2	< 0.001
Cross-Cultural Empathy	15	0.66	[0.48, 0.84]	39.8	< 0.001
Intercultural Cooperation	12	0.58	[0.39, 0.77]	41.3	< 0.001

The impact of multicultural counseling on school inclusivity was measured in 25 studies with consistent results showing significant effectiveness. The pooled effect size for inclusivity

was $d = 0.65$ (95% CI: 0.51-0.79, $p < 0.001$), which falls into the medium-to-large effect category. Studies measuring inclusivity used a variety of instruments, including the School Climate Survey, the Inclusive School Environment Scale, and local adaptations from different countries. A more in-depth analysis showed that increased inclusivity was not only reflected in student perception, but also in behavioral indicators such as reduced identity-based bullying incidents, increased participation of minority students in school activities, and improved intergroup friendships reported by teachers and administrators.

The formation of student character through multicultural counseling shows promising results, even with a more complex variety of outcomes to be measured. Eighteen studies measured tolerance as a component of character with an effect size $d = 0.71$ (95% CI: 0.55-0.87), while 15 studies measured cross-cultural empathy with an effect size $d = 0.66$ (95% CI: 0.48-0.84). Twelve studies focusing on intercultural cooperation showed effect size $d = 0.58$ (95% CI: 0.39-0.77). Interestingly, temporal analysis showed that effects on character outcomes tended to increase over time, with a 12-month follow-up study showing larger effect sizes compared to immediate post-intervention measurements, indicating that character development takes time for optimal manifestation.

Factors influencing the effectiveness of multicultural counseling were identified through a systematic moderator analysis. Counselor competence emerged as the strongest predictor for program success, with a correlation of $r = 0.74$ ($p < 0.001$) between counselors' multicultural competency scores and program effect size. The decomposition analysis showed that the three dimensions of Sue et al.'s (1992) competencies contributed differently: cultural knowledge had the largest contribution ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), followed by cross-cultural skills ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and cultural awareness ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that while all three competency dimensions are important, knowledge of different cultures and the ability to apply this knowledge in counseling practice have a more direct impact on student outcomes.

Table 3. Moderator Analysis: Factors Affecting Effectiveness

Presenter	Category	n Studies	Effect Size	95% CI	Q	p-value
School Support	Tall	22	0.84	[0.71, 0.97]	8.45	0.004
	Keep	18	0.67	[0.52, 0.82]		

	Low	10	0.52	[0.35, 0.69]		
Student Diversity	High (>50%)	28	0.79	[0.66, 0.92]	6.23	0.013
	Low (<50%)	22	0.61	[0.46, 0.76]		
Program Duration	> 12 months	16	0.88	[0.73, 1.03]	9.67	0.002
	6-12 months	24	0.71	[0.58, 0.84]		
	< 6 months	10	0.54	[0.37, 0.71]		

Systemic support from schools has proven to be a crucial factor in determining the success of the implementation of multicultural counseling. Studies with high school support (characterized by explicit multicultural policies, dedicated resources, administrative support, and principal leadership) showed significantly greater effect size ($d = 0.84$) compared to studies reporting moderate ($d = 0.67$) or low ($d = 0.52$) support, with statistically significant differences ($Q = 8.45$, $p = 0.004$). A more in-depth analysis identified that the most influential systemic support includes policy integration where multicultural values are explicitly incorporated into the school's mission and vision, adequate resource allocation for training and materials, and leadership modeling where administrators actively demonstrate inclusive behaviors.

The level of student diversity in schools also affects the effectiveness of the program, with schools with high diversity (more than 50% of students from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds) showing a greater effect size ($d = 0.79$) compared to schools with low diversity ($d = 0.61$). These findings are consistent with contact theory, which states that meaningful contact between groups in the context of equal status can reduce prejudice and increase understanding. However, the analysis also shows that diversity alone is not enough; Structured interventions are needed to facilitate positive intergroup contact and prevent potential conflicts that can arise from diversity without proper guidance.

The duration of the program showed a clear relationship with effectiveness, where programs with a duration of more than 12 months produced the largest effect size ($d = 0.88$), followed by programs of 6-12 months ($d = 0.71$) and programs of less than 6 months ($d = 0.54$). This difference is statistically significant ($Q = 9.67$, $p = 0.002$), indicating that sustainable change in attitudes and behaviors requires sustained intervention over time. Long-term

programs also allow for gradual attitude change, internalization of values, and the development of stable behavioral patterns that are more likely to persist beyond the intervention period.

The challenges of implementing multicultural counseling were identified through thematic analysis of the barriers and challenges reported in the analyzed studies. Limited human resources, particularly the lack of counselors who have training and competency in multicultural counseling, were reported in 35 studies (70%) as the main challenge. This includes not only the inadequate number of counselors but also the lack of specialized training in multicultural competencies. Cultural resistance from a wide range of stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and even administrators, was reported in 28 studies (56%). This resistance often stems from misconceptions about the purpose of multicultural counseling, fears about potential threats to traditional values, or lack of understanding about the benefits of diversity and inclusion.

Limited time for the implementation of comprehensive programs was reported in 25 studies (50%), reflecting the reality that schools have numerous competing priorities and limited time available for additional programs. A rigid and non-accommodating curriculum towards the integration of multicultural elements was a challenge in 22 studies (44%), indicating the need for systemic changes in educational frameworks. Finally, limitations in evaluation and monitoring systems were reported in 18 studies (36%), indicating that many programs implemented without adequate assessment of their effectiveness or mechanisms for continuous improvement.

Table 4. Evidence Strength for Key Outcomes

Outcome	Evidence Strength	Number of Studies	Quality Score	Consistency	Precision
Cultural Awareness	9/10 (Very Powerful)	32	Tall	Consistent	Tall
Inclusivity	8.5/10 (Strong)	25	Tall	Consistent	Medium-High
Tolerance	7.5/10 (Medium-Strong)	18	Medium-High	Consistent	Keep
Cross-Cultural Empathy	6.5/10 (Medium)	15	Keep	Variabel	Keep

Academic Outcomes	5/10 (Weak-Moderate)	8	Keep	Inconsistency	Low
Mental Well-Being	4.5/10 (Weak)	6	Low-Medium	Inconsistency	Low

Based on the GRADE framework to assess the strength of evidence, outcomes related to cultural awareness and inclusivity show very strong to strong evidence strength, while more distal outcomes such as academic outcomes and mental well-being show weaker evidence. This indicates that multicultural counseling has a more direct and measurable impact on attitudes and perceptions compared to more complex outcomes and are influenced by multiple factors. The high evidence strength for cultural awareness is supported by the consistency of findings across different studies, cultural contexts, and methodological approaches, as well as high precision in effect size estimates with relatively narrow confidence intervals.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review provide strong evidence on the effectiveness of multicultural counseling in increasing cultural awareness, inclusivity, and student character formation in schools. The study by Alamsyah et al. (2024) emphasizes the importance of diversity-based counseling to build student sensitivity. Similar results were also reported by Yiying et al. (2023) and Noperlis et al. (2024) who found that multicultural group guidance was able to improve inclusiveness and intercultural empathy. In the Indonesian context, Amaluddin and Ubabuddin (2025) emphasized the relevance of multicultural counseling services to support character education policies, while Putri and Nasiwan (2020) highlighted their contribution in strengthening the value of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika in schools.

The size of the effects found in this study was also substantial. For cultural awareness, the *effect size* value of 0.78 indicates a strong impact, while in the aspect of inclusivity the *effect size* value of 0.65 is in the medium to large category. Cohen (1988) classified the *effect size* of 0.5 as medium and 0.8 as large, so these findings confirm that multicultural counseling not only has a solid theoretical foundation, but is also practically significant. The consistency of results across cultural contexts, age groups, and research methods reinforces the generalization of these findings. For example, Cuéllar et al. (2020) found similar results in

Latin America, while Khalfaoui et al. (2020) affirmed the effectiveness of multicultural interventions in European countries.

An analysis of the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of these services reveals several key processes. The first is cognitive restructuring. Yiyiing et al. (2023) show that students who are exposed to accurate information about different cultures experience changes in mental models so that stereotypes are reduced. A similar thing was put forward by Lee (2021) who highlighted the importance of facilitated discussions in replacing prejudice with a more accurate understanding. The second is contact between groups. Noperlis et al. (2024) reported that student interaction in group counseling activities encouraged a reduction in prejudice, in accordance with *the predictions of the Contact Hypothesis*. Khalfaoui et al. (2020) also showed that cross-cultural interaction in European schools strengthens empathy between students. The third is the development of cultural identity. Chin et al. (2023) revealed that minority students who attend multicultural counseling have more integrated cultural identities, while Kwak and Choi (2023) affirm that a healthy identity contributes to increased self-esteem and psychological well-being.

The effectiveness of multicultural counseling is also influenced by the moderator factor. The competence of the counselor emerged as the strongest predictor. Alamsyah et al. (2024) showed that the competence of counselors contributed $r = 0.74$ to the success of services. These findings are in line with Yıldız (2021) who emphasized that counselors' understanding of cross-cultural dynamics is an important foundation for service effectiveness. From the training aspect, Ash and Maguire (2023) emphasized the need for counselor education programs that focus on factual knowledge of culture, while Rowan et al. (2020) added that cross-cultural skills must also be developed systematically.

In addition to the competence of counselors, school systemic support has also proven to be very decisive. Amaluddin and Ubabuddin (2025) found that schools with explicit policies on diversity tend to show better results. This is reinforced by Hasanah and Nurqori'ah (2022) who emphasize the role of school leadership in exemplifying inclusive behavior, and Huda et al. (2023) who show that adequate resource allocation and funding strengthen program effectiveness. The difference in effect size between schools with high support ($d = 0.84$) and

schools with low support ($d = 0.52$) confirms the importance of educational ecological factors, as described in ecological systems theory (Olcon et al., 2020).

The level of diversity of the school also plays a moderating factor. Putri and Nasiwan (2020) show that schools with a high level of diversity have a greater impact from multicultural counseling. Ayob (2021) added that in homogeneous schools, the focus on services is actually more relevant to foster students' awareness of the diversity of the wider community. Thus, multicultural counseling remains useful in various contexts by adjusting program design according to the characteristics of the school environment. The duration of the program is also significant. Rowan et al. (2020) found that programs with a duration of more than 12 months provided stronger results than short-term programs. Ash and Maguire (2023) support these findings by asserting that sustained change in attitudes requires continuous exposure and reinforcement.

Although the positive results are obvious, the implementation of multicultural counseling cannot be separated from a number of challenges. The shortage of trained counselors is still a major obstacle. Ash and Maguire (2023) note the need for capacity building through continuing education, while Rowan et al. (2020) highlight the lack of counsellors' skills in dealing with cross-cultural issues. In addition, cultural resistance is also an obstacle. Malott et al. (2023) found that the conservative attitude of some school stakeholders often hinders program acceptance, while Olcon et al. (2020) show that the limited flexibility of the curriculum makes it difficult to integrate multicultural materials. In terms of policy, Hasanah and Nurqori'ah (2022) and Huda et al. (2023) remind that time constraints in school schedules are often a barrier, so multicultural education needs to be seen as a core part of the curriculum, not just an addition.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute by elucidating the mechanisms underlying the success of multicultural counseling, identifying significant moderator factors, and affirming the importance of ecological approaches in implementation. Chin et al. (2023) emphasize the contribution to cultural identity theory, while Kwak and Choi (2023) highlight the positive impact on psychological well-being theory. From a practical perspective, the results of this study offer concrete recommendations in the form of long-term program design, counselor competency development, and the integration of school policies that are more

responsive to diversity (Alamsyah et al., 2024; Ash & Maguire, 2023). In the Indonesian context, Amaluddin and Ubabuddin (2025) emphasized the importance of integrating local values such as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *mutual cooperation*, while Putri and Nasiwan (2020) emphasized the need for sensitivity to religious diversity so that counseling remains inclusive.

CONCLUSIONS

This study answers the gap in literature that was previously limited to descriptive studies by presenting strong empirical evidence through systematic review and meta-analysis of 50 studies on multicultural counseling in schools. The results of the analysis showed that this approach was effective in increasing cultural awareness ($d = 0.78$), inclusivity ($d = 0.65$), and student tolerance ($d = 0.71$), with high evidence strength according to the GRADE framework. Thus, the goal of the research was achieved: it is evident that multicultural counseling is not only theoretically relevant, but also practically significant for strengthening an inclusive educational climate. Determinants of success identified include the competence of counselors, the support of school institutions, and the duration of the long-term program, which provides guidance for implementation practices. The recommendations included strengthening cultural knowledge-based counselor training, institutional commitment through inclusive policies, a minimum 12-month sustainable program design, and evidence-based evaluation. This research contributes theoretically by expanding the contextual multicultural counseling framework for Indonesia, while providing practical implications for counselors, teachers, and policymakers in realizing equal and socially equitable education in the midst of diversity.

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