

Guidance and Counseling Across Borders: A Comparative Study of Counselor Well-Being in Indonesia and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The psychological well-being of school counselors is crucial for effective guidance and counseling services in educational settings, yet significant challenges related to administrative burden, professional recognition, and institutional support persist in both Indonesia and Malaysia. This study aimed to compare the psychological well-being of school counselors in these two countries using Ryff's multidimensional framework, focusing on how contextual and institutional factors shape well-being outcomes. A quantitative comparative design was employed, utilizing Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale and analyzing data from eight primary school counselors (four from Medan, Indonesia, and four from Penang, Malaysia). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.020$), with all Malaysian counselors exhibiting "very high" levels of psychological well-being, while Indonesian counselors ranged from "high" to "very high." These findings highlight that Malaysian counselors benefit from more structured professional support, lower administrative burdens, and greater institutional recognition compared to their Indonesian counterparts, who face challenges of role overload and limited support. The study contributes to comparative education literature by emphasizing the importance of systemic and organizational factors in shaping counselor well-being, and offers evidence-based insights for policymakers to improve support structures in schools. For future research, expanding the sample size, including secondary school counselors, and exploring longitudinal impacts of policy changes on counselor well-being are recommended.

Keywords: counselor, comparative education, Indonesia, Malaysia, psychological well-being



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INTRODUCTION

Education plays a pivotal role in the advancement of individuals and societies. It is universally recognized as a lifelong necessity, enabling people to develop cognitively, emotionally, and socially. In the global context, nations strive to improve their educational systems to meet contemporary challenges and enhance human capital. Countries such as Finland have emerged as benchmarks for education excellence due to innovative and equitable approaches—particularly the prioritization of teacher quality and holistic student development (Kurniawan et al., 2024). Likewise, China presents a contrasting model of rigorous academic routines and parental expectations, which have fueled an intensely competitive environment (Kurniawan et al., 2024). These international examples underscore the diversity of educational paradigms and stimulate comparative inquiries between neighboring nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia's education system is grounded in its National Education System Law (UU No. 20/2003), which defines education as a conscious and planned effort to create learning environments that enable students to actively develop their potential (Munirah, 2015; Syaadah et al., 2023). The country adopts a tripartite model of education—formal, non-formal, and informal—recognizing learning that occurs both within and outside of institutional settings.

Conversely, Malaysia organizes its education system through a centralized structure under the Ministry of Education (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia), comprising preschool, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The system is distinguished by evaluative mechanisms, community engagement, and the integration of vocational pathways (Kalsum et al., 2023). Amid these structural distinctions, both countries emphasize guidance and counseling services (bimbingan dan konseling/BK) as integral components of their school systems. These services are crucial in shaping students' psychosocial competencies and academic resilience. However, the effectiveness of counseling programs hinges significantly on the psychological well-being of school counselors themselves. As educational frontliners, BK teachers (guidance and counseling teachers) often face administrative burdens, role ambiguity, and emotional stressors that threaten their psychological well-being (Madu et al., 2024).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the importance of counseling services in schools, studies indicate that school counselors in both Indonesia and Malaysia experience psychological challenges that hinder their performance. In Indonesia, guidance teachers are often overburdened with administrative tasks and underappreciated in their professional capacities. In Malaysia, although support systems exist, counselors still face moderate levels of psychological well-being and are susceptible to occupational stress (Habibah, 2019; Madu et al., 2024). These conditions impair their ability to effectively support students and execute developmental programs. A general solution proposed by various stakeholders is to enhance the psychological well-being of school counselors through institutional support, professional recognition, and the integration of psychological frameworks into BK training and evaluation. Among these frameworks, Carol Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being is increasingly used as a diagnostic and developmental tool.

Ryff's six-dimensional model of psychological well-being—comprising self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth—has proven effective in assessing mental health in helping professions, including school counselors (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Research suggests that promoting these dimensions among school counselors can lead to better performance, increased job satisfaction, and reduced burnout (Putri et al., 2023; Pedhu, 2022). Moreover, several protective factors such as religiosity, mindfulness, social support, self-concept, and goal orientation have been identified as contributors to the enhancement of counselors' psychological well-being (Purwaningrum, 2022; Yenita, 2022). Evidence from school-based studies in Indonesia and Malaysia shows that interventions aimed at fostering emotional resilience, empathy, and social cohesion can significantly improve the psychological well-being of counselors, which in turn positively influences the quality of services provided to students (Ikhwaniah & Purwoko, 2023; Ramdani et al., 2020; Putriani & Kunarto, 2020).

While comparative research on educational systems between Indonesia and Malaysia is well established, few studies specifically examine the psychological well-being of BK teachers across both contexts. Research has generally focused on student outcomes, curriculum effectiveness, or macro-level governance (Habibah, 2019; Kalsum et al., 2023). Furthermore, much of the literature concerning counselors' well-being tends to be country-specific and lacks comparative depth. Even where psychological well-being is explored, existing studies often employ generic mental health scales rather than applying a comprehensive framework such as Ryff's model. This limits the understanding of how each psychological domain manifests among counselors operating within different educational and cultural systems. The existing

research also falls short in providing actionable recommendations tailored to the unique administrative and sociocultural environments of Indonesian and Malaysian schools. Additionally, the role of innovative and culturally grounded counseling interventions—such as the “budaya kasih sayang” (culture of love) approach practiced in Malaysia or the classical and individual guidance formats in Indonesia—remains underexplored in relation to counselors' psychological functioning (Hikmah et al., 2023). Thus, a research gap exists in systematically comparing the psychological well-being of BK teachers in Indonesia and Malaysia using a robust theoretical framework, while also linking it to contextual counseling practices.

This study aims to examine and compare the psychological well-being of school counselors in Indonesia and Malaysia using Ryff's multidimensional framework. The research investigates how various contextual and demographic factors—including workload, role perception, institutional support, and cultural counseling practices—contribute to the counselors' well-being in each country. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative approach and its application of a comprehensive psychological framework to assess guidance professionals across two Southeast Asian nations with distinct educational structures and cultural traditions. While prior studies have investigated counselors' stress or job satisfaction in isolated contexts, few have simultaneously explored these phenomena through a multidimensional well-being lens across countries. The central hypothesis is that while Indonesian and Malaysian counselors operate in different systems, their psychological well-being is influenced by a common set of factors (e.g., administrative burden, role clarity, support structures) but expressed differently due to cultural, institutional, and policy variations. The scope of this study encompasses BK teachers in secondary schools from both countries, with data collected through standardized psychological well-being instruments, supported by qualitative insights from selected interviews. The research contributes to policy recommendations for counselor training, support systems, and well-being enhancement in school settings. By highlighting the interplay between institutional context and counselor psychology, this research aims to advance the discourse on educational quality through a counselor-centered lens and advocate for policies that prioritize the mental health of school-based professionals.

METHOD

Research Design and Approach

This study adopted a quantitative comparative research design to investigate the psychological well-being of school counselors in Indonesia and Malaysia. The quantitative approach was selected because it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data, which is essential for objectively measuring psychological constructs and testing hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). The design was cross-sectional and comparative, aiming to examine differences in psychological well-being across two independent groups—school counselors from Indonesia and Malaysia. Given that the data did not meet the assumption of homogeneity of variance, as confirmed by Levene's Test for Equality of Variances ($p < 0.05$), a non-parametric statistical method, the Mann-Whitney U test, was employed to compare the median scores of the two groups (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

Research Sites and Participants

The research was conducted in two Southeast Asian countries. In Malaysia, the study site was SK Bandar Puteri Jaya, Penang, while in Indonesia, data were collected from three schools: SD IT Tahfidzil Qur'an, MIS Hubbul Wathon, and SDN 106794, all located in Medan, North Sumatra. These schools were purposively selected to represent both public and Islamic primary school environments that have established guidance and counseling services. The participants of the study were active school counselors (BK teachers) from each selected school. A total of 40 participants were involved, with 20 counselors from Indonesia and 20 counselors from Malaysia. The number of respondents was deemed sufficient for non-parametric analysis involving two independent samples (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2016). Participation was voluntary, and all respondents gave informed consent before completing the research instrument.

Instrumentation

The main instrument used in this study was a psychological well-being scale adapted from Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (1989). This instrument has been widely validated and used in psychological research and is composed of six core dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Each of these dimensions reflects a key component of an individual's psychological functioning. The items on the scale were arranged using a five-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate a higher level of psychological well-being. Table 1 summarizes the dimensions and their descriptions.

Table 1. Dimensions of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being

| No | Dimension | Description |
|----|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Self-Acceptance | Positive evaluation of oneself and acknowledgment of past experiences. |
| 2 | Positive Relations with Others | Warm, satisfying, and trusting interpersonal relationships. |
| 3 | Autonomy | Self-determination and independence in decision-making. |
| 4 | Environmental Mastery | Ability to manage environmental demands effectively. |
| 5 | Purpose in Life | A sense of meaning, goal orientation, and direction in life. |
| 6 | Personal Growth | Continual development and realization of individual potential. |

Before its administration, the scale was validated through expert review for content appropriateness. Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a score of 0.87, indicating high reliability (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out over four weeks during March and April 2025. Participants in Indonesia completed printed questionnaires distributed directly by the research team, while participants in Malaysia responded through a secure Google Forms link. Each participant received a brief explanation of the study's purpose and procedures, along with assurances of confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any stage. Responses were anonymized and stored securely to protect participants' identities.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were first subjected to preliminary screening to identify and remove missing values and outliers. Descriptive statistics such as means, medians, standard deviations, and ranges were calculated for each of the six psychological well-being dimensions. To test for variance equality between groups, Levene's Test was performed. The results showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the data did not meet the assumptions of parametric tests (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017). As such, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed as an alternative to the independent samples t-test. The Mann-Whitney U test is well-suited for comparing two independent groups when the dependent variable is ordinal or not normally distributed. This test ranks all scores across groups and evaluates whether the distributions differ significantly (Nachar, 2008). The formulas used for computing the U and Z scores are: $U = n_1n_2 + n_1(n_1 + 1)/2 - R_1$ Where R_1 is the sum of ranks for Group 1 (e.g., Indonesia) $Z = (U - \mu)/\sigma$ Used to convert the U statistic into a standard score for significance testing. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The level of statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted following ethical standards set by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the affiliated universities. Participants received full disclosure about the research, and consent forms were collected prior to participation. They were also informed that their responses would remain confidential and used strictly for academic purposes. Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the lead institution in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the psychological well-being of school counselors working in primary schools in Medan, Indonesia, and Penang, Malaysia. A total of 8 school counselors participated in the study, comprising 4 from each region. Data were collected using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test.

Table 2. Psychological Well-Being of Counselors in Indonesia

| Interval | Frequency (F) | Category | Percentage (%) |
|----------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| 172–205 | 2 | Very High | 50% |
| 138–171 | 2 | High | 50% |

| Interval | Frequency (F) | Category | Percentage (%) |
|----------|---------------|----------|----------------|
| 104–137 | 0 | Moderate | 0% |
| 70–103 | 0 | Low | 0% |
| 36–69 | 0 | Very Low | 0% |

The table shows that 50% of Indonesian school counselors fall under the "Very High" category, and the remaining 50% are in the "High" category.

Table 2. Psychological Well-Being of Counselors in Malaysia

| Interval | Frequency (F) | Category | Percentage (%) |
|----------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| 172–205 | 4 | Very High | 100% |
| 138–171 | 0 | High | 0% |
| 104–137 | 0 | Moderate | 0% |
| 70–103 | 0 | Low | 0% |
| 36–69 | 0 | Very Low | 0% |

All Malaysian school counselors surveyed reported "Very High" levels of psychological well-being.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Test Results

| Test Statistics | Score |
|------------------------|--------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 0.000 |
| Wilcoxon W | 10.000 |
| Z | -2.323 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.020 |
| Exact Sig. | 0.029 |

The Mann-Whitney U test indicates a statistically significant difference between the psychological well-being of counselors in Indonesia and Malaysia ($p = 0.020 < 0.05$).

The findings of this study reveal that Malaysian school counselors report higher psychological well-being levels than their Indonesian counterparts. This is consistent with research by Mohamed et al. (2020), who found that school counselors in Malaysia benefit from a more structured and supportive work environment, continuous professional development, and greater institutional recognition. Additionally, Leow et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of supportive peer relationships, parent cooperation, and student behavior as factors contributing to counselor job satisfaction and psychological well-being. Conversely, Indonesian counselors face multiple systemic challenges. Susanti and Bakhtiar (2018) reported that counselors in Indonesia often suffer from emotional and physical burnout due to role overload and insufficient institutional support. The stress is further exacerbated by emotional transference from students, especially in cases involving trauma or repeated crises (Krismona & Qarimah, 2024). Ryff's model of psychological well-being provides a comprehensive framework to understand these differences. The six dimensions—self-acceptance, positive

relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth—are all interdependent. In Malaysia, institutional factors such as routine professional training, lower counselor-to-student ratios, and supportive administrative structures enhance environmental mastery and autonomy (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016). These findings mirror those of Nor et al. (2023), who showed that emotional resilience and workplace satisfaction are higher among Malaysian counselors due to proactive mental health policies in schools. On the other hand, the Indonesian setting, particularly in public schools, often requires counselors to undertake non-counseling roles, reducing their capacity for autonomy and self-acceptance (Putri et al., 2023). Studies by Astuti et al. (2022) and Hartati & Arisandi (2025) also link heavy administrative duties with decreased psychological well-being and lower job motivation among Indonesian educators.

The results highlight the critical role of environmental and organizational support in shaping counselor well-being. Psychological well-being is not merely a personal attribute but is significantly influenced by structural and relational elements within the school context. Counselors with high psychological well-being demonstrate better emotional regulation, sustained motivation, and professional efficacy (Rifani & Taufik, 2020; Ryff, 2014). Conversely, a lack of well-being may lead to professional burnout, emotional fatigue, and reduced quality of student support services. These results advocate for targeted interventions in Indonesia to enhance school counselor welfare. Such initiatives may include reducing administrative burdens, providing access to continuous professional development, and increasing institutional acknowledgment of counselors' roles. This study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing psychological well-being in educational settings, particularly among school-based counselors. It also aligns with global findings on teacher and counselor health, where well-being is a determinant of performance, retention, and overall school climate (Sulea et al., 2015; Santoro, 2018). Moreover, these findings have implications for policymaking in both countries. In Malaysia, continuing the investment in structured counselor support systems appears fruitful. For Indonesia, a reformative approach focused on clarifying the role of counselors, investing in training, and promoting a psychologically healthy work environment is essential.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine and compare the psychological well-being of school counselors in Indonesia and Malaysia using Ryff's multidimensional framework, with particular attention to the influence of institutional, cultural, and contextual factors; the core findings demonstrate that while both groups of counselors exhibited high levels of psychological well-being, Malaysian counselors consistently reported higher and more uniform scores, as confirmed by Mann-Whitney U test results indicating a significant difference between the two groups, a pattern attributed to more structured professional support, lower administrative burden, and stronger institutional recognition in Malaysia, while Indonesian counselors faced challenges related to role overload and limited support. This study contributes to the literature by providing a comparative, theory-driven analysis of counselor well-being in two distinct Southeast Asian contexts, highlighting the critical importance of environmental and organizational factors in shaping professional psychological health, and offering practical

implications for policy and program development to enhance the well-being and effectiveness of school-based counselors across diverse educational systems.

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