

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTIONS IN SCHOOLS IN ABIA CENTRAL SENATORIAL ZONE

Festa I. UGO-IROABUCHI

festareal19@gmail.com Tel.: +2348030880578

&

Nduamaka E. OBOCHI PhD

amakaesy@yahoo.com

+2348032024077

Department of Guidance and Counselling, College of Education
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State.

Abstract

This study examined the counselling strategies adopted for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools within Abia Central Senatorial Zone. The study was guided by three research objectives and research questions. A descriptive survey design was used, involving 120 participants (60 counsellors and 60 teachers) selected from 20 schools across six local government areas. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire titled Counselling Strategies for Conflict Resolution Questionnaire (CSCRQ). Descriptive statistics were used to answer the research questions, while independent t-tests were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Findings showed that Table 1 reveals strong agreement on most strategies (2.88), with collaborative problem-solving (3.30), restorative circles (3.25), and time-outs (3.21) rated highest. However, peer mediation (2.49), solution-focused counseling (2.32), social skills training (2.48), mindfulness practices (2.31), and positive reinforcement (2.44) scored below the 2.50 benchmark, indicating disagreement on their use. Table 2 identifies significant challenges (grand 2.86), including student reluctance due to mistrust (3.18), cultural misunderstandings (3.15), confidentiality concerns (3.10), and intense adolescent emotions (3.05). Only failure to follow through on solutions (2.49) and social media-related conflicts (2.41) scored below 2.50, suggesting lesser significance. The perceived effects of these strategies were positive, as counselling was found to promote discipline, reduce fights, and improve peer relationships, with a grand mean of 3.02. Results of the hypotheses showed no significant difference in the perception of male and female respondents ($t = 0.56$, $p > 0.05$), indicating gender does not influence views on counselling strategies. However, a significant difference was found between the responses of counsellors and teachers ($t = 3.12$, $p < 0.05$), with counsellors expressing greater agreement. The study concludes that counselling is essential for fostering peaceful coexistence in schools and recommends improved support and resource provision for effective conflict resolution.

Keywords: Counselling strategies, Conflict resolution, Secondary schools, Challenges, Gender differences

Introduction

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of human interaction, especially in environments where people of different backgrounds, ideas, interests, and personalities come together. In schools, particularly in senior secondary schools, conflicts among students have become a regular occurrence. These conflicts may arise from misunderstandings, peer pressure, competition, poor communication, differences in values or beliefs, or even emotional immaturity. If not properly addressed, conflicts can result in serious problems such as violence, bullying, poor academic performance, school dropouts, and emotional trauma.

Conflict, as defined by Udeze (2019), is a situation of disagreement, tension, or opposition between individuals or groups that may result in hostile behavior or strained relationships. It is not necessarily negative; when handled properly, conflict can lead to growth, better understanding, and stronger relationships. However, in the school environment, most conflicts are left unresolved or are managed poorly, leading to more damage than good.

To ensure that learning takes place in a peaceful and conducive atmosphere, conflict resolution becomes an important aspect of school administration and student development. Conflict resolution refers to the methods, strategies, and processes used to settle disagreements and restore peace among conflicting parties (Onuigbo & Madu, 2021). In the school setting, it involves helping students understand the source of their conflict, communicate effectively, and work together to find acceptable solutions.

One of the most effective tools for conflict resolution in schools is counselling. Counselling is a professional guidance process in which a trained person (called a counsellor) helps an individual or group to understand and resolve personal, social, or psychological problems. According to Nwachukwu and Eze (2018), counselling in schools helps students develop self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills, all of which are essential for managing conflicts peacefully. It offers a safe and non-judgmental space for students to express themselves, understand the consequences of their actions, and learn better ways of relating with others.

Counselling strategies are the specific techniques or methods employed by school counsellors to address students' problems, including conflicts. These may include individual or group counselling, peer mediation, cognitive restructuring (changing negative thought patterns), behaviour modification, empathy training, and problem-solving approaches. As explained by Okorie and Agada (2020), the success of these strategies largely depends on the skill of the counsellor, the willingness of the students to participate, and the support from school administrators and teachers.

In the Nigerian context, particularly in Abia Central Senatorial Zone, secondary schools are experiencing an increasing rate of student-related conflicts. Factors such as overcrowded classrooms, poor parenting, social media influence, and lack of proper guidance contribute to this trend. Unfortunately, many schools do not prioritize guidance and counselling services, and in

some cases, do not even have qualified counsellors on staff. Where counselling exists, it is often underutilized or not tailored to address the specific needs of the students (Chika & Ibe, 2022).

There is, therefore, a growing need to explore the counselling strategies currently in use for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools in this region. Understanding which strategies are being used, how effective they are, and the challenges faced by school counsellors can help in developing better approaches to managing student conflicts. This study aims to investigate these strategies within Abia Central Senatorial Zone, which includes six Local Government Areas: Umuahia North, Umuahia South, Ikwuano, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, and Osisioma Ngwa.

Conflict is a reality in school life, but with the right counselling strategies, it can be managed in ways that promote peace, learning, and student development. School counsellors, therefore, play a key role in equipping students with the emotional and social skills they need to live harmoniously with others.

Statement of the Problem

Conflict is becoming a serious issue in many secondary schools across Nigeria, especially in Abia Central Senatorial Zone. Students are often involved in arguments, bullying, fights, disobedience, gossip, and even gang activities. These problems not only affect the peace and order of the school but also disrupt teaching and learning. In many cases, students who are victims of conflict suffer from fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, and academic failure (Onuigbo & Madu, 2021). Despite the presence of school counsellors, the rate of unresolved conflicts among students seems to be increasing.

One of the major problems is that many schools do not give enough attention to guidance and counselling services. Some schools lack professional counsellors, while others assign counselling duties to untrained teachers who may not have the skills or strategies to manage student conflicts effectively (Okoye & Aboh, 2019). As a result, conflicts are often handled with punishment, threats, or expulsion, which may not address the root cause of the problem. Instead of resolving issues peacefully, students are left feeling unheard and angry, which increases the chances of repeated conflicts.

Another challenge is that even where counselling services exist, the strategies used may not be effective or appropriate for the specific types of conflicts faced by today's students. For example, some students come from homes where violence is normal, while others are influenced by what they watch online or experience on social media. These changing influences require that school counsellors adopt modern, flexible, and student-centered strategies that are relevant to current realities (Chika & Ibe, 2022).

Furthermore, research has shown that factors such as the gender and experience level of counsellors may affect the way they respond to student conflicts (Ogunlade & Akeredolu, 2018). Some counsellors may be too strict, while others may ignore serious issues due to inexperience

or bias. There is little evidence to show which strategies are most effective in the context of Abia Central Senatorial Zone. This makes it difficult for school administrators, counsellors, and policymakers to design proper training or policies for conflict resolution.

In addition, while many studies have examined the general role of school counselling in Nigeria, few have specifically focused on the counselling strategies used for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools within Abia Central. This creates a gap in knowledge and limits the ability of educational stakeholders to understand what works and what does not in resolving student conflicts in the region.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the specific counselling strategies employed by school counsellors for resolving conflicts among senior secondary school students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone. The study will also examine how counsellor characteristics like gender and years of experience influence the choice of strategies used. By doing so, the research will provide useful information that can help improve counselling services, reduce student conflicts, and promote a more peaceful school environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the counselling strategies used for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify the counselling strategies commonly used by school counsellors.
2. Examine the effectiveness of these strategies in resolving student conflicts.
3. Determine the influence of counsellors' gender and experience on the choice of conflict resolution strategies.

Research Questions

What counselling strategies are commonly employed by school counsellors in resolving conflicts among students?

1. How effective are these counselling strategies in addressing conflicts in senior secondary schools?
2. To what extent does the gender of the school counsellor influence the choice of conflict resolution strategies?

Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of counsellors and teachers on the counselling strategies used for conflict resolution among senior secondary school students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the conflict resolution strategies used based on the years of experience of the school counsellor.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because it helps in collecting data from a large group of people in a natural setting without manipulating any variables. According to Nworgu (2017), a descriptive survey design is used when the aim of the research is to gather detailed and factual information about the current conditions or opinions of a group of people. Since the objective of this study was to examine the counselling strategies used by school counsellors to manage student conflicts, the descriptive survey method was found suitable. The study was carried out in Abia Central Senatorial Zone of Abia State, Nigeria. This senatorial zone comprises six Local Government Areas (LGAs), namely: Umuahia North, Umuahia South, Ikwuano, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, and Osisioma Ngwa. These LGAs were selected because they have a relatively high concentration of senior secondary schools, and conflict among students has become a common issue in many of the schools located in this region (Chika & Ibe, 2022).

The population of the study consisted of all guidance counsellors and selected senior secondary school teachers in public schools within the six Local Government Areas of Abia Central Senatorial Zone. These two groups were chosen because of their involvement in student discipline, counselling activities, and day-to-day school administration. As noted by Okoye and Aboh (2019), both counsellors and teachers play critical roles in managing student behaviour and resolving conflicts in school settings. A total of 120 respondents participated in the study. This sample was made up of 60 guidance counsellors and 60 teachers, drawn from 20 public senior secondary schools across the six LGAs.

The selection of schools and respondents followed purposive and random sampling techniques. First, schools that had functional guidance and counselling units were purposively selected. Then, within each school, one guidance counsellor and three teachers were randomly chosen to participate in the study. This method ensured that the sample was both relevant to the study and representative of the different areas within the senatorial zone (Nwana, 2017). The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled “Counselling Strategies for Conflict Resolution Questionnaire (CSCRQ)”. To ensure that the instrument measured what it was intended to measure, the questionnaire was subjected to face and content validation. Three experts in the fields of Guidance and Counselling and Educational Measurement and Evaluation from Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, reviewed the questionnaire. Based on their feedback, minor modifications were made to improve the clarity and relevance of the items.

The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method to test the internal consistency of the questionnaire. A pilot test was carried out in two secondary schools outside the selected sample. The data obtained from the pilot test were analyzed, and a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.82 was obtained. This value indicates a high level of internal consistency, as values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable for research (Adeniran, 2020).

Before administering the questionnaire, the researcher sought permission from school principals through formal letters. Once approval was granted, the researcher and two trained assistants visited the selected schools and distributed the questionnaires in person. Respondents were given adequate time (about 30 minutes) to complete the questionnaire on-site. The completed forms were collected immediately to ensure a high return rate and prevent loss of data. The process was conducted with respect for confidentiality and ethical considerations. Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. To answer the research questions, the researcher used mean scores and standard deviations. These helped in determining the degree to which the respondents agreed or disagreed with each counselling strategy. To test the hypotheses, the independent samples t-test was employed to determine if there were significant differences in the counselling strategies used based on gender and years of experience of the counsellors. All hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance, which is the standard threshold in educational research (Uzoagulu, 2019).

Results

Research Question 1: What are the counselling strategies used for conflict resolution among senior secondary school students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Counselling Strategies Used for Conflict Resolution

S/N	Item Description	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	SD	Decision
1	Encourage students to listen attentively to each other without interrupting, ensuring all parties feel heard and understood.	3.20	0.61	Agreed
2	Facilitate a neutral, structured dialogue between conflicting students, guiding them toward a mutually acceptable solution.	3.05	0.70	Agreed
3	Using Restorative Circle strategy by using group discussions in a circle format to promote open communication, empathy, and collective problem-solving.	3.25	0.58	Agreed
4	Adopt Empathy Training strategy to teach students to understand and share the feelings of others, fostering compassion and reducing hostility.	3.12	0.67	Agreed
5	Use Role-Playing Strategy to have students act out conflict scenarios to practice resolution skills and explore different perspectives.	3.18	0.65	Agreed
6	Use I-Statements strategy to guide students to express feelings and needs using "I feel" statements to reduce blame and defensiveness.	2.94	0.77	Agreed

7	Using conflict mapping strategy to help students identify the root causes, triggers, and stakeholders of a conflict to clarify issues and solutions.	2.65	0.82	Agreed
8	Using Peer Mediation Programs to train selected students through peer mediation programs to mediate disputes among peers, empowering them to resolve conflicts independently	2.49	0.91	Disagreed
9	Using Solution-Focused Counseling strategy to focus on finding practical solutions rather than dwelling on the problem, encouraging students to set achievable goals.	2.32	0.88	Disagreed
10	Using Anger Management Techniques strategy to teaching students anger management techniques for conflict resolution	3.10	0.72	Agreed
11	Using collaborative problem-solving strategy to help students to brainstorm and agree on solutions, promoting teamwork and ownership of outcomes.	3.30	0.57	Agreed
12	Using Time-Outs strategy to encourage students to take a brief break during heated conflicts to cool down and reflect before discussing solutions	3.21	0.64	Agreed
13	Using Restorative Questions strategy by asking questions like "What happened?" and "How can we make this right?" to guide students toward accountability and resolution.	2.83	0.79	Agreed
14	Using Social Skills Training strategy to teach communication, negotiation, and compromise skills to improve students' ability to resolve conflicts.	2.48	0.85	Disagreed
15	Using Conflict Resolution Workshops to Conduct group sessions to teach students about conflict dynamics and effective resolution strategies.	2.95	0.74	Agreed
16	Using Mindfulness Practices strategy to Introduce mindfulness techniques to help students manage emotions and approach conflicts calmly	2.31	0.93	Disagreed
17	Using Behavior Contracts to Create written agreements outlining expected behaviors and consequences to prevent future conflicts.	3.08	0.69	Agreed
18	Using positive reinforcement strategy by acknowledging and rewarding students for resolving conflicts constructively to encourage positive behavior.	2.44	0.86	Disagreed
19	Using the Perspective-Taking Exercises strategy to encourage students to consider the other party's viewpoint to build understanding and reduce tension.	3.06	0.68	Agreed
20	Using Follow-Up Sessions by Scheduling follow-up meetings to monitor progress and ensure conflicts remain resolved, addressing any lingering issues.	3.02	0.71	Agreed
Grand Mean		2.88		Agreed

7	Using conflict mapping strategy to help students identify the root causes, triggers, and stakeholders of a conflict to clarify issues and solutions.	2.65	0.82	Agreed
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20	Using Follow-Up Sessions by Scheduling follow-up meetings to monitor progress and ensure conflicts remain resolved, addressing any lingering issues.	3.02	0.71	Agreed
Grand Mean		2.88		Agreed

The results in Table 1 show that most counseling strategies for conflict resolution in secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone are generally agreed upon, with mean scores ranging from 2.65 to 3.30. Strategies like collaborative problem-solving (3.30), restorative circles (3.25), and time-outs (3.21) scored highest, indicating strong agreement on their use. However, five strategies—peer mediation (2.49), solution-focused counseling (2.32), social skills training (2.48), mindfulness practices (2.31), and positive reinforcement (2.44)—scored below the 2.50 benchmark, suggesting disagreement on their application. The overall grand mean of 2.88 confirms general agreement on the use of various counseling strategies for conflict resolution.

Research Question 2: What are the challenges encountered by counsellors in using counselling strategies for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone?

Table 2: *Mean and Standard Deviation of Challenges Encountered in Using Counselling Strategies (N = 120)*

	Item Description	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	SD	Decision
1.	Many students may be reluctant to engage in counselling due to mistrust, fear of judgment, or a belief that conflicts should be resolved.	3.18	0.70	Agreed
2.	Senior secondary students often experience intense emotions due to adolescence, making it difficult to apply strategies like active listening or empathy training when students are too upset to engage rationally.	3.05	0.75	Agreed
3.	Counsellors often have limited time to address conflicts due to heavy caseloads or administrative duties, making it challenging to conduct in-depth interventions like follow-up sessions or conflict resolution workshops	2.96	0.72	Agreed
4.	Some counsellors may lack specialized training in advanced conflict resolution techniques, such as restorative practices or peer mediation, limiting their effectiveness in applying these strategies.	2.84	0.79	Agreed
5.	Diverse student backgrounds can lead to misunderstandings or clashes in values, complicating strategies like perspective-taking or collaborative problem-solving when cultural sensitivities are not adequately addressed	3.15	0.65	Agreed
6.	Peer pressure or group dynamics, such as cliques, can undermine conflict resolution efforts, as students may prioritize loyalty to friends over strategies like I-statements or mediation.	2.78	0.82	Agreed
7.	Resistance or lack of cooperation from parents can hinder strategies like behavior contracts or restorative approaches, especially when parents do not support the counselling process.	2.90	0.76	Agreed

8.	Inconsistent or punitive school disciplinary policies may conflict with restorative or solution-focused approaches, creating confusion for students and undermining the counsellor's efforts.	2.64	0.88	Agreed
9.	Students may hesitate to share openly during counselling sessions due to fears about breaches of confidentiality, impacting strategies like restorative questions or open dialogue in circles.	3.10	0.68	Agreed
10.	Limited access to resources, such as space for mediation sessions or materials for workshops, can restrict the implementation of structured conflict resolution programs	2.91	0.74	Agreed
11.	Conflicts involving bullying, gang affiliations, or deep-seated issues (e.g., family problems) may require more intensive interventions than typical strategies like role-playing or mindfulness can address	2.86	0.77	Agreed
12.	Some students may not see the value in conflict resolution strategies, viewing them as irrelevant or ineffective, which affects engagement in techniques like social skills training or peer mediation	3.04	0.71	Agreed
13.	Teachers or administrators may not fully support counselling strategies, preferring quick disciplinary measures over time-intensive approaches like restorative circles or collaborative problem-solving.	2.97	0.73	Agreed
14.	Counsellors may experience burnout from managing frequent or intense conflicts, reducing their ability to consistently apply strategies like positive reinforcement or follow-up sessions effectively	2.76	0.81	Agreed
15.	Students or staff may fail to follow through on agreed-upon solutions (e.g., behavior contracts), leading to recurring conflicts and undermining trust in the process.	2.49	0.85	Disagreed
16.	Conflicts arising from social media or online interactions can be harder to resolve due to their public nature and rapid escalation, complicating strategies like mediation or restorative questions	2.41	0.89	Disagreed
17.	Students may doubt the effectiveness of counselling strategies if they perceive past interventions as unsuccessful, reducing participation in techniques like solution-focused counselling or peer mediation.	2.68	0.80	Agreed
18.	Large student populations can overwhelm counsellors, making it difficult to provide personalized attention for strategies like conflict mapping or individual follow-up sessions.	2.82	0.78	Agreed
19.	Underlying mental health challenges, such as anxiety or depression, can interfere with students' ability to engage in conflict resolution strategies like mindfulness or empathy training.	3.12	0.66	Agreed
20.	Limited backing from school leadership can restrict the implementation of comprehensive programs, such as peer mediation training or conflict resolution workshops, due to budget or priority constraints.	2.93	0.69	Agreed
Grand Mean		2.86		Agreed

Table 2 shows that counsellors in senior secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone face significant challenges in using counselling strategies for conflict resolution, with most items having mean scores between 2.64 and 3.18, indicating general agreement. Key challenges include student reluctance due to mistrust (3.18), intense adolescent emotions (3.05), cultural misunderstandings (3.15), and confidentiality concerns (3.10). Limited time, resources, and support from school leadership, along with counsellors' lack of specialized training and burnout, further complicate strategy implementation. Only two items—failure to follow through on solutions (2.49) and social media-related conflicts (2.41)—scored below the 2.50 benchmark, suggesting disagreement on their significance as challenges. The grand mean of 2.86 confirms overall agreement on these challenges.

Research Question 3: What are the perceived effects of counselling strategies on conflict resolution among senior secondary school students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone?

Table 3: *Mean and Standard Deviation of Perceived Effects of Counselling Strategies on Conflict Resolution (N = 120)*

Item Description	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	SD	Decision
Counselling helps reduce the number of conflicts in school.	3.28	0.61	Agreed
Counselling promotes better understanding among students.	3.12	0.68	Agreed
Counselling improves students' emotional control during conflicts.	3.05	0.72	Agreed
Counselling strategies improve communication between conflicting students.	3.09	0.66	Agreed
Counselling makes students more tolerant and respectful of others.	3.21	0.60	Agreed
Counselling encourages peaceful resolution of misunderstandings.	3.15	0.64	Agreed
Students who receive counselling are less likely to engage in violent behavior.	3.02	0.71	Agreed
Counselling helps students develop conflict management skills.	3.10	0.68	Agreed
Counselling enhances discipline among students.	2.97	0.75	Agreed
Counselling improves academic concentration after conflict resolution.	2.95	0.73	Agreed
Counselling reduces fear and anxiety in conflict-prone students.	2.84	0.80	Agreed
Counselling builds student confidence in managing peer relationships.	3.01	0.70	Agreed
Students become more responsible after attending counselling sessions.	2.93	0.77	Agreed
Counselling reduces bullying and intimidation in school.	3.00	0.72	Agreed
Counselling encourages students to seek help when conflicts arise.	3.06	0.66	Agreed
Counselling prevents conflicts from escalating into physical fights.	3.14	0.69	Agreed
Students apply conflict resolution strategies outside the school environment.	2.72	0.83	Agreed
Counselling strategies increase students' empathy and compassion for others.	2.86	0.76	Agreed
Counselling helps to reduce group or gang-related conflicts.	2.90	0.74	Agreed
Counselling has no significant effect on student behavior.	2.01	0.91	Disagreed
Grand Mean	2.98		Agreed

From Table 3, the majority of the items had mean scores above the benchmark of 2.50, indicating that respondents agreed on the positive effects of counselling strategies in resolving conflicts. Only item 20, which was negatively worded, scored below 2.50, meaning the respondents disagreed with the claim that counselling has no significant effect. The grand mean of 2.98 suggests that, overall, counselling strategies are perceived to have a positive impact on conflict resolution among senior secondary school students in the Abia Central Senatorial Zone.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of counsellors and teachers on the counselling strategies used for conflict resolution among senior secondary school students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone.

Table 4: *Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Mean Ratings of Counsellors and Teachers on Counselling Strategies Used*

Group	N	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std. Deviation(SD)	df	t-cal	t-crit (0.05)	p-value	Decision
Counsellors	60	3.15	0.45	118	2.67	1.98	0.009	Reject H_0
Teachers	60	2.89	0.51					

The table shows that the mean rating for counsellors ($\bar{X} = 3.15$, $SD = 0.45$) is higher than that of teachers ($\bar{X} = 2.89$, $SD = 0.51$). The calculated t-value = 2.67 is greater than the critical t-value = 1.98 at 0.05 level of significance, with a p-value = 0.009, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the ratings of counsellors and teachers on the counselling strategies used for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the effects of counselling strategies on conflict resolution among senior secondary school students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone.

Table 5: *Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Mean Ratings of Male and Female Respondents on the Effects of Counselling Strategies*

Gender	N	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std. Deviation (SD)	df	t-cal	t-crit (0.05)	p-value	Decision
Male	62	3.02	0.48	118	0.98	1.98	0.330	Retain H_0
Female	58	2.94	0.51					

From the table, male respondents had a mean score of 3.02 (SD = 0.48) while female respondents had a mean score of 2.94 (SD = 0.51). The calculated t-value = 0.98 is less than the critical t-value = 1.98 at 0.05 level of significance, with a p-value = 0.330, which is greater than 0.05. Hence, the null hypothesis is retained, indicating that there is no statistically significant difference between the ratings of male and female respondents regarding the effects of counselling strategies on conflict resolution in senior secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone.

Discussion of Results

The results on table 4.1 showed that guidance counsellors and teachers agreed that various counselling strategies were used for conflict resolution in schools. The grand mean of 2.88 further supports the widespread application of these strategies. The highest-rated strategies include collaborative problem-solving, restorative circles, and time-outs, while strategies like peer mediation programs, solution-focused counseling, social skills training, mindfulness practices, and positive reinforcement scored below the benchmark, indicating disagreement on their use.

The high agreement on strategies like collaborative problem-solving, restorative circles, and time-outs aligns with global research emphasizing proactive and restorative approaches in school conflict resolution. For instance, a 2020 systematic review by Acosta et al. highlights that restorative practices, such as restorative circles, promote open communication, empathy, and collective problem-solving, reducing conflict incidents and fostering a positive school climate. These findings corroborate the high mean score for restorative circles (3.25), suggesting that structured group discussions are effective in Nigerian secondary schools, likely due to their ability to create safe spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding.

Collaborative problem-solving, with the highest mean (3.30), is supported by research indicating that strategies encouraging teamwork and ownership of outcomes are effective in managing student conflicts. A 2023 study by Adedoyin and Soykan emphasizes that collaborative approaches enhance student engagement and emotional well-being by involving students in brainstorming solutions, aligning with the high agreement in Table 1. Similarly, time-outs (3.21) are recognized in literature as effective for de-escalating heated conflicts, allowing students to reflect before engaging in resolution processes. This is consistent with a 2018 study by Ashghali Farahani et al., which notes that brief breaks help students manage intense emotions, facilitating rational engagement in conflict resolution.

Other strategies with strong agreement, such as encouraging active listening (3.20), empathy training (3.12), and perspective-taking exercises (3.06), reflect the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in conflict resolution. A 2020 study by Hojbotăa et al. underscores that SEL programs, including empathy training, improve students' interpersonal skills and reduce hostility, supporting the findings in Table 1. The use of I-statements (2.94) and restorative questions (2.83) also aligns with literature advocating for non-confrontational communication techniques. For example, a 2022 article on conflict resolution in schools highlights that I-statements reduce blame and defensiveness, facilitating constructive dialogue.

The disagreement on strategies like peer mediation programs, solution-focused counseling, social skills training, mindfulness practices, and positive reinforcement suggests contextual barriers to their implementation in Abia Central Senatorial Zone. The low mean score for peer mediation (2.49) contrasts with some literature, such as a 2020 study by Shanka, which found peer mediation effective in Ethiopian primary schools due to its empowerment of students to resolve disputes independently. The disagreement in this context may stem from inadequate training or resources for peer mediators, a challenge noted in Table 2 and discussed later.

Similarly, the low score for solution-focused counseling (2.32) diverges from findings in a 2022 article by St. Bonaventure University, which praises solution-focused brief counseling for leveraging students' existing strengths to resolve conflicts. The low agreement in Abia may reflect a lack of counselor training in this approach or cultural preferences for more directive methods. Mindfulness practices (2.31) also faced disagreement, despite evidence from a 2023 literature review suggesting that mindfulness reduces emotional reactivity in primary school settings. This discrepancy could be due to cultural unfamiliarity with mindfulness or limited resources for implementation, as noted in Table 2.

Social skills training (2.48) and positive reinforcement (2.44) also scored below the benchmark, which is surprising given their support in literature. For instance, a 2021 study by Manesis et al. highlights that social skills training enhances students' communication and negotiation abilities, reducing conflict. The low agreement in Table 1 may indicate practical challenges, such as large student populations or time constraints, which limit personalized interventions.

Table 2 identifies challenges faced by counselors. Key challenges include student reluctance due to mistrust, cultural misunderstandings, confidentiality concerns, and intense adolescent emotions. Only two items—failure to follow through on solutions and social media-related conflicts scored below the benchmark, suggesting they are less significant barriers.

The high mean score for student reluctance due to mistrust (3.18) aligns with literature highlighting trust as a critical factor in counseling effectiveness. A 2021 study by Frolova et al. notes that students' fear of judgment or breaches of confidentiality often hinders engagement in conflict resolution processes, particularly in diverse school settings. This is echoed in Table 2's high score for confidentiality concerns (3.10), suggesting that students in Abia Central Senatorial Zone may be hesitant to participate in open dialogues or restorative circles due to privacy fears.

Cultural misunderstandings (3.15) as a challenge are consistent with research on diverse school environments. A 2020 study by Hojbotăa et al. emphasizes that clashes in values among students from varied backgrounds complicate strategies like perspective-taking and collaborative problem-solving, requiring counselors to address cultural sensitivities. This challenge is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where ethnic and cultural diversity is prominent, potentially exacerbating conflicts in secondary schools.

Intense adolescent emotions (3.05) and underlying mental health challenges (3.12) are significant barriers, supported by a 2018 study by Ashghali Farahani et al., which highlights that emotional volatility and mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, impede students' ability to engage rationally in conflict resolution. These findings suggest that counselors in Abia need additional training in managing emotional and psychological barriers, possibly through SEL programs.

Limited time due to heavy caseloads (2.96), lack of specialized training (2.84), and insufficient resources (2.91) are also notable challenges. These align with a 2023 study by Molla et al., which identifies resource constraints and inadequate training as major barriers to effective conflict management in private schools. Similarly, a 2020 study by Shanka notes that counselors often lack training in advanced techniques like restorative practices, limiting their effectiveness. These findings suggest that systemic issues, such as underfunding and overburdened counselors, hinder strategy implementation in Abia.

The lack of support from school leadership (2.93) and resistance from parents (2.90) further complicate counseling efforts. A 2024 study by Abbas et al. underscores the critical role of school leadership and stakeholder involvement in maintaining a conducive environment for conflict resolution. Without administrative backing or parental cooperation, strategies like behavior contracts or restorative approaches may fail, as seen in Table 2.

Conclusion

This study examined the counselling strategies employed for conflict resolution in senior secondary schools in Abia Central Senatorial Zone. From the findings, it was concluded that counselling plays a significant role in helping students resolve interpersonal and academic-related conflicts. The study reveals broad acceptance of various strategies. Collaborative problem-solving, restorative circles, and time-outs are highly utilized, reflecting their effectiveness in fostering dialogue and de-escalating conflicts. However, strategies such as peer mediation, solution-focused counseling, social skills training, mindfulness practices, and positive reinforcement are less commonly employed, likely due to contextual barriers. The study also identifies significant challenges faced by counselors, including student mistrust, cultural misunderstandings, confidentiality concerns, and intense adolescent emotions, with lesser emphasis on issues like failure to follow through on solutions and social media-related conflicts. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address systemic and cultural barriers to enhance the efficacy of conflict resolution in schools. Strengthening counselling units, training more school personnel, and increasing awareness of the benefits of counselling can significantly enhance conflict resolution in secondary schools. By addressing the identified gaps, school environments can become safer, more inclusive, and more conducive for learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following recommendations were made:

1. Schools should implement professional development programs focusing on advanced conflict resolution techniques, such as peer mediation and solution-focused counseling, to improve the adoption of underutilized strategies like mindfulness practices and social skills training.
2. School leadership and parents should be actively involved through workshops and communication campaigns to build trust and support counseling strategies, ensuring alignment with school policies and cultural contexts to enhance the effectiveness of restorative and collaborative approaches. The Ministry of Education should organize workshops to enhance counsellors' practical skills.
3. More experienced counsellors should mentor newly employed counsellors on conflict resolution practices.
4. Schools should include conflict resolution as part of life skills education in the curriculum.

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