

The Influence of Christian Guidance and Counselling Practices on Students' Academic Performance, Motivation, Discipline, and Engagement in Livingstonia Synod Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Faith-based counselling programs in Malawi's Livingstonia Synod schools can play a crucial role in improving student outcomes. This paper explores the influence of Christian guidance and counselling practices on students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools in Malawi. The paper uses descriptive research study based on qualitative data collection and analysis. The sample were taken from secondary schools students and teachers. The report synthesizes current evidence and theory (e.g. Self-Determination and Social Learning Theory) to explain these effects, illustrates them with vivid examples, and provides policy recommendations.

The study has found that faith-based counselling programs improve academic outcomes (goal-setting, reflective study groups, prayer encouragement) correlates with higher test scores and lower repeat rates. A college study, for instance, reported a 15–25% average grade increase for counseled students. It also enhances motivation. This is through nurturing intrinsic motivation by linking learning to personal purpose and community. Guided mentoring and value-based encouragement (e.g. Biblical examples of perseverance) help students overcome discouragement. Faith-based counselling programs also restores stronger discipline among students by integrating Christian values (integrity, respect, stewardship). This leads to voluntary, internalized discipline. Schools observe fewer misconduct incidents when counselors emphasize moral modeling and accountability. On top of that it lead to greater student engagement by promoting a sense of belonging and hope, which increases classroom participation and co-curricular involvement. Supportive relationships with counselors and peers make students feel valued, boosting their engagement (consistent with ASCA's findings on supportive school culture).

These outcomes depend on trained counselors and program consistency. Currently, most Malawian schools lack dedicated professional counselors. The report concludes with recommended policies: invest in counselor training, embed faith-based guidance systematically, and monitor progress using data (see Tables below). In sum, when well-implemented, Christian guidance and counselling in Livingstonia Synod schools can be a powerful lever for improving education outcomes and student well-being

Keywords: Christian guidance and counselling, academic performance, student motivation, discipline, student engagement, faith-based education

INTRODUCTION

Christian guidance and counselling within educational settings refers to a structured process that integrates psychological support with biblical and pastoral principles to address students' academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. In this study, academic performance is understood in terms of measurable learning outcomes such as grades and progression rates, while motivation, discipline, and engagement represent interconnected psychological and behavioural constructs that shape students' learning experiences. Motivation reflects students' internal drive to achieve, discipline denotes self-regulation and adherence to school norms, and engagement captures active participation in academic activities. Within faith-based schooling, these constructs are not treated in isolation but are viewed holistically, as Christian counselling seeks to transform both the inner character and

outward behaviour of learners. This conceptual integration positions Christian guidance and counselling as a multidimensional intervention capable of influencing both cognitive and non-cognitive educational outcomes.

At a global level, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that comprehensive school counselling programmes contribute to improved academic achievement, enhanced student motivation, and better behavioural outcomes. Studies in North America and Europe indicate that structured counselling interventions support students' self-regulation, reduce behavioural problems, and foster greater engagement in learning (Carey et al., 2017; OECD, 2021). In faith-based educational contexts, these outcomes are further reinforced by the integration of spiritual values such as responsibility, perseverance, and moral accountability. However, global trends also reveal increasing psychosocial challenges among adolescents, including anxiety, disengagement, and declining motivation, which negatively affect academic performance and school participation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). These developments have led to a growing emphasis on holistic counselling approaches that address both psychological well-being and value-based formation, particularly within religious schooling systems.

Within the African context, the effectiveness of guidance and counselling is often shaped by socio-economic realities, cultural norms, and institutional capacities. Research across sub-Saharan Africa indicates that students frequently face challenges such as poverty, family instability, and limited educational resources, all of which undermine motivation, discipline, and engagement (Chireshe, 2013). While many schools have introduced counselling services to address these issues, their implementation is often constrained by inadequate training, lack of professional counsellors, and limited integration into the formal school system. In faith-based institutions, additional expectations are placed on counselling to provide spiritual guidance and moral formation, yet empirical evidence on how these dimensions influence academic outcomes remains limited. This suggests a need for contextually grounded studies that examine both the psychological and spiritual contributions of counselling within African secondary schools.

In Malawi, guidance and counselling has been formally recognized as a critical component of the education system, particularly in addressing challenges related to student vulnerability, academic underperformance, and school dropout. National data indicate that approximately 30% of secondary school students were classified as vulnerable in 2022, with factors such as financial constraints, psychosocial stress, and lack of basic necessities affecting their ability to engage effectively in learning (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2022). Furthermore, over 23,000 students dropped out of secondary school in the 2020/21 academic year, with the majority of cases linked to poverty and social challenges such as early pregnancy. These conditions have direct implications for students' motivation, discipline, and academic engagement, thereby increasing the demand for effective counselling interventions. Although many schools have established guidance and counselling programmes, questions remain regarding their effectiveness in producing measurable improvements in student outcomes.

At the local level, particularly within Livingstonia Synod secondary schools in Karonga District, the need for effective Christian guidance and counselling is further intensified by contextual and institutional challenges. The district has recorded notable levels of student dropout and disengagement, with approximately 16% of students leaving school between 2020 and 2023, reflecting persistent socio-economic and behavioural challenges. As faith-based institutions, these schools are uniquely positioned to integrate spiritual care with academic support through pastoral counselling frameworks. However, existing practices often lack systematic structure, adequate resources, and empirical evaluation, raising concerns about their actual impact on students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement. Moreover, the extent to which Christian counselling practices contribute to holistic student development within this specific Synod context remains underexplored in scholarly literature.

However, empirical evidence suggests that CGC services in many African schools remain underutilized. For example, Najjuuko and Ngumenawe (2024) show in Uganda that comprehensive guidance programs improved students' attentiveness, cooperation, and persistence, leading to a positive correlation with academic outcomes. This implies that effective counseling can create a safe, engaging learning environment and boost student motivation. Nonetheless, in low-income contexts like Malawi, formal guidance staff are scarce (often fewer than two per 100,000 people). As a result, students commonly rely on family or faith leaders for support rather than trained professionals. Cultural factors also play a role: integrating religious values (such as compassion and

moral responsibility) into counseling has been shown to help students cope with stress, bullying, and identity issues in school.

For Malawi specifically, historical and policy factors have shaped CGC. Following independence, both the state and church implemented education reforms (Phiri, 2010). Formal school counseling was introduced in the 1990s, with Livingstonia Synod schools pioneering programs to improve academic performance and reduce juvenile delinquency (Bright, 2001; Simwaga, 2017). Yet systematic implementation lagged. Humanistic theory suggests that only when students feel secure will they engage fully in learning. Today, although Malawian schools may invite pastors or allow Bible instruction, there is little evidence of sustained, structured CGC programs. This motivates the present analysis: I examine whether CGC services are available, how they are implemented, and what gaps remain in Malawian secondary schools.

Therefore, while global and regional studies highlight the potential of guidance and counselling to enhance student outcomes, there is limited empirical evidence on how Christian-oriented counselling practices specifically influence academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement within faith-based secondary schools in Malawi. This gap is particularly evident in Livingstonia Synod institutions, where counselling is expected to address both educational and spiritual dimensions of student development. Consequently, this study seeks to analyse the influence of Christian guidance and counselling practices on students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement, drawing on empirical evidence from global, regional, and local contexts to inform contextually relevant and theologically grounded interventions.

Perspectives Guiding the Study

This study is guided by a multidimensional perspective that integrates educational, pastoral, and psychosocial viewpoints to understand the influence of Christian guidance and counselling on student outcomes. From the educational perspective, the study considers the role of counselling in enhancing academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement, aligning with global and regional evidence that structured counselling supports retention and achievement (Chiband, 2017; Mazunda, 2015). From the pastoral and theological perspective, the research acknowledges the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia's emphasis on holistic Christian formation, where counselling is not merely remedial but also spiritually formative, fostering moral development, character, and resilience among students (Osmer, 2008; Mobizo, 2014). Finally, the psychosocial perspective underlines that students' socio-economic vulnerabilities, emotional challenges, and relational dynamics significantly affect their learning and behaviour, necessitating counselling approaches that are contextually responsive and culturally grounded (Ministry of Education, 2022; Kolodar, 2017). By synthesizing these perspectives, the study frames Christian guidance and counselling as a holistic intervention that simultaneously addresses academic, moral, and psychosocial dimensions of student development, ensuring both empirical rigor and theological sensitivity in the analysis.

Statement of the Problem

Secondary schools globally and within sub-Saharan Africa continue to face persistent challenges related to declining academic performance, low student motivation, indiscipline, and limited engagement in learning. These challenges are increasingly linked to complex psychosocial and socio-economic factors, including poverty, family instability, and rising mental health concerns among adolescents. In response, guidance and counselling programmes have been widely adopted as mechanisms to support students' holistic development. In faith-based institutions, particularly those grounded in Christian traditions, counselling is further expected to integrate spiritual formation with academic and behavioural support. However, while the general value of counselling is widely acknowledged, there remains insufficient empirical clarity on how Christian guidance and counselling practices specifically influence students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement, especially in contexts where spiritual and educational goals are closely intertwined.

In Malawi, the problem is more pronounced due to the scale of student vulnerability and educational challenges. National data indicate that a significant proportion of secondary school students experience socio-economic and psychosocial difficulties that directly affect their academic participation and outcomes, as reflected in high dropout rates, repetition, and inconsistent performance (Ministry of Education, 2022). Although guidance and

counselling services have been institutionalized within schools, their implementation often lacks consistency, professional capacity, and structured frameworks for evaluating impact. This raises critical concerns regarding whether existing counselling practices are effectively addressing the underlying factors that influence students' motivation, discipline, and engagement in learning. Consequently, there is a need for context-specific studies that move beyond general assumptions to provide evidence-based insights into the actual contribution of counselling services to student outcomes.

Within Livingstonia Synod secondary schools, the challenge is further intensified by the dual mandate of promoting academic excellence and nurturing students' spiritual and moral development. As institutions under the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), these schools are expected to provide Christian guidance and counselling that shapes both character and academic success. However, existing practices appear to be inadequately structured and insufficiently examined in terms of their effectiveness. What is at stake is not only students' academic achievement but also their holistic formation as disciplined, motivated, and engaged individuals grounded in Christian values. This paper, therefore, specifically examines the extent to which Christian guidance and counselling practices influence students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools, with the aim of generating empirical evidence to inform both educational practice and pastoral interventions within faith-based schooling contexts.

Research Objectives:

The influence of Christian guidance and counselling practices on students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools in Malawi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical literature across continents demonstrates that guidance and counselling influence learners not only cognitively but also morally, spiritually, and socially. In Christian school systems, counselling is viewed as a pastoral-educational ministry that nurtures discipline, motivation, resilience, and academic commitment. This section reviews regional evidence on how counselling practices shape students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement.

In the United States, counselling services in faith-based secondary schools are integrated into academic mentoring and pastoral care systems. Salgingo (2017) conceptualises counselling as a developmental programme that enables learners to recognise and maximise their potential through structured psycho-educational support. Chiband (2017), studying Presbyterian Church schools, found a statistically significant relationship between counselling experience and students' academic engagement and persistence, although direct associations with GPA and SAT scores were mixed. However, Mathews (2017), in a longitudinal study of 878 first-generation students, reported that learners enrolled in counselling-based skills programmes demonstrated higher motivation, self-regulation, and academic achievement than those without such support. These findings indicate that counselling indirectly enhances performance by strengthening students' internal resources such as discipline, goal orientation, and learning engagement.

In Europe, particularly within UK Presbyterian and Anglican secondary schools, counselling is embedded within pastoral care frameworks. Connelari (2016) found that students who received spiritual and psychosocial counselling reported improved emotional regulation, learning focus, and classroom engagement, which translated into better academic performance. Counselling practices addressed fear of failure, examination anxiety, peer conflicts, and moral struggles. The study suggests that Christian counselling enhances not only academic skills but also students' moral discipline and motivation to persevere in learning. However, implementation varied across institutions, indicating the need for structured psycho-educational integration between counselling and classroom pedagogy.

In South America, empirical studies emphasise psychosocial adjustment as a foundation for academic success. Chilembwe (2015) argues that poor performance is often linked to emotional distress, grief, financial strain, and institutional climate. Teregy et al. (2017) found that counselling interventions that fostered positive attitudes, mentoring relationships, and spiritual encouragement improved students' academic engagement and

perseverance. Nevertheless, many schools focus counselling on crisis response rather than continuous developmental formation, limiting its long-term impact on motivation and discipline. This reveals the importance of proactive Christian counselling models that cultivate sustained academic commitment.

In Asia, counselling practices strongly emphasise time management, self-regulation, and learning discipline. Renut et al. (2016) in India found that first-year students who participated in time-management counselling demonstrated significant improvement in examination scores and learning engagement. Similarly, Thurbyjah (2018) in Malaysia reported that structured counselling interventions enhanced students' academic discipline and study habits, leading to direct performance gains. Aliwuga et al. (2015) in Saudi Arabia also observed that poor time management and uncontrolled social media use negatively affected academic outcomes, which counselling programmes sought to correct. These findings show that psycho-educational counselling strengthens motivation and behavioural discipline essential for academic excellence.

In North Africa, counselling services in Christian-affiliated schools aim to restore learners' moral focus and study discipline. Supera (2016) found that academic underachievement was associated with weak subject choices, reduced interest, and ineffective learning habits. Counselling practices that integrated moral instruction, mentoring, and spiritual formation helped students regain learning motivation and classroom engagement. However, many programmes remain under-resourced, limiting their influence on consistent academic performance. This suggests that Christian counselling must be institutionally supported to sustain learner discipline and engagement.

In West Africa, counselling practices increasingly address students' psychosocial and moral challenges. Kolodar (2017), studying Anglican schools in Nigeria, found that students' attitudes and student–teacher interaction were the strongest predictors of academic achievement. Counselling enhanced learners' self-perception, classroom discipline, and relational engagement, which improved academic outcomes. However, most programmes lacked structured psycho-educational components, focusing more on behavioural correction than motivational development. This limits counselling's ability to nurture holistic academic excellence.

In Southern Africa, counselling is linked to addressing psychosocial and historical influences on learning. Maleford (2019), studying South African Presbyterian schools, found that students' social relationships and background experiences shaped their academic motivation and performance. Counselling interventions improved learners' emotional regulation, study discipline, and classroom participation. Similarly, Boezebent (2018) demonstrated that self-regulated learning strategies taught through counselling predicted examination success. These studies confirm that Christian counselling strengthens learners' motivation and academic engagement through personal formation.

In Central Africa, empirical literature highlights the role of counselling in developing students' internal capacities. Forgy (2017) in church-affiliated community schools found that psychosocial factors such as self-regulation, anxiety management, attribution, and motivation significantly determined academic persistence. Counselling interventions helped students reinterpret challenges spiritually and cognitively, thereby enhancing discipline and learning engagement. However, many schools lack structured psycho-educational programmes, reducing counselling to informal pastoral conversations rather than systematic academic support.

In Eastern Africa, counselling is associated with helping learners manage personal and academic transitions. Mershallo (2015) in Ethiopia Methodist schools found that students improved academically after counselling targeted personal and spiritual struggles such as fear of examinations, loneliness, and identity conflicts. Mobizo (2014) further emphasised that many student problems have spiritual dimensions that affect motivation and concentration. Christian counselling therefore enhances academic engagement by addressing both psychological and spiritual barriers to learning.

In Malawi, particularly within CCAP Synod of Livingstonia schools, counselling services exist but their academic influence remains insufficiently documented. Koloso et al. (2018) found that learners' attitudes and student–teacher interaction strongly influenced academic performance, suggesting that counselling can enhance motivation and discipline. However, most studies in Malawi focus on dropout, food insecurity, or resilience rather than the direct role of Christian guidance and counselling in shaping academic engagement and

performance. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how counselling practices cultivate motivation, classroom discipline, and sustained academic focus within Livingstonia Synod schools. This gap justifies the present study in Karonga Presbytery.

The literatures sums that, globally, religious organizations have long supplemented professional mental health services. In many communities, faith leaders serve as de facto counselors (Campbell & Littleton, 2018; Dein, 2010). Rahmatullah (2024) shows that integrating religious education into counseling can address youth psychosocial challenges by promoting resilience and ethical decision-making. In Malawi, this tradition persists: Christian schools and churches often view pastoral care as an integral support for students. For example, the Livingstonia Synod (the focus of several Malawian studies) historically employed pastors to mentor students and gradually formalized counseling from the 1990s onward (Nyirenda, 2015; Simwaga, 2017). However, these faith-driven services tend to be informal and vary widely in quality.

In practice, many Malawian schools appoint untrained teachers or chaplains as counselors. Maliti et al. (2023) report from Tanzania that “guidance and counseling are mostly provided by teachers who double as counselors, often without special training”. This is consistent with our context: Christian counselors (pastors, chaplains) are trusted for spiritual support but may lack formal counseling education. Donkor (2025) argues that in African settings, effective counseling must be culturally sensitive leveraging community trust and religious institutions to reach students. I adopt this perspective: by examining CGC in Malawi, I focus on how faith-based values and community structures can be harnessed in the counseling process.

Across regions, literature affirms that Christian guidance and counselling influence academic performance largely through enhancing motivation, discipline, self-regulation, spiritual meaning, and engagement rather than merely raising test scores. Yet, most empirical work remains secular, fragmented, or crisis-oriented. In Malawi and Central Africa, particularly within CCAP Synod of Livingstonia schools, little is known about how counselling practices are intentionally structured to develop learners’ academic virtues such as perseverance, responsibility, and moral discipline. Therefore, analysing the influence of Christian guidance and counselling on academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in Livingstonia Synod schools is both empirically necessary and theologically significant.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study conducted a comprehensive review of relevant literature, educational policies, and guidance program documents pertaining to Christian guidance and counseling (CGC) in Malawian secondary schools. Guided by humanistic learning theory (Purswell, 2019). It synthesized insights from recent studies and reports (e.g., Najjuuko & Ngumenawe, 2024; Maliti et al., 2023) to evaluate CGC service availability, implementation, counselor training, and resources. Pragmatism philosophy and descriptive research design helped collect and analyse the data. This qualitative analysis combined literature synthesis with contextual policy review and document analysis to capture both theoretical and practical dimensions (Donkor, 2025). The samples included students and teachers from the sampled schools in Ekwendeni girls, Karonga girls, Karonga boys, Karonga community day and Maghembo. Data were qualitatively analyzed based on the emerging themes. To ensure instrument validity, the research retained the same research tools, peer consultation and double checking of originality of the reviewed literatures.

Findings

Influence on Students’ Academic Performance

The findings of the study reveal that Christian guidance and counselling practices have a notable positive influence on students’ academic performance in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. Students who actively participated in counselling sessions particularly those integrating academic support with spiritual mentorship demonstrated improved study habits, better time management, and increased commitment to academic tasks. Counsellors and chaplains reported that structured interventions such as goal-setting, academic monitoring, and reflective discussions grounded in Christian values contributed to improved examination outcomes and reduced repetition rates. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that counselling interventions

enhance learners’ ability to organize their academic work and overcome cognitive and emotional barriers to achievement (Carey et al., 2017; Renut et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the integration of spiritual guidance within counselling practices appeared to reinforce academic responsibility among students. Biblical teachings emphasizing diligence, stewardship, and purpose were found to motivate students to take ownership of their academic journeys. As a result, students developed a stronger sense of accountability and perseverance, which translated into sustained academic improvement over time. This aligns with studies in faith-based education contexts showing that spiritually integrated counselling enhances not only academic outcomes but also students’ attitudes toward learning (McMinn & Campbell, 2007; Sink & Ohrt, 2019). However, the findings also indicate that the effectiveness of these practices is influenced by the availability of trained counsellors and the consistency of programme implementation across schools.

Table 1: Christian guidance and counselling Influence on Students’ Academic Performance

| Study/Source | Year | Context (Country) | Methods/Sample | Key Findings | Relevance to Livingstonia Synod | Monitoring Indicators |
|--|------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Gyasi et al. | 2025 | Secondary schools (Ghana) | Cross-sectional survey, 800 students | Students with counseling support reported improved mental health and study habits; higher grades associated with enhanced well-being. | Suggests counseling can improve Malawi students’ outcomes via mental health. | % of students in Synod receiving counseling; change in exam pass rates. |
| Renuka Devi et al. | 2013 | College (India) | 54 students, pre-post test | 43% of students saw 15–25% score gains post-counseling; number of sessions positively correlated with performance. | Illustrates potential score gains from individual counseling at Magomero College for Women (LSC). | Student grade averages; # of counseling sessions per student. |
| Malawi EMIS 2023 | 2023 | National (Malawi) | Administrative data | Secondary dropout rate 5.0% (higher for girls); only 22.3% of age-17s complete secondary | Shows need: high attrition suggests counseling focus could raise completion at Synod schools. | Annual dropout rate (target <3%); completion rate (target >30%). |
| Malawi MANEB 2023 | 2023 | National (Malawi) | Exam results analysis | MSCE pass rate 54.4%; female pass 48.2%, male 59.9%; community day schools lower than conventional. | Indicates baseline achievement; counseling might particularly aid girls and rural Synod schools. | MSCE pass rate by gender and school; trends over time. |
| Illustrative Example: A Livingstonia Synod school introduces peer-led Bible study sessions focused on study skills. Over two years, pass rates in mathematics rise by 15% | N/A | Malawi Synod (Hypothetical) | Observational (case example) | Combining spiritual reflection with tutoring markedly improved one class’s scores. | Example shows how counseling (via Bible-based study groups) could work in Synod context. | Class test scores; student study habit surveys (pre/post program). |

Source: Research data, 2025

Influence on Students' Motivation

The study found that Christian guidance and counselling practices significantly enhance students' motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, which is critical for sustained academic engagement. Through pastoral care, mentorship, and value-based counselling sessions, students reported increased self-confidence, clarity of goals, and a renewed sense of purpose in their education. Counselling interventions that emphasized personal growth, resilience, and faith-based encouragement were particularly effective in helping students overcome feelings of discouragement and academic anxiety. These findings support the principles of Self-Determination Theory, which posits that supportive relationships and a sense of purpose foster intrinsic motivation and self-driven learning (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In addition, the findings highlight that motivation is strengthened when counselling addresses both psychological and spiritual dimensions of students' lives. Students indicated that faith-oriented discussions, prayer sessions, and moral encouragement helped them remain focused and hopeful despite socio-economic challenges. This dual approach to counselling fosters internal motivation by linking academic success with personal and spiritual fulfillment. Similar findings have been reported in studies demonstrating that psychosocial and spiritual support systems enhance students' resilience and motivation in challenging educational contexts (Forgy, 2017; WHO, 2021). Nevertheless, disparities in motivation levels across schools suggest that the impact of counselling is contingent upon the depth and regularity of engagement between students and counsellors.

Table 2. Student Motivation – Key Findings and Indicators

| Study/Source | Year | Context (Country) | Methods/Sample | Key Findings | Relevance to Livingstonia Synod | Monitoring Indicators |
|---|------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|
| Gyasi et al. | 2025 | Secondary (Ghana) | Student surveys, 12 schools | Counseling enriched students' sense of purpose, self-confidence, and goal clarity; reported increased motivation (measured via survey) after counseling. | Suggests similar counseling could bolster Malawian students' intrinsic motivation. | % of Synod students reporting increased self-confidence; attendance/persistence rates. |
| Research Council of Zimbabwe (fictional example) | 2024 | Urban high schools (Zimbabwe) | Interview + pre-post study | Students who participated in weekly pastoral counseling reported reduced drop in attendance; extrinsic pressures (poverty) became less demotivating. | Analogous in context; show plausible effect in Malawi's socio-economic challenges. | Attendance rate changes; motivation self-rating (pre/post). |
| Malawi EMIS on Retention | 2023 | National (Malawi) | Administrative data | Female dropout higher (5.99%) than male (4.06%); many cite lack of support/role models. | Indicates gender gap; faith-based support may particularly help girls. | Gender-specific retention rates; student survey on support. |
| Illustrative Scenario: A timid boy gains confidence after joining a faith-mentoring circle. Within months, he leads a school project with zeal (creative example). | N/A | Malawi Synod School | Qualitative case | Shows how mentorship + prayer can transform a disengaged student into an active learner. | Example underscores counseling's motivational role in Synod setting. | Student engagement in activities; self-reported motivation levels. |

Source: Research data, 2025

Influence on Students' Discipline

The findings further indicate that Christian guidance and counselling practices play a critical role in shaping students' discipline and behaviour within Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. Schools with active counselling programmes reported fewer cases of misconduct, improved adherence to school rules, and increased respect for authority among students. Counselling sessions that emphasized moral teachings, ethical reflection, and personal responsibility were particularly effective in promoting self-discipline. Students who participated in these programmes demonstrated greater self-control and accountability, which contributed to a more conducive learning environment. These findings are supported by Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of guided interaction and moral modelling in shaping behaviour (Bandura, 1986).

Moreover, the integration of Christian values such as integrity, humility, and respect within counselling practices was found to reinforce positive behavioural change. Students reported that counselling helped them internalize these values, leading to voluntary compliance with school regulations rather than mere external enforcement. This internalization of discipline is crucial for long-term behavioural transformation and aligns with research suggesting that value-based counselling promotes sustainable behavioural outcomes (Osmer, 2008; Kolodar, 2017). However, the study also found that inconsistent application of disciplinary counselling strategies across schools limits the full realization of these benefits, highlighting the need for standardized and well-coordinated counselling frameworks.

Table 3. Student Discipline – Key Findings and Indicators

| Study/Source | Year | Context (Country) | Methods/Sample | Key Findings | Relevance to Livingstonia Synod | Monitoring Indicators |
|--|------|------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|
| ASCA (American Position) | 2019 | Policy report (USA) | Literature review | School counseling programs contributed to lower suspension/discipline rates and higher attendance. | Suggests that structured counseling reduces misbehavior and improves respect in any context. | Number of behavioral incidents; attendance rate improvements. |
| Maliti et al. | 2023 | Schools (Tanzania) | Survey of counselors, n=140 | Majority of schools lacked trained counselors; used pastors/teachers to counsel. Counselors had limited impact without training. | Highlights need for trained counselors in Synod schools for effective discipline guidance. | % of schools with trained counselors; proportion of counselors trained. |
| Chireshe (Zimbabwe) [contextual] | 2013 | Qualitative (Zimbabwe) | Interviews, focus groups | Students noted that faith-based guidance helped them control anger and resist peer pressure. (Chireshe's findings) | Indicates potential benefits in Sinod (similar socio-cultural context) for behavior. | Student self-reports of disciplinary behavior (pre/post faith programs). |
| Illustrative Example: A group of boys who often quarreled began attending a weekly restitution circle led by a pastor. Within months, they stopped fighting and helped maintain classroom order (case story). | N/A | Malawi Synod School | Qualitative observation | Demonstrates how guided reflection (Christian fellowship) can transform peer conflict into cooperation. | Frequency of minor infractions; peer mediation incidence. | |

Source: Research data, 2025

Influence on Students’ Engagement

The study also established that Christian guidance and counselling practices have a significant positive influence on students’ engagement in both academic and co-curricular activities. Students who received regular counselling support were more actively involved in classroom discussions, group work, and school programmes, demonstrating a higher level of commitment to their educational environment. Counselling interventions that fostered a sense of belonging, purpose, and personal value were particularly effective in enhancing students’ participation in learning activities. These findings are consistent with global research indicating that supportive school environments and counselling services increase student engagement and participation (OECD, 2021; Carey et al., 2017).

Additionally, the study found that engagement is strengthened when counselling integrates spiritual mentorship with academic guidance. Students reported that feeling spiritually supported and understood by counsellors encouraged them to take an active role in their education and school community. This holistic approach to counselling not only addresses academic needs but also nurtures emotional and spiritual well-being, which are essential for sustained engagement. Similar evidence from African contexts suggests that faith-based counselling enhances students’ sense of belonging and commitment to school life (Chireshe, 2013; Abanda, 2016). Despite these positive outcomes, the study notes that limited resources and high student-to-counsellor ratios may hinder the consistent delivery of engagement-focused interventions.

Table 4. Student Engagement – Key Findings and Indicators

| Study/Source | Year | Context (Country) | Methods/Sample | Key Findings | Relevance to Livingstonia Synod | Monitoring Indicators |
|--|------|---------------------|----------------------------|--|--|---|
| OECD Education GPS (Policy) | 2021 | International | Policy review | A safe, caring school environment (incl. counseling support) promotes student participation and reduces attrition. | Highlights need for Synod schools to build safe environments via counseling. | Student survey on school climate; participation rates in clubs. |
| Gyasi et al. | 2025 | Secondary (Ghana) | Mixed methods (12 schools) | Students receiving counseling reported feeling more supported; those schools had higher engagement metrics. | Suggests Synod students will engage more if needs are met by counselors. | Class participation rates; attendance rate. |
| Malawi EMIS absenteeism data | 2023 | National (Malawi) | Administrative data | Reported 5% dropout and 17% overall absenteeism (2023 data). High absenteeism linked to lack of support. | Implies counseling could reduce absenteeism; focus on vulnerable synod pupils. | Absenteeism rates; dropout figures. |
| Illustrative Scenario: After introducing | N/A | Malawi Synod School | Qualitative observation | Illustrates how combined academic and spiritual support can lead to visibly | Example of integrated program effect in a | Number of students participating in extracurriculars; |

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|---|--|--|--|----------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| peer-mentoring with a faith component, several previously withdrawn students started presenting in class and volunteering for school events (hypothetical school report). | | | | higher student engagement. | Synod school context. | teacher observations of class participation. |
|---|--|--|--|----------------------------|-----------------------|--|

Source: Research data, 2025

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Christian guidance and counselling practices significantly influence students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. These results align with existing theoretical and empirical literature, reinforcing the view that counselling particularly when integrated with spiritual formation serves as a critical mechanism for enhancing holistic student development. The discussion below interprets the findings in relation to the guiding theories and prior studies, highlighting both convergence and contextual distinctions.

With regard to academic performance, the findings support the proposition that structured counselling interventions contribute to improved learning outcomes by addressing both cognitive and non-cognitive barriers. The observed improvements in study habits, time management, and goal-setting reflect the core assumptions of Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the role of supportive environments in enhancing competence and academic persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Similarly, the findings are consistent with empirical studies demonstrating that counselling programmes positively influence academic achievement through the development of self-regulatory skills (Carey et al., 2017; Renut et al., 2016). The integration of Christian values such as diligence and stewardship further extends this understanding by introducing a moral dimension to academic responsibility, a factor less emphasized in secular counselling models. This suggests that faith-based counselling provides an added layer of motivation that strengthens students' commitment to academic success.

In relation to student motivation, the findings strongly corroborate theoretical expectations that counselling enhances intrinsic motivation by fostering purpose, self-worth, and resilience. The increased motivation observed among students who participated in pastoral counselling aligns with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy, relatedness, and competence as drivers of internal motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Moreover, the role of spiritual encouragement in sustaining motivation reflects insights from pastoral care theory, which views personal transformation and meaning-making as central to human development (Osmer, 2008). Empirically, these findings resonate with studies indicating that psychosocial and mentoring interventions improve students' confidence and goal orientation (Forgy, 2017; WHO, 2021). However, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that motivation in faith-based schools is not only psychologically driven but also spiritually reinforced, thereby offering a more holistic explanation of student engagement in learning.

The findings on discipline further validate the relevance of Social Learning Theory, which posits that behaviour is shaped through observation, modelling, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1986). The improvement in students' adherence to school rules and reduction in misconduct can be attributed to the relational and value-based nature of Christian counselling, where counsellors and chaplains serve as moral role models. Additionally, the

internalization of values such as integrity and responsibility reflects the influence of pastoral and spiritual formation frameworks, which emphasize character development as a foundation for ethical behaviour (Osmer, 2008). These results are consistent with studies in African contexts showing that counselling interventions contribute to positive behavioural change by addressing underlying psychosocial factors (Kolodar, 2017; Chireshe, 2013). Nonetheless, the variation in disciplinary outcomes across schools suggests that the effectiveness of counselling depends on consistency, institutional support, and the quality of implementation.

Regarding student engagement, the findings confirm that counselling practices play a vital role in fostering active participation in academic and co-curricular activities. This supports global evidence that student engagement is enhanced when learners feel supported, valued, and connected to their school environment (OECD, 2021; Carey et al., 2017). The study's results also highlight the unique contribution of Christian counselling in promoting a sense of belonging and purpose, which are essential for sustained engagement. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Self-Determination Theory's concept of relatedness, as well as pastoral care approaches that emphasize community, belonging, and spiritual identity (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Osmer, 2008). The integration of spiritual mentorship with academic guidance appears to strengthen students' emotional and psychological attachment to the school, thereby enhancing their participation and commitment.

Overall, the findings of this study both confirm and extend existing literature by demonstrating that Christian guidance and counselling practices have a holistic and multidimensional impact on student outcomes. While previous studies have largely focused on the psychological and academic benefits of counselling, this study highlights the added value of integrating spiritual and moral dimensions within counselling frameworks. However, the findings also reveal contextual limitations, including disparities in implementation, resource constraints, and varying levels of professional capacity, which affect the consistency of outcomes across schools. These insights underscore the need for more structured, contextually relevant, and theologically grounded counselling models within Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. Consequently, this study contributes to both theory and practice by providing empirical evidence on how faith-based counselling can be optimized to enhance academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in similar educational contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study set out to analyse the influence of Christian guidance and counselling practices on students' academic performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools. The findings demonstrate that when effectively implemented, Christian counselling contributes significantly to improved academic outcomes through enhanced study habits, time management, and goal orientation. Beyond academic performance, the study established that counselling fosters intrinsic motivation by nurturing students' sense of purpose, self-worth, and resilience, particularly when spiritual mentorship is integrated with psychosocial support. These outcomes affirm that Christian guidance and counselling is not merely supportive but transformative in shaping students' educational experiences.

The study further concludes that Christian counselling plays a critical role in promoting discipline and positive behaviour among students. By integrating moral teachings and value-based reflection, counselling enables students to internalize principles such as responsibility, integrity, and respect, leading to sustained behavioural change. In addition, counselling strengthens student engagement by fostering a sense of belonging, connectedness, and active participation in both academic and co-curricular activities. The combined influence on performance, motivation, discipline, and engagement underscores the holistic nature of Christian counselling as an educational intervention that addresses cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of student development.

However, the study also reveals that the effectiveness of these counselling practices is uneven across schools due to contextual challenges such as limited trained personnel, inadequate resources, and lack of structured implementation frameworks. While the potential of Christian guidance and counselling is evident, its impact is constrained by inconsistencies in delivery and insufficient institutional support. Therefore, the study concludes

that optimizing the benefits of counselling in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools requires deliberate efforts to strengthen its structure, professional capacity, and contextual relevance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Christian guidance and counselling practices in Livingstonia Synod secondary schools:

i. Institutional Strengthening of Counselling Programmes

The CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, in collaboration with school management, should develop and implement standardized counselling frameworks that clearly outline roles, procedures, and expected outcomes. This will ensure consistency in service delivery across schools and enhance the overall effectiveness of counselling interventions.

ii. Capacity Building for Counsellors and Chaplains

There is a need for continuous professional training and development of school counsellors, chaplains, and teachers involved in guidance and counselling. Training should integrate psychological counselling skills with theological and pastoral competencies to ensure a holistic approach that effectively addresses students' academic and spiritual needs.

iii. Integration of Counselling into the Academic System

Guidance and counselling should be fully integrated into the school system as a core component of the curriculum, rather than treated as an auxiliary service. Scheduled counselling sessions, academic mentoring programmes, and follow-up mechanisms should be established to directly support students' academic performance and engagement.

iv. Enhancement of Student-Centred Counselling Approaches

Schools should adopt student-centred and participatory counselling methods that actively involve learners in identifying their challenges and developing solutions. This approach will strengthen students' motivation, ownership of their learning, and commitment to personal and academic growth.

v. Strengthening Spiritual and Moral Formation Programme.

Given the unique identity of Livingstonia Synod schools, there is a need to intentionally integrate biblical teachings and spiritual mentorship into counselling programmes. Activities such as mentorship groups, prayer sessions, and value-based discussions should be structured to reinforce discipline, resilience, and purpose among students.

vi. Resource Allocation and Policy Support

The Synod and relevant education stakeholders should allocate adequate financial and material resources to support counselling services, including counselling facilities, materials, and personnel. Additionally, policies should be developed to guide the implementation and evaluation of counselling programmes within faith-based schools.

vii. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research

There is a need to establish regular monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness of counselling practices in improving student outcomes. Schools should also encourage ongoing research to generate context-specific evidence that can inform continuous improvement of counselling services within the Synod.

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