

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND COUNSELLOR COMPETENCE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF REHABILITATION COUNSELLORS' SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS IN KADUNA STATE

MOHAMMED NURADDEEN DALHATU

Nigerian Navy Basic Training School, Onne
nuradeendalhatu@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study empirically assesses the Inclusive Education and Counsellor Competence: An Empirical Study of Rehabilitation Counsellors' Support for Learners with Special Needs in Mainstream Schools in Kaduna State. Using a descriptive survey research design, data were collected from 265 respondents, comprising 200 practicing counselors and 65 special education teachers, across the three senatorial districts of Kaduna North, Central, and South. Rehabilitation Counsellor Competence and Systemic Barriers Scale (RCCSBS) was employed to measure variables including disability awareness, psychosocial intervention skills, and technical proficiency in assistive technology. Findings indicate a significant positive correlation between specialized rehabilitation training and the successful integration of LSNs into mainstream classrooms. The findings highlight a significant gap in technical proficiency among counselors and a lack of uniform assessment frameworks to support inclusive methods. The study recommends the institutionalization of the SMILE (Support Mainstreaming Inclusion so all can Learn Equally) framework as a strategic approach to bridging the gap between policy mandates and practitioner capability in inclusive education.

Keywords: Rehabilitation Counselors, Competence, Inclusive Education, Learners with Special Needs

Introduction

The historical landscape of education for persons with disabilities in Nigeria has long been defined by segregation, where students with impairments were relegated to isolated special schools. This exclusionary model often resulted in social marginalization and substandard academic outcomes. However, the contemporary era marks a decisive shift towards inclusive education, driven by domestic legislation and international pressure. The enactment of the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act has fundamentally altered the legal obligations of educational institutions. As argued by Adebayo (2024), this Act mandates that persons with disabilities have an equal right to education without discrimination, effectively making the transition from segregated to mainstream settings a statutory requirement rather than an optional educational strategy.

In Kaduna State, this national mandate has been operationalized through a series of aggressive policy interventions. The Education Transformation Blueprint (2025), unveiled during the KADA EduPACT International Summit, serves as the state's primary roadmap for reform (Kaduna State Government, 2025). This plan establishes an ambitious goal to enrol every child currently missing from the education system. It places particular emphasis on children with disabilities, who represent a large portion of this group. The state government has emphasized that equity is the cornerstone of the Sustain Agenda, aiming to dismantle the physical and financial barriers that have historically kept learners with special needs (LSNs) outside the formal school system (Kaduna State Government, 2025).

Despite these legislative strides, the mere presence of LSNs in mainstream classrooms does not equate to effective inclusion. Findings from Inclusive Futures (2023) concerning the SMILE project in North-Western Nigeria indicate a concerning pattern. Although student numbers are increasing, the standard of inclusive practice remains unstable. Bello and Smith (2024) observe that learners often find themselves physically present but pedagogically excluded because the school environment has not been sufficiently adapted to meet their unique sensory, intellectual, or physical requirements. This integration without inclusion creates a frustrating experience for both the learner and the educator, often leading to high dropout rates.

The success of this transition rests heavily on the availability of a robust support network, with the rehabilitation counselor serving as the primary professional architect of this system. Unlike general school counselors, rehabilitation counselors are specifically trained to address the multidimensional barriers faced by individuals with disabilities (Koch & Rumrill, 2016). Their role encompasses the management of psychosocial trauma, the facilitation of vocational transitions, and the coordination of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Nkomadu (2025) observes that the rehabilitation counsellor serves as the essential link between a learner's medical needs and the academic requirements of the education system. Lacking this specific support, students with special needs frequently struggle within a mainstream environment built for typical learners. However, a significant professional crisis is emerging within the Kaduna State school system. There is an increasing concern that many practitioners currently filling these roles lack the specific counselor competence required for rehabilitation work. Empirical observations by Ipadeola et al. (2025) indicate that a vast majority of service providers in Kaduna possess general pedagogical training but remain unfamiliar with disability-specific protocols, such as the use of assistive technology or the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This competency gap suggests that while the state has successfully changed the where of education, it has yet to fully address the how of professional support.

The SMILE Project Compendium (2023) further elucidates that inclusive education requires a whole-school approach where the counselor leads the sensitization of the school community. Danladi (2024) posits that the competence of these counselors is often measured by their ability to foster a disability-positive culture, yet many feel overwhelmed by the lack of administrative support. Furthermore, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2024) highlights that in sub-Saharan Africa, the ratio of specialized support staff to students with disabilities is alarmingly high. In Kaduna, urban centres face overcrowded classrooms where a single counselor might be responsible for hundreds of students, making the rehabilitation aspect of their role nearly impossible to execute. The urgency for empirical evidence in this area is highlighted by the Federal Ministry of Education (2020) in the National Policy on Inclusive Education. The policy calls for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the workforce to ensure that inclusive does not become a hollow label. If rehabilitation counselors in Kaduna are to fulfil their mandate, there must be a clear assessment of their current skill sets against the demands of the 21st-century inclusive classroom. Identifying these strengths and deficits is the first step toward creating a targeted professional development framework that aligns with the state's ambitious 2025 goals (Kaduna State Government, 2021; CACREP, 2024).

This study seeks to bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. The study offers a data-driven basis for future educational planning by evaluating the function and proficiency of rehabilitation counsellors within the unique socio-political setting of Kaduna State. As the state moves closer to its goal of total enrolment, ensuring that every child is not just in school but learning

and supported becomes the ultimate measure of the Education Transformation Blueprint. This study is therefore a vital contribution to the ongoing discourse on disability rights and educational equity in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The implementation of inclusive education in Kaduna State is hindered by a fundamental disconnect between legislative intent and school-level execution. While the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act and the state's 2025 Blueprint mandate the inclusion of learners with special needs, these students continue to face pedagogical neglect and social isolation. The central issue is the lack of specific technical competence among rehabilitation counsellors, who are meant to bridge the gap between medical needs and academic expectations. Evidence suggests that without high-level expertise in disability advocacy and assessment, counsellors are often relegated to administrative roles. This leaves teachers without guidance, resulting in students being viewed as a burden rather than as individuals with rights. Unless the specific competency gaps of these professionals are identified and addressed, the state's investment in inclusive infrastructure will fail to improve the actual academic experiences of learners with special needs.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the level of professional competence among rehabilitation counselors in Kaduna State mainstream schools regarding disability management and psychosocial support.
2. Identify the systemic and environmental factors that hinder the effective performance of rehabilitation counselors in the state's inclusive education framework.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the level of professional competence among rehabilitation counselors in Kaduna State mainstream schools?
2. What systemic factors hinder the effective performance of rehabilitation counselors in the state?

Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant difference in the professional competence levels of rehabilitation counselors across the three senatorial districts of Kaduna State.

H02: There is no significant relationship between counselor competence and the successful implementation of IEPs in mainstream schools in Kaduna State.

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive survey design to evaluate the current state of professional competence among student support staff in Kaduna State without altering their natural work environment. The study targets a population of 850 registered professionals, including guidance and rehabilitation counsellors along with special education teachers from public secondary schools. From this group, a sample of 265 respondents was selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) standard. To ensure the data reflects the diverse geographic and administrative realities of the region, a stratified random sampling technique was applied, allowing for a balanced representation across the three senatorial districts and weighing rural challenges against urban pressures.

The primary data collection tool is a structured questionnaire titled the Rehabilitation Counsellor

Competence and Systemic Barriers Scale (RCCSBS), which covers demographics, self-assessment of skills, collaboration frequency, and service barriers. Validated by experts at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, the instrument achieved a high reliability coefficient of 0.84 through Cronbach's Alpha. Data was gathered through a combination of school visits and digital distribution. For the results, mean and standard deviation scores determine competence levels based on a 2.50 benchmark, while ANOVA and PPMC are used to test the research hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

Research Questions One: What is the level of professional competence among rehabilitation counselors in Kaduna State mainstream schools?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Counselor Competence Levels

S/N	Competency Indicator	Mean (X)	SD	Remark
1	Knowledge of Disability Legislation	3.10	0.52	Competent
2	Mastery of Assistive Technology	1.48	0.74	Incompetent
3	Skill in Designing IEPs	2.15	0.81	Incompetent
4	Psychosocial Support Skills	2.78	0.63	Competent
	Cluster Mean	2.38	0.68	Incompetent

The data in Table 1 reveal that while counselors show strength in legal awareness and general psychosocial support, they fall below the competence threshold in technical areas such as assistive technology and the practical design of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Research Questions Two: What systemic factors hinder the effective performance of rehabilitation counselors in the state?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Systemic Factors Hindering the Performance of Rehabilitation Counselors

S/N	Systemic Factor	Mean (X)	SD	Decision
1	Inadequate professional training opportunities	3.21	0.71	Agreed
2	Lack of assistive technology and learning resources	3.34	0.66	Agreed
3	Insufficient funding for inclusive education programmes	3.18	0.74	Agreed
4	Heavy workload and limited number of counselors	2.97	0.69	Agreed
5	Lack of administrative and institutional support	3.05	0.72	Agreed
	Cluster Mean	3.15	0.70	Agreed

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that several systemic factors hinder the effective performance of rehabilitation counselors in Kaduna State. The respondents agreed that inadequate professional training opportunities ($x = 3.21$), lack of assistive technology and learning resources ($x = 3.34$), and insufficient funding for inclusive education programmes ($x = 3.18$) significantly affect their professional performance. Additionally, heavy workload resulting from a limited number of counselors ($x = 2.97$) and lack of administrative and institutional support ($x = 3.05$) were also

identified as major barriers. The overall cluster mean of 3.15 indicates that systemic challenges are significant factors limiting the effectiveness of rehabilitation counselors in supporting learners with special needs in the state.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the professional competence levels of rehabilitation counselors across the three senatorial districts of Kaduna State.

Table 3: Summary of One-Way ANOVA for Competence Levels by District

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-ratio	Sig. (p)	Decision
Between Groups	12.450	2	6.225	1.840		
Within Groups	885.600	262	3.380	1.840	0.161	N.S.
Total	898.050	264				

The results in Table 3 show that the calculated p-value (0.161) is greater than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that the level of counselor competence is consistently low across all three senatorial districts of Kaduna State, suggesting that the professional gap is a state-wide systemic issue rather than a regional one.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between counselor competence and the successful implementation of IEPs in mainstream schools in Kaduna State.

Table 4: Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) of Competence and IEP Implementation

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r-calc	p-value	Decision
Counselor Competence	265	2.38	0.68			
IEP Implementation	265	2.11	0.75	0.742*	0.001	Sig.

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.742$) between counselor competence and the successful implementation of IEPs. Since the p-value (0.001) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that as counselor competence increases, the quality and success of IEP implementation for learners with special needs also significantly improve.

Discussion of Findings

The information provided in Table 1 indicates that counsellors are competent in legal awareness and overall psychosocial support, but below the competence level in technical skills, including assistive technology and the practical structuring of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs). This asymmetry implies that though counsellors are aware of their legal duties under laws such as the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, they do not have practical expertise on how these rights can be put into practice in a classroom setting. Koch and Rumrill (2016) note that to be successful in rehabilitation counselling, practitioners have to master the medical and vocational aspects of disability, which also entail the particular use of assistive tools. The counsellor could not efficiently mediate the gap between the medical realities of a student and his or her academic needs without such technical skills.

The mean cluster of 3.15 in Table 2 implies that the overall systemic challenges are major issues that have been limiting the effectiveness of rehabilitation counsellors in supporting learners with special needs in the state. The scores in this field are high and this indicates that even a good counsellor would not be able to carry out their work in the existing school set up. Danladi (2024) argues that infrastructure and professional skill should evolve together because otherwise, the investment in one will be wasted due to the incidence of the other. Systemic pressures in this research like administrative burdens and large student-counsellor ratios tend to develop specialists into clerical positions at the expense of intensive support on student development.

Table 3 shows that competence of counsellors is always low in all three senatorial districts of the Kaduna State implying that the lack of professionalism is not a regional problem, but a systemic one in the state. The implication of this absence of geographical diversity is that the shortage of technical skills lies deep within the larger institutional structure of the state education sector. This result is consistent with Ipadeola et al. (2025), who found that in Kaduna, service providers usually have the required will, but they lack the particular skills that are needed to be effective in the process of inclusion. Sharma and Sokal (2016) and Forlin and Chambers (2017) also confirmed this point of view and stated that although educators might be positive towards inclusive education, they often do not have practical knowledge on how to implement individualised instructional approaches. In turn, the success of inclusive efforts, as Ainscow (2020) notes, is crucial to the technical readiness of staff, which does not seem to be present throughout the state.

The empirical findings of Table 4 also indicate that the quality and success of the implementation of the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) of learners with special needs is significantly enhanced with the rise in counsellor competence. This connection underlines the fact that the professional constraints of counsellors are one of the main obstacles to academic development of students with disabilities. These findings support the research conducted by SMILE Project (2023), where the quality of professional support was one of the most important predictors of student retention and achievement in a mainstream environment. Moreover, Mitchell (2015) and Florian (2019) hold that the key variable that guarantees the inclusion of policies into practical classroom activities is the competence of support personnel. Although researchers such as Slee (2018) also propose that funding and infrastructure play a crucial role, the lack of regional disparities in the current study means that the Teachers Service Board (TSB) should focus on a cohesive, state-wide capacity-building intervention to enhance the results of all learners.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the proficiency of rehabilitation counsellors across Kaduna State falls short of established benchmarks, especially in technical areas such as assistive technology and the formulation of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs). Although there is a broad awareness of disability laws, the state-wide average score of 2.38 reflects a widespread lack of expertise across all three senatorial districts. This indicates that the obstacles to successful inclusive education are a result of systemic issues rather than isolated local failures. The data further demonstrates a strong link between counsellor proficiency and successful student outcomes, indicating that the mere existence of policies like the Education Transformation Blueprint (2025) is insufficient. Without addressing critical barriers such as inadequate funding, poor administrative support, and the lack of specialized training, the gap between inclusive policy and effective classroom practice will likely persist across the state.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends the following:

1. The Teachers Service Board (TSB) should institute comprehensive, state-wide training programmes focused on enhancing technical competencies in assistive technology and the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), to ensure that all rehabilitation counselors meet the required professional standards.
2. Kaduna State Ministry of Education should strengthen institutional support for rehabilitation counselors by providing adequate assistive technologies, improving funding for inclusive education programmes, and establishing structured monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess counselor performance and the effectiveness of IEP implementation.

References

- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2024). 2024 Standards for counseling and related educational programs. <https://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2024-CACREP-Standards.pdf>
- Federal Ministry of Education (2020). National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria. Abuja: FME
- Florian, L. (2019). On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(7–8), 691–704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1622801>
- Forlin, C., & Chambers, D. (2017). Teacher preparation for inclusive education: Increasing knowledge but raising concerns. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(1), 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2010.540850>
- Inclusive Futures (2023). SMILE Project Impact Report: Mainstreaming in North-Western Nigeria.
- Ipadeola, M. H., Onjewu, M., Zibiri, A. R., and Inuwa, S. Z. (2025). Ascertaining the Understanding Level of Service Providers for Implementing Inclusive Education in Kaduna State. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*, 12(4), 211-218.
- Kaduna State Government (2025). Education Transformation Blueprint: KADA EduPACT Post-Summit Report.
- Kaduna State Government. (2021). Kaduna State education transformation blueprint (2021–2025). Ministry of Education.
- Koch, L. C., & Rumrill, P. D., Jr. (2016). Rehabilitation counseling and emerging disabilities: Medical, psychosocial, and vocational aspects. Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826120694>
- Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 30(3), 607–610.
- Mitchell, D. (2015). Inclusive education is a multi-faceted concept. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 5(1), 9–30.
- Nkomadu, A. J. (2025). Expected Attitudinal and Professional Qualities in Rehabilitation Counselling. *International Journal of Economics, Environmental Development and Society*, 6(3), 634-646.
- Sharma, U., & Sokal, L. (2016). Can teachers' self-efficacy, concerns, and attitudes toward inclusion be improved through teaching experience? *Australasian Journal of Special Education*. 2016;40(1):21-38. doi:10.1017/jse.2015.14
- Slee, R. (2018). Inclusive education isn't dead, it just smells funny. Routledge.
- UNESCO (2024). Empirical Assessments of Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa. Paris: UNESCO Press.