

## Developing Effective Cross-Cultural Counseling Practices for Counselors Working Outside Their Home Regions: A Study on Non-Local Counseling Teachers in Bireuen

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### Abstract

School guidance and counseling services require sensitivity to the cultural context, especially in areas with strong local values such as Bireuen District, Aceh. Non-local counseling teachers often experience difficulties due to differences in language, values, and perceptions of counseling, which have an impact on the effectiveness of services. This study aims to explore the culturally responsive counseling practices of non-local counseling teachers, the adaptation strategies used, and the challenges they face. This research is a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. The participants were six non-local counseling teachers from outside Aceh Province who have been assigned to public schools (Junior/Senior High School) in Bireuen District for at least one year. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and documentation studies. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach based on Braun & Clarke's model, supported by triangulation, member checking, and audit trail techniques to maintain data validity. The findings revealed four main themes: cultural challenges in counseling, cultural adaptation strategies, culturally responsive counseling practices, and cross-role collaboration. The counseling teachers used religious approaches, local value-based communication, as well as establishing social relationships to encourage student acceptance. Counseling grounded in cultural sensitivity is particularly important in areas with robust cultural identities. It is important to provide counselors with multicultural competency training and educational policies that support their work across cultures.

**Keywords:** *Aceh, Counseling Teachers, Cross-Culture, Culturally Responsive Counseling, Phenomenology.*

### INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling are key parts of the national education system. This system aims to help students optimally develop in the areas of academics, society, emotions, and careers. When counseling services are implemented, it's essential to consider the cultural context in which they are provided (Daulay, et.al., 2022). This is increasingly important in a multicultural society like Indonesia, with its diverse ethnic backgrounds, values, and norms. So, we need a counseling approach that's responsive to the cultural diversity of learners.

Normatively (das Sollen), counseling services should be conducted by considering the cultural values believed by the counselee. According to Permendikbud Number 111 of 2014, counseling services must consider the individual characteristics, developmental needs, and socio-cultural background of students. In this context, multicultural counseling

competence becomes the main foundation. This concept includes cultural self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, and intercultural skills that counselors must develop. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, an individual's behavior and development are significantly impacted by the socio-cultural environment in which they are situated.

However, in actual practice (*das Sein*), real gaps still exist. Many of the assigned counseling teachers in Bireuen District, Aceh Province, come from outside the area, such as North Sumatra and Java. This is because the district is known as a religious area that closely holds customary values and Islamic law. These teachers bring different values and customs than the locals, and sometimes these values are not in line with local norms. Consequently, the counseling process becomes less effective as students feel uncomfortable or distrust the counselor.

Early observations and interviews with students and teachers revealed clear resistance in counseling conducted by non-regional counseling teachers. This is in line with the findings of Fatmawati and Supriyadi (2018), who definitively determined that students tend to refuse the counselors they perceive as lacking understanding of local culture. This emphasizes the critical need to implement the contextual counseling approach (Holcomb-McCoy, 2020) and cultural awareness (Hook et al., 2016). Where the counselors must be open, humble, and adaptable to their students' local cultures.

Azis and Fitriani's (2020) research on the adaptation strategies of migrant teachers in Aceh definitively shows that cultural challenges are the main factors that affect the effectiveness of educational communication. In addition, Lubis and Hadi (2019) highlighted the critical need for multicultural counseling training for counseling teachers in ethnically diverse regions. It is clear that most counseling teachers have not received specialized training in this area. Sari and Widodo (2021) revealed that although multicultural competence is important, its implementation in schools is still not optimal.

The condition indicates the difference between what the counseling service system is supposed to be (*das Sollen*) and what it is in reality (*das Sein*). In theory, the system guarantees equal services without cultural discrimination. However, counseling teachers from outside the region face challenges in providing services due to cultural differences. This is similar to what Muchtar and Zainuddin (2022) found in their research, which shows that counseling services in areas with strong cultures can be successful if the approach matches local values.

This gap shows that we need to develop counseling practices that are based on local culture, especially for non local counseling teachers who work in outside the region such Bireuen. This research is important to explore how counselors from outside the region gain cultural competence, the strategies they use to adapt, and the factors that support or hinder the success of their services. The study's results will help create educational policies, counselor training, and counseling models that are important to different communities.

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study type. The aim is to deeply understand the experiences of Guidance and Counseling teachers from outside the region. It focuses on how the counselors provide counseling services to students in a different cultural environment, specifically in Bireuen Regency, Aceh Province. This approach enables researchers to understand the meaning of the informants' experiences in

providing counseling practices that are adapted to local culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The subject in this study were Guidance and Counseling teachers from outside Aceh Province working in public schools (junior and senior high school) in Bireuen Regency. They were selected using purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: counselor teachers are from outside the region of Aceh, have worked in Bireuen District for at least 1 year, actively help students, and are eager to share information and participate in interviews and observations. Six counseling teachers were selected as informants from different backgrounds.

Data collection techniques include three main methods: In-depth semi-structured interviews that focus to explore the experiences, challenges, and cultural adaptation strategies of counseling teachers. Then, non-participative observation that aims to understand the counseling process of social interactions, and how students interact with counselors. Following with documentation study that include counseling service program documents, counseling implementation reports, and counselors' reflective notes. The data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2016). The analysis procedure comprised six stages: (1) transcription and repetition in reading the data, (2) initial coding, (3) identification of major themes, (4) review of themes, (5) labeling of themes, and (6) descriptive-narrative composition of the results. The aim was to find patterns of meaning from the counselors' experiences implementing culturally responsive practices. Data validity testing is carried out through several techniques. First, triangulation of sources and techniques compares data from various methods and sources. Second, member checking involves asking informants to confirm interview results and data interpretation. Third, peer debriefing consists of discussions with peers or supervisors to review the accuracy and consistency of research results. Fourth, an audit trail is carried out by systematically recording all research processes to ensure transparency.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis from in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, this study describes the dynamics of non-local counseling teachers' experiences in adapting different cultural environments, especially in Bireuen Regency. Data analysis from in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation revealed four main interrelated themes: (1) cultural challenges in the counseling process, (2) counselors' cultural adaptation strategies, and (3) forms of culturally responsive counseling.

### *Cultural Challenges in Counseling*

There are significant cultural challenges in implementing counseling practices by the non-local counselor teachers, especially in Bireuen district. This indicates a gap between *das Sollen* (the expectation that counseling can be implemented professionally and universally) and *das Sein* (the complex social and cultural reality in the field).

Language differences become one of the obstacles in strengthening the bond between counselors and counselees. Despite the use of Indonesian as the formal language, students and the local community are more familiar with Acehnese in practice. This makes it difficult for counselors to understand the emotional expressions and implied meanings that arise during counseling sessions.

Following Deardorff's (2016) Intercultural Competence Theory, effectively communicating in different cultural contexts requires understanding verbal and nonverbal language, as well as empathy and acceptance. Failure to master the local language can result in ineffective communication and misunderstandings. A study by Santosa (2021) in coastal areas of Sulawesi revealed that counselors from outside the region encountered communication difficulties which hindered the effectiveness of counseling services, particularly in schools where the local language was dominant. Counselors must adapt the local values and language, as well as *self-disclosure* strategies, as outlined by Ifdil (2013). The author stated that an open attitude can build the foundation of a comfortable counseling relationship and cultural matching, even if the counselors are from outside the area. In Bireuen, this strategy runs alongside other adaptation practices, such as language, social participation, and religious approaches, and it serves as an emotional bridge between counselors and counselees.

Counselors from outside the region are often perceived as outsiders who are unfamiliar with local values, norms, and customs. Sue & Sue's (2016) multicultural counseling theory emphasizes counselors' awareness of clients' cultures and ability to adjust counseling approaches accordingly. Counselors may face obstacles in building trusts with clients due to the perception of cultural incompatibility. Research by Fitriani (2020) in East Lombok Regency indicates that non-local counselors require more effort to engage with students and gain their trust compared to local counselor teachers who have community ties.

In Bireuen, some narrow-minded communities view that a counseling service is only focused on troublemaker students. This causes students avoid counseling services. In addition, the discussions of sensitive issues, such as personal relationships, family, or sexual matters, are considered taboo unless handled very carefully and contextually.

Wibowo's (2019) Local Culture-Based Counseling Model asserts that counseling services must be culturally and religiously adapted to suit the values of the community. Direct application of the Western theory-based counseling approach without adjustment will result in resistance and rejection from the client.

Research by Ramadhani & Sa'diyah (2022) states that counseling in conservative Islamic-based areas should adopt a religious approach as an entry point to build effective communication with students.

Some counselors admitted that the counseling approaches learned in their home regions, such as the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers or the cognitive approach of Aaron Beck, were not fully aligned with the religious and collective-oriented character of Acehese society. Such individualistic approaches are often irrelevant to the communal and spiritual values of the local community.

Corey (2017) in his theory of integrative approaches in counseling suggests that counselors need to be flexible in combining several approaches based on the needs and cultural context of the counselee. Research by Nasution (2019) in West Sumatra shows that the integration of Islamic values in counseling approaches is proven to increase student openness and the effectiveness of counseling services.

### ***Cultural Adaptation Strategies***

The various adaptation strategies developed by non-local counseling teachers in Bireuen, such as adjusting to the social environment, local values, and the needs of students

with different cultural backgrounds. These strategies are implemented gradually and evolve alongside the counselors' experiences and interactions in schools and communities.

One of the most effective adaptation strategies is to build social relationships outside the classroom, specifically by participating in community activities such as Quran recitations, events, community cooperation activities, and attending invitations from students' families. It is a form of integrative acculturative strategy, which seeks to maintain the identity of origin while adapting to the local culture (Berry, 2017). Counselors who actively participate in community activities gain the trust of students and parents more quickly. After participating in religious activities at the meunasah, I was interviewed. This is how I became known to the residents, who no longer hesitate to greet me or discuss matters with me, including those concerning their children. This is the most effective form of adaptation because it fosters a respectful, two-way relationship between newcomers and the local community. This strategy enhances the counselor's experience and fosters social acceptance. Research by Zubaidah (2021) in Central Aceh indicates that teachers from outside the area who participate in local social activities can expedite cultural integration and boost community trust.

Most counseling teachers learn the local language or commonly used terms, either informally or with the help of colleagues. According to the theory of intercultural communication competence by Gudykunst and Kim (2013), effective communication in cross-cultural contexts requires awareness of differences in language styles, including verbal and nonverbal expressions. Students will feel more comfortable and appreciated when counselors are able to understand and use local idioms or regional greetings. The findings of this study support the view of Arsih, Hariko, and Karneli (2023) that culture plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the counseling process. In a cross-cultural context, effective counseling requires cultural awareness, deep understanding of the client's social values, and adaptive cross-cultural communication skills. This framework is useful to understand the strategies and practices of non-local counseling teachers working in Bireuen Regency. Research by Siregar (2020) in North Sumatra showed that counseling teachers who mastered local languages had stronger interpersonal relationships with students and were able to prevent misunderstandings in counseling sessions.

Due to the strong Islamic religious values in Acehnese culture, the counselor's adaptation process is greatly influenced. Counselors use a spiritual or religious approach when delivering counseling materials. For example, they may quote verses from the Qur'an or Hadith or use Islamic moral values as the basis for problem solving. According to the theory of Islamic Counseling by Abd Shukor and Mohd Tuah (2020), integrating Islamic values into counseling practices can increase the effectiveness of services in Muslim communities because this approach aligns with local belief systems and ethics. One of the counseling teachers mentioned in the interview results that they often use religious approaches in counseling sessions. These approaches include reminding students of the importance of prayer and discussing relevant verses. This approach makes students more accepting and open. According to research by Fauziah and Sulaiman (2019) in Lhokseumawe, an Islamic values-based counseling approach increases student participation in counseling programs and reduces resistance to services.

The non-local counseling teachers build synergies with local teachers and religious leaders in the neighborhood around the school. This collaboration aligns with the ecosystem

approach, which emphasizes that individual development is influenced by interacting social systems. School counselors who can build networks with people in the mesosystem environment will be more effective in carrying out counseling interventions. Yulianti's (2022) research indicates that collaboration between counselors and local stakeholders, such as religious teachers, traditional leaders, and school committees, can enhance the credibility of the counselor's role in communities that tend to be culturally exclusive. Counselors from outside the region also demonstrate high levels of self-reflection skills and a readiness to adjust their values. Instead of imposing standards or perspectives from their home region, these counselors learned to view local cultural realities as a reference for practice.

### **Culturally Responsive Counseling Practices**

Most counseling teachers adapt materials and approaches to align with the strong Islamic values in Bireuen. Counselors use local values, such as Acehese customs, Islamic norms, and family values, to understand student problems and build emotional closeness. For example, approaches to solving student problems often involve the concept of *gampong* deliberation or advice from local scholars. According to Ibrahim & Heuer (2016), integrating local cultural values into counseling interventions can strengthen their effectiveness and accelerate clients' acceptance of counselors. In a collective society like Aceh, counseling that emphasizes social harmony is more widely accepted than individualistic approaches.

Research by Maulana & Fauzi (2020) in the West Aceh region shows that local culture-based counseling can reduce students' resistance to counseling services and increase their participation in self-development programs. Some counselors realize the importance of adjusting language style, tone, and communication etiquette to local customs. For example, in Acehese culture, a direct approach to sensitive topics is considered impolite and may offend students. Therefore, counselors used a gradual and contextual approach and avoided confrontation in giving feedback.

Gudykunst & Kim (2013) emphasize the importance of understanding the differences between high- and low-context cultures. In high-context societies, such as Aceh, meaning is implied not only in verbal utterances, but also in body language and social norms. According to Sari and Hasibuan (2021), counselors who adapt their communication styles to local cultural norms are more effective at building student trust.

Another aspect of culturally responsive counseling practices is the inclusion of continuous self-reflection activities. Counselors evaluate their approach, word choice, and reactions during the counseling process, particularly when students appear uncomfortable or unresponsive. Effective practitioners can do both "on-action" and "in-action" reflection and analyze the experience during and after the action. In the context of counseling, this reflection helps counselors understand how their personal cultural values influence the way they help clients. The application of Transactional Analysis in group counseling, as described by Ulandari Juwita, Yeni Karneli, & Netrawati (2022), is an elaboration of the cultural adaptation practice. This approach contributes to the management of children's emotions and aggressiveness. This approach, emphasizing understanding one's role in communication, provides counselors with the tools to help students identify and replace automatic behavior patterns that go against local values. Integrating this approach with local religious values and language in Bireuen District makes the intervention model more responsive to the culture of the counselee.

To overcome the limitations of understanding local culture, counselors should also collaborate with traditional leaders, religious leaders, and local teachers who already understand the social context of students. Aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, this approach acknowledges that student development is influenced by interactions within various systems, including the mesosystem, where counselors facilitate interactions with the surrounding environment. Furthermore, research by Wahyuni and Harahap (2023) indicates that counseling programs involving religious teachers and parents tend to be more widely accepted and show a greater impact on positive changes in student behavior.

## CONCLUSION

The study revealed that counselors working outside the region face considerable difficulties in providing guidance and counseling services in a community with cultural strength, as experienced in Bireuen District. The main challenges include language barriers, cultural value mismatches, negative perceptions of counseling, and gaps between learned counseling approaches and local values. However, effective adaptation strategies were developed by the counselors, such as building social relationships outside the classroom, learning the local language and customs, integrating Islamic values in services, and building collaboration with local religious leaders and teachers. These strategies not only increased students' trust and openness, but also strengthened the counselors' legitimacy as part of the school community. The non-local counseling teachers emphasize the importance of adaptability, cultural awareness, and reflective ability in understanding the needs of counselees. Counselors who are able to adapt communication styles, service materials, and approaches to local cultural values prove to be more effective in building meaningful and empowering counseling relationships.

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