



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Exploring the relationship between practicum challenges and stress levels among bachelor of education with guidance and counselling students in Kenyan Universities

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### Abstract

This study explores the relationship between challenges faced during practicum and stress levels among Kenyan University students. Utilizing a correlational research design, the study involved 30 fourth-year students pursuing Bachelor of Education with Guidance and Counselling (B. Ed - G&C), selected from a target population of 300 through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising two scales: one measuring the challenges experienced during practicum (18 items) and another assessing perceived stress levels (12 items). Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyse the data, with correlation analysis revealing a significant relationship between the challenges encountered and the stress levels experienced by the students. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between practicum challenges and stress levels, indicating that as students encountered more challenges during their practicum, their stress levels tended to increase. The challenges faced by students included problems accessing counselling facilities, inadequate time for counselling, and dual roles of counselling and teaching, were prominent and contributed significantly to their stress. The findings underscore the importance of addressing these challenges to reduce stress and enhance the practicum experience, thereby better preparing students for their future roles as helping professionals. This study provides insights into the specific challenges that contribute to stress during practicum and suggests strategies for mitigating their impact on students' well-being and professional development.

**Keywords:** Practicum challenges; Practicum Stress; Student-Counsellors; Student well-being

### 1. Introduction

The practicum experience is a critical component of professional development for students pursuing Bachelor of Education with Guidance and Counselling (B. Ed -G&C), offering a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Lee *et al.*, 2023; Fantinelli *et al.*, 2024). However, this phase is often accompanied by a range of challenges that can significantly impact students' well-being and performance. Challenges during practicum may include role ambiguity, inadequate supervision, heavy caseloads, and limited resources (Al-Momani, 2016; Peetoom & Nuttgens, 2019). These challenges can lead to heightened stress levels, which in turn may affect the students' ability to effectively execute their roles as future counsellors.

Stress, defined as a physical and emotional response to demands that exceed an individual's coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Jin *et al.*, 2023), is a common experience during practicum. For B. Ed -G&C students, stress can stem from the pressures of dealing with complex client issues, balancing academic and practical responsibilities, and meeting the expectations of supervisors and clients. Research has shown that excessive stress during training can impair learning, reduce self-efficacy, and ultimately hinder professional growth (Alosius *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2024). Moreover,

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the cumulative effect of stress during practicum can lead to burnout, which is detrimental to both the counsellor's well-being and the quality of care provided to clients (Tsai, 2015).

Globally, studies have highlighted the significant impact of practicum challenges on students' stress levels and overall training outcomes. For instance, a study in Malaysia by Ngui and Lay (2018) found that stress is a pervasive issue during practicum for trainee teachers, who must navigate high standards, challenging student behaviours, and the adaptation to school environments. Their study in Sabah Teacher Education Institutions demonstrated that stress-coping factors such as self-efficacy and subjective well-being are significant predictors of resilience and practicum stress, underscoring the need for targeted support during this critical training phase. A study conducted in Singapore by Liang *et al.* (2019) identified several challenges faced by guidance and counselling students during their practicum. These challenges included difficulties in finding practicum placements on their own, limited opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings, feelings of incompetence, a sense of insecurity, challenges in communicating with clients, and a lack of emotional resilience.

In the Kenyan context, the challenges faced by B. Ed -G&C students during practicum are compounded by systemic issues such as limited access to adequate training facilities, insufficient supervision, and a lack of structured support systems (Misigo, 2014). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health services in Kenya, the training of guidance and counselling professionals remains under-resourced, contributing to heightened stress among students (Okech & Kimemia, 2012). The existing literature on the relationship between practicum challenges and stress levels in Kenya is limited, with most studies focusing on general stress factors in the educational environment rather than the specific experiences of B. Ed -G&C students.

Given the critical role that guidance and counselling professionals play in supporting mental health (Parveen & Akhtar, 2023), it is essential to understand how practicum-related challenges influence their stress levels and, consequently, their professional development. This study aimed to explore the relationship between the challenges faced during practicum and the stress levels experienced by students pursuing B. Ed -G&C at a public University in Kenya. By examining this relationship, the study sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and provide insights that could inform the development of more effective support systems for these students in Kenya.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

The practicum experience is a critical phase in the training of B. Ed -G&C students, serving as a vital link between theoretical learning and practical application. However, this period is often fraught with challenges that can significantly impact students' stress levels and overall effectiveness. Despite the crucial role that guidance and counselling practitioners play in supporting mental health, there is a concerning gap in the literature, particularly in the Kenyan context, regarding how these practicum-related challenges influence stress among B. Ed -G&C students. While global studies have highlighted various challenges such as difficulty in finding practicum placements, limited opportunities to apply classroom knowledge, and emotional struggles faced by students during practicum (Liang *et al.*, 2019; Ngui & Lay, 2018), little attention has been given to how these issues manifest in Kenya. The unique socio-economic and educational landscape in Kenya, characterized by inadequate training facilities and insufficient supervision, potentially exacerbates the stress experienced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum (Misigo, 2014).

Understanding the relationship between practicum challenges and stress levels is crucial for developing effective support mechanisms that can enhance the training process and ensure that students are adequately prepared for their professional roles. However, this area remains under-researched, particularly in the context of Kenyan universities. This study sought to fill this gap by exploring the specific challenges faced by university students pursuing B. Ed -G&C during their practicum and examining how these challenges contribute to their stress levels. The findings of this study provide insights that could inform the development of relevant interventions to support B. Ed -G&C students, thereby improving the quality of mental health services in Kenya.

### **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the specific challenges faced by university students pursuing B. Ed-G&C during their practicum.
- To assess the levels of stress experienced by university students pursuing B. Ed-G&C during their practicum.
- To examine the relationship between the challenges encountered during practicum and the stress levels experienced by university students pursuing B. Ed -G&C.

## 2. Literature Review

The practicum period is a cornerstone of professional training for B. Ed -G&C students, providing an essential opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge into practical skills. However, this phase often presents numerous challenges that can significantly affect students' experiences and professional development. A study by Liang *et al.* (2019) in Singapore identified several key challenges encountered by the students during their practicum. These included difficulties in securing practicum placements, limited chances to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings, feelings of incompetence, insecurity, communication barriers with clients, and a lack of emotional resilience. These challenges highlight the complex nature of the practicum experience, where students must navigate both professional and personal obstacles.

A study done in Turkey by Kurtyilmaz (2015) found that the process of integrating theoretical knowledge into practice during practicum often leads to negative emotions such as anxiety, confusion, and feelings of incompetence among counsellor trainees. These emotions are primarily driven by the pressures of professional practice, including the demands of managing counselling sessions and the anxiety associated with evaluations. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing these negative feelings to support the personal and professional development of trainees.

In South-East Nigeria, Nwaoba and Nwankwo (2019) identified several significant challenges faced by postgraduate student-counsellors during their practicum. These included a lack of funding, inadequate pre-practicum preparation, unsuitable practicum environments, students' ignorance about the supervision process, and difficulties in meeting clients' needs. The study also highlighted potential remedies, such as providing practicum allowances, allowing students to select their practicum settings, enforcing strict supervision, and offering moral support alongside adequate simulation in micro practicum settings. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both logistical and educational support needs to enhance the effectiveness of counselling practicum experiences.

As a result of the various challenges that students face during practicum, stress is a prevalent issue during this period. Stress in this context is defined as a physical and emotional response to demands that exceed an individual's coping resources (Jin *et al.*, 2023). The practicum experience, with its inherent demands and expectations, can be a significant source of stress for students. According to Kaihlanen *et al.*, (2020), the cumulative stress experienced during practicum can lead to burnout and stress, which negatively impacts both the student's well-being and their ability to provide quality care to clients.

Ngui and Lay (2018) found that stress among trainee teachers in Sabah, Malaysia, was influenced by factors such as self-efficacy, subjective well-being, and emotional intelligence. These stress-coping factors were significant predictors of resilience and practicum stress, suggesting that students' internal resources play a crucial role in managing the stress associated with practicum challenges. This finding underscores the importance of fostering these internal resources in students to help them navigate the stressful aspects of their training.

In the Kenyan setting, stress among B. Ed -G&C students is often exacerbated by the systemic challenges mentioned earlier. The lack of adequate support structures within educational institutions leaves students vulnerable to high levels of stress, which can impair their learning and professional development. While research on this specific issue in Kenya is limited, existing studies indicate that stress is a significant concern for students during their practicum, with implications for both their academic performance and future professional effectiveness. For instance, a study by VanLeeuwen *et al.* (2018) in Kenya revealed that students often encounter numerous challenges in the field. The researchers suggested that providing students with opportunities to familiarize themselves with these challenges and equipping them with tools to manage distressing situations could help them become and remain effective helping professionals.

The reviewed literature highlights that while the practicum period is vital for the professional growth of B. Ed -G&C students, it is fraught with challenges that can significantly impact their stress levels and overall well-being. Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring that students can effectively navigate the demands of practicum and emerge as competent and resilient professionals. The literature review underscores the need for interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of practicum stress and promote a more supportive training environment. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring the relationship between the challenges faced during practicum and the stress levels experienced by B. Ed -G&C students, with the goal of informing strategies to improve their practicum experiences.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research design**

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between challenges faced during practicum and stress levels experienced by B. Ed -G&C students. The correlational design was chosen because it allows for the exploration of the strength and direction of the relationship between these variables without manipulating them (Price, Jhangiani & Chiang, 2015). This design is well-suited for identifying associations and understanding how various factors are interrelated, providing insights into the impact of practicum challenges on student stress levels.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study focused on fourth-year university students pursuing B. Ed - G&C at a public University in Kenya. These students had completed their practicum after their third year of study. From a target population of 300 students, a sample size of 30 was selected using stratified random sampling. This method ensured that different strata within the population were adequately represented, thereby increasing the generalizability of the findings.

#### **3.3. Instrumentation**

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two scales. The first scale, comprising 18 items, was designed to measure the challenges experienced by the students during their practicum. The second scale included 12 items focused on assessing the perceived stress levels of the students. Both scales utilized a Likert-type format, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The scales were developed and validated through a pilot study to ensure reliability and validity.

#### **3.4. Data collection procedure**

The questionnaire was administered to the selected students at the end of their practicum period. Before data collection, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained. The questionnaires were distributed and collected in person to ensure a high response rate.

#### **3.5. Data analysis**

The collected data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the general trends in challenges and stress levels among the students. Inferential statistics, particularly correlation analysis, were employed to examine the relationship between the challenges faced during practicum and the stress levels reported by the students. The results of the analysis were used to draw conclusions about the impact of practicum challenges on student stress levels and to suggest potential interventions.

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## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Challenges faced by students during practicum**

The first goal of this study was to identify the specific challenges faced by university students pursuing B. Ed - G&C during their practicum. Table 1 presents the various challenges experienced by the students during their practicum, as reported by a sample of 30 students. The percentage of students experiencing each challenge ranged from 30% to 90%. The most common challenge was problems accessing counselling facilities, experienced by 29 out of 30 students (90.0%). Other significant challenges included inadequate time set aside for counselling (83.3%), the absence of counselling rooms (73.3%), and issues such as the dual role of counselling and teaching problems (73.3%). At the lower end, challenges such as a negative attitude of non-teaching staff to counselling were reported by 9 students (30.0%).

The findings in Table 1 suggest that a majority of the students faced substantial obstacles during their practicum, which could potentially impede their ability to effectively apply their counselling skills. The most prevalent challenge, with 90% of students affected, was difficulty accessing counselling facilities. This indicates a critical infrastructural shortfall, which could severely limit the students' opportunities to engage in practical counselling activities. Inadequate time allocated for counselling (83.3%) and the absence of dedicated counselling rooms (73.3%) further emphasize the lack of supportive environments for the practicum. These issues likely compounded the difficulty of balancing the dual roles of counselling and teaching, which was also a common problem (73.3%).

**Table 1** Challenges experienced during practicum

Challenges experienced	No. of students	%
Problems accessing counselling facilities	29	90.0
Inadequate time set aside for counselling	25	83.3
Absence of counselling rooms	22	73.3
Inadequate referral documents and contacts	22	73.3
Dual role of counselling and teaching problems	22	73.3
Negative attitude of students to counselling	22	73.3
Insufficient clients	18	60.0
Inadequate psychological tests to use	18	60.0
Inadequate exposure to practical aspect of counselling during training	18	60.0
Not being embraced by students	17	56.7
Confidentiality related issues for individual counselling	15	50.0
Confidentiality related issues for group counselling	15	50.0
Negative attitude of teachers to counselling	14	46.7
Not being embraced by staff	11	36.7
Negative attitude of the administration to counselling	11	36.7
Inadequate theoretical approaches taught	11	36.7
Overwhelming number of clients	10	33.3
Negative attitude of non-teaching staff to counselling	9	30.0

The negative attitudes of various stakeholders – students (73.3%), teachers (46.7%), and non-teaching staff (30.0%) – toward counselling point to a broader cultural or institutional challenge. Such attitudes could diminish the perceived value of counselling services and demotivate students during their practicum. Moreover, 60% of the students reported insufficient clients and inadequate psychological tests, which highlights gaps in the practical training aspects of their education. Without sufficient client interactions or appropriate tools, students may struggle to develop the competencies required for professional practice. Interestingly, confidentiality-related issues, both for individual (50.0%) and group counselling (50.0%), indicate that half of the students encountered ethical dilemmas, potentially compromising their effectiveness and the trust clients place in them. These findings suggest that the practicum experience for B. Ed - G&C students is fraught with challenges, many of which are related to systemic and infrastructural deficiencies.

#### 4.2. Stress experienced by students during practicum

The second aim of this study was to assess the levels of stress experienced by B. Ed - G&C students during their practicum. Table 2 shows how the 30 students responded to the 12 items that assessed stress experienced during their practicum, highlighting how these levels varied across different counselling roles and situations. Initially, nearly half of the students (46.7%) reported very high levels of stress at the beginning of their practicum. This heightened stress is likely due to the anxiety and uncertainty students felt as they transitioned from theoretical learning to the practical application of their skills. However, a significant portion of the students (43.3%) experienced moderate stress, indicating that while the start of the practicum was challenging, some students were able to manage the demands more effectively. Only a small percentage (10%) of students felt no stress at all, suggesting that the majority found the early stages of the practicum to be a stressful period.

As the practicum progressed, the level of stress associated with counselling roles showed a notable decrease. During the course of the practicum, only 16.7% of students reported very high stress, while the majority (66.7%) experienced moderate stress. This reduction in stress levels over time suggests that students became more accustomed to their roles and developed coping strategies to manage the practicum's demands. By the end of the practicum, a significant portion

of students (43.3%) reported not feeling stressed at all, indicating that as they gained experience and confidence, their stress levels diminished.

The dual role of managing both counselling and teaching responsibilities during the practicum period emerged as a significant stressor. Thirty percent of the students reported very high stress, while 53.3% experienced moderate stress in this area. Balancing these dual roles likely added complexity and workload, contributing to elevated stress levels. Nevertheless, it is notable that 16.7% of the students did not find this aspect particularly stressful, suggesting that some students were able to effectively juggle these responsibilities.

**Table 2** Stress levels during practicum

Practicum stress	Very high		Moderate		Not at all	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>How stressful did you perceive...</i>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Counselling roles at the beginning of the practicum?	14	46.7	13	43.3	3	10.0
Counselling roles during the course of the practicum?	5	16.7	20	66.7	5	16.7
Counselling roles at the end of practicum period?	6	20.0	11	36.7	13	43.3
Dual relationship of counselling-teaching roles during the practicum period?	9	30.0	16	53.3	5	16.7
Counselling roles in relation to career related issues?	6	20.0	14	46.7	10	33.3
Counselling roles in relation to boy-girl relationship issues?	10	33.3	12	40.0	8	26.47
Counselling roles in relation to teacher-student relationship issues?	4	13.3	14	46.7	12	4.0
Counselling roles in relation to student-parent relationship issues?	4	13.3	22	73.3	4	13.3
Counselling roles in relation to drug use issues?	16	53.3	8	26.7	6	20.0
Counselling roles in relation to emotional problem issues like stress, sadness etc.?	7	23.3	17	56.7	6	20.0
Counselling roles in relation to death and bereavement issues?	7	23.3	15	50.0	8	26.7
The practicum period because of two roles of teaching practice and counselling practicum at the same time?	12	40.0	11	36.7	7	23.3

Different types of counselling issues elicited varying levels of stress among the students. The highest stress levels were associated with counselling related to drug use issues, with 53.3% of students experiencing very high stress. This may be due to the sensitive and potentially volatile nature of drug-related counselling. On the other hand, counselling issues related to teacher-student relationships and student-parent relationships elicited lower stress levels, with only 13.3% of students reporting very high stress. Counselling related to boy-girl relationship issues and death and bereavement issues were also significant stressors, with around a third of students (33.3% and 23.3%, respectively) reporting very high stress. These areas likely involve emotional and delicate conversations, which can be challenging for students to navigate. When considering the practicum period as a whole, particularly the challenge of balancing both teaching and counselling duties, 40.0% of students reported very high stress, while 36.7% experienced moderate stress. This indicates that the dual demands of the practicum were a significant source of stress for most students, although a notable proportion (23.3%) managed these demands without experiencing high stress.

#### 4.3. Relationship between challenges encountered and practicum stress

The third goal of this study was to examine the relationship between the challenges encountered during practicum and the stress levels experienced by university students pursuing B. Ed - G&C. Table 3 presents the results of the correlation analysis. The descriptive statistics show that the mean score for challenges during practicum was 10.23, with a standard deviation of 3.380. This means that, out of the 18 different problem areas, the students experienced an average of about 10 different problems. The mean stress level was 24.43, with a standard deviation of 4.280, suggesting a slightly higher level of variability in stress levels among the participants. The Pearson correlation coefficient between challenges during practicum and stress levels was found to be 0.455, with a significance level of 0.012. This positive correlation indicates a moderate relationship between the two variables, meaning that as the challenges experienced by students during their practicum increase, their stress levels also tended to rise. The correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, suggesting that the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

These findings suggest that the challenges students face during their practicum, such as difficulties accessing counselling facilities, inadequate time for counselling, and negative attitudes from others, are contributing factors to their elevated stress levels. This highlights the importance of addressing these challenges to potentially reduce stress among students, which is crucial for their well-being and professional development.

**Table 3** Correlation between challenges experienced and practicum stress

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Practicum challenges	10.23	3.380	30
Stress levels	24.43	4.280	30
Correlations			
		Practicum challenges	Stress levels
Practicum challenges	Pearson Correlation	1	0.455*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.012
	N	30	30

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a significant relationship between the challenges experienced by B. Ed -G&C students during their practicum and the stress levels they reported. The correlation analysis showed a positive and moderate relationship between these two variables, suggesting that the more challenges students encountered, the higher their stress levels were. This relationship aligns with previous research, such as the study by Gutierrez *et al.* (2016), which found that stress among pre-service teachers fluctuated with the demands and challenges they faced during practicum. Similarly, the findings resonate with the study by Nwaoba and Nwankwo (2019), which highlighted various challenges faced by student-counsellors, including inadequate pre-practicum preparation and unsupportive practicum environments, contributing to stress and impacting their effectiveness.

The specific challenges identified in this study, such as difficulties in accessing counselling facilities and the dual role of counselling and teaching, were found to be common stressors in other studies as well. For instance, Kurtyilmaz (2015) emphasized the anxiety and negative emotions experienced by counsellor trainees due to the integration of theoretical knowledge into practice, which parallels the challenges noted by the students in this study. Similarly, the study by VanLeeuwen *et al.* (2018) in Kenya pointed out that students often encounter numerous challenges in the field, and without adequate tools to manage these challenges, their stress levels can escalate, potentially affecting their professional development.

The implications of these findings are significant for the training and preparation of B. Ed - G&C students. The moderate correlation between challenges and stress levels indicates that while challenges are an inherent part of the practicum experience, their impact on stress can be mitigated through better preparation and support. Educational institutions should consider enhancing pre-practicum preparation, providing more effective support systems during practicum, and offering coping mechanisms to help students manage the stress associated with the challenges they face. Additionally, there is a need for systematic interventions to address specific challenges, such as improving access to counselling facilities and balancing the dual roles of teaching and counselling, which could help reduce stress levels and improve the overall practicum experience.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the relationship between challenges experienced during practicum and the stress levels of B. Ed - G&C students at a public University in Kenya. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between practicum challenges and stress levels, indicating that as students encountered more challenges during their practicum, their stress levels tended to increase. The challenges faced by students, such as problems accessing counselling facilities, inadequate time for counselling, and dual roles of counselling and teaching, were prominent and contributed significantly to their stress. The implications of these findings suggest that the practicum experience, while essential for

professional development, can also be a significant source of stress, potentially affecting students' well-being and effectiveness as future counsellors.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that educational institutions should enhance support structures for practicum students. This could include providing better access to counselling facilities, offering more time for counselling activities, and ensuring that students have access to adequate resources, such as referral documents and psychological tests. These measures could help mitigate some of the challenges that contribute to elevated stress levels. Institutions should also emphasize pre-practicum training that prepares students not only for the technical aspects of counselling but also for the emotional and psychological challenges they might face. This could involve simulations, workshops on stress management, and discussions about the dual roles of counselling and teaching. Strengthening supervision and mentorship during the practicum period is essential, in order to provide students with the necessary guidance and support to navigate the complexities of their roles. Regular feedback and emotional support from experienced counsellors could help students manage stress and build resilience.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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