



# “Like an Emotional Trash Can”: An Interview Study of Bhutanese School Guidance Counselors’ Perceived Challenges and Resources

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## Abstract

School counselors are responsible for students’ mental health and their increasingly complex issues. However, little is known about school counseling services in the Kingdom of Bhutan. This study conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with school guidance counselors in Bhutan, 19 online and 9 in-person, to investigate their perceived challenges and resources. The data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach to inquiry and thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (*Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2):77-101, 2006). The identified challenges and resources were grouped for further analysis according to Martin et al.’s (*International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* 37(4):305-318, 2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling. The most often mentioned challenges were insufficient resources to cope with rising mental health needs and cultural barriers to the implementation of school guidance counseling, such as stigma and the role of corporal punishment. The most often mentioned resources were the importance of material resources, such as having a separate counseling room within the school, and the importance of support from external professionals, such as clinical counselors. In sum, the results revealed the need for (1) more resources to cope with the mental health needs of students, such as additional training, (2) more organization to systemize stakeholder collaboration and to clarify the school guidance counselors’ roles, (3) more awareness in the general population about school guidance counseling, including overcoming stigma towards mental health issues, and (4) more time for this profession to establish itself in the Kingdom.

**Keywords** School counseling · School-based mental health · Bhutan · Interviews · Thematic analysis

The Kingdom of Bhutan is a mountainous, Buddhist country in the Himalayas with a population of just over 754,000 (United Nations, 2019). The school guidance counseling profession was introduced in Bhutan in 2010, and around 200 school

guidance counselors serve over 500 schools across the Kingdom today (Ministry of Education & Skills Development, 2023). According to the Guidance and Counseling Framework for Schools in Bhutan, a school guidance counselor is “a professional member of an educational team in primary, middle, and high schools who assists students in their personal, social, academic, and career development through a range of services including individual counseling, group counseling, and specialized classroom teaching” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 14). However, as very little information is available about the factors that affect the work of Bhutanese school guidance counselors, this study will investigate their perceived challenges and resources using interview methods.

Research on school counseling services has highlighted factors that challenge or support school counselors worldwide. These include how school counseling is organized, such as around a specific school counseling framework or program (Foss-Kelly et al., 2021; Goodman-Scott et al., 2022), how school counseling is directed, such as through specific policies (Camilleri-Zahra, 2021), or how school counseling is affected by cultural factors, such as the role of spirituality (Cobb, 2021; Stevens & Ritten, 2022). Investigating these factors has long been considered essential as they can influence school counselors’ job satisfaction, such as job strain and turnover intentions, according to research from the United States (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Mullen et al., 2017, 2020). Reported challenges specific to school counselors include role confusion (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Kim & Lambie, 2018), namely, the uncertainty resulting from dealing with tasks unrelated to school counseling (Blake, 2020), a lack of stakeholder support (Carey et al., 2017), and a lack of supervision (Bledsoe et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2014), namely, when a professional in a given field who has more experience and knowledge than another professional working with them provides guidance, support or feedback (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). What little research exists from East and Southeast Asia suggests similar factors affecting school counselors’ work which can result in burnout such as role ambiguity and lack of stakeholder support in Korea (Cho & Kim, 2024) and role conflict in Malaysia (Chua et al., 2018). Understanding these factors, including challenges and resources, is vital as school counselors are prone to burnout (Fye et al., 2020; Mullen et al., 2017), the experience of a physical, behavioral, and emotional state of exhaustion as a result of their work conditions (Freudenberger, 1974; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Burnout not only affects school counselors but can spill over to the entire school and, in turn, impact students’ mental health if school counselors are unable to attend to students’ needs (Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Burnout can also increase the likelihood of school counselors quitting (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). That is why it is important to investigate factors leading to burnout in depth in the school counseling profession, such as using qualitative research methods, so as to inform schools and allow for the implementation of evidence-based, school counseling policies.

Qualitative studies, such as those employing interview methods, can provide an in-depth and nuanced understanding of potential factors that challenge or support school counselors. This is evidenced in international research such as on perceptions of supervision experiences in an interview study of seven school counselors in the United States (Gillen et al., 2024), on self-care practices in an interview study of 15

school counselors in Turkey (Şimşir Gökalp, 2022), or on perceived preparedness and efficacy in an interview study of 12 school counselors in Australia (Quigley & Hyde, 2023). In East and Southeast Asian countries, where school counseling has a relatively short history (Larran & Hein, 2024), interview studies have revealed, for instance, the need for a more systematic, collaborative model for working with other school staff, as was found in an interview study of 11 school counselors in Malaysia (Kok, 2013). Similar studies have found evidence for the need for role clarity, including a common understanding and shared expectations of the role of the school counselor, such as clear definitions of confidentiality, as was found in an interview study of nine school counselors in Singapore (Lim & Wong, 2018), and the issue of having to tackle stigma towards mental health issues, namely, negative views of mental health issues which sets affected persons apart from others (Byrne, 2000), as was found in an interview study of four school counselors in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena & Gamage, 2022). However, because few studies are available from Bhutan, where school counseling was recently implemented, the present study addressed this research gap.

## School Guidance Counseling in Bhutan

Secluded from the world stage until the 1990s (Wangchhuk, 2008), the Kingdom of Bhutan underwent rapid modernization, believed to have had negative consequences for children and youth (Dema et al., 2019; Lester et al., 2020; Norbu, 2021; Phuntsho, 2017; World Health Organization, 2022). In response to these concerns, the Kingdom of Bhutan established the professions of clinical counseling, substance use counseling, and school guidance counseling (Dem & Busch, 2018). Today, Bhutanese school guidance counselors must reckon with numerous challenges threatening the mental health of children and youth, including bullying (UNICEF Bhutan, 2016), changing family structures (Phuntsho, 2017), high youth unemployment (Harrison, 2021; Lester et al., 2020; Norbu, 2021), and rises in cases of substance use (Lorelle & Guth, 2013) and suicidal behaviors (Dema et al., 2019; The World Bank, 2024; World Health Organization, 2017, 2022). To date, though, little information is available about the factors that affect school guidance counselors' work, including perceived challenges and resources. The first large-scale, online survey study of Bhutanese school guidance counseling carried out in 2022 (Larran & Hein, [in press](#)) reached 162 of the 179 school guidance counselors active at the time, investigating their demographic characteristics, daily activities, roles, and responsibilities and perceived challenges and resources. Results revealed the need for more clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the need for material resources, such as a counseling room, and the problem of stigma towards mental health issues acting as a significant barrier to help-seeking because of traditional health beliefs according to which mental illnesses are caused by black magic, evil spirits, or a curse, and the need for schools to make sure there is sufficient time and opportunities for students to see the school guidance counselor. In addition, results revealed the role of the COVID-19 pandemic as both a curse and a blessing for the school guidance counseling profession. While moving counseling online in a country with sometimes

insufficient infrastructure was a challenge, the pandemic also highlighted the importance of mental health and the need for counseling services during times of crisis, which elevated the role of school guidance counselors in the wider community. However, few qualitative studies have sought to investigate school guidance counseling services in Bhutan.

To our knowledge, only two interview studies have been carried out with Bhutanese school guidance counselors. In their narrative interview study with four, first-generation Bhutanese school guidance counselors, Dem and Busch (2018) provided a first account of the challenges they face. These include role confusion, high workload, insufficient preparation, a lack of support mechanisms, such as adequate supervision, and the resulting threat of burnout. They further mentioned skepticism and a lack of support from school stakeholders, including school teachers and school principals, who view school guidance counseling services as mere advice giving or disciplinary measures through corporal punishment while simultaneously having high expectations about counseling, such as that it provides immediate solutions to students' issues. In an interview study by Jamtsho (2017) with eight teachers, four of whom were teachers with school guidance counseling training, on their experiences with well-being leadership roles, they reported that their school colleagues did not support them or understand the preventive value of school guidance counseling services and merely saw school guidance counseling as a disciplinary measure.

In sum, what little information exists suggests that Bhutanese school guidance counselors face several challenges that need further investigation. Interview data from a large, representative sample of school guidance counselors could provide a thorough understanding of their different perceived challenges and the resources that support them.

### ***Martin et al.'s (2015) Model of 11 Factors Influencing School Counseling Services***

School counseling is now implemented worldwide but is executed differently across different countries (Carey et al., 2017). To facilitate comparison, Martin et al. (2015) developed a model of factors related to the development and practice of school counseling. To this end, they analyzed literature from 25 countries and created a model of 11 factors that influence school counseling. These factors are (1) "Cultural Factors," (2) "National Needs," (3) "Larger Societal Movements," (4) "Models of School Counseling," (5) "Laws and Educational Policy," (6) "Characteristics of the Public Education System," (7) "The Counseling Profession," (8) "Research and Evaluation," (9) "Related Professions," (10) "Community Organizations or NGO Coalitions," and (11) "Local Stakeholder Perceptions." In one ethnographic study of five school counselors in Barbados (Griffin, 2019), themes that emerged from the analysis aligned with all 11 factors of the model. Furthermore, the results helped provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by school counselors in Barbados, such as on the issue of stigma around mental health and help-seeking, and informed policy and practice (Griffin, 2019).

## Study Aims

The first school guidance counselors assumed their positions over ten years ago in schools across Bhutan. However, how school guidance counselors experience their work, including their perceived challenges and resources, remains underexplored. Thus, building on the results of a survey study of school guidance counselors (Lar-ran & Hein, *in press*), this study sought to answer the question: What are the most important challenges and resources perceived by Bhutanese school guidance counselors according to interview methods? To answer this question, semi-structured interviews were carried out with Bhutanese school guidance counselors, and the resulting data were analyzed using Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling. The resulting data was expected to inform school guidance counseling policy in Bhutan and international research on school counseling.

## Method

### Design

To allow for a nuanced understanding of Bhutanese school guidance counselors' challenges and resources from their perspective, the present study used qualitative research methods, namely semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research refers to the collection and analysis of nonnumerical data and is especially appropriate for investigating underexplored research subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Ponterotto, 2010). This approach is an ideal method to analyze the relatively new school guidance counseling profession in Bhutan, which has attracted little research attention. The focus of qualitative research in this study is on Bhutanese school guidance counselors' perceptions and experiences of school guidance counseling. Interview methods are especially suitable for studies that describe human experiences of a phenomenon (Morris et al., 2021), such as the experiences of psychotherapists and counselors (McLeod, 2001). Using these methods, participants can voice their own opinions and thoughts, allowing unanticipated ideas to emerge (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### Sample

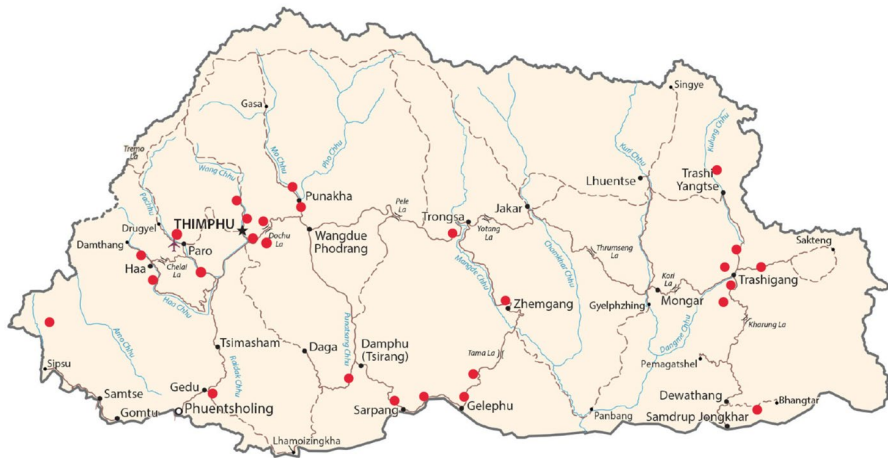
Twenty-eight Bhutanese school guidance counselors were interviewed for this study. This sample comprised 15 female and 13 male school guidance counselors, 19 of whom were from day schools and nine from boarding schools across the country, therefore constituting a representative sample. It was important to obtain various views of challenges pertaining to gender, location, and school type. Their level of experience ranged from one year to ten years. Of these 28, 19 were interviewed online, and nine were interviewed in person. Criteria for participation in the study was being a certified school guidance counselor in Bhutan registered

at the Division for Youth and Sports (DYS) of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD). Demographic information about the sample can be found in Table 1 and a map of the locations of participants across Bhutan can be found in Fig. 1.

The provisional goal for this study was to interview at least 26 school guidance counselors. Similar international studies investigating school counseling using interview methods on samples of 12 to 15 school counselors have obtained valuable data (Kok & Low, 2017; Reupert et al., 2022; Şimşir Gökalp, 2022). Sample size recommendations for interview-based qualitative studies vary between six (Morse, 1995) and 25 (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) participants to reach saturation, understood as the point at which a data set is considered complete, as indicated by data replication or redundancy (Marshall et al., 2013). That is why the final sample of 28 participants was deemed sufficient.

**Table 1** Summary of demographic data of Bhutanese school guidance counselors ( $n=28$ )

	<i>n</i>	%
Interview participation format		
In-person	9	32.1
Online	19	67.9
Gender		
Female	15	53.6
Male	13	46.4
School type		
Day school	19	67.9
Boarding school	9	32.1
School level		
Primary school	1	3.6
Lower secondary school	4	14.3
Middle secondary school	10	35.7
Higher secondary school	6	21.4
Central school	7	25.0
Work experience ( $M=5$ years)		
1 year	2	7.1
2 years	1	2.6
3 years	10	35.7
4 years	0	0.0
5 years	4	14.3
6 years	0	0.0
7 years	4	14.3
8 years	2	7.1
9 years	2	7.1
10 years	1	2.6



**Fig. 1** Map of the distribution of school guidance counselors who participated in the interview (GISGeography, 2023)

## Materials

An individual, semi-structured interview format was used for data collection, namely, all interview questions were asked in the same order to allow for a more open discussion than is possible with structured interviews. The interview was guided by an interview protocol designed according to recommendations by Creswell and Creswell (2017). The interview questions were prepared considering the cultural context of Bhutanese school guidance counseling. Since the profession is emerging in Bhutan, the questions were designed to be exploratory. The interview questions were further prepared according to a literature review on school counseling, per the research question, and Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling. The resulting interview protocol consisted of 11 open-ended questions, including how adequately participants felt their training prepared them for their role as a school guidance counselor, how they perceive the collaborative work with students, school staff, and parents, what barriers stop them from engaging in their role as a school guidance counselor, what resources support them and what resources are lacking, how school guidance counseling services fit or do not fit in Bhutanese culture, and how they were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, those with over five years of experience were also asked whether they felt the profession had changed over time and how it might further change in the next five years. Finally, all participants were asked at the end of the interview if there was anything else they would like to add that was not mentioned yet. The interview protocol for this study can be found in the Appendices.

## Procedure

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Education and Psychology at the Freie Universität Berlin, supported by the MoESD, and performed according to the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. Active or passive consent was sought from relevant school authorities, including the Dzongkha Education Officer of each of Bhutan's 20 regions, or "Dzongkhas," and the school principal of the counselor's school. Before the interviews, the DYS reviewed the interview protocol to ensure that the questions were appropriate and understandable, and then the protocol was piloted with one school guidance counselor. Both approved the interview protocol and confirmed that the questions were appropriate and understandable, including their order and the way they were formulated. As a result, no changes were subsequently made to the interview protocol.

The interviews took place in August and September 2022. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, and all school guidance counselors were contacted by email to request their participation. School guidance counselors who agreed to participate in the interview received an e-mail with date, time, and location suggestions, either online or in person, to conduct the interview. In responding to school guidance counselors who agreed to be interviewed, we purposely aimed to invite an equal number of male and female school guidance counselors working in an equal number of day schools and boarding schools in urban and rural locations to avoid any bias in the results, for example, to prevent that mostly male school guidance counselors in urban day schools are interviewed so that the results are primarily generalizable only to this specific group. Once the meeting was determined, participants were asked to be interviewed in a quiet setting free of disturbances and to allow for about one hour of uninterrupted time.

All participants were sent a copy of the consent form, which indicated informed consent, including that the interview would be recorded, an understanding of confidentiality, and an understanding of the role of the primary investigator (PI) [JL] before their interview and were asked to sign it either before or after the interview. Participants were further informed of the voluntary nature of the study that they could refuse to answer specific questions if they did not want to, and were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were not sent a copy of the interview questions before the interview to guarantee consistency in the interview procedure, namely that none of the school guidance counselors knew of the questions before participating in the interview. Just before beginning the interview, participants were reminded again that they would be recorded and that the PI would take notes during the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It was anticipated that the interviews would last no longer than one hour but, in the end, ranged between 00:37 min and 1:36:00 h ( $M = 00:53$  min), depending on the participant's expertise and willingness to share their experiences. At the end of the interview, each participant was gifted with a book on school-based mental health. All interviews were audio-recorded using the recording and audio editing software Audacity, then later transcribed using the transcription software Trint.

## Analysis

This study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined by Moustakas (1994). This method focuses on a population's shared experience of a phenomenon, here, the school guidance counseling profession in Bhutan, to reach the "universal essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 76) of the experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach to inquiry was chosen because it is suited for investigating the experience of a phenomenon shared by several individuals (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Because of the open-ended nature of the research question, thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the interviews. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify themes in qualitative data, namely similar responses, which form a pattern and capture meaning that is relevant to the research question consistently and systematically. In keeping with this paradigm, the PI's roles and their lived experiences were acknowledged as playing an active role in the presentation and interpretation of data. The researcher must distance themselves from these experiences, called bracketing, when analyzing and describing it (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which is why the PI endeavored wherever possible to bracket their own experiences of the phenomenon, to let the data speak for itself, namely, allowing for the different perspectives of the participants to be compared and contrasted, and for expected and unexpected yet relevant inferences to be uncovered (Nowell et al., 2017). After transcription of the interviews, the PI carried out the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) on the resulting data namely (1) taking time to get to know the data well, during which the PI immersed themselves in the data, reviewing and rereading the interviews to become familiar with the data, making notes where necessary and actively looking for meanings and patterns relevant to the present study's research question, (2) identifying codes, during which initial codes were created, making sure to be inclusive and using broad initial definitions for these codes, (3) finding themes, during which the identified codes were organized into overarching themes, (4) reviewing the themes, during which the themes were reviewed for coherence and correctness and to make sure they are distinct from each other, (5) labeling the themes, during which definitions were developed for each theme, and (6) creating the report, during which the themes were reported in narrative form, with interview extract examples in quotations to provide rich textual description.

Coding is the process of designating or categorizing text from qualitative data to help interpret the data and uncover themes (Gibbs, 2007). Both a deductive and inductive approach were used to code the interviews. The Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling was used to guide the coding of the data using a deductive approach, where the data is analyzed according to theoretical or analytical interest. The themes uncovered by the coding process were categorized under one of the 11 factors of the model. In addition, to ensure that participants' statements were fully captured and appreciated, the analysis also employed an inductive approach, where the data is analyzed without trying to integrate it into a pre-existing theoretical framework or any other previous assumptions. As such, themes not anticipated by Martin et al.'s (2015) model that different participants

repeatedly mentioned were noted and formed into specific themes, which were then categorized under one of the 11 factors of the model until data saturation had been reached. Both approaches were used to uncover as many themes as possible from the interviews, namely, as many important challenges and resources as possible. Using deductive and inductive approaches, it was possible to uncover themes which might have been overlooked. One example of this is the role of corporal punishment in Bhutanese schools, which was categorized under (1) “Cultural Factors.” The qualitative analysis software program MAXQDA was used to analyze the interviews, namely, to code all interviews, distinguish patterns among codes, and draw conclusions about the coded excerpts, such as commonalities between the excerpts that suggest specific themes. This allowed for a list of themes to be developed, including the number of times each study mentioned each theme and an easy-to-access repertoire of the excerpts relevant to each theme, resulting in a code book. A trained research assistant (RA) independently coded five (18%) interviews to assess coding reliability. They were trained by learning the code book and reading three interviews that were already coded, practicing coding another three interviews independently, going over the results with the PI, and then coding five interviews independently. Comparison with the coding of the five interviews by the PI revealed an inter-rater reliability of 71.1% with 122 disagreements. All disagreements were analyzed by the PI, which revealed that 27 (22.1%) were coding errors in which the RA assigned the wrong code, 67 (54.9%) were codes that the PI had assigned to the interviews but not the RA because of the PI’s experience with school guidance counseling in Bhutan (for instance the PI knew that the government wing responsible for school guidance counseling was sometimes referred to as “the division,” “the ministry,” or “our supervisors”), and 27 (22.1%) were codes which the RA had assigned but not the PI. The PI and RA discussed these results and agreed that the former two categories of disagreement could be corrected. In contrast, the latter category was due to different perspectives around the themes, codes, and definitions. In the end, an inter-rater reliability of 85.9% was achieved, which was deemed satisfactory, and the remaining disagreements were further discussed and resolved in that each disagreement was discussed in depth until a consensus was reached and a final decision was made. It was concluded that the coding procedure and codebook were effective, broad, and sufficient. Finally, the RA did not find or suggest additional codes or themes the PI might have overlooked.

## Research Positionality Statement

The PI for this specific study identifies as a white, cisgender female of European descent (British and French nationality). They were born in France, grew up bilingual (French/English) in an atheist household, and had lived in Germany since 2012. They had two years of experience working in schools as an educator and in a care home for youth as a psychologist. They had, over the last four years, investigated the Kingdom of Bhutan and the school guidance counseling profession through regular communications, staying updated on mental health research in Bhutan, regularly

reading all Bhutanese news outlets, studying the history of Bhutan, and visiting the Kingdom twice to conduct field research.

Because of initial contact with academics in Bhutan and because of their interest in school-based mental health, they enquired about what services were available in Bhutanese schools and came across the recently implemented school guidance counseling profession. Because of the lack of research investigating school guidance counseling in Bhutan, they resolved to investigate this profession further and came into contact with members of the MoESD who agreed to help them pursue this endeavor.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness defines specific criteria of qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). For the present study, two Euro-Western researchers from a Euro-Western university setting sought to carry out an investigation in a non-Euro-Western, non-university setting. Such circumstances, further underlined by the PI's positionality statement above, have direct implications for this study's trustworthiness, which need to be considered. These considerations pertain specifically to decolonizing methods. Decolonizing methods seek to decolonize and indigenize Euro-Western research methodologies to avoid academic imperialism. This is achieved by centering participants' concerns and worldviews so that their assumptions and perspectives are heard (Chilisa, 2019) and by actively involving participants in the research process so the research results are relevant to their needs (Stoltz et al., 2022). The term "Indigenous" is understood here as persons native to a place whose cultural heritage differs from traditions that are associated with Euro-Western societies but who have not necessarily been subjugated to colonialization at some point in history (Chilisa & Malunga, 2012). For the present study, decolonizing methods were employed where possible for the PI to be aware of the influence of their own biases and assumptions, including self-interests and motivations, from developing the research paradigm to disseminating results (Mbah & Bailey, 2022). This was to avoid potential power imbalances by giving participants an equal position in the research process while guaranteeing trustworthiness.

To achieve this, interview methods were used to ensure participants could be coresearchers in the investigation by providing room to articulate their views and experiences. Moreover, reflexive journaling, maintaining an audit trail, assuring reciprocity and respect for self-determination, and active listening were also employed. The PI used regular, reflexive journaling, namely writing down notes whenever possible about the phenomena under investigation in a reflexivity journal to reveal, for instance, Western-centric biases and assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The PI also maintained an audit trail including timelines, informed consent, participant demographic questionnaires, interview protocols, transcriptions, memos kept during the coding process in MAXQDA, notes documenting changes in themes, and regularly updating the reflexivity journal (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). The PI addressed reciprocity and respect for self-determination by attempting

to co-create the research design using the piloting described above (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Finally, during the interview process, active listening, namely intensely listening to and respecting participants' voices and interpretations of life events (Sciarra, 1999), was employed by the PI, who also regularly summarized and reflected on key points raised by participants to check that meaning was interpreted appropriately.

## Results

Guided by Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling, the analysis of interviews with 28 Bhutanese school guidance counselors revealed 15 themes that were deemed specific enough and exhaustive enough to be final. The most often mentioned themes were insufficient resources to cope with rising mental health needs, such as training and workshops (100%), the importance of material resources, such as a counseling room with a computer (100%), the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures on school counseling, such as having to move counseling online fast (96.4%), and cultural barriers to implementation of school guidance counseling, such as stigma and the role of corporal punishment (92.9%).

All themes are presented in Table 2, along with the number of interviews in which these were mentioned. Each theme is expressed either as a challenge (i.e., "challenge of" or "need for"), in that it is perceived as a barrier to school guidance counselors carrying out their work that needs to be improved or changed somehow, or as a resource (i.e., "importance of"), in that it is already existing and perceived as an essential factor which supports school guidance counselors in their work and which should be nurtured.

Themes were found to correspond to all factors of the Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling except for "Models of School Counseling," "Research and Evaluation," and "Community Organizations or NGO Coalitions."

This categorization is visualized in Fig. 2.

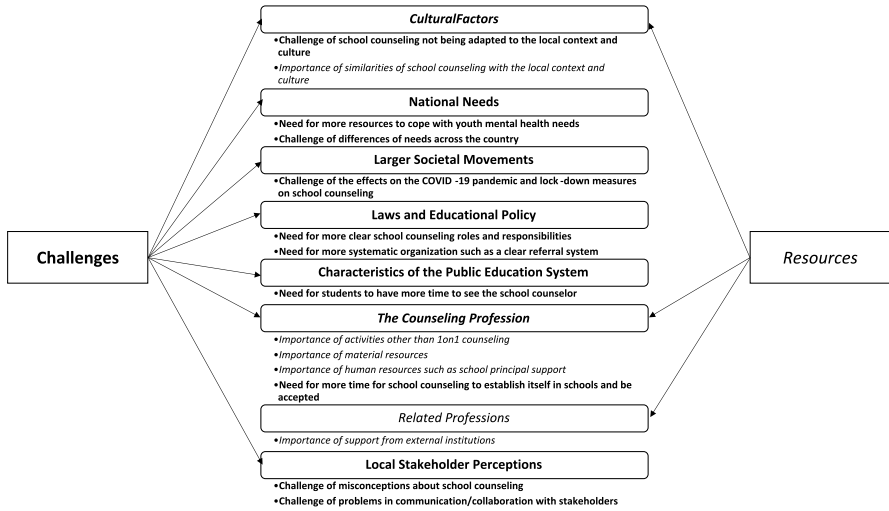
As such, this analysis revealed the following challenges and resources, which are presented in order of how often they were mentioned under each of Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling, along with direct quote examples from the interviews. Each participant is designated with a random number ranging from 1 to 28. The quotes have slightly different grammar from British or American English due to English being used as a secondary language in schools, government, and other administrative institutions. Rather than "correcting" these quotes, they were kept intact to honor representation and participant's voice.

## Challenges

The most often mentioned challenges were found for the factors "National Needs" (100%), "Larger Societal Movements" (96.4%), "Cultural Factors" (92.9%), "Local

**Table 2** Themes revealed by the interviews and categorized according to Martin et al.'s (2015) model of factors. *n*, number of interviews in which the respective theme was mentioned

Factor	<i>n</i>	%	Theme	<i>n</i>	%
Cultural Factors	26	92.9	Challenge of school counseling not being adapted to the local context and culture	26	92.9
National Needs	28	100	Importance of similarities of school counseling with the local context and culture Need for more resources to cope with youth mental health needs	23	82.1
Larger Societal Movements	27	96.4	Challenge of differences of needs across the country Challenge of the effects on the COVID-19 pandemic and lock-down measures on school counseling	28	100
Models of School Counseling	0	0	None	21	75
Laws and Educational Policy	24	85.7	Need for more clear school counseling roles and responsibilities	27	96.4
Characteristics of the Public Education System	13	46.4	Need for more systematic organization such as a clear referral system	0	0
The Counseling Profession	28	100	Need for students to have more time to see the school counselor Importance of activities other than individual counseling	20	71.4
Research and Evaluation	0	0	Importance of material resources	12	42.9
Related Professions	16	57.1	Importance of human resources such as school principal support	13	46.4
Community Organizations or NGO Coalitions	0	0	Need for more time for school counseling to establish itself in schools and be accepted	24	85.7
Local Stakeholder Perceptions	27	96.4	None	28	100
			Importance of support from external institutions	25	89.3
			None	24	85.7
			Challenge of misconceptions about school counseling	0	0
			Challenge of problems in communication/collaboration with stakeholders	24	85.7
				18	64.3



**Fig. 2** Categorization of themes mentioned in the interviews according to each factor of the Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors into Challenges (in bold) or Resources (in italic)

Stakeholder Perceptions” (85.7%), “Laws and Educational Policy” (71.4%), and “Characteristics of the Public Education System” (46.4%).

**“National Needs”**

All 28 (100%) school guidance counselors interviewed for this study mentioned the lack of resources to cope with youth mental health needs perceived to be rising (46.4%), such as increases in cases of drug use (35.7%): “I think every year we are seeing diverse issues. Issues are increasing in terms of as I said, [...] for example substance use disorder was one of the common issues in school” (Participant 25).

Such resources perceived as lacking include the need for more specific, up-to-date training (78.6%), with their current training being largely perceived as insufficient to address complex student mental health needs (89.2%): “The training module that got us is not enough for us particularly to deal with the substance use issues and mental health and well-being of children. Because whenever we deal with students who are undergoing tremendous stress and disorder, any kind of mental issues, sometimes we feel that we are not competent enough to deal with such issues because the training we have undergone, we feel that it’s not adequate enough” (Participant 3).

These findings are consistent with research from other countries, most notably in the United States (Goodman-Scott, 2015) and Australia, where interviewed school psychologists similarly reported feeling unprepared for their job (Quigley & Hyde, 2023), and in East and Southeast Asian countries, especially in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Larran & Hein, 2024).

Participants also mentioned the lack of awareness about school guidance counseling among school stakeholders and the wider community (64.3%), the lack of supervision (32.1%), and the need for having one female and one male school

guidance counselor in each school (25%): “A female and a male would be fair for students like for example, especially teen boys when they have issue they are very hesitant over the very fact that I am a female counselor they can’t really open up to me” (Participant 16).

Only the finding about lack of supervision was consistent with other research, mainly from the United States (Bardhoshi et al., 2019; Bledsoe et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2014; Fye et al., 2020; Randick et al., 2018) but also in East and Southeast Asia (Larran & Hein, 2024).

### “Larger Societal Movements”

Almost all participants mentioned at least once the challenge of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures (96.4%), which is consistent with a survey study of Bhutanese school guidance counselors (Larran & Hein, *in press*) and with international research (Akgül & Atalan Ergin, 2022; Behl et al., 2024; Berger et al., 2023; Greenidge et al., 2023; Reupert et al., 2022). This includes the issue of having to switch to online counseling fast (57.1%), sometimes with insufficient infrastructure (21.4%), and new counselors who graduated during the lockdown not being able to gain valuable, in-school experience necessary for their work, instead having to move straight into online counseling (25%): “Then the lockdown happened and then I was like, it really affected me professionally because I did not have hands-on practice to take clients directly, we had to take online sessions with the students” (Participant 9).

### “Cultural Factors”

Most school guidance counselors also mentioned the challenge of school guidance counseling not being adapted to the local context and culture (92.9%) because, for instance, of stigma towards mental health issues (53.6%), the traditional role of corporal punishment in schools (53.6%), and school stakeholders not understanding the importance of confidentiality (32.1%): “There are kids who want to reach out. There are staff who want to reach out, who want to talk about their issues, who want to be heard, and they want to discuss things with the counselor. But because of the stigma, they hold themselves back and this is what, and because of this, they cannot seek help when they need it” (Participant 17).

“Sometimes they have a rigid mindset that our counseling won’t help students. And they are in the belief of the old mindset, where it works through corporal punishment and all. So in that case, sometimes I get feedback from my friends and other teachers saying that -your counseling won’t work-” (Participant 6).

The role of stigma is in line with mental health research in Bhutan (Calabrese & Dorji, 2014; Pelzang, 2012; UNICEF Bhutan, 2021), in other East and Southeast Asian countries (Larran & Hein, 2024) and international research attesting to the role of stigma as a barrier to help-seeking (Bowers et al., 2013; Radez et al., 2021). In contrast, little research is available about the role of corporal punishment as a barrier to school counseling services.

### **“Local Stakeholder Perceptions”**

Most school guidance counselors also mentioned the challenge of misconceptions about school guidance counseling (85.7%), which is in line with international research (Low, 2015; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022), for instance, being told that school guidance counselors don't do any work (46.4%) or that they are meant to provide immediate solutions to complex problems (46.4%): “All or some have misconception that counselors do not have much work compared to the teachers. And since counseling is taking place in a private room or in a closed or in a very safe room, many people do not know the work that we are doing” (Participant 12).

“As soon as they referred the child to the counseling, they want to see the immediate changes on the students where it takes some time. So, they don't understand that, they think that as soon as the child is sent to the counseling, they want that child to come back as a perfect individual” (Participant 23).

Participants also mentioned the need for more time for school guidance counseling to establish itself in schools and be accepted (64.3%), which was not reflected in other literature: “So people have started to accept that when you are not feeling well, especially when you're not feeling good here, it's ok to go to talk to someone, just like when you're having headache or stomachache, how you visit a doctor the same way. So now they have accepted that” (Participant 16).

Also mentioned often was the challenge of poor communication and collaboration with stakeholders (64.3%), which is also consistent with international research, for instance, in Norway (Singstad et al., 2024): “Teachers, sometimes they do not always, but then sometimes they really go against the decision we make and the programs we do in school” (Participant 9).

### **“Laws and Educational Policy”**

An often-mentioned challenge was the need for clearer school guidance counseling roles and responsibilities (71.4%), which is consistent with research from East and Southeast Asia (Larran & Hein, 2024) and with research from the United States, Barbados, and Czech Republic (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Burnham et al., 2024; Fye et al., 2020; Griffin & Bryan, 2024; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Müllerová & Šmahaj, 2023): “There's no clear, clarity of the roles and responsibilities of the school guidance counselor, because sometimes school guidance counselors are given the roles and responsibilities which directly come in conflict with their profession, like counselors are given those responsibilities of a teacher” (Participant 5).

### **“Characteristics of the Public Education System”**

Finally, participants also mentioned challenges related to the public education system (46.4%), such as that students need to have more time to see the school guidance counselor (46.4%) and the need for a more systematic organization such as a clear referral system (42.9%) which could not be compared with findings from other research: “we don't have separate timing to take sessions. What we do is we take sessions during recess, during the break, which is just 10 minute break, we try to adjust

the time in that 10 minute and we take sessions during lunch, And the third time that we have is after the school. After the school where they are eager to go home. Right. Because they are exhausted from the whole of being in the school” (Participant 7).

## Resources

The most often mentioned resources were found for the factors “The Counseling Profession” (100%) and for “Related Professions” (57.1%), neither of which could be corroborated by findings from other school counseling studies.

### “The Counseling Profession”

All 28 school guidance counselors mentioned the importance of material resources (100%), specifically the need for more of these (78.6%), including a separate counseling room within the school (57.1%), a printer (39.3%), counseling books (35.7%), or a computer (32.1%): “To have a session we need a separate room. We cannot go everywhere and take a session. Luckily, I’m given a room here in this school” (Participant 7).

Most school guidance counselors also mentioned the importance of activities other than individual, one-on-one counseling which are helpful for their work (85.7%), such as carrying out orientation and awareness programs about school guidance counseling, namely roles, tasks, and aims of school guidance counseling services, with teachers, students, and parents (71.4%), carrying out parenting education programs on topics such as parenting styles and children’s digital media use (42.9%) and taking part in other training workshops such as about substance use (35.7%): “So after having conducted some orientation program on counseling, awareness program to the student, parents and teachers, yes, some of this misconception has been cleared. And now, most of the teachers and school principals, they are more supportive of the counseling” (Participant 12).

Beyond the help of material resources and other specific activities, most school guidance counselors also mentioned the importance of support from the government (75%), from other school guidance counselors (46.4%), and the school principal (42.9%): “ [the government] really ensures that none of the counselors experience professional burnout. So time to time they make a point to check on us how we are doing, not just professionally but personally also. So we have a place to share our feelings when we are not well” (Participant 16).

### “Related Professions”

Finally, school guidance counselors also mentioned the importance of support from external institutions (57.1%) such as clinical counselors (39.3%), hospitals, and other medical centers (35.1%) and psychiatrists (28.6%) of which there are currently three in the Kingdom: “Whenever we feel beyond our own capacity, we refer them to clinical counselor in hospital. And with regard to substance use and substance abuses, if it is a, you know, chronic user, then we send them to a (location withheld)

regional referral hospital where we have a drop-in center as well as there is a team where they assess the addiction level of the client” (Participant 19).

## Discussion

Semi-structured interviews with 28 Bhutanese school guidance counselors revealed different perspectives on school guidance counseling services in Bhutan. These range from being described as a “growing noble profession” (Participant 12), school guidance counselors being perceived as a “magician” expected to instantly solve student’s complex issues (Participant 19), or feeling like the “emotional trash can” of the school (Participant 11), namely, the person children come to to “dump” their confidential problems and emotions on so that they, the school guidance counselors, must bear the burden of carrying around with them “emotional bins.”

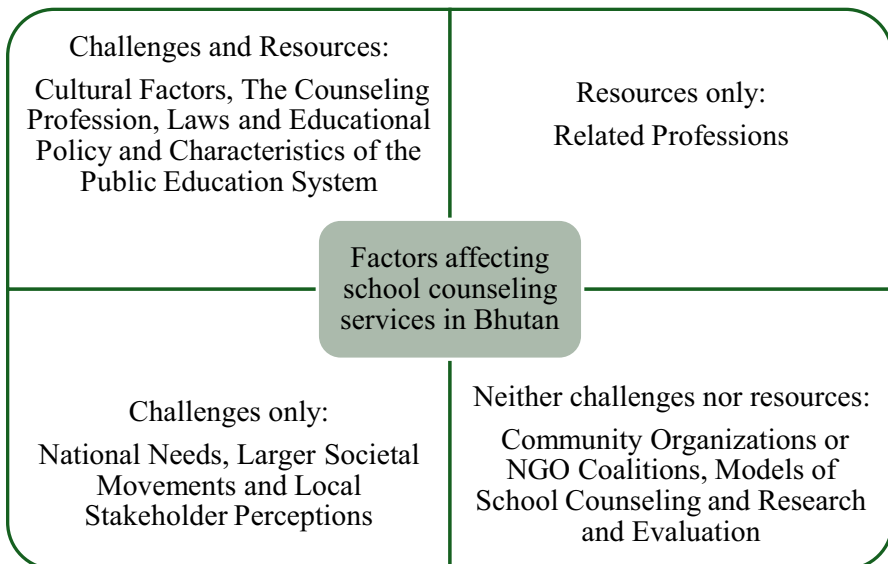
More importantly, specific challenges and resources, some expected and some not, were revealed by the analysis guided by Martin et al.’s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling. Challenges and resources were found for the factors “Cultural Factors,” “The Counseling Profession,” “Laws and Educational Policy,” and “Characteristics of the Public Education System.” Challenges only were found for the factors “National Needs,” “Larger Societal Movements,” and “Local Stakeholder Perceptions.” Resources only were found for the factor “Related Professions.” No challenges or resources were found for the factors “Models of School Counseling,” “Research and Evaluation,” and “Community Organizations or NGO Coalitions.” Reasons for this could be that there is already a model of school counseling available in Bhutan, namely the Guidance and Counseling Framework for Schools in Bhutan (Ministry of Education, 2010), albeit not explicitly mentioned in any of the interviews, such that school counselors do not perceive a need for a model or specific changes to the existing one. Moreover, there is no information available about research and evaluation currently being undertaken specifically for school guidance counseling in Bhutan, which was also found in the study of school counseling services in Barbados also using Martin et al.’s (2015) model (Griffin, 2019). This may be due to school guidance counseling services in Bhutan being very new, so there has been insufficient time for initiatives to implement research and evaluation measures. Finally, “Community Organizations or NGO Coalitions” was also not mentioned by Bhutanese school guidance counselors, perhaps because they currently don’t play a significant role supporting school guidance counseling services such as was also found in an interview study of nine school counselors in Singapore (Lim & Wong, 2018).

These results are comparable to research results from nearby countries, such as from an interview study of 11 school counselors in Singapore (Kok, 2013) which similarly revealed the need for a more systematic, collaborative model for working with school stakeholders, from an interview study of nine school counselors in Singapore (Lim & Wong, 2018) which similarly revealed the need for role clarity, and from an interview study of four school counselors in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena & Gamage, 2022) which also revealed the issue of stigma towards mental health issues.

These results are depicted in Fig. 3.

These results suggest that, specifically in Bhutan, the school guidance counseling profession needs (1) more resources, (2) more organization, (3) more awareness, and (4) more time. Bhutanese school guidance counselors need (1) more resources to cope with complex mental health needs across schools and regions, including more up-to-date training and material resources. They need (2) more organization to make school guidance counselor roles more specific and clear, to systemize stakeholder collaboration and referral systems, and to allow more time for students to go to the counselor. They also need (3) more awareness in schools and the broader society about school guidance counseling, including clearing misconceptions about the profession and overcoming stigma towards mental health issues. Finally, the school guidance counseling profession in Bhutan also needs (4) more time to allow for this profession to establish itself as an essential actor in schools in Bhutan.

The results of this investigation are consistent with previous research and provide new and unique contributions. These results corroborate a survey study carried out with 162 school guidance counselors on their daily activities, perceived roles and responsibilities, and challenges and resources (Larran & Hein, *in press*), namely that school guidance counselors need more role clarity so that they are not being made to take on administrative duties, that they are impeded by lack of stakeholder communication and support, by a lack of supervision and by stigma towards counseling and mental health issues. The findings of the present study also support the survey results, namely, the critical role of material resources, such as having a counseling room and a computer, the ambiguous role of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was both a significant barrier to school guidance counseling and a blessing



**Fig. 3** Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors organized as challenges and/or resources according to interview results

as it instigated government initiatives to raise awareness about mental health and counseling, and the vital role of time, more specifically that the profession needs more time to establish itself. The results of this interview study supplement the survey study and highlight, beyond material resources, the important role of support provided by the school principal and by the government and other school guidance counselors.

The findings of the present study are also in line with Dem and Busch's (2018) study of four school guidance counselors in which they reported skepticism from their colleagues, role confusion, insufficient preparation, insufficient supervision, and stigma about counseling as important challenges. The present study adds to this research by also revealing the importance of orientation and awareness programs to reduce stigma, the importance of collaboration with stakeholders within the school and external institutions such as clinical counselors, and the need not just for more school guidance counselors but specifically for one female and one male school guidance counselor in each school.

School counseling research from other countries further supports these findings, such as on the benefits of supervision. For instance, a pre-post supervision intervention study of 24 school counselors in the United States reported improved self-efficacy after the intervention compared to a control group of 69 school counselors (Tang, 2020).

## Implications

First of all, the results of this study imply that Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling is a valuable model for investigating school counseling services using interview methods. No new factors were created to accommodate other themes relevant to the research questions that might have emerged from the data, demonstrating the model's exhaustiveness.

The results of this study further have various implications for policymakers seeking to improve school guidance counseling services in Bhutan. To address specific challenges hindering school counselors and possibly contributing to burnout, policymakers could start by addressing the four needs revealed by the present study. To address (1) the need for more resources, Bhutanese school guidance counselors' initial training should be updated to ensure it is relevant to the current needs of students, such as by including more training on substance use depending on the specific needs of individual schools. They should also be provided with adequate material resources, such as a counseling room and a computer with internet access. Policymakers should also consider implementing one female and one male school guidance counselor in each school, or more, depending again on the specific needs of that school. To address (2) the need for more organization, school guidance counselors' specific roles must be more clearly defined and communicated to other school staff. A referral system should be established so that school guidance counselors can efficiently collaborate with external institutions to make referrals. Within schools, school policies should allow students more time to go to the school guidance counselor for counseling, for example, by allowing students to go to the school guidance

counselor during class. To address (3) the need for more awareness, more orientation should be provided in schools and more awareness initiatives should be carried out to counteract stigma towards counseling and mental health issues. Finally, to address (4) the need for more time to overcome challenges, patience is warranted. Namely, more time needs to pass to allow school guidance counseling services to become more established in schools in Bhutan, and school guidance counselors should not be expected to facilitate immediate, drastic changes. In sum, school guidance counseling policy in Bhutan should seek to update the school guidance counseling training to reflect contemporary, on-the-ground issues faced by students, should clarify school guidance counselor roles and referral processes, and should mandate that each school have one female and one male school guidance counselor, that all school guidance counselors have adequate material resources to carry out their work, that more orientation and awareness measures be carried out, and that students have enough time to see the school guidance counselor.

### Strengths and Limitations

A notable strength of this study is its sizeable and representative sample. The PI conducted interviews with 28 school guidance counselors, which exceeded the provisional goal of 26 school guidance counselors, of different genders, backgrounds, and different levels of expertise. Moreover, the interview protocol consisted of questions covering a wide array of themes relevant to school guidance counseling which allowed, in turn, for a wide array of challenges and resources to be uncovered.

However, this study also presents several limitations. First, the closed setting of the Kingdom of Bhutan posed a challenge for qualitative investigation. Because of strict administrative laws, obtaining a visa to travel to Bhutan is challenging and expensive, even for a short stay of two weeks, for which a personal, government invitation is required. Additionally, in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government enforced the closure of all borders, rendering a trip to Bhutan virtually impossible for most of 2020, 2021, and 2022. That is why spending prolonged time in the field, which is desirable for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), was impossible for this study. Second, while having a non-Bhutanese national carry out this research has potential advantages, such as providing an unbiased eye into the profession, this study was likely also impacted by cultural differences, such as the language barrier. Although English is the language of instruction in Bhutanese schools, carrying out the interviews in English means valuable information might have been missed, perhaps because of misunderstandings or because participants were less comfortable expressing how they felt in a language that wasn't their mother tongue. Indeed, there are around 19 languages recorded across Bhutan, each with different dialects (Tshering, 2020). Future studies should consider interviewing in the language of choice of the participants to ensure they are comfortable expressing themselves. Furthermore, although the PI made every effort to consider their positionality, participants may nevertheless have been biased in their responses because of the interviewer not being a Bhutanese national, which is why future studies may also want to consider having a researcher native to Bhutan carry out and analyze the

interviews. Finally, as this study only focused on school guidance counselors, the discussion may not represent the whole community. Future research should investigate the perspectives and views of other stakeholders such as school teachers, school principals, students, and parents.

## Future Directions

In the future, interview studies should be repeated with school guidance counselors in Bhutan in a few years to assess how these challenges and resources have evolved and why or how they may have changed because of changes to the school guidance counseling system, which address the four needs revealed by this study. Moreover, similar research applying Martin et al.'s (2015) model of 11 factors influencing school counseling should be repeated in Bhutan in a few years and carried out in other countries to allow for country comparison of challenges and resources of school counselors worldwide. Such research could help to elucidate why the factors “Models of School Counseling,” “Research and Evaluation,” and “Community Organizations or NGO Coalitions” were not or hardly mentioned in the interviews. Furthermore, such research could help to advance the global research field of school counseling.

## Conclusions

Using interviews carried out with 28 Bhutanese school guidance counselors, the present study revealed that the most critical challenges were insufficient resources to cope with rising mental health needs, such as lack of training, and cultural barriers to implementation of school guidance counseling, such as stigma and the role of corporal punishment. The most important resources were material resources, such as having a counseling room in the school, and the importance of support from external professionals, such as clinical counselors. In sum, it was found that the profession in Bhutan needs more resources, organization, awareness, and time to establish itself. It will be important to address these needs to buttress this nascent profession destined to play an ever-important role in the Kingdom of Bhutan, but one at increased risk of burnout.

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**Data Availability** The data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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