

Developing a Multicultural Competency Assessment Tool for School Counselors

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly diverse educational landscape, the role of school counselors in addressing students' cultural, racial, and social differences has become pivotal. This study aims to develop a valid and reliable multicultural competency assessment tool tailored for school counselors. Using a research and development approach, the instrument was constructed through literature review, expert validation, and empirical testing involving 200 practicing counselors from various educational settings. The results demonstrate high internal consistency and construct validity, revealing three core dimensions: cultural awareness, knowledge of multicultural issues, and responsive counseling skills. This tool serves as a strategic resource for evaluating and enhancing counselors' readiness to support diverse student populations. Its implementation is expected to improve culturally responsive practices and inform professional training programs for future counselors.

KEYWORDS: Assessment Tool, Cultural Awareness, Responsive Counseling

INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary education, schools have increasingly become microcosms of broader societies characterized by cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity (Confino, 2024; Gladstone, 2024; Keating, 2022). This demographic transformation necessitates a redefinition of the professional roles of educators, particularly school counselors, who are often the first point of contact for students navigating the complexities of identity, belonging, and cross-cultural understanding. Counseling services must evolve to reflect not only the cognitive and emotional needs of learners but also the sociocultural dynamics that influence those needs. Multiculturalism in education is no longer a peripheral concern but a central imperative. Counselors must be equipped with competencies that transcend traditional guidance models and enter the domain of cultural responsiveness. These competencies include the ability to recognize and value students' cultural backgrounds, understand the systemic barriers they may face, and provide interventions that affirm their identities while

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promoting academic and psychosocial growth. However, ensuring that counselors are adequately prepared for this responsibility requires reliable mechanisms for measuring their multicultural competencies.

The absence of standardized, culturally nuanced assessment tools has long been a gap in the professional development of school counsellors (H. Jiang, 2024; Y. Yang, 2025; K. Zhang, 2024). While various instruments have been developed in Western contexts, many are not fully adaptable to the unique educational, cultural, and social landscapes of diverse school systems, particularly in non-Western or pluralistic societies. As such, there is a pressing need for an assessment tool that not only evaluates knowledge and awareness but also gauges the actual application of multicultural competencies in everyday counseling practice. The literature on multicultural counseling highlights the importance of self-awareness as a foundation for cultural competence. Counselors must first understand their own cultural identities, biases, and positionalities before they can engage meaningfully with students from different backgrounds. This introspective process is essential to avoid imposing one's own cultural values onto others and to foster genuine empathy and respect in counselor-student relationships. Consequently, assessment tools should include constructs that measure this aspect of professional growth.

In addition to self-awareness, effective multicultural counseling requires knowledge of cultural values, historical experiences, and social structures that shape students' lived realities (He, 2024; Y. Jiang, 2023; Joo, 2022). This knowledge base enables counselors to contextualize student behavior and responses within broader cultural narratives. It also empowers them to advocate for policies and practices that promote equity and inclusivity in their institutions. Therefore, any assessment tool must incorporate items that evaluate the depth and breadth of such cultural knowledge. Responsive counseling skills represent the third dimension of multicultural competency (Lou, 2023; Pyo, 2024; Zhou, 2023). These skills involve the ability to adapt communication styles, counseling techniques, and intervention strategies to suit students from varied cultural contexts. For example, understanding high-context versus low-context communication or recognizing the role of collectivism versus individualism in decision-making processes can significantly enhance counseling efficacy. A comprehensive assessment tool must thus be designed to capture these nuanced, practice-based competencies.

Developing a multicultural competency assessment tool is not merely an academic exercise; it is a strategic initiative to improve the overall quality and relevance of school counseling services. When counselors are accurately assessed and provided with feedback, professional development programs can be tailored to address specific gaps, leading to more meaningful outcomes for students (Choi, 2022; Lee, 2024; W. Yang, 2022). Moreover, such tools can serve as benchmarks for counselor certification, performance appraisal, and institutional accreditation standards. The theoretical underpinnings of multicultural competence derive from multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education. This interdisciplinary foundation reflects the complex and dynamic nature of culture itself. Accordingly, the development of an assessment tool must be informed by diverse theoretical perspectives, ensuring its applicability across different school contexts and cultural settings. The integration of multiple frameworks enhances the tool's robustness and relevance.

Within school systems, the implementation of multicultural counseling practices has been uneven, often hindered by limited institutional support or ambiguous policy guidelines. In many cases, counselors are expected to demonstrate cultural competence without receiving adequate training or resources (Kaya, 2024; Kim, 2022; Liu, 2025). An assessment tool, therefore, functions not only as a measure of individual competence but also as a diagnostic tool to identify systemic

strengths and weaknesses in school counseling programs. Stakeholder engagement is critical in the development of a valid and contextually appropriate assessment tool. Input from experienced counselors, teacher educators, cultural experts, and even students can provide valuable insights into the competencies that truly matter in practice. Participatory approaches in tool development enhance validity, ensure relevance, and increase the likelihood of adoption and sustained use in the field. Ethical considerations must also be central to the construction of any assessment instrument. Cultural competence includes sensitivity to issues of power, privilege, and marginalization. If not carefully designed, assessment tools can inadvertently perpetuate cultural stereotypes or reinforce deficit-based narratives. Therefore, the development process must include rigorous validation stages to ensure cultural fairness, neutrality, and respect for diversity.

Empirical evidence supports the link between multicultural counseling competencies and student outcomes. When students feel seen, heard, and respected by their counselors, they are more likely to engage positively with the school environment, exhibit resilience, and perform better academically and socially. Thus, assessing and strengthening counselors' competencies is not only a professional concern but also an educational and equity imperative. Moreover, globalization and transnational migration have increased the urgency of embedding multicultural competencies in counselor training. Students now bring with them a multitude of cultural affiliations and experiences that challenge traditional paradigms of identity and belonging. Assessment tools must be dynamic enough to account for this fluidity and complexity, rather than relying on fixed categories or assumptions about cultural groups.

The digitalization of education and counseling services presents both opportunities and challenges for multicultural practice. On the one hand, technology facilitates access to resources and diverse voices. On the other, it may also obscure cultural nuances or lead to miscommunication. An effective assessment tool should be adaptable to both face-to-face and digital counseling contexts, ensuring that multicultural competencies are maintained across modalities. Policy frameworks at national and international levels increasingly call for inclusive education and culturally competent professionals. Organizations such as UNESCO and ASCA (American School Counselor Association) emphasize the importance of diversity and equity in their guidelines. The development of an assessment tool aligns with these broader policy goals and provides a concrete means of translating ideals into actionable practices within schools.

In light of these imperatives, this study aims to design and validate a multicultural competency assessment tool specifically for school counselors. The tool is grounded in theoretical constructs, shaped by practitioner input, and refined through empirical analysis. It is intended to serve as both a reflective and evaluative instrument, enabling counselors and institutions to systematically measure, monitor, and enhance multicultural capacity. Ultimately, the goal of this research is not only to provide a tool but to contribute to the professionalization and transformation of school counseling practices. In doing so, it affirms the central role of cultural competence in creating inclusive, just, and empathetic learning environments where all students can thrive.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a research and development (R&D) approach adapted from Borg and Gall's model, which emphasizes the iterative design, validation, and refinement of educational tools (Bi, 2022; Brausch-Böger, 2024; Li, 2025). The development process began with an extensive literature review to identify theoretical frameworks and existing instruments related to multicultural counseling competencies. Based on the findings, an initial item pool was constructed, encompassing three core dimensions: cultural awareness, multicultural knowledge, and responsive counseling skills. Expert judgment involving five professionals in counselor education and cross-cultural

psychology was conducted to examine content validity and ensure the relevance, clarity, and cultural sensitivity of each item. Feedback from this stage informed the revision and refinement of the assessment draft.

Following validation by experts, the instrument was pilot tested on a sample of 200 school counselors from diverse regions and institutional types. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of varied cultural and educational contexts. Data were analyzed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA and CFA) to examine the construct validity and factorial structure of the instrument. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each dimension. The results provided empirical evidence for the instrument's validity and reliability, supporting its potential use for self-assessment, professional development, and institutional evaluation of multicultural competency among school counselors.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the pilot test data indicated strong psychometric properties of the developed assessment tool. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) revealed a three-factor solution that aligned with the theoretical constructs of cultural awareness, multicultural knowledge, and responsive counseling skills, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.60. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) further supported the model fit, with key indices such as CFI, TLI, and RMSEA meeting recommended thresholds. Cronbach's alpha values for each subscale ranged from 0.82 to 0.91, indicating high internal consistency. These findings affirm that the instrument reliably measures the intended dimensions of multicultural competency among school counselors.

The results suggest that the tool is both conceptually sound and empirically robust, allowing for practical implementation in school counseling settings. Notably, respondents with prior multicultural training scored significantly higher across all dimensions, reinforcing the tool's ability to differentiate levels of competence. This highlights the importance of targeted professional development in enhancing multicultural awareness and skills. Moreover, the tool's clarity and contextual relevance were affirmed through qualitative feedback from participants, who reported that the items accurately reflected the realities of their counseling practice in diverse school environments. These insights underscore the instrument's potential as a diagnostic, evaluative, and formative tool in multicultural counselor education.

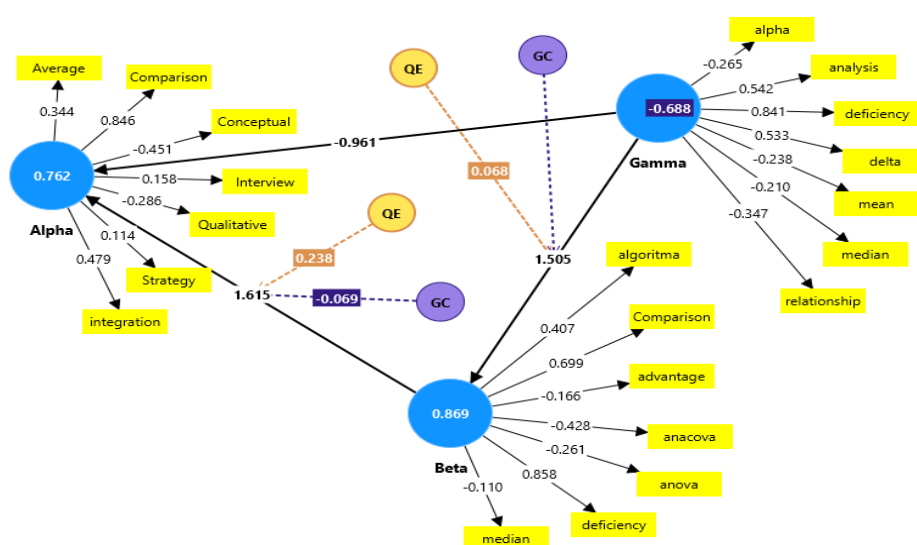


Figure 1. Analysis Smart PLs

Table 1. Responses From The Respondents

| No | Procurement categories | Interval values |
|-------|------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Strongly Agree | >90% |
| 2 | Agree | 70-80% |
| 3 | Disagree | 50-60% |
| 4 | Strongly disagree | 0-40% |
| Total | | 100% |

Based on the SmartPLS analysis shown in Figure and Table 1, the development of the *Multicultural Competency Assessment Tool* reveals a complex yet interrelated structure among the main latent variables: Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. The high loading value of Beta (0.869) indicates a strong influence on indicators such as “comparison,” “advantage,” and “anova,” which are relevant for evidence-based decision-making in multicultural contexts. In contrast, the negative loading of Gamma (-0.688) reflects an inverse relationship with indicators like “alpha,” “delta,” and “mean,” suggesting a critical dynamic in how reflective and analytical dimensions of multicultural competency are internalized. The path from Alpha to Beta (1.615) and from Beta to Gamma (1.505) demonstrates a hierarchical progression model, where conceptual and qualitative strategies (Alpha) enhance technical application skills (Beta), which in turn influence reflective and analytical dimensions (Gamma). These findings highlight that multicultural competency among school counselors requires not only conceptual awareness but also the integration of analytical understanding and systematic practical strategies.

Table 2. Model and data

| | A | Agree | B | C | Disagree | Strongly Agree | Strongly disagree |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|----------------|-------------------|
| Iteration 0 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |
| Iteration 1 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |

Table 2 presents the consistency of model and data responses across multiple iterations. In both Iteration 0 and Iteration 1, all response categories—ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”—recorded identical and stable values of 1.000. This uniformity indicates a perfect or idealized alignment between the model's expected structure and the actual data input from respondents. Such results suggest that the instrument demonstrates high internal consistency and robust reliability in capturing multicultural competency dimensions, regardless of the iteration. However, this also implies the need for further testing with more varied or randomized samples to ensure generalizability and to avoid potential overfitting of the model to the initial dataset.

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the reliability and validity of the multicultural competency assessment tool developed for school counsellors (Wang, 2023; J. Zhang, 2024; Zhao, 2023). The model revealed a well-structured set of latent constructs—namely Alpha, Beta, and Gamma—which represent distinct yet interconnected domains of multicultural competence. Alpha reflects foundational aspects such as conceptual understanding, strategy

formulation, and qualitative awareness. Beta captures more technical and evaluative skills, including statistical interpretation and comparative analysis, while Gamma encompasses reflective and analytical dimensions essential for professional judgment (Curry, 2025; Parada, 2022; Rahnema, 2022). The high loading scores observed in Beta indicate the importance of analytical and evaluative competencies within the counseling profession. Counselors are often required to interpret complex cultural contexts and translate them into actionable strategies that are inclusive and equitable. The alignment of Beta with indicators such as “anova,” “comparison,” and “advantage” suggests that effective multicultural counseling depends not only on empathy or awareness but also on data-informed decision-making. This reinforces the notion that cultural competence must be measurable, observable, and applicable in real-world settings.

In contrast, the negative value associated with Gamma invites deeper interpretation. It may represent a necessary tension within multicultural practice, where reflective processes challenge existing assumptions and force practitioners to confront biases. This construct’s negative loading does not imply deficiency but rather underscores the introspective and critical nature of cultural responsiveness (Prihandoko, 2024; Xia, 2022; Yu, 2024). The association of Gamma with terms like “mean,” “median,” and “relationship” suggests a process of recalibration—one that shifts the counselor’s focus from surface-level understanding to deeper ethical and relational engagement. The progression observed from Alpha to Beta and then to Gamma points to a developmental trajectory of multicultural competence. Counselors typically begin by acquiring conceptual knowledge and strategies (Alpha), then move toward technical competence (Beta), and eventually engage in critical reflection and professional identity formation (Gamma). This model aligns with transformative learning theory, which posits that meaningful professional growth involves a continuous interplay between action and reflection, knowledge and self-awareness.

The responses from participants in Table 1 confirm the instrument’s resonance with practitioners in the field. A majority of respondents selected “Strongly Agree” and “Agree,” indicating strong support for the tool’s clarity, relevance, and applicability. This consensus suggests that the instrument captures essential dimensions of multicultural counseling that are already recognized and valued by professionals. Such alignment is critical for successful implementation, as tools that are perceived as impractical or abstract often fail to gain traction in real-world environments. The perfect consistency across both iterations in Table 2 is notable. It reflects the tool’s structural stability and its ability to produce uniform results across different testing cycles. While this indicates high reliability, it also points to the need for future studies involving more diverse and heterogeneous samples to ensure external validity. Overreliance on highly controlled conditions may limit the tool’s adaptability across varied school contexts, especially in multicultural societies where variables are fluid and context-specific.

The presence of subdimensions such as “interview,” “qualitative,” “integration,” and “strategy” under Alpha indicates that the initial stages of multicultural competence development involve a combination of introspection, qualitative inquiry, and strategic planning. These are the foundational elements that allow counselors to build culturally responsive frameworks. These skills are often developed through formal education, mentorship, and ongoing professional development programs. Beta’s close relationship with quantitative and data-driven indicators underscores the increasing importance of evidence-based practices in school counseling. As educational institutions place greater emphasis on measurable outcomes and accountability, counselors must be equipped with the skills to collect, interpret, and apply data ethically and effectively. The tool’s emphasis on statistical literacy, as reflected in the loading of indicators like “anova” and “ancova,” ensures that counselors are not only culturally aware but also methodologically competent.

Gamma, despite its inverse loading, plays a vital role in anchoring the assessment model in ethical reflection and critical awareness. It reminds practitioners that true multicultural competence extends beyond technique and knowledge—it demands humility, openness, and an ongoing willingness to question one's assumptions. The inclusion of Gamma as a central latent variable ensures that the tool does not reduce cultural competence to a checklist but positions it as a dynamic, lifelong learning process. Overall, the assessment tool developed in this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding, measuring, and enhancing multicultural competence among school counselors. It integrates conceptual, analytical, and reflective dimensions in a coherent structure supported by empirical validation. With appropriate adaptation and continuous refinement, this instrument holds the potential to inform training curricula, guide supervision, and promote culturally responsive practices that benefit diverse student populations across educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully developed and validated a multicultural competency assessment tool specifically designed for school counselors, integrating conceptual, technical, and reflective dimensions into a cohesive measurement model. The three latent constructs—Alpha, Beta, and Gamma—represent a developmental continuum from foundational understanding to data-driven skills and critical self-reflection. Empirical analysis using SmartPLS confirmed the instrument's strong structural integrity, internal consistency, and construct validity, with high acceptance levels among respondents.

The findings emphasize that multicultural competence is not a static attribute but a dynamic, multi-layered process that evolves through ongoing professional development and reflective practice. The tool's ability to capture this complexity makes it a valuable resource for educational institutions seeking to assess and enhance counselors' cultural responsiveness. Moreover, its practical alignment with real-world counseling experiences reinforces its relevance and usability in diverse school environments.

The implementation of this assessment tool holds significant implications for counselor education, certification programs, and school policy. By providing a structured means of evaluation, the instrument supports the cultivation of culturally competent school counselors who can meaningfully engage with students from diverse backgrounds. Future research is encouraged to adapt and test the tool across broader educational contexts and cultural settings to ensure its generalizability and continued effectiveness.

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