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Strategies for implementing comprehensive guidance and counseling within forest school

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: comprehensive guidance and counseling; forest school; nature-based education.	Comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) plays an essential role in supporting students' holistic development; however, its implementation within nature-based educational settings remains insufficiently explored. This study aimed to examine the strategies for implementing comprehensive G&C within a forest school in Rembang, Indonesia. Employing a naturalistic qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving eight purposively selected informants, comprising a principal, two counselors, two homeroom teachers, two students, and a parent. Thematic analysis identified six interconnected themes: integration of guidance into nature-based learning, personalized responsive services, individualized planning through mentoring and portfolios, collaborative system support, reflective evaluation, and a supportive school climate. The findings indicate that comprehensive G&C is embedded in experiential learning, daily interactions, and collaborative educational practices rather than delivered exclusively through conventional counseling activities. These strategies demonstrate how the four components of comprehensive G&C can be contextually adapted to the educational philosophy and developmental characteristics of forest schools. This study contributes to understanding comprehensive counseling implementation in alternative educational settings and highlights the importance of contextual flexibility, stakeholder collaboration, and systematic program evaluation.

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Introduction

Guidance and counseling (G&C) play an essential role in supporting students' holistic development across personal, social, academic, and career domains. Comprehensive G&C emphasizes a systematic, preventive, developmental, and collaborative approach that extends beyond addressing students' immediate difficulties. In Indonesia, Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 111 of 2014 establishes four interconnected components of school G&C programs: basic services, responsive services, individual planning and specialization, and system support. These components are intended to facilitate students' developmental needs through coordinated educational services. However, implementing comprehensive counseling requires more than establishing formal program structures. Hilt et al. (2025) demonstrated that organizational support, professional characteristics, and ecological factors contribute to comprehensive school counseling implementation. Similarly, Kratsa et al. (2023) found that institutional type, geographical region, and community context were significant predictors of program recognition, highlighting the importance of considering educational environments when implementing comprehensive counseling.

The implementation of comprehensive G&C also depends on collaboration among counselors, teachers, school leadership, and families. Brown et al. (2024), in a study involving 404 parents, identified important

challenges concerning counselor–parent communication and parental involvement in educational planning. These findings indicate that effective counseling programs require accessible communication, clearly defined professional responsibilities, and coordinated support systems. Consequently, comprehensive G&C strategies should be responsive not only to students' developmental characteristics but also to the institutional and pedagogical conditions in which counseling services are delivered.

Forest schools represent a distinctive educational approach that emphasizes experiential learning, student autonomy, environmental engagement, and holistic development through interactions with natural settings. Unlike predominantly classroom-centered instruction, forest school pedagogy integrates practical exploration, collaborative activities, reflection, and meaningful relationships with the natural environment. Knight et al. (2024) conceptualized forest school education through an interdisciplinary framework emphasizing experiential learning, play-based pedagogy, and biophilic interaction. Similarly, Garden and Downes (2023) highlighted the importance of understanding forest school practices within their educational, social, and environmental contexts. These characteristics suggest that forest schools offer opportunities for integrating developmental guidance into authentic learning experiences.

Recent empirical research has demonstrated the developmental potential of nature-based education. Mann et al. (2022), through a systematic review of 147 studies, identified positive outcomes associated with outdoor learning, including student engagement, collaboration, self-concept, and personal development. Ly and Vella-Brodrick (2024) further reported that school-led greenspace interventions showed potential benefits for students' emotional well-being, physical activity, and social relationships. Similarly, Sella et al. (2023), in a systematic review of forest school programs for preschool children, identified potential benefits related to cognitive development, motor competencies, nature connectedness, and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, the authors emphasized the methodological limitations of existing studies and the need for further research. Collectively, these findings support the developmental relevance of nature-based education, although they do not directly establish the effectiveness of comprehensive counseling services within forest schools.

The educational philosophy of forest schools presents meaningful opportunities for contextualizing comprehensive G&C. Developmental guidance may be integrated into outdoor thematic learning, responsive services may be facilitated through personalized dialogue, individual planning may involve mentoring and reflective portfolios, and system support may be strengthened through collaboration among counselors, teachers, and parents. Such practices are compatible with humanistic principles that emphasize empathy, acceptance, and student-centered relationships. They are also consistent with an ecological understanding of student development, which recognizes the influence of interconnected educational, family, and community environments. Nevertheless, adapting comprehensive counseling to experiential education requires careful consideration of professional roles, systematic planning, and service evaluation to ensure that flexibility does not compromise program accountability.

Despite increasing research on forest school pedagogy and comprehensive school counseling, an important gap remains in understanding how these two educational approaches are integrated in practice. Existing forest school studies have primarily examined pedagogical characteristics and students' developmental outcomes (Knight et al., 2024; Mann et al., 2022; Sella et al., 2023), whereas comprehensive counseling research has largely focused on organizational characteristics, implementation barriers, and collaborative support systems (Brown et al., 2024; Hilts et al., 2025; Kratsa et al., 2023). These research strands provide valuable but distinct perspectives, leaving the contextual implementation of the four comprehensive G&C components within nature-based educational settings insufficiently explained. In particular, further investigation is needed into how experiential learning, mentoring, responsive interactions, and stakeholder collaboration are organized as systematic guidance practices within forest schools.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategies for implementing comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) within a forest school in Rembang, Indonesia. Using an intrinsic qualitative case study, the research seeks to address the limited understanding of how comprehensive G&C is implemented in nature-based educational settings. The study is expected to contribute to the literature on comprehensive school counseling and provide practical insights for developing contextually responsive guidance and counseling practices in alternative educational environments.

Method

This study employed a naturalistic qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design to explore strategies for implementing comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) within a forest school. An intrinsic case study was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of a specific educational context, emphasizing its

distinctive characteristics rather than seeking statistical generalization (Stake, 1995). The investigation focused on how the four components of comprehensive G&C—guidance curriculum, responsive services, individual planning, and system support—were adapted to nature-based educational practices. Particular attention was given to the experiences of school stakeholders, service implementation, collaborative practices, and contextual factors influencing guidance delivery.

The research was conducted at a forest school in Rembang, Central Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of G&C services. Eight informants participated, comprising one principal, two guidance counselors, two homeroom teachers, two students, and one parent. This selection allowed the investigation to incorporate perspectives from school leadership, counseling practitioners, teachers, service recipients, and families. To maintain confidentiality and facilitate data analysis, each participant was assigned an identification code, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics and Distribution of Research Informants

Informant category	Participant codes	<i>n</i>
Principal	KS_TR	1
Guidance counselors	BK1_TY, BK2_LY	2
Homeroom teachers	GK1_SL, GK2_HR	2
Students	SM1_PA, SM2_YN	2
Parent	WM_AR	1
Total		8

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences and perspectives regarding comprehensive G&C implementation. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded using a Sony ICD-PX470 digital recorder. The recordings were subsequently transcribed to facilitate systematic analysis. The semi-structured format enabled the researchers to explore predetermined topics while allowing follow-up questions to clarify participants' experiences and obtain contextual information.

The interview guide was organized around the four components of comprehensive G&C and supplementary aspects of implementation, including reflective evaluation, collaborative relationships, and the characteristics of nature-based education. Questions were adjusted to participants' respective roles to ensure relevance and accessibility. For example, counselors and teachers were asked about service delivery, whereas students were encouraged to describe their experiences of receiving guidance and participating in school activities. Examples of questions aligned with the research objectives are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Focus of inquiry	Example interview questions	Target informants
Program planning	How are comprehensive G&C services planned and adapted to the forest school's educational philosophy?	Principal, counselors
Guidance curriculum	How are personal and social development objectives integrated into outdoor learning and thematic activities?	Counselors, homeroom teachers
Responsive services	How are students' personal, social, or emotional difficulties identified and addressed during school activities?	Counselors, homeroom teachers
Student experiences	When you experience difficulties at school, whom do you approach, and how do they help you?	Students
Individual planning	How are students supported in identifying their interests, setting goals, and monitoring personal development?	Counselors, homeroom teachers, students
System support	How do counselors, teachers, school leaders, and parents coordinate their roles in supporting students?	Principal, counselors, teachers, parent
Reflective evaluation	How are students' developmental progress and counseling activities evaluated and followed up?	Counselors, teachers, parent
School climate	How do outdoor learning activities and relationships with teachers influence students' experiences of guidance?	Students, homeroom teachers

Focus of inquiry	Example interview questions	Target informants
Implementation challenges	What challenges are encountered when implementing comprehensive G&C in a forest school, and how are they addressed?	Principal, counselors, homeroom teachers

Observations were conducted on ten occasions, each lasting approximately two hours, to examine the implementation of G&C services in natural educational settings. Observational activities focused on nature-based learning, collaborative projects, student–teacher interactions, informal guidance practices, and reflection sessions. The researchers used a structured observation guide to record relevant behaviors, interpersonal interactions, and contextual characteristics. These observations provided opportunities to compare participants' interview accounts with practices occurring within the school environment.

Document analysis was undertaken to obtain additional evidence regarding program planning, implementation, and evaluation. The documents examined included curriculum materials, G&C service plans, activity schedules, student portfolios, mentoring journals, reflective reports, student development records, and visual documentation of school activities. These materials were used to examine how guidance objectives were incorporated into educational practices and how students' developmental progress was documented. The interview and observation guides were reviewed by a guidance and counseling expert to assess their content relevance and alignment with the research objectives.

The researchers served as the primary instruments responsible for collecting, interpreting, and contextualizing the qualitative data. NVivo 12 Plus software was used to assist with organizing interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence. Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving several interconnected stages: data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, identification of meaningful units through initial coding, comparison and categorization of related codes, development of preliminary themes, and refinement of themes through continuous comparison with the original data. Open coding was used to identify relevant concepts, while axial coding facilitated the examination of relationships among categories. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the four components of comprehensive G&C and the contextual characteristics of forest school education.

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation involved comparing information from principals, counselors, teachers, students, and parents, while methodological triangulation examined convergence among interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of researchers' interpretations with informants. These procedures were intended to enhance the credibility and consistency of the thematic findings while preserving the contextual meaning of participants' experiences.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of interviews with eight informants, ten field observations, and institutional documents identified six interrelated themes describing the implementation of comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) at a forest school in Rembang, Indonesia. These themes included (1) integration of guidance into nature-based learning, (2) personalized responsive services, (3) individualized planning through mentoring and portfolios, (4) collaborative system support, (5) reflective and participatory evaluation, and (6) a supportive and humanistic school climate. The findings revealed that the four components of comprehensive G&C were implemented through flexible strategies integrated into the school's experiential learning activities, interpersonal relationships, and institutional practices. The thematic findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic Findings on the Implementation of Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling in Forest School

Theme	Implementation strategy	Supporting informants	Documentary and observational evidence
Nature-integrated guidance curriculum	Outdoor thematic learning, character education, and collaborative projects	Counselors and homeroom teachers	Integrated service plans, outdoor activities, character development records
Personalized responsive services	Empathetic dialogue and informal guidance interactions	Counselors, teachers, and students	Observed interactions and reflective activities

Theme	Implementation strategy	Supporting informants	Documentary and observational evidence
Individualized planning	Mentoring, personal goal-setting, and portfolio development	Counselors, teachers, and students	Mentoring journals, student portfolios, developmental targets
Collaborative system support	Coordination among counselors, teachers, school leadership, and parents	Principal, teachers, and parent	Communication logs, mentoring reports, school activities
Reflective evaluation	Weekly reflection, narrative feedback, and participatory assessment	Teachers, students, and parent	Reflection journals and evaluation reports
Humanistic school climate	Acceptance, supportive relationships, and student participation	Students and teachers	Field observations and student activity records

The first theme demonstrated the integration of developmental guidance into nature-based thematic learning. Counselors and homeroom teachers described guidance activities as flexible and closely connected to students' everyday educational experiences. Core values, including honesty, care, cooperation, and responsibility, were incorporated into outdoor learning and collaborative projects. The teacher interview-summary record stated:

“The guidance curriculum, or basic services, is embedded within nature-based thematic learning by integrating core life values like honesty, care, and responsibility.” (BK1_TY, BK2_LY, GK1_SL, and GK2_HR).

This finding was supported by observations of outdoor activities and documentary evidence, including integrated guidance plans and character development records. It suggests that the forest school utilized experiential learning as a medium for promoting students' personal and social development. Mann et al. (2022), through a systematic review, identified the potential contribution of nature-specific outdoor learning to students' engagement, collaboration, and personal development. Similarly, Prins et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of interactions between educators, children, and natural environments in supporting meaningful learning experiences. The present findings extend this perspective by illustrating how nature-based activities can be integrated with developmental guidance objectives rather than functioning merely as outdoor educational experiences.

The second theme concerned personalized responsive services. Counselors and teachers reported that student concerns were addressed through accessible, informal, and empathetic communication. Students similarly perceived their teachers as approachable individuals with whom they could discuss personal difficulties. The student interview-summary record indicated:

“Students reported that they felt comfortable with and accepted by their teachers, whom they regarded as conversational partners for discussing problems.” (SM1_PA and SM2_YN).

These accounts were consistent with field observations indicating that students participated openly in group discussions, reflective activities, and informal guidance interactions. The findings suggest that responsive services were supported by positive teacher–student relationships and an environment that encouraged self-expression. This approach reflects the humanistic principles of empathy, acceptance, and respect for individual experiences. Nevertheless, informal guidance should remain supported by professional counseling procedures, particularly regarding confidentiality, problem assessment, and referral when specialized assistance is required. The third theme involved individual planning through mentoring and portfolio-based activities. Counselors and teachers reported using mentoring to help students recognize their interests, identify their potential, and establish personal development goals. Student portfolios contained reflective notes, developmental targets, and records of character-building activities. The student interview-summary record further stated:

“Students felt involved in the learning process, including in planning activities and setting personal learning goals.” (SM1_PA and SM2_YN).

These findings suggest that individual planning emphasized student participation, self-awareness, and continuous developmental reflection. The approach is consistent with the learner-centered orientation of forest school education, which provides opportunities for students to explore their capabilities and participate in educational decision-making. However, the available evidence primarily documents personal development and learning goals. Greater attention to academic planning and career exploration would strengthen the implementation of individual planning as a comprehensive counseling component.

The fourth theme highlighted collaboration among school stakeholders. The principal emphasized that comprehensive G&C was implemented through shared responsibilities involving counselors, homeroom teachers, parents, and school leadership. The principal interview-summary record noted:

“A clear synergy exists among homeroom teachers, parents, and the school counselor.” (KS_TR).

“Communication between teachers and parents was open and two-way.” (WM_AR)

These findings were corroborated by communication records, mentoring reports, and observations of parental participation in school activities. The results indicate that system support was implemented through reciprocal communication and shared monitoring of students' development. Brown et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of counselor–parent relationships and parental involvement in comprehensive school counseling programs. Similarly, Kratsa et al. (2023) demonstrated that institutional and contextual factors are relevant to the implementation of comprehensive counseling programs. Thus, the collaborative approach identified in the present study represents an important organizational strategy for connecting students' developmental support across school and family environments.

The fifth theme concerned reflective and participatory evaluation. Teachers reported that evaluation was conducted through weekly reflections, mentoring journals, and narrative developmental reports rather than relying exclusively on numerical assessment. Documentary analysis identified student portfolios, character development notes, and weekly reflection reports. The researcher's document-analysis summary stated:

“The evaluation was conducted participatively through discussion rather than quantitative assessment.” (SM1_PA, SM2_YN, WM_AR).

This finding indicates that evaluation was integrated into students' developmental experiences through reflective discussions and participatory assessment. Such practices are consistent with Sortwell et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of formative assessment in monitoring learning progress and informing educational improvements. However, reflective evaluation should be complemented by measurable developmental indicators and systematic program monitoring. Geesa et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of evaluation systems aligned with school counselors' professional responsibilities, while Rutledge et al. (2023) demonstrated the relevance of student outcome data in evaluating comprehensive school counseling programs. Therefore, integrating reflective and outcome-based evaluation is essential for strengthening program accountability and assessing students' developmental progress.

The final theme concerned the development of a supportive and humanistic school climate. Students described feeling accepted by teachers and participating in activities involving storytelling, play, group discussions, and outdoor experiences. Field observations further documented opportunities for students to express themselves and participate in collaborative learning. The researcher's observation summary described the atmosphere as follows:

“The guidance process took place in an open, supportive, and humanistic atmosphere.”
(SM2_YN, SM2_YN)

These findings indicate that the school's relational environment provided favorable conditions for accessible guidance and student participation. Cudworth and Lumber (2021) emphasized the importance of meaningful experiences in natural environments for developing children's connection with nature. Furthermore, Sella et al. (2023), in a systematic review, identified potential psychological and developmental benefits associated with forest school experiences among preschool children. Although these studies support the broader relevance of nature-based education, the present research specifically contributes evidence

concerning the integration of comprehensive guidance within an experiential and supportive school environment.

The integration of the six themes demonstrates that comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) at the forest school was embedded in educational activities and interpersonal relationships. Nature-based learning supported developmental guidance (Mann et al., 2022), while personalized dialogue, mentoring, and reflection facilitated responsive services and individual planning. Collaboration among counselors, teachers, and parents strengthened system support (Brown et al., 2024), highlighting the importance of contextual factors in comprehensive counseling implementation (Kratsa et al., 2023). Reflective evaluation and a humanistic school climate connected these components, illustrating a contextualized approach to comprehensive G&C, as presented in Figure 1.

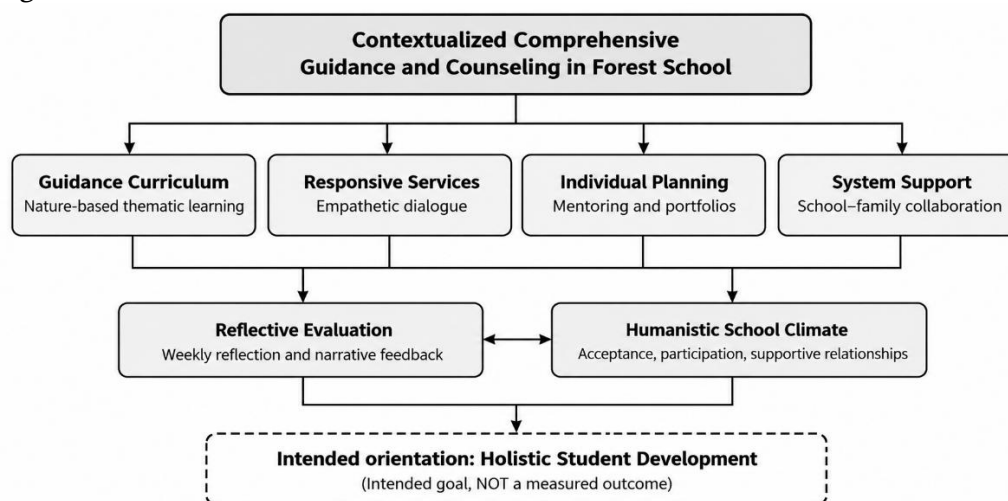


Figure 1. Thematic map of contextualized comprehensive guidance and counseling implementation in forest school.

The consistency of the findings across different data collection techniques provided additional support for the thematic interpretation. Table 3 presents the convergence of evidence from interviews, observations, and documentation.

Table 3. Triangulation of Evidence Across Data Collection Methods

Theme	Interview evidence	Observation evidence	Documentary evidence
Guidance curriculum	Teachers reported integration with thematic learning	Outdoor learning and character projects	Integrated guidance plans
Responsive services	Students described accessible teachers	Supportive guidance interactions	Mentoring and developmental notes
Individual planning	Students and teachers reported goal-setting	Participation in reflective activities	Individual portfolios and mentoring journals
System support	Principal and parent described collaboration	Parental involvement in activities	Communication logs and reports
Reflective evaluation	Teachers described participatory assessment	Weekly reflection activities	Reflection journals and evaluation records
Humanistic school climate	Students reported acceptance and comfort	Positive teacher-student interactions	Character development records

The triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents strengthened the credibility of the findings by demonstrating consistency across multiple data sources. However, triangulation does not necessarily establish data saturation. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) emphasized that saturation depends on the emergence of new information, while Braun and Clarke (2021) highlighted the importance of interpretative depth in thematic analysis. Therefore, the findings are best understood as a contextually grounded account of comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) implementation.

The findings demonstrate that comprehensive G&C can be adapted to forest school education through nature-based learning, personalized counseling, individual mentoring, and collaborative support. This approach aligns with Mann et al. (2022), who highlighted the developmental benefits of outdoor learning, and Kratsa et al. (2023), who emphasized the influence of institutional contexts on counseling implementation. Brown et al. (2024) further supported the importance of school–family collaboration. These findings highlight the potential of contextualized G&C while emphasizing the need for systematic planning, professional accountability, and continuous evaluation..

Conclusion

This study reveals that comprehensive guidance and counseling (G&C) at the forest school in Rembang is implemented through contextual, participatory, and holistic strategies that integrate guidance services into nature-based learning and students' daily experiences. The implementation emphasizes four key strategies: integrating guidance into experiential activities, adopting flexible and nature-based approaches, strengthening collaboration among counselors, teachers, parents, and school communities, and adapting services to students' developmental needs. Supported by reflective evaluation and a humanistic school climate, these strategies illustrate how comprehensive G&C can be adapted to alternative educational settings while maintaining its developmental orientation. The findings offer practical insights into developing flexible, collaborative, and contextually responsive counseling programs, although further research is needed to evaluate their effectiveness in improving student developmental outcomes and their applicability across different educational contexts.

Author Contributions Statement

Afifah 'Ainun Ni'mah: Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Kurotul Aeni:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Sugiyono:** Supervision, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing. All authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the development of this manuscript, the authors employed AI-assisted tools to refine the language and enhance the clarity and readability of the text. The resulting content was subsequently examined and revised by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final published version of the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no known financial conflicts or personal associations that could reasonably be regarded as having influenced the conduct or reporting of this research.

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