



Imbalanced Counselor Ratios and Their Implications for individual Counseling Services in the Merdeka Curriculum Era at SMA Negeri 1 Rancah

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ABSTRACT

Individual counseling services are vital for supporting student development, especially in the era of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes student autonomy. At SMA Negeri 1 Rancah, despite the limited number of guidance counselors, teachers are expected to provide effective counseling services. This study examines how guidance counselors optimize individual counseling services amidst an imbalanced teacher-to-student ratio. The objectives are to describe service optimization strategies, identify driving factors, and analyze their implications in the Independent Curriculum context. A qualitative case study approach was employed, using observations, interviews, and document analysis, followed by descriptive analysis. Findings reveal that guidance counselors employ strategies such as collaboration with homeroom teachers, flexible service delivery, personalized and informal approaches, and responsiveness to student needs. Key driving factors include communication and synergy among educators, accessibility, adaptive methods, teacher experience, and institutional support. These practices result in enhanced student self-development, positive behavioral changes, increased service effectiveness, and strengthened student trust and sense of security. The study concludes that individual counseling services can remain effective despite an imbalanced teacher-to-student ratio through personalized approaches and collaboration with various school stakeholders. Further comparative research across schools is recommended to expand understanding and contribute to the field of educational counseling.

Introduction

The development of education in Indonesia today requires schools to focus not only on academic achievement but also on students' psychological well-being (Aisa & Aziz, 2025). This aligns with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the development of students' potential, character, and independence. In the Merdeka Curriculum era, the role of guidance and counseling teachers is no longer centered solely on handling students' problems, but rather on serving as mentors who accompany and support students throughout their development process. This argument is strengthened by Ulfah, (2025) who states that guidance and counseling teachers function as facilitators, mediators, and motivators in supporting students' social, spiritual, and emotional aspects. As the role of guidance and counseling teachers becomes increasingly complex, the issue of an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio may directly contribute to an increased workload for school counselors.

The imbalance in the counselor-to-student ratio makes it difficult to optimize counseling services provided to students, which may potentially reduce the overall quality of guidance and counseling services in schools. This imbalance commonly occurs in regions with limited human resources. According to a report from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), West Java Province has experienced a shortage of school counselors, resulting in less optimal guidance and counseling services and contributing to an increase in juvenile delinquency cases in schools (Bekasi24jam.com, 2025). In addition, the Acting Head of the East Java Provincial Education Office Branch in Jombang Regency stated that nearly all schools in Jombang face a shortage of guidance and counseling teachers (Radarjombang.jawapos.com, 2024). Similarly,

Blora Regency reported a shortage of 902 teaching positions, with one of the largest proportions coming from the guidance and counseling field ([Banyumas.tribunnews.com](https://www.banyumas.tribunnews.com), 2025). Furthermore, Maros Regency still requires an additional 15 school counselors to meet the demand for counseling services in schools ([Matamaros.com](https://www.matamaros.com), 2025). Therefore, the shortage of guidance and counseling teachers is not limited to a specific region but represents a national issue that directly affects the suboptimal implementation of individual counseling services and student potential development. For this reason, a more equitable distribution of school counselors is needed to address the imbalance between the number of counselors and students.

To date, research on individual counseling services in schools has been limited to three main aspects. First, studies have highlighted the ineffectiveness of individual counseling services in schools with an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio, which leads to a decline in service quality and inequity in service delivery, ultimately affecting students' discipline and school attendance ([Brown & Knight, 2024](#)). Second, existing research has emphasized counseling services that primarily focus on teachers' competencies and roles in developing students' potential ([Dwiyono & Eliasa, 2025](#)). Third, individual counseling services have been examined through the lens of guidance and counseling management in addressing student delinquency in Islamic junior high schools (madrasah), particularly by focusing on planning, implementation, and evaluation processes ([Yuniarti, 2025](#)).

Based on previous studies, research on individual counseling services has tended to focus on the competencies and roles of guidance and counseling teachers, the management of service implementation, and the impact of counselor-to-student ratio imbalances on service quality. However, limited research has specifically examined efforts to optimize individual counseling services amid an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio in the Merdeka Curriculum era. This gap highlights an important issue that requires further investigation. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on the optimization of individual counseling services under conditions of an imbalanced ratio between school counselors and students in the Merdeka Curriculum context by providing an overview of how such optimization is implemented by guidance and counseling teachers. The issue of counselor-to-student ratio imbalance, which increases counselors' workload, remains a problem that has not been comprehensively addressed. In line with this, three research questions are formulated. First, what forms of optimization are applied in individual counseling services under an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio in the Merdeka Curriculum era? Second, what factors support the optimization of individual counseling services under such conditions? Third, what are the implications of optimizing individual counseling services amid an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio in the Merdeka Curriculum era? The answers to these questions form the basis of the findings and discussion in this study.

This study is based on the assumption that guidance and counseling teachers who face an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio are still able to optimize individual counseling services effectively. In addition, counselors with extensive professional experience tend to prioritize emotional approaches in order to build positive relationships with students and create a supportive and conducive environment. Knowledge regarding students' psychological conditions, as well as emotional, social, and cultural approaches, can serve as important resources in strengthening positive counselor-student relationships. The urgency of this study arises from the fact that many schools continue to experience an imbalance between the number of school counselors and students. This condition has the potential to increase counselors' workload, which may hinder the optimization of counseling services for students. Therefore, this research aims to identify the forms of optimization applied in individual counseling services, examine the supporting factors contributing to successful implementation, and analyze the implications of service optimization in the Merdeka Curriculum era. Furthermore, studies

addressing the optimization of individual counseling services in the context of counselor-to-student ratio imbalance within the Merdeka Curriculum framework remain limited.

Methods

The phenomenon of an imbalanced ratio between guidance and counseling teachers and students in the Merdeka Curriculum era reflects the non-ideal availability of counselors within a school. This phenomenon was selected because the imbalance between school counselors and students can be addressed through efforts to optimize individual counseling services under such conditions. The unit of analysis in this study consists of guidance and counseling teachers as the primary informants. School counselors were chosen because they are directly involved in implementing strategies to optimize individual counseling services amid an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio.

This study employed a qualitative method with a case study approach to understand the strategies used by guidance and counseling teachers in optimizing individual counseling services under conditions of an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio. The qualitative method was selected because it allows the researcher to obtain descriptive data in the form of spoken and written narratives as well as informants' behaviors ([Nurrisa et al., 2025](#)). The unit of analysis in this study was the guidance and counseling teacher, as they are directly involved in the implementation of individual counseling services in schools. The case study approach was applied to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined, including its causes and consequences ([Elva & Murhayati, 2025](#)). The data were analyzed thoroughly and presented in a descriptive narrative form to provide an in-depth depiction of the phenomenon.

The research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, as this method allows the researcher to determine informants based on criteria relevant to the research objectives. [Dahal et al \(2024\)](#) stated that purposive sampling facilitates research by selecting participants according to predetermined criteria, thereby producing more relevant data and supporting the validity of the information obtained. Therefore, the primary subject of this study was a guidance and counseling teacher who experienced an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio. The school counselor was selected as the main informant due to direct involvement in delivering individual counseling services. Supporting informants in this study included a homeroom teacher and three students from different grade levels. This was intended to obtain additional perspectives regarding the impacts of service optimization. Data were collected through interviews with five informants. The identities of the research subjects are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Research Subjects*

No	Inisial	Jenis Kelamin	Keterangan
1	P	Laki-laki	Guru BK
2	YW	Laki-laki	Guru Wali Kelas
3	ALK	Perempuan	Siswa Kelas X
4	MFA	Laki-laki	Siswa Kelas XI
5	TAA	Laki-laki	Siswa Kelas XII

Data collection in this study was conducted using three techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation study. These three techniques were selected to obtain comprehensive data in accordance with the research objectives. Observation was carried out to examine the planning and implementation of individual counseling services, as well as the facilities and infrastructure supporting guidance and counseling services. Interviews were conducted to explore informants' experiences, perspectives, and the implications of optimizing individual counseling services in the Merdeka Curriculum era. The interviews were conducted directly with the guidance and counseling teacher, as well as the homeroom teacher and

students. Documentation study was used to collect supporting data such as service implementation plans, counseling reports, records of students accepted into universities, and students' achievements. This documentation served to strengthen the data obtained from observations and interviews regarding the optimization of individual counseling services under conditions of an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio.

Result and Discussion

1. Strategies for Optimizing Individual Counseling Services amid an Imbalanced Counselor-to-Student Ratio

Based on the field findings regarding the optimization of individual counseling services implemented by the school counselor under conditions of an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio, the researcher identified several forms of service optimization applied in the school. The following table presents a compilation of interview results obtained in the field.

Table 2. *Compilation of Interview Results on Forms of Optimization*

Description	Statement	Informant
Collaboration with homeroom teachers	"...I deliberately maintain good relationships with homeroom teachers so that they can become my partners. Homeroom teachers can serve as the counselor's eyes and ears..."	P
	"So here, teachers also need to approach students more closely... it turns out that collaboration between the school counselor and teachers is important..."	P
	"Yes, we work together because we see that the situation and conditions in our school show that we are indeed lacking school counselors"	YW
	"Also, since access to parents is usually through the homeroom teacher, the school counselor tries to ask for assistance when parents need to be invited to the school"	YW
	"There must be an intermediary from the homeroom teacher first..."	TAA
Flexible implementation of individual counseling services	"...it is still not well-planned or scheduled..."	P
	"The school counselor is open for us to consult at any time"	ALK
	"...if we want to talk at night, it can be at night, because I have even gone to the counselor's house"	TAA
Personal and informal approach toward students	"...So, we do not talk as if we are talking to a teacher. It feels like talking to a friend..."	MFA
	"...o we feel comfortable and relaxed to communicate or share stories directly..."	TAA
	"...sometimes the counselor uses Sundanese, so students can talk in the way they feel most comfortable..."	ALK
Responsive implementation of individual counseling services	"...when the counselor receives a report, it is responded to immediately in order to resolve the problem"	YW
	"...most of the time, it is followed up by the counselor..."	ALK
	"...the counselor usually handles it quickly and understands the situation right away..."	TAA

Based on the table, it can be identified that there are four main forms of optimization of individual counseling services implemented by the school counselor. First, collaboration with homeroom teachers through Focus Group Discussions. One form of optimization is achieved by involving homeroom teachers as partners in monitoring students' conditions. Homeroom teachers function as an extension of the counselor in conducting early identification of students' problems before they are referred to individual counseling services. This finding is consistent with previous studies stating that collaboration among school counselors, homeroom teachers, and other school personnel in identifying and referring student problems serves as a functional

strategy to expand service coverage under limited human resources (Fitri & Neviyarni, 2024; Nasrudin et al., 2025). Such cross-role collaboration is also aligned with the student-centered learning principles promoted in the Merdeka Curriculum (Aprilia et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2024). Second, individual counseling services are delivered flexibly, particularly in terms of time arrangement. Field findings indicate that counseling sessions are often conducted without a fixed schedule and may even take place outside regular school hours, depending on students' needs, situational conditions, and the counselor's workload. This flexibility provides an open and accessible consultation space that can be adjusted to students' circumstances. This finding aligns with the studies conducted by Jaffer, (2022); Khasanah et al., (2024); Praekanata et al., (2024), which indicate that the provision of counseling services beyond formal schedules demonstrates counselors' adaptive responses to students' needs while enhancing the accessibility of counseling services.

Third, counselors apply a personal and informal approach toward students. Based on observations and interviews, the counselor builds closer relationships with students in order to create a comfortable and safe atmosphere for sharing personal concerns. This approach gives students the impression that they are talking to a friend rather than engaging in a formal conversation with a teacher. As a result, students feel freer to communicate openly and share their experiences. This personal approach is also reflected through cultural sensitivity, such as the use of local language in communication. The use of regional language helps strengthen emotional closeness between the counselor and students. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that warm and informal communication can enhance therapeutic relationships, increase student openness, and foster trust and psychological safety (Hopeman et al., 2022; Karneli et al., 2024; Omariyah et al., 2024). Fourth, individual counseling services are implemented responsively. Counseling sessions are carried out quickly and adjusted immediately to the urgency of students' issues. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that service responsiveness, including prompt follow-up of students' concerns, strengthens counseling effectiveness and supports the continuity of the counselor-counsee relationship (Davi et al., 2024; Khusnah et al., 2025; Salsabila & Qiptiah, 2025). Therefore, the integration of collaboration, flexibility, personal approaches, and responsiveness forms an optimized model of individual counseling services that is humanistic, contextual, and aligned with the student-centered principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. Supporting Factors for Optimizing Individual Counseling Services under an Imbalanced Counselor-to-Student Ratio

The optimization of individual counseling services under conditions of an imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio cannot be separated from various supporting factors. Both internal and external factors contribute to the successful implementation of service optimization. The following section presents a compilation of interview findings obtained from the field.

Table 3. *Compilation of Interview Results on Supporting Factors*

Description	Statement	Informant
Communication and synergy among educators	"...I communicate with the homeroom teachers..."	P
	"...communication between the homeroom teachers and the school counselor is actively maintained, so we can find solutions together..."	YW
	"...so far, the synergy has been quite good..."	YW
	"...the homeroom teachers and the school counselor have very close communication..."	MFA
Ease of access to individual counseling services	"...in terms of accessibility, it is actually quite easy..."	YW
	"It is very easy, even though the school counselors at SMA Negeri 1 Rancah is limited..."	MFA
	"So, contacting the school counselor is very easy"	TAA

	"...it is definitely quite easy.."	ALK
Adaptive counseling approach	"...I am not committed to only one counseling approach. In practice, I combine several approaches..."	P
	"...they also do not judge us..."	ALK
Counselor's professional experience	"...I have been serving as a guidance and counseling teacher at this senior high school for quite a long time..."	P
	"...the counselor is quite senior, so he probably already understands different types of students from year to year ..."	MFA
Basic facility support	"...in terms of basic infrastructure, the counseling room is already quite good..."	P
	"...it is quite adequate because there is a separate counseling room..."	ALK
	"...Alhamdulillah, overall the counseling room is very good and very comfortable..."	MFA
	"...from what I can see, the room is quite complete and well-prepared..."	TAA

Based on the table above, it can be identified that the optimization of individual counseling services is influenced by five interrelated supporting factors. First, communication and synergy among educators. The primary supporting factor in service optimization is the establishment of effective communication between the school counselor and homeroom teachers. This communication enables collaboration in addressing students' problems. This argument is supported [Nasrudin et al., 2025](#), who stated that active communication and collaboration between school counselors and homeroom teachers allow student issues to be handled more comprehensively despite the limited number of counselors. Such efforts are oriented toward joint problem-solving, which facilitates sustainable collaboration in formulating shared solutions to students' concerns. Second, ease of access to individual counseling services. Field findings indicate that individual counseling services remain relatively accessible to students despite the imbalanced counselor-to-student ratio. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that easy access to counseling services strengthens students' participation in utilizing services in a timely manner ([Habibah, 2025](#); [Lestari & Ummah, 2025](#)). During interviews, both homeroom teachers and students consistently reported that the process of contacting and meeting the counselor occurred without significant obstacles. This perception suggests that the limited counselor ratio does not necessarily prevent students from utilizing counseling services. The findings highlight that good service accessibility plays an important role in maintaining the reach and effectiveness of individual counseling services. Third, an adaptive counseling approach. Based on field findings, the school counselor combines various counseling approaches tailored to students' characteristics and the specific problems they experience. This adaptive approach is reflected in the counselor's nonjudgmental attitude throughout the counseling process, which helps create a sense of safety and trust among students. This condition aligns with previous research indicating that adaptive and nonjudgmental counseling approaches enhance students' openness and trust toward school counselors ([Kurniawati et al., 2025](#); [Praekanata et al., 2024](#)). Fourth, the counselor's professional experience. Interview results indicate that the counselor has extensive experience serving as a school counselor, which strengthens professional competence in handling diverse student problems. This experience contributes to the counselor's sensitivity in understanding students' characteristics and needs. This finding supports the study by [Karneli et al \(2024\)](#), which emphasized that counselors' professional competence and interpersonal skills play an important role in maintaining service effectiveness under limited resource conditions. Fifth, basic facility support. Based on the findings, the counseling room was considered adequate, separate from other rooms, comfortable, and able to maintain client confidentiality. This is consistent with previous studies indicating that counselors' professional performance is strengthened by adequate counseling facilities, which allow the counseling process to take place comfortably while ensuring

confidentiality (Herman et al., 2025; Putra, 2024). Overall, the combination of these supporting factors demonstrates that the optimization of counseling services can remain adaptive and effective even under conditions of limited counselor-to-student ratios.

3. Impacts of Optimizing Individual Counseling Services in the Merdeka Curriculum Era

Individual counseling services provide positive impacts on the sustainability of guidance and counseling services in schools. In the Merdeka Curriculum era, which emphasizes the fulfillment of students' needs in a holistic, responsive, and student-centered manner, optimization strategies serve as an adaptive solution to maintain the quality of individual counseling services. Based on the compilation of interview data obtained from the informants, four major impacts of optimizing individual counseling services were identified. These impacts are presented in the following summary table.

Table 4. *Compilation of Interview Results on Impacts*

Description	Statement	Informant
Students' ability to develop their skills	"...the counselor emphasized that I must be able to develop problem-solving skills...."	TAA
	"...we have to have problem-solving skills..."	MFA
	"...because it helped me gain a new perspective.."	ALK
	"...it helped me see several possible ways to deal with the problems I face..."	ALK
Changes in students' behavior and discipline	"...previously, the student was absent for 10 days in a month, but now it has decreased to only 5 days..."	P
	"...now the student is present in class and participates in lessons..."	P
	"...after counseling, they tend to feel relieved, happy, and better..."	P
	"...generally, students leave the counseling session feeling better..."	P
	"...feeling more relieved and calmer..."	ALK
Individual counseling services are perceived as effective by students	"...because students' needs can be accommodated and fulfilled by the counselor..."	TAA
	"...when we have a problem, the counselor always helps find a solution..."	ALK
	"...after attending counseling services, students feel enlightened or gain new insights..."	YW
Development of students' sense of safety and trust in counseling services	"...I document it because psychologically, documentation in front of students can sometimes make them feel judged or stigmatized..."	P
	"...the counselor definitely does not judge us and gives us the opportunity to speak..."	ALK
	"...when we want to share our stories, we feel comfortable because we can speak safely..."	ALK
	"...then, when the student speaks, they are given the freedom to express themselves..."	MFA
	"...it is very comfortable for us to share and exchange stories..."	MFA
	"...it becomes a two-way conversation, but we are still given the freedom to express ourselves in our own way..."	TAA

Based on Table 4, it was found that the optimization of individual counseling services has positive impacts on school counselors, students, and the overall implementation of guidance and counseling services in schools. First, students are able to develop their abilities. The optimization of individual counseling services contributes to strengthening students' critical thinking, reflective skills, and sense of responsibility in their self-development process. One of

the key outcomes is the improvement of students' problem-solving ability. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that individual counseling services promote students' independence and problem-solving skills through reflective processes and structured decision-making ([Arianti & Alamsyah, 2023](#); [Fatmawati & Aziz, 2024](#)). This is further supported by research showing that optimized counseling services lead to behavioral changes, improved discipline, and increased student participation in learning activities ([Mubarok et al., 2025](#); [Mustikaningrum & Herdi, 2025](#)). In optimized services, students are guided to enhance their competencies in identifying solutions and considering various possible alternatives when facing problems. Furthermore, individual counseling services help broaden students' perspectives, enabling them to view problems from different angles.

Second, there are changes in students' behavior and discipline. This is reflected in the reduction of absenteeism among students who previously frequently missed school. In addition, students who initially showed low discipline in attending classes began to demonstrate greater willingness to participate in classroom learning activities. These behavioral improvements were accompanied by better emotional conditions, such as feeling more relieved, calm, happy, and psychologically stable. This finding aligns with the study by [Khasanah et al., 2024](#), which revealed that responsive and adaptive counseling services contribute to students' emotional stability, including feelings of relief and happiness, which in turn increase learning motivation and self-confidence. Third, individual counseling services are still perceived as effective by students. Interview results indicate that students feel their problems are responded to optimally by the school counselor, as shown through serious handling and joint efforts to find solutions. The perceived effectiveness of these services also provides students with enlightenment and new understanding in dealing with their problems.

Fourth, a sense of safety and trust toward counseling services is developed among students. This outcome is closely related to the counselor's efforts to create a safe environment by avoiding practices that may cause students to feel judged or stigmatized. This approach fosters students' sense of security and trust in individual counseling services. The counselor applies a nonjudgmental attitude and provides participatory space for students to freely express their feelings, thereby strengthening students' sense of safety, being valued, and trust toward counseling services. This finding is in line with previous studies stating that students' trust and psychological safety can be fostered through nonjudgmental approaches and the protection of client confidentiality ([Hamidah et al., 2024](#); [Wati et al., 2024](#)). In addition, the counselor allows students to share their stories and opinions openly, reflecting the implementation of student-centered counseling services that support psychological safety. This atmosphere enables the counseling process to take place in a two-way and egalitarian manner.

The findings indicate that the optimization of individual counseling services at SMA Negeri 1 Rancah is implemented through collaboration between the school counselor, homeroom teachers, and subject teachers. This collaboration supports the early identification of students who experience academic, personal, or social problems, allowing referrals to counseling services to be carried out more effectively. In practice, individual counseling services are provided in a flexible manner, with adjustments made to students' needs, available time, and the nature of the problems being addressed. The counselor also applies a personal approach to build students' trust and encourage openness during counseling sessions. Furthermore, student development is monitored through communication with homeroom teachers and counseling records that document students' progress. These efforts help the counselor evaluate the outcomes of counseling services and determine appropriate follow-up actions for students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the optimization of individual counseling services can still be implemented effectively despite an imbalanced ratio between guidance and counseling teachers and students in the Merdeka Curriculum era. The school counselor at SMA Negeri 1 Rancah was able to develop an adaptive service model through flexible scheduling, emotional and personal approaches, and prioritizing services based on the urgency of students' issues. This indicates that an imbalanced ratio does not necessarily become a major barrier as long as school counselors are able to manage service strategies contextually and respond to students' needs effectively. The success of service optimization is also influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include the counselor's professional competence, experience, and commitment, while external factors involve institutional support through synergy between the school counselor, homeroom teachers, and school management in monitoring students' conditions. This optimization contributes to the development of more positive counselor-student relationships, increased student openness, and the emergence of more adaptive behavioral changes, in line with the student-centered learning principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the development of guidance and counseling research, particularly in the context of individual counseling services under non-ideal conditions. The findings enrich the understanding that the optimization of individual counseling services is not solely determined by achieving an ideal counselor-to-student ratio, but also by counselors' adaptive capacity in responding to educational policy contexts, student characteristics, and school dynamics. Therefore, the results of this study may serve as a conceptual foundation for developing an individual counseling service model that is contextual, flexible, and relevant to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, while also providing opportunities for further research in the field of guidance and counseling in situations with limited resources.

Recommendations

This study was limited to a single educational institution, namely SMA Negeri 1 Rancah. Therefore, the findings cannot be broadly generalized to all senior high schools, as each school has different student characteristics, internal policies, school culture, and resource conditions. In addition, the data obtained relied on observations, interviews, and documentation studies, which may be subject to interpretive bias from either the researcher or the informants. This study was descriptive in nature and did not aim to statistically examine causal relationships between the counselor-to-student ratio imbalance and student outcomes.

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