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COUNSELLING FOR MENTAL HEALTH WELLNESS IN MILITARIZED SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE ANGLOPHONE CRISIS FOR STUDENTS' PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BAMENDA, NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

The Anglophone socio-political crisis has militarized secondary schools' vicinities in Bamenda, exposing students to ongoing threats of violence, harassment, and educational disruption with severe consequences for mental health. This study investigates the implications of schooling in military zones for students' mental health and emotional development in selected secondary schools in Bamenda Town, North West Region of Cameroon. Specifically, the research examines how disruption of education and school attendance, physical and sexual harassment, and experiences of death and injury affect students' psychosocial well-being. A mixed methods research design was adopted, utilizing questionnaires for students and interview guides for teachers and administrators. Purposive and convenient sampling techniques were employed to select schools and participants. A total sample of 303 respondents was involved, comprising 288 students, 5 administrators, and 10 teachers. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, and Spearman's rho correlation test, while qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that educational disruptions, harassment, and exposure to death and injury significantly affect students' mental health and emotional development. Based on these findings, it is recommended that parents, guardians, and teachers provide psychosocial support while educating students on safety measures in militarized zones. Students should remain calm during armed confrontations and avoid actions that may escalate tensions with military personnel. Furthermore, school stakeholders and policymakers should advocate for safer learning environments, ensuring that the presence of security forces in schools contributes to protection rather than threatens student and cause psychological harm. School-based trauma-informed counselling, sensitization of security forces, and policy support for psychosocial services tailored to crisis-prone urban settings be upheld in the North West Region

KEYWORDS: Anglophone crisis, militarized school environments, mental health wellness, counselling interventions and psychosocial development

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Schools are expected to serve as safe spaces where young people acquire knowledge, build social relationships, and develop emotionally. However, in many parts of the North West Region of Cameroon, particularly in Bamenda, this fundamental expectation has been severely undermined by the prolonged Anglophone sociopolitical crisis that began in 2016. What were once ordinary secondary schools have increasingly become militarized environments, marked by the frequent presence of armed forces, checkpoints, sporadic gunfire, and the constant threat of violence. In such settings, the daily journey to and from school has turned into a source of fear and anxiety for many students rather than an opportunity for growth. In the midst of this challenging reality, the role of counselling becomes critically important. Beyond addressing immediate emotional distress, counselling offers a pathway toward mental health wellness by helping students process trauma, rebuild a sense of safety, strengthen resilience, and restore hope. Yet, in crisis-affected contexts like Bamenda, conventional Western approaches to counselling may fall short if they fail to integrate local cultural values such as communal support, relational healing, and spiritual practices that are deeply embedded in Grassfields communities.

Schools traditionally function as secure environments that foster learning, socialization, and holistic child development. In militarized settings, however, this protective function is frequently eroded as educational spaces become sites of insecurity, surveillance, and psychological strain. Some community members may regard military presence as a source of protection, yet others experience it as a direct threat, particularly when it provokes violent confrontations between state forces and non-state armed groups (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024). As a result, schools in conflict-affected areas often transform into environments characterized by fear, frequent disruptions, harassment, and trauma rather than safety and growth.

Education constitutes a fundamental human right and serves as a critical foundation for individual and societal progress (United Nations, 2015). Nevertheless, in militarized zones, this right is routinely undermined by pervasive insecurity, forced displacement, and profound psychological pressure. Schooling near military installations or active conflict zones creates distinctive challenges arising from armed actors' activities, community tensions, and students' heightened vulnerability. These conditions expose learners to instability, occasional repurposing of school facilities, displacement, and repeated trauma, all of which can severely impair mental health and emotional development (Betancourt et al., 2013; Frederick & Siebler, 2023).

In Cameroon's North West Region (NWR), and particularly in the urban centre of Bamenda, the prolonged Anglophone sociopolitical crisis since 2016 has converted numerous educational institutions into contested and highly insecure spaces. Students encounter direct and indirect harms—including school closures, occupation of premises by armed groups or security forces, displacement, and constant fear from nearby violence—that threaten their mental health and emotional well-being (Human Rights Watch, 2021; UNICEF, 2019). Experiences in Bamenda are marked by recurrent

interruptions, militarized use of school grounds, and pervasive anxiety stemming from armed activity, which collectively diminish learning opportunities and generate significant psychosocial distress (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024).

The United Nations Secretary-General (2015) highlighted that military use of schools endangers children's physical safety while violating their right to education. Such practices frequently lead to population mobility, plummeting enrolment, elevated dropout rates (especially among girls), and increased risk of schools becoming targets of attack. Children in these zones also endure repeated breaks in academic continuity caused by relocations, infrastructure damage, and ongoing security threats. This chronic instability is associated with heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and behavioural difficulties (Frederick & Siebler, 2023). Furthermore, cultural stigma around mental health issues often discourages help-seeking, leaving many students without timely psychological support (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007).

In the NWR, the sociopolitical crisis has accelerated the militarization of civilian spaces, including schools (Adebayo, 2015). This has produced widespread educational disruption, displacement, exposure to violence, and trauma among students. Research indicates that children in militarized areas commonly exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Betancourt et al., 2013; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). In Bamenda specifically, learners face school closures triggered by clashes, checkpoint harassment, and fear within or near occupied classrooms (Voice of America, 2019). Both separatist fighters and government forces have occupied schools—for bases, training, or purported protection—further compromising safety and the learning environment (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024).

Although the Safe Schools Declaration enjoys global endorsement and urges protection of education from military interference, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly across Sub-Saharan Africa (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024). Students in militarized zones face not only risks of physical harm or death but also enduring psychological effects such as impaired concentration, diminished academic achievement, social withdrawal, and emotional blunting (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Fazel et al., 2014).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Anglophone sociopolitical crisis, ongoing since 2016 in Cameroon's North West and South West Regions, has created a profound mental health emergency in Bamenda and surrounding areas. In Bamenda, residents and students routinely confront gunfire near school premises, physical and sexual harassment at checkpoints, arbitrary arrests and detention, verbal intimidation, exposure to injuries or deaths from crossfire, forced displacements, and loss of livelihoods, resulting in widespread psychological distress. These exposures contribute to elevated prevalence of trauma symptoms, anxiety, depression, concentration difficulties, social withdrawal, substance use as maladaptive coping, and long-term disruptions in emotional regulation and social development

during adolescence. Empirical data from Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS) in the North West Region indicate that between 2017 and 2020 alone, over 16,568 individuals sought psychosocial support, with females comprising 55% of cases; many presented with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, insomnia, anxiety, and depression (Data Cameroon, 2021, as reported from CBCHS records). In Bamenda specifically, the crisis has led to increased reports of nightmares, panic attacks, suicidal ideation, and substance use as maladaptive coping, exacerbating family disintegration, youth idleness, and reduced access to education and healthcare.

Despite these alarming consequences-estimated to contribute significantly to disability-adjusted life years in the region-mental health services remain severely limited due to stigma, shortage of trained counsellors, underfunding, and a predominant reliance on biomedical or Western individualistic approaches that overlook Africentric values of communalism, spirituality, and indigenous healing. Few studies have systematically examined the effectiveness of culturally tailored counselling interventions in crisis-prone urban settings like Bamenda, creating a critical empirical gap. This study addresses this void by investigating how counselling can promote mental wellness in such contexts, with direct implications for policy and practice in the North West Region.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How Does Disruption in Education and School Attendance Due to Militarization Affect Students' Mental Health and Emotional Development?
- What Is the Impact of Physical, Verbal, and Sexual Harassment on Students' Mental Health?
- How Does Exposure to Death and Injury Around School Premises Affect Students' Mental Health and Emotional Development?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Schooling in militarized zones involves educational institutions operating near or within areas influenced by armed forces, active conflict, or heightened security operations. Such environments expose students to ongoing insecurity, displacement risks, and direct or indirect encounters with violence, which can profoundly shape their developmental trajectories. In these settings, learning continuity is frequently interrupted, peer relationships destabilized, and opportunities for safe socialization diminished, heightening vulnerability to stress and emotional difficulties (Clever & Segal, 2013; Betancourt et al., 2013).

Students in militarized school environments encounter multiple layered challenges that affect their overall well-being. Frequent school closures, relocations, and restricted access due to security concerns disrupt academic progress and impede the development of stable social networks, often elevating levels of anxiety and hypervigilance. The visible presence of armed personnel, checkpoints, and the constant threat of violence can precipitate trauma responses, including emotional numbness, social withdrawal, and difficulties in concentration (Tol et al., 2013). These issues are frequently compounded by damaged infrastructure, limited learning resources, and

inadequate support systems, which collectively undermine both academic achievement and socio-emotional growth (UNICEF, 2020; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024).

The psychosocial consequences of schooling amid militarization are substantial. Prolonged exposure to threats, instability, and violence is associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and emotional dysregulation. Such stressors can impair motivation, disrupt interpersonal relationships, and hinder healthy social and emotional development, underscoring the urgent need for robust protective mechanisms, including trauma-informed practices and accessible mental health support within educational settings (Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Frederick & Siebler, 2023).

In Bamenda Town, located in Cameroon's North West Region, where armed separatist activities and state security operations have persistently affected daily life since 2016, these dynamics are particularly acute. Schools have become contested spaces, with students facing unique risks to their mental health, emotional regulation, and academic engagement. This reality calls for targeted, context-sensitive interventions that incorporate trauma-informed strategies and ongoing monitoring of student psychosocial needs (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024).

In conflict-affected and militarized contexts, schooling is often interrupted by security threats, political tensions, and the direct involvement of armed actors in civilian spaces. Educational disruption encompasses breaks in regular school functioning that compromise consistent learning and can produce lasting academic and psychosocial repercussions (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In militarized areas, schools may close temporarily, operate under severe restrictions, or face occupation, forcing students into unsafe or inconsistent learning conditions (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024; UNESCO, 2020).

Repeated interruptions negatively influence academic performance and psychosocial adjustment. Learners commonly experience knowledge gaps, reduced motivation, and challenges reintegrating into reinstated curricula. Prolonged disruptions widen educational inequalities, especially for low-income or displaced families with limited access to alternative resources. Parents may withdraw children for safety reasons, while teachers struggle to sustain instructional continuity, resulting in chronic absenteeism and elevated dropout rates (Save the Children, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2021). In the North West Region, these patterns have contributed to hundreds of thousands of children missing years of schooling, with significant implications for long-term development (ACCORD, 2024).

Direct or indirect exposure to death and injury in militarized zones carries deep implications for students' mental health and engagement with education. Witnessing violence or fatalities among peers, teachers, or community members can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

depression, grief, and other stress-related conditions (Brewin et al., 2009; Betancourt et al., 2013). Trauma extends beyond the individual, generating ripple effects that disrupt family and community cohesion (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

In many conflict settings, including Cameroon's North West Region, repeated encounters with violence may paradoxically normalize danger while sustaining pervasive fear and uncertainty about personal safety. Students often report intrusive memories, avoidance behaviours, emotional withdrawal, or difficulties forming trusting relationships, all of which impair psychosocial development (Jordans et al., 2016; Tol et al., 2013). In Bamenda, ongoing armed confrontations have exposed learners to corpses, injuries, and aggressive responses from involved parties, fostering a climate of fear that undermines the school's role as a stabilizing environment and necessitates targeted psychosocial support (Voice of America, 2019; ACCORD, 2024).

Physical, verbal, and sexual harassment in militarized school environments poses a serious threat to students' psychological and emotional well-being. The proximity of armed forces, even when intended for protection, can create power imbalances that facilitate intimidation, coercion, abuse, or exploitation (Betancourt & Khan, 2018; UNICEF, 2020). Such experiences are strongly linked to heightened anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviours that interfere with learning and peer interactions (Tol et al., 2013; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017).

Harassment erodes trust in educational institutions and the broader community, transforming schools from safe havens into sources of additional distress (Astor et al., 2013). In Bamenda, students frequently describe encounters with arbitrary searches, threats, detention, verbal abuse, and unwanted sexual advances at checkpoints near school premises, intensifying feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024). Effective responses require comprehensive mental health interventions, trauma-informed counselling, and policies that prioritize child protection and dignity in militarized contexts (Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

This study is theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), adapted through an Africentric lens to reflect the cultural and contextual realities of conflict-affected communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The theory posits that mental health and emotional development emerge from ongoing interactions across multiple nested systems: the microsystem (immediate settings such as family, peers, teachers, and school counsellors), mesosystem (interconnections among them), exosystem (indirect influences like military checkpoints, school occupations, and security operations in Bamenda), macrosystem (broader cultural values, including Grassfields communalism, relational interdependence akin to ubuntu principles, and spiritual practices), and chronosystem (the cumulative, long-term effects of the prolonged Anglophone crisis since 2016). In militarized environments, disruptions at the exosystem and macrosystem levels often erode protective factors within the microsystem, amplifying trauma while highlighting opportunities for

intervention. A hybrid ecological-Africentric approach emphasizes strengthening relational networks, communal storytelling, family mediation, and culturally congruent healing practices to restore balance and promote holistic mental health wellness among students in crisis-prone settings like Bamenda (Atilola, 2017; Betancourt et al., 2013).

Despite growing documentation of educational attacks and general trauma in conflict zones, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding Cameroon's North West Region. Bamenda-specific empirical studies that systematically examine the mental health and emotional development impacts of distinct militarization stressors (educational disruption, harassment, and exposure to death/injury) on secondary school students are limited. Most research focuses on broad educational access or general conflict effects rather than nuanced psychosocial outcomes or the effectiveness of school-based counselling interventions. Furthermore, few studies integrate ecological frameworks with Africentric perspectives—such as communal healing, family mediation, or collaboration with traditional support systems—to develop culturally responsive counselling approaches suited to Grassfields communities. The scarcity of localized, mixed-methods evidence on resilience factors and long-term wellness promotion in prolonged crisis settings like Bamenda hinders the design of contextually relevant policies and interventions. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the specified pathways and their implications for mental health counselling and psychosocial support in Bamenda's secondary schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to triangulate quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, enhancing credibility in a complex crisis setting. The target population included students, teachers, and administrators in secondary schools located near military installations or frequently affected by operations in Bamenda Town (Bamenda I, II, and III subdivisions).

Purposive sampling selected six schools with documented exposure to militarization (GBHS Atiela, GBHS Downtown, GBHS Bamendankwe, and others), supplemented by convenience elements for accessibility amid insecurity. A total of 288 students (Forms 1–5) and 15 key informants (10 teachers, 5 administrators) participated.

A structured questionnaire (adapted and pilot-tested for cultural relevance in English) captured demographics, exposure levels, and mental health indicators (drawing on validated items for anxiety, fear, and wellness). Semi-structured interview guides explored teachers' and administrators' observations of student behaviour, emotional states, and counselling needs.

Ethical clearance was secured from the University of Bamenda's institutional review processes and relevant education authorities. Informed consent/assent procedures respected cultural norms (verbal options with witnesses where appropriate), emphasized voluntariness, confidentiality, anonymity,

and the right to withdraw. Trauma-informed protocols were implemented, including referral pathways to available local psychosocial services and collaboration with trained counsellors to prevent re-traumatization. Data were gathered in secure settings during periods of relative calm.

Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rho correlations (suitable for ordinal responses). Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis supported by member-checking for trustworthiness. Integration of findings occurred during interpretation. Limitations such as self-report bias and insecurity-related access issues were mitigated through methodological triangulation and community gatekeeper involvement. This approach ensures cultural sensitivity, participant safety, and rigorous insights applicable to counselling practice in crisis zones.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data analysis employed the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The significance level (alpha) was set at 0.05 for all statistical tests. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) summarized students' opinions on exposure to militarization stressors. Spearman's rho correlation was used to examine relationships between stressors and mental health/emotional development indicators, as the data were ordinal and non-normally distributed. Qualitative data from school personnel (teachers and administrators) were analyzed thematically to provide contextual depth and triangulation. All interpretations below have been revised to align precisely with table items, emphasize counselling implications for mental health wellness, and ground findings in the prolonged Anglophone crisis in Bamenda.

Research Question One: How Does Disruption in Education and School Attendance Due to Militarization Affect Students' Mental Health and Emotional Development?

Table 1: Students' Opinion on Disruption in School Attendance

Items	Stretched				Collapsed	
	SA	A	D	SD	SA/A	D/SD
I always stay away from school when I hear gunshots around the school premises because I'm afraid	136 (47.2%)	84 (29.2%)	28 (9.7%)	40 (13.9%)	220 (76.4%)	68 (23.6%)
When there are gunshots, around my school premises I'm worried because my parents are scared	140 (48.6%)	48 (16.7%)	56 (19.4%)	44 (15.3%)	188 (65.3%)	100 (34.7%)
My parents are reluctant to allow me come to school even the following day.	136 (47.2%)	88 (30.5%)	48 (16.7%)	16 (5.6%)	224 (77.8%)	64 (22.2%)
My friends also stay away from school, out of fear, in	104 (36.1%)	96 (33.3%)	48 (16.7%)	40 (13.9%)	200 (69.4%)	88 (30.6%)

case of gunshots						
I feel bad when our school	72	52	84	80	124	164
shuts down temporary when	(25.0%)	(18.0%)	(29.2%)	(27.8%)	(43.1%)	(56.9%)
unknown gunmen attack the						
school premises						
Multiple Response Set	588	368	264	220	956	484
	(40.8%)	(25.6%)	(18.3%)	(15.3%)	(66.4%)	(33.6%)

Key: SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree and SD= Strongly Disagree.

A substantial majority (66.4%) of the 288 students reported negative effects from educational disruptions, with agreement rates ranging from 43.1% to 77.8% across items. The highest concerns involved fear-driven absenteeism (76.4%), parental reluctance to permit attendance the next day (77.8%), and peer modelling of avoidance (69.4%). These patterns reflect how gunfire and attacks near schools in Bamenda create pervasive fear that disrupts the microsystem of daily schooling, leading to chronic absenteeism, idleness at home, and heightened anxiety.

From a counselling perspective in crisis-prone Bamenda, such disruptions erode the school as a stabilizing relational space, fostering hypervigilance, emotional numbness, and loss of future orientation—common trauma responses in the Anglophone crisis.

Table 2: School Personnel View if Disruption in School Attendance Affect Students' Mental health and emotional development

Themes	Quotations
Impaired performance	“We have a situation where when some students don’t come to school, their friends are somehow downgraded because they ask questions like why are my classmates not in school? It affects their studies, the way they think, and in fact it affects the way they comprehend the lessons for that day.” “I think yes. It will affect their mental health and emotional development because days that they are absent from school, it quite affects the time they are to study meaning that even the work that teachers prepare, they will be unable to deliver that work and that alone affects them psychologically and also considering the fact that being at home, they are idle and are involved in horrible things that might end up affecting them socially.” “I think it has a lot of impact on students’ wellbeing because the majority of those students have work coverage throughout the year and most of them write exams so disruption affects the work coverage and affects the wellbeing because most of the things will be rushed and a majority of them will not have the exam material that is needed for an

Fear	exam or what they need to know.” “Disruption in school attendance has an impact on students’ mental health and emotional development in the sense that if school is disrupted on a normal schooling day for example if students are already in school and maybe there's a gunshot for example the students will be thinking on how to get home instead of paying attention to what the teacher is saying in class so there's a great impact, the disruption of school attendance really affects the student mental health and emotional development.”
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More so, based on school personnel opinion if disruption in school attendance affect students’ mental health and emotional development, all of them said it does with some saying that it causes mental instability in students as explain *“Yes, students knowing that they are not sure of the next minute their going to school already makes them not stable in their mindset and so it is certainly going to affect psychosocial well-being.”* More so, some school personnel said it affect students’ performance as explain *“I think yes. It will affect their mental health and emotional development because days that they are absent from school, it quite affects the time they are to study meaning that even the work that teachers prepare, they will be unable to deliver that work and that alone affects them psychologically and also considering the fact that being at home, they are idle and are involved in horrible things that might end up affecting them socially.”*

In a nut shell, Teachers’ qualitative accounts reinforced this: students experience impaired academic performance, idleness leading to negative social influences, rushed curricula upon resumption, and mental instability ("not stable in their mindset"). These align with ecological disruptions that undermine emotional regulation and social development during adolescence

Verification of Hypothesis One:

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between disruption in attendance and students’ mental health and emotional development.

Ha1: There is a significant relationship between disruption in attendance and students’ mental health and emotional development.

Table 3: Relationship between Disruption in School Attendance and Students’ Mental health and emotional development

		Disruption attendance	in Students’ mental health and emotional development
Spearman’s	R-value	1	.535**
rho test	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	288	288

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A moderate-to-strong positive relationship existed between frequency of educational disruptions and poorer mental health/emotional development indicators ($\rho = .535$, $p < .001$). The null hypothesis was rejected.

These findings demonstrate that militarization-related school disruptions in Bamenda significantly compromise students' psychosocial wellness. Consistent with broader conflict literature, repeated interruptions contribute to knowledge gaps, diminished motivation, and increased risk of internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and withdrawal (Betancourt et al., 2013; Tol et al., 2013). In the NWR context, where over 70% of students in some Bamenda schools report conflict-related trauma exposure, such disruptions exacerbate idleness, substance use risks, and long-term developmental setbacks. Counselling interventions should prioritize trauma-informed group sessions, routine-rebuilding activities, family mediation (palaver-style), and resilience training to restore a sense of safety and purpose within the school microsystem.

Research Question Two: What Is the Impact of Physical, Verbal, and Sexual Harassment on Students' Mental Health?

The study examined how harassment from military personnel in proximity to schools affects students' mental health and emotional development.

Table 4: Harassment and students' mental health

Items	Stretched				Collapsed	
	SA	A	D	S D	SA/A	D/SD
I have seen or heard of students being physically searched by soldiers.	101 (43%)	94 (40%)	22 (9.4%)	16 (6.8%)	195 (83%)	38 (16.2%)
Some students have experienced threats or intimidation from armed officers	87 (37%)	118 (50.2%)	24 (10.2%)	6 (2.6%)	205 (87.2%)	30 (12.8%)
Military personnel sometimes retain and withhold student's identity cards without any due cause.	54 (23%)	90 (38.3%)	58 (24.7%)	33 (14%)	144 (61.3%)	91 (38.7%)
Have you experienced unwanted sexual comments, advances or gestures from military personnel or others near the camps?	55 (23.4%)	118 (50.2%)	28 (11.9%)	34 (14.5%)	173 (73.6)	62 (26.4)
Security forces sometimes mock or belittle students during operations	52 (22.1%)	79 (33.6%)	69 (29.4%)	35 (14.9%)	131 (55.7%)	104 (44.3%)
Sometimes I stay away from school due to military activities in the area.	60 (25.5%)	94 (40%)	46 (19.6%)	35 (14.9%)	154 (65.5%)	81 (34.5%)
Multiple responses (MRS)	409 (29.0%)	593 (42.05%)	247 (17.53%)	159 (11.28%)	1002 (71.05%)	406 (28.82%)

A striking 83% of students reported having seen or heard of peers being physically searched by soldiers. Such actions can be humiliating and foster an environment of intimidation and insecurity.

Furthermore, 87.2% of respondents acknowledged that some students have experienced threats or intimidation from armed officers. This suggests that harassment is not only prevalent but also impactful enough to be widely recognized by students. When asked whether military personnel detain withhold students identity card without any due cause, 61.3% agreed. This reveals a concerning pattern of abuse of authority, contributing to a hostile atmosphere around schools. A serious concern was raised by 73.6% of students who admitted that either they or others had been subjected to unwanted sexual comments, advances, or gestures from military personnel or others near the camps. This reflects the presence of sexual harassment and its damaging mental health effects. In addition, 55.7% of students shared that security forces sometimes mock or belittle them during operations. This public ridicule can damage self-esteem and escalate fear among the student body. Also, 65.5% said some students avoid school entirely because of military activities in the area, indicating that harassment is powerful enough to interrupt education. The multiple response data confirms that 71.05% of responses reflected agreement with harassment-related impacts, while 28.82% disagreed. Thus, high exposure to harassment—particularly searches, threats, and sexual advances—creates chronic humiliation, fear, and powerlessness among students in Bamenda. These experiences undermine trust in authority figures and transform school vicinities into sites of additional trauma rather than safety. Sexual harassment, reported by nearly three-quarters of respondents, carries profound implications for emotional regulation, self-esteem, and gender-specific vulnerabilities in a crisis setting

Table 5: School Personnel View if Physical, Verbal, and Sexual Harassment Affect Students' Mental health and emotional development

Themes	Quotations
Physical Searches and Intimidation	I have seen or heard of many students being physically searched by soldiers at checkpoints near the school. "Some students are made to empty their bags and pockets in public, which embarrasses them greatly."
Threats and Verbal Intimidation	I see how students are "accused falsely, or warned harshly even when going to or from school."
Withholding of Identity Cards	"Military personnel sometimes retain and withhold students' identity cards without any due cause. Students are delayed for hours and feel helpless."
Unwanted Sexual Comments and Advances	"Yes. "beautiful buttocks and breast, "sending their hands and touching female buttocks"

Majority of the school personnel's affirmed they have seen or heard of many students being physically searched by soldiers at checkpoints near the school. *Some students complain that they are made to empty their bags and pockets in public, which embarrasses them greatly.*" Creates feelings of humiliation, powerlessness, and loss of dignity. Increases anxiety and school avoidance. Counselling should focus on restoring self-esteem and teaching safety assertiveness skills. *"Some students have experienced threats or intimidation from armed officers. They report being shouted at, accused falsely, or warned harshly even when going to or from school."* Generates chronic fear and hypervigilance. Students become tense and distracted in class. Trauma-informed counselling is needed to reduce fear responses and rebuild trust in adults.

Furthermore, based on withholding of Identity Cards, *"Military personnel sometimes retain and withhold students' identity cards without any due cause. Students say they are delayed for hours and feel helpless."* Produces frustration, helplessness, and a deep sense of injustice. Contributes to emotional dysregulation and reluctance to attend school. Group counselling can help process feelings of powerlessness. *"Some female students have complained of unwanted sexual comments, advances, or gestures from military personnel or others near the camps. This makes them very uncomfortable and afraid."* Leads to shame, fear of sexual exploitation, lowered self-worth, and heightened gender-based trauma. Requires gender-sensitive counselling and safe reporting mechanisms. *"Security forces sometimes mock or belittle students during operations. Students report being laughed at or insulted in front of their peers, which hurts their confidence."* Damages self-esteem and peer relationships. Results in social withdrawal and emotional numbness. Peer support groups and self-esteem building interventions are recommended. *"Sometimes students stay away from school entirely due to military activities and the fear of harassment in the area. Many parents also become reluctant to send their children."* Directly contributes to chronic absenteeism, learning loss, and social isolation. Exacerbates anxiety and long-term mental health challenges. School-based counselling programmes should include family mediation and re-engagement strategies.

Teachers and administrators unanimously observed that harassment is widespread and creates a climate of fear and insecurity around schools in Bamenda. *"The constant presence of armed men makes students feel they are not safe even when coming to learn."* Harassment acts as a significant barrier to mental health wellness. There is an urgent need for trauma-informed counselling, sensitization of security forces, and establishment of safe counselling spaces within or near schools.

Table 6: Relationship between harassment and mental health

		Harassment	Mental health
Spearman's rho test	R-value	1	.672**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	288	288

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

Statistically, findings revealed a strong positive relationship between exposure and adverse mental health outcomes ($R = 0.672$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of harassment are associated with greater adverse effects on students' mental health and emotional development. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis. These findings confirm that harassment by military personnel significantly affects students' mental health, emotional development, and academic engagement. Harassment in militarized environments around Bamenda schools generates chronic stress, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviours that disrupt learning and peer relationships (Tol et al., 2013; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). In the local context, power imbalances between students and security forces intensify feelings of helplessness, aligning with reports of intimidation, arbitrary detention, and gender-based risks that exacerbate PTSD-like symptoms and social withdrawal (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024). Counselling must address these through trauma-informed individual sessions, safety planning, assertiveness training adapted to cultural contexts, and peer support groups to rebuild dignity and relational trust.

Research Question Three: How Does Exposure to Death and Injury Around School Premises Affect Students' Mental Health and Emotional Development?

This section examines how exposure to death and injury around school premises during military operations affects students' mental health and emotional development

Table 7: Students' Opinion on exposure to Death and Injury Around School Premise

Items	Stretched				Collapsed	
	SA	A	D	SD	SA/A	D/SD
People had been killed around my school premises during a military operation which is so scary.	56 (19.4%)	76 (26.4%)	76 (26.4%)	80 (27.8%)	132 (45.8%)	156 (54.2%)
Some people were injured in a military attack that took place around my school premises, giving me a painful image	84 (29.2%)	92 (31.9%)	72 (25.0%)	40 (13.9%)	176 (61.1%)	112 (38.9%)
I am scared whenever I see a corpse in my school premises after a military operation	128 (44.4%)	80 (27.8%)	28 (9.7%)	52 (18.1%)	208 (72.2%)	80 (27.8%)
When military men sustain injuries during an attack in the school premise, they become aggressive towards everyone	136 (47.2%)	84 (29.2%)	40 (13.9%)	28 (9.7%)	220 (76.4%)	68 (23.6%)

Fear of the risk of being killed or injured in school often traumatises me when I think of previous military operations in my school premises	124 (43.1%)	88 (30.5%)	56 (19.4%)	20 (6.9%)	202 (70.1%)	86 (29.9%)
Multiple Response Set	528 (36.7%)	420 (29.1%)	272 (18.9%)	220 (15.3%)	948 (65.8%)	492 (34.2%)

Key: *SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree and SD= Strongly Disagree.*

In aggregate, 65.8% of students are affected when people are killed or injured around their school premise while 34.2% are not. Specifically, 76.4% (220) of students agreed that military men become aggressive towards everyone when a member sustain injuries due to attack while 23.6% (68) denied. Similarly, 72.2% (208) of students become scared whenever they see a corpse in their school premise while 27.8% (80) do not. Furthermore, 70.1% (202) of students are afraid of being killed in their school which traumatized them while 29.9% (86) are not. Finally, 61.1% (176) of students feel pains when they see people injured in a military attack that took place around their school premise while 38.9% (112) do not. Thus, Exposure to death, injuries, and subsequent aggression creates intense fear, intrusive memories, and generalized insecurity and student's in Bamenda frequently witness or hear about violent incidents near schools, leading to panic, concentration difficulties, and eroded sense of safety.

Table 8: School Personnel View if Death or Injury of Persons Affect Students' Mental health and emotional development

Themes	Quotations
Fear	"Yes, it does, just taking for instance that a student hears that a corpse is in this particular place, just coming to school becomes very difficult, that creates a lot of tension. So, I think death and injury cause a lot of effects on students' mental health and emotional development." "That one is a very challenging situation we have especially with the crisis we have in this area of our country. Now just imagine a student getting information that their fellow classmate is dead, now education becomes very frightful. Will I go to school? Should I not go? Even if I'm in school I might be the next. Terrible! So, it downgrades the student." "Yes. It makes them to be frightened. Knowing fully well that they might go to school and encounter gunshots or something, it disturbs them even their mental health. I for one if I know that if I enter the school and I will not be safe, I will not learn well." "Yes, it influences it negatively because imagine a student coming to school and bypasses corpses or people with very deep injuries on the way,

	they day will not be the same for them. Sometimes they go back home because that frightened them and even if they make it to school, they will not be able to study, they are panicking so it really affects them negatively.”
Traumatised	“I think it does. Death of teachers or students or other people in the society impacts their mental health and emotional development a lot. Just the other day, I was coming to school and there was a dead body on the road because of the crisis and I saw a student that was on his way to school. This student was demoralized, it was so bad that he couldn’t even stand on his feet, he was actually sitting on the ground.” “Yes, it does. Anybody who is going into study and sees dead person or injured person nearby is certainly going to be disturbed because they equally will not be sure of their own self and so sitting to study, the image of what happened keeps floating in your mind and by this, your studies will be affected.”
Reduce class focus	“I think it is a yes. For example, if a student leaves on their way to school and they see a lifeless body, it already disturbs them and I think that during that day or week, it already disturbs their concentration in class and it has already caused a negative impact on their education.”
Skeptical	“Yes. Death of people in or out of school affects students’ psychosocial well-being because they feel insecure. They leave their houses going to school and they are not even sure of their safety. They feel they can die at any time and so it impacts their psychosocial well-being.”

Furthermore, based on how students’ observation of death or injury of people affect their mental health and emotional development, some school personnel said it causes fear in students as explained “*It makes them to be frightened. Knowing fully well that they might go to school and encounter gunshots or something, it disturbs them even their mental health. I for one if I know that if I enter the school and I will not be safe, I will not learn well.*” Again, some school personnel added that it causes emotional instability in students as explained “*So much because you cannot actually be thinking well or feeling fine or act well in the society when you have emotional pain. It must have a serious impact which is a negative impact.*”

More so, some school personnel added that it causes trauma in students as explained “*Anybody who is going into study and sees dead person or injured person nearby is certainly going to be disturbed because they equally will not be sure of their own self and so sitting to study, the image of what happened keeps floating in your mind and by this, your studies will be affected.*”

Qualitative themes from school personnel included pervasive fear ("coming to school becomes very difficult"), trauma ("the image keeps floating in your mind"), reduced class focus, emotional instability, and scepticism about the future.

Verification of Hypothesis Three

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between death or injury of people and students' mental health and emotional development

Ha3: There is a significant relationship between death or injury of people on students' mental health and emotional development

Table 9: Relationship between Death or Injury of People and Students' Mental health and emotional development

		Death or injury of people	Students' mental health and emotional development
Spearman's rho test	R-value	1	.672**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	n	288	288

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Statistically, findings showed a strong and significant relationship between exposure to death or injury and students' mental health and emotional development ($R = 0.672$, $p < 0.001$). This confirms that the higher the exposure to violent events, the more pronounced the negative impact on students' psychological and emotional states. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis accepted. The majority of the students affirmed that there are attacks in the school premises. These findings confirm that witnessing or being aware of death and injury in militarized school zones has a profound impact on students' mental health.

Witnessing death or injury in militarized zones triggers grief, PTSD symptoms, and emotional dysregulation, with ripple effects on families and communities (Betancourt et al., 2013; Hobfoll et al., 2007). In Bamenda, where students bypass corpses or injured individuals en route to school, these exposures compound the chronosystem effects of prolonged crisis, impairing concentration and social integration during a critical developmental window (Human Rights Watch, 2021; recent Bamenda III studies showing >70% trauma exposure). Counselling responses should integrate grief processing, desensitization techniques, family involvement, and culturally congruent practices such as communal rituals or spiritual support to facilitate healing and restore ecological balance

Table 10: Suggestions by School Personnel to Improve on Students' mental health and emotional development

Themes	Quotations
Stop military harassment / sensitization	"What I can say as far as that point is concerned is actual point to look deep into it because many of our military forces really harass students and make them feel uncomfortable. Just knowing that they are around affects them psychosocially. So, I think the first thing that should be done is cautioning those people that they shouldn't harass students or make them feel embarrassed, but make them feel at home, see them as brothers, see them as fellow people that they can flow with instead of scaring them." "The first thing I will say is the military based around these areas should be cautioned." "They have to educate the military to be welcoming because just their presence in school affect students psychologically. When they just see a military man and a gun, they just know that they are not secured." "The military people should also be drilled to know that their role in a school environment is that of protection of the students so that they mind their relationship with the students."
Parental support	"Parents too should be able to encourage their children at home and tell them not to be affected by the way things are going, they should be able to be supportive with these children and help to be able to cope with the changes in our atmosphere especially the learning atmosphere."
No soldier inside school premise	"I think that if the military must be around, they need to be a little out of this study environment, at the entrance or out of the school campus. Inside the campus makes it a little bit uncomfortable for the students."

Finally, based on suggestions to improve on students' mental health and emotional development, some school personnel recommended counseling of students as explained *"I think that one of the things that can be done is actually providing a counselor in times of difficulties as mentioned earlier like diminished quality of education, disruption in school attendance, injury or death, they need a counselor that they can talk to. I think when they share out these things, their mental health and emotional development will be well managed."*

More so, some suggested sensitization of students as explained *"Now, the students should be cautioned their school is in the military vicinity they should do the right thing at the right time because if they go against the law the military of course will go after them."*

Furthermore, some suggested that the sensitization of military personnel to stop harassing students as explained *"What I can say as far as that point is concerned is actual point to look deep into it because many of our military forces really harass students and make them feel uncomfortable. Just*

knowing that they are around affects them psychosocially. So, I think the first thing that should be done is cautioning those people that they shouldn't harass students or make them feel embarrassed, but make them feel at home, see them as brothers, see them as fellow people that they can flow with instead of scaring them."

Finally, school personnel Key recommendations: Sensitize and train military personnel to reduce harassment and adopt protective (non-intimidating) roles; provide parental emotional support; position security outside school premises; and crucially, establish accessible counselling services for students to process disruptions, harassment, and trauma. These align directly with findings and underscore the need for school-based psychosocial programmes.

Overall, the quantitative correlations ($p = .535-.672$, all $p < .001$) and qualitative themes consistently demonstrate that militarization stressors in Bamenda secondary schools—disruption, harassment, and exposure to violence—significantly undermine students' mental health and emotional development. These align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, where exosystem military activities disrupt microsystem protective factors (school routines, peer/family relations), amplified by the macrosystem crisis context and chronosystem duration since 2016. In Bamenda's reality, high trauma prevalence ($>70\%$ in local studies) manifests as fear, anxiety, withdrawal, and lost learning opportunities, with counselling playing a pivotal role in mitigation through relational, trauma-informed, and Africentric approaches

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study illuminate the profound and multifaceted ways in which militarized school environments, shaped by the ongoing Anglophone sociopolitical crisis, undermine students' mental health and psychosocial development in secondary schools in Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon. Consistent with the research questions, the results demonstrate that disruption in education and school attendance, physical, verbal, and sexual harassment, and exposure to death and injury around school premises collectively create an ecology of fear, trauma, and emotional instability that severely compromises students' well-being.

First, disruptions in education and school attendance due to gunfire, sudden closures, and parental safety concerns significantly affect students' mental health and emotional development. A large proportion of students (66.4%) reported frequent absenteeism triggered by fear of gunshots, with parental reluctance and peer avoidance behaviours reinforcing this pattern (77.8% and 69.4% agreement respectively). These interruptions fracture the daily routines and relational stability that schools should provide, leading to learning gaps, idleness at home, heightened anxiety, social withdrawal, and diminished sense of future orientation. In the context of Bamenda, where the crisis has persisted, such disruptions exacerbate psychological distress and hinder emotional regulation during a critical developmental stage.

Second, physical, verbal, and sexual harassment by security personnel near school premises emerged as a pervasive threat to students' mental health. Over 70% of students reported exposure to physical searches, threats, intimidation, identity card withholding, unwanted sexual comments or advances, and mockery. These experiences generate chronic humiliation, hypervigilance, eroded self-esteem, and school avoidance, with a strong statistical correlation to adverse mental health outcomes ($\rho = .672, p < .001$). In Bamenda's militarized urban landscape, such harassment destroys trust in adult authority figures and transforms the school vicinity from a place of learning into an additional source of relational trauma, particularly affecting girls and heightening risks of emotional dysregulation.

Third, exposure to death and injury around school premises exerts a powerful negative influence on students' psychosocial well-being. Approximately 65.8% of students indicated significant distress from witnessing corpses, injuries, or aggressive behaviour by affected military personnel following clashes. Qualitative accounts from school personnel highlighted intense fear, intrusive memories ("the image keeps floating in your mind"), panic, reduced concentration, and generalised insecurity about personal safety. The strong correlation with mental health challenges ($\rho = .672, p < .001$) confirms that repeated traumatic exposure in Bamenda deepens symptoms of post-traumatic stress, grief, and emotional numbness, further disrupting academic engagement and long-term emotional development.

Taken together, these findings reveal that schooling in military-proximate zones in Bamenda does not merely interrupt education; it actively generates an environment of chronic psychological stress that undermines students' mental health wellness. The presence of armed actors and associated violence around schools erodes the protective microsystem functions of education, amplifying the chronosystem effects of the prolonged Anglophone crisis. In a region already characterised by limited mental health infrastructure and cultural stigma around help-seeking, these stressors risk perpetuating cycles of trauma, idleness, substance use, and lost developmental opportunities among Bamenda's youth.

Nevertheless, the study also points to pathways for healing and resilience. School personnel strongly advocated for accessible counselling services, sensitization of security forces, parental emotional support, and safer positioning of military personnel outside school premises. These recommendations align directly with the need for culturally responsive, trauma-informed counselling that integrates Africentric principles of communal healing, family mediation (palaver), relational support, and spiritual resources alongside evidence-based practices.

The Anglophone crisis has transformed secondary schools in Bamenda into high-risk environments where educational disruption, harassment, and exposure to violence collectively threaten students' mental health and psychosocial development. Addressing these challenges demands urgent, context-specific interventions centred on counselling for mental health wellness. Generally, Educational authorities, counsellors, policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders in the North West Region

must collaborate to establish school-based psychosocial support systems, train counsellors in hybrid ecological-Africentric approaches, implement safety protocols, and sensitize security actors on child protection. By prioritising safe learning environments, trauma-informed counselling, and community-based resilience programmes, stakeholders can help students in Bamenda recover from the psychological wounds of militarization, rebuild emotional stability, restore hope, and reclaim their right to quality education and holistic development.

Ultimately, investing in mental health wellness through counselling is not only essential for individual recovery but also critical for the long-term social cohesion and future prosperity of conflict-affected communities in Bamenda and the broader North West Region of Cameroon thus specifically each stake holder is recommended to join hands to ensure wellness; -

School Counsellors and Guidance Teachers should Implement regular trauma-informed group counselling sessions incorporating storytelling, peer support, and family palaver to process disruptions and harassment. Train counsellors in hybrid approaches that blend Western techniques with Africentric elements (e.g., communal rituals for grief). Prioritize self-care protocols given the stressful environment (directly supported by strong correlations between stressors and mental health).

School Administrators and Teachers could Establish early warning systems, safe reporting mechanisms for harassment, and daily emotional check-ins. Position security (if present) outside school premises and advocate for sensitization of military personnel on child protection and non-intimidating conduct. Integrate mental wellness into the curriculum via resilience modules.

Parents/Guardians and Community Leaders provide home-based emotional support and collaborate with schools on safety planning. Engage traditional healers and faith leaders in referral networks to reduce stigma and enhance culturally congruent care.

Policymakers and Education Authorities (Regional/National) develop and fund a NWR-specific trauma-informed education policy that includes mandatory counselling training, mobile psychosocial units for hard-to-reach areas, and monitoring of militarization's impact on schools. Fully implement Safe Schools Declaration commitments locally.

NGOs and Humanitarian Actors should Scale evidence-based psychosocial programmes (e.g., adapted Better Learning Programme models) and support research on long-term counselling outcomes in Bamenda.

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