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Making School Counseling Accessible After Online Harm in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

School reporting channels can make online harm visible without securing counseling for affected learners. This conceptual article examines the institutional conditions that connect disclosure to accessible and sustained support in Ghanaian secondary education. It brings adolescent help-seeking and bullying-disclosure research into dialogue with implementation scholarship, published Ghanaian evidence, and six illustrative accounts reproduced in a doctoral manuscript. The accounts are used to develop the argument, not as a new qualitative dataset. The proposed framework distinguishes initiating contact, receiving an appropriate response, and maintaining support across investigation or referral. Response clarity is expected to reduce uncertainty; proportionate information sharing to limit additional exposure; and identifiable responsibility to reduce interruption of assistance. These mechanisms depend on staff competence, credible practice, accessible contact routes, and referral capacity. Three conditional propositions specify expected relationships, competing explanations, and observations that would challenge the framework. A staged evaluation approach separates service use from unmet need, implementation from student outcomes, and administrative closure from resolution of harm. The article argues that counseling access is a continuing institutional accomplishment rather than an automatic consequence of reporting. It offers a testable account of how schools might make support usable while preserving fair investigation and recognizing resource constraints. Contextual development and prospective evaluation are required before claims of effectiveness or wider adoption.

Keywords: school counseling; online harm; adolescent help-seeking; disclosure; implementation; Ghana

INTRODUCTION

A school can publicize a reporting channel without making counseling accessible. Students may know whom to approach yet remain uncertain about who will learn of their disclosure, whether peers will retaliate, and whether assistance will continue after the first conversation. The institutional problem is therefore not exhausted by persuading students to speak. It concerns whether schools can turn an initial concern into appropriate support without generating avoidable exposure, uncertainty, or abandonment along the way.

Research on adolescent help-seeking identifies social and organizational barriers even where services are physically nearby (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020; McPhail et al., 2024). Bullying-disclosure studies show that anticipated peer reactions and loss of autonomy can discourage contact with teachers (Boulton et al., 2017). These findings explain why a visible service may remain unused. A further question concerns what happens

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after contact: how do the arrangements for receiving, sharing, investigating, and following up a concern enable or interrupt counseling access? This article develops that question into a framework for school response.

Online harm is used here to include humiliating messages, unwanted circulation of personal material, and peer harassment. The broader term permits advice seeking without requiring a learner first to establish repetition, intent, or a power imbalance. It does not imply that all upsetting online interactions are equivalent or require the same response. Reporting means communicating an incident to someone able to act. Counseling access means being able to reach, begin, and continue appropriate assistance, including referral when needs exceed school capacity. A completed incident form is not evidence of counseling, and receiving support does not establish another student's guilt.

The argument is that access depends on the quality of the transitions between initial contact, an appropriate first response, and continuing assistance. A failure at any transition may leave need unmet even when another part of the process works well. We identify three institutional functions that could improve these transitions: explaining the response, limiting unnecessary information circulation, and maintaining identifiable responsibility for support. Their value depends on actual delivery and on the student's circumstances; procedural clarity alone cannot make an unsafe or unavailable service trustworthy.

The contribution is an incident-specific account of where support is interrupted between disclosure, first response and continuing assistance. It translates existing concerns about trust and care into separately observable transitions and testable propositions. Ghana supplies the policy setting and contextual illustrations; neither national representativeness nor effectiveness is claimed. The framework complements prevention, fair investigation and specialist care.

Analytical Approach and Evidence Boundaries

This is a conceptual synthesis intended to develop an explanatory framework rather than estimate an intervention effect. The argument draws on three bodies of published work: adolescent help-seeking and bullying disclosure; school counseling and service access, including Ghanaian research; and implementation and complex-intervention evaluation. Sources were selected purposively for their bearing on initial contact, anticipated consequences, continuity, and evaluation. Bibliographic details were checked against publisher or institutional records during revision. The selection is not a systematic search, and no exhaustive coverage, formal risk-of-bias assessment, or pooled estimate is claimed. The contextual material consists of six quotations or quotation fragments reproduced on pages 163–167 of Afriyie's (2026) doctoral manuscript.

Four concern student expectations and two describe school-staff perspectives. The parent manuscript reports four student focus groups involving 24 students, six teacher interviews, and four school-staff interviews. These totals describe the source investigation, not a sample recruited for this article. The six passages were checked against the supplied doctoral manuscript, retaining its participant identifiers and page references. The underlying recordings and complete transcripts were not reanalysed, so this comparison verifies correspondence with the document rather than independently validating the original accounts.

The six passages are mapped to distinct institutional questions: peer standing and loyalty (SFGD2-P1 and SFGD4-P2), additional exposure (SFGD1-P6), uncertainty about after-hours online incidents (SFGD2-P3), delayed awareness (SSI-03), and support beyond punishment (SSI-02). This states their relevance to the argument rather than claiming an independently conducted selection protocol. The source material used here does not document a comprehensive search for positive or disconfirming accounts, a denominator of eligible quotations, or independent selection decisions. We cannot claim that such accounts were absent or systematically considered.

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The selection is therefore illustrative and vulnerable to confirmation bias. We do not treat the passages as a new coded dataset, calculate frequencies, claim saturation, or link student and staff statements to the same incidents. Competing explanations make the conceptual claims more testable but cannot remove selection bias. A future transcript-based study should explicitly seek successful support, voluntary non-disclosure and cases contradicting each proposed mechanism, with a documented selection and coding record. The authors report ethical clearance and consent for the parent investigation, including adult consent and parental or guardian consent with assent for minors. No new participants were recruited for this article.

Ghanaian Context and the Problem of Usable Support

The distinction between having a counseling unit and receiving useful assistance has a local empirical basis. In a mixed-methods study of school-going adolescents in rural and peri-urban Ghana, Addy et al. (2021) identified concerns about trust, confidentiality, and the preparation of personnel involved in guidance and counseling. Their findings concern adolescent mental health broadly rather than online harm specifically. They therefore support attention to service credibility and capacity, but do not establish how Ghanaian students respond to cyberbullying disclosure procedures. The inference developed here is that a school-based location cannot be treated as sufficient evidence of accessible support.

Ghana's National Child Online Protection Framework provides more than background: its victim-support provisions identify coordinated assistance through investigation and beyond, workforce preparation, and child-sensitive remedies (Cyber Security Authority, 2024, section 5.3, p. 25). Its implementation plan includes building school counseling units' capacity and explaining reporting and complaint mechanisms in child-friendly language (pp. 34–35). These are policy commitments, not evidence of delivery in the schools discussed here. The present propositions examine whether school-level practices make those commitments usable.

Local adaptation must address variation rather than assume a single Ghanaian school model. Boarding arrangements, opportunities for private contact, languages used in sensitive conversations, staffing, and access to external services are relevant conditions to investigate. They are not established differences in the six illustrative accounts. A response delivered through a trained counselor may operate differently from one coordinated by a teacher with multiple responsibilities. The framework consequently specifies functions that need to be delivered and questions that schools must resolve, while leaving their organizational form open to contextual development.

Online Specificity and Alternative Explanations

The three functions also apply to offline peer harm; they are not claimed to be uniquely digital. Online harm makes particular tests salient: material can persist and be redistributed after school, audiences can expand during a response, and school support can be confused with authority over a platform. The proposed additional value lies in specifying these incident-level demands. Equivalent online and offline scenarios should hold severity and relationship constant while varying persistence, redistribution and after-hours uncertainty. If only general trust predicts contact in both conditions, a digital-specific explanation would add little.

Relational trust concerns the quality of school relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002); school climate is a broader contextual influence. This framework instead specifies whether a learner understands the next action, whether information circulation adds exposure, and whether an agreed referral is completed. These observations should not be renamed trust scores. A comparative model would first include general trust, school climate, prior service use, severity and capacity, then add the three process measures. Improved prediction on held-out observations would support incremental usefulness, not prove causality; negligible improvement would favor the simpler account.

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Help Seeking and the Limits of Reporting Policies

Disclosure as a Social Decision

Help seeking involves interpreting a difficulty, deciding whether assistance is appropriate, and choosing an accessible source. Rickwood et al. (2007) distinguish individual influences, such as beliefs about help, from structural influences, including support systems and referral arrangements. Their discussion also emphasizes trusted relationships. Applied to online peer harm, this perspective suggests that knowledge of services is only one condition of access. Institutional procedures can affect what students expect to happen when they use those services.

Reviews identify stigma, beliefs about services, scheduling and peer concerns as barriers to adolescent mental health help seeking (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020; McPhail et al., 2024). These broader service findings explain why location within a school is insufficient, while bullying-disclosure studies address the incident context more directly.

Bullying-disclosure research provides more direct evidence. Boulton et al. (2017) identified anticipated peer disapproval, feeling weak, and loss of autonomy among barriers for English adolescents. In one study, some barriers persisted even when students were told that a teacher would stop the bullying. Dennehy et al. (2020), drawing on focus groups with young people, identified difficulty expressing distress and concerns about adult support and school intervention after cybervictimization. These findings suggest that students evaluate the consequences of disclosure alongside the possibility of stopping the harm.

Nagar and Talwar (2023) found that teacher support affected intentions to disclose hypothetical cyberbullying, with responses differing by incident severity. Vignette responses cannot establish actual reporting behavior, but they show why perceived support merits attention. Dawes et al. (2026), using emerging adults' retrospective accounts, also identified concerns about teachers, reputation, friendship, and self-reliance. Differences in age, recall, and setting limit direct application to Ghana. Across these sources, however, anticipated adult and peer responses are relevant to explaining disclosure decisions.

Policy Availability and Policy Operation

A written policy cannot be assumed to operate as students or staff expect. Harrison-Pavlik and Cashel (2025) found that antibullying policies were not significant predictors of help seeking in their study of rural United States schools. This does not show that policies are universally ineffective. It cautions against treating their existence as an adequate measure of accessible assistance. Evaluators need to examine what the policy enables people to do and how students experience its implementation.

There is evidence that school programs can reduce cyberbullying. Polanin et al. (2022) synthesized 50 studies and reported reductions in perpetration and victimization. Those findings concern evaluated programs with multiple possible components; they do not isolate the contribution of counseling after disclosure. The present proposal therefore complements prevention research by specifying a narrower institutional process for investigation. It asks how a school can connect an initial concern to support, and how that connection can be evaluated without confusing greater reporting with greater underlying harm.

Ghanaian Accounts and the Consequences of Disclosure

The selected accounts illustrate three pressures that a counseling response needs to consider. First, requesting assistance may challenge a learner's standing among peers. One student described fear of being called "weak" or unable to "take jokes" (SFGD2-P1; Afriyie, 2026, p. 163). Another explained, "Sometimes you cannot report your friend because the group will say you are betraying them" (SFGD4-P2; Afriyie, 2026, p. 164). These

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expectations suggest a tension between seeking protection and maintaining valued relationships. They do not establish how widespread that tension was in the study population.

Second, disclosure may be expected to enlarge the audience for an embarrassing event. A student observed, "If you report, the issue can become bigger, and others may start talking about you more" (SFGD1-P6; Afriyie, 2026, p. 164). The relevant policy problem is therefore partly informational: students need a credible explanation of who may receive their account and why. A vague promise of privacy cannot address this concern if routine practice involves unnecessary retelling or visible movement through school offices.

Third, learners may be unsure whether school support applies to events beyond the school day. One account stated, "If it happens in a WhatsApp group after school, some students are not sure whether it is still a school issue" (SFGD2-P3; Afriyie, 2026, p. 165). This uncertainty concerns access to assistance; it does not settle the legal or disciplinary jurisdiction of a school. Schools can explain available support while obtaining appropriate guidance on their responsibilities for particular incidents.

Staff accounts locate the problem in the timing and purpose of the response. One described delayed awareness: "By the time the school hears about it, the message has already gone around and the affected learner may already be distressed" (SSI-03; Afriyie, 2026, p. 166). Another argued that the school "must not only punish the offender. The affected learner also needs support" (SSI-02; Afriyie, 2026, p. 167). The accounts cannot be linked to the same events. Read together as illustrations, they draw attention to support that may be needed before an investigation concludes and after a sanction has been imposed.

Connecting Disclosure to Sustained Support

The proposed framework treats counseling access as a sequence of decisions and encounters, with possible interruption and re-entry. A learner may first seek informal advice, decline a formal allegation, accept limited assistance, and return later. Others may require an immediate protective response. The sequence is therefore an analytical device, not a compulsory administrative route. Assistance should be responsive to need rather than conditional on completing every step.

Three distinctions are central. First, anticipated response and experienced response are different: students form expectations before contact and revise them through encounters. Second, relational confidence and organizational capacity are different: a trusted adult may still lack time, competence, or a workable referral. Third, access and benefit are different: attending a session may be necessary for support but does not prove that distress or continuing harm has improved. These distinctions prevent the framework from explaining every favorable outcome simply as an increase in trust.

The expected relationship is conditional. Clear information should help students understand available choices; proportionate sharing should reduce avoidable additional exposure; and continuing responsibility should reduce loss of assistance during handovers. Each function can be delivered poorly or produce unintended consequences. A transparent explanation may reveal weak provision, a private appointment may become conspicuous, or repeated follow-up may feel intrusive. The propositions therefore concern credible and acceptable practice, not the mere adoption of written procedures.

Response Clarity

Response clarity means that a student can understand how to seek assistance, what the initial conversation involves, and which subsequent actions may follow. It requires more than naming a trusted adult. A student should be able to ask for advice, discuss uncertainty, and learn about available options without being required immediately to produce a complete allegation. Staff must nevertheless explain circumstances in which

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protective responsibilities require action. The aim is informed access, with realistic limits, rather than a promise that the student controls every decision.

Proposition 1 predicts that, where an acceptable support option exists, an understandable explanation of contact and subsequent action will improve comprehension and initial help-seeking through reduced uncertainty. For online harm, the explanation should state whether advice is available for after-hours group-chat incidents, what happens to digital material, and when referral may occur. This operationalises the Framework's child-friendly information commitment; it does not create a new legal jurisdiction. A matched offline-harm scenario would test whether these digital questions add explanatory value beyond general service knowledge, prior trust and incident severity. Better knowledge without reduced uncertainty or increased use would challenge the pathway.

Proportionate Information Sharing

Proportionate information sharing requires a defined purpose for collecting and communicating personal material. An initial request for advice should not automatically trigger circulation of screenshots or detailed accounts among staff. The person receiving the concern should distinguish information needed to assess immediate safety from information required later for investigation or referral. Students should hear why information may need to move beyond the first adult. Absolute confidentiality should not be promised where safeguarding duties may require disclosure.

Proposition 2 predicts that, among initial service users, explained and proportionate sharing will be associated with less additional disclosure-related exposure and greater continued engagement than unexplained or unnecessarily broad sharing. In online cases, record school-related retelling or redistribution separately from pre-existing peer circulation, including whether screenshots are requested, retained or forwarded. The predicted mechanism is reduced additional informational cost. This is a school-level interpretation of the Framework's emphasis on avoiding unnecessary procedures and interviews (section 5.3.2.3), not a claim that the Framework prescribes a particular screenshot protocol. Necessary protective disclosure may still be distressing; engagement alone cannot determine whether action was appropriate.

There are two important limits. Existing peer circulation may already make an incident widely known, reducing the effect of school information practices on total exposure. Conversely, even a narrowly shared account can feel exposing when a learner is visibly removed from class. The proposition would be weakened if students understood and experienced the intended practices but additional exposure and disengagement remained unchanged across comparable circumstances. General school climate, family reactions, and prior breaches of trust must be considered before attributing the association to the new procedure.

Continuity of Support

Continuity means that responsibility for assistance remains identifiable across initial contact, investigation, referral, and follow-up. An adult should check whether agreed support occurred and whether unwanted attention continues. This does not require one person to perform every function. It requires a responsible contact, an alternative during absence, and an understood handover when another practitioner becomes involved. Support for distress should remain available while an allegation is assessed, without treating the provision of assistance as a finding against another student.

Proposition 3 predicts that a named contact, understood handover and agreed follow-up will increase receipt of agreed assistance when the receiving service is available. For online incidents, follow-up should ask whether material has recirculated or crossed platforms after an investigation closes. The mechanism is reduced loss of responsibility, consistent with the Framework's end-to-end support objective (section 5.3.2.1). Compare confirmed assistance, not referral slips, and test whether continuity matters especially when circulation persists.

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More paperwork without greater receipt of support would challenge the proposition; it would not demonstrate effective access.

The responsible contact coordinates assistance but does not acquire unrestricted access to counseling records. Students should know how to change the contact, decline optional follow-up, or request an alternative where a relationship is difficult. Missing follow-up must be distinguished from an informed decision to stop. Continuity is not equivalent to indefinite monitoring, and closing a disciplinary case does not establish that support needs have ended. These distinctions make the framework compatible with both student agency and accountable school response.

Table 1 specifies the proposed mechanisms and tests. The three functions are analytically distinct but may reinforce one another: a well-explained referral is of little practical use if no one checks whether it occurred. Their combined effect, however, remains an empirical question. A study should not assume that improvements in all three functions are necessary or sufficient in every case.

Table 1. Proposed functions, mechanisms and challenges to the framework

Function	Expected mechanism and outcome	Conditions and challenging evidence
Response clarity (P1)	Understanding the response reduces uncertainty and supports initial help-seeking.	Requires an acceptable, available service. Better understanding without reduced uncertainty or increased use challenges the pathway; accurate information may expose inadequate provision.
Proportionate sharing (P2)	Explained, justified sharing limits additional exposure and supports continued engagement.	Existing peer circulation and urgent protection may constrain effects. Unchanged exposure or engagement despite understood and delivered practices weakens the proposition.
Continuity (P3)	A responsible contact, handover and agreed follow-up reduce loss of assistance.	Requires receiving-service capacity and acceptable contact. More documentation without increased receipt of agreed support challenges the mechanism.

Note. These propositions are conceptual deductions, not findings or validated intervention components. Comparisons require attention to incident severity, prior relationships, school climate and service capacity.

Policy Choices and Institutional Tradeoffs

Awareness campaigns have broad reach but cannot resolve hesitation about an unclear or unavailable response. Formal channels can standardize intake and responsibility, yet mandatory forms and evidence requests may deter preliminary advice seeking. Digital channels additionally require access and regular monitoring. Each option should therefore be assessed against an existing service's capacity.

Linking reporting to counseling and follow-up addresses interrupted support directly and requires staff time, privacy, supervision and workable referrals. A monitored introduction is justified as a test of this fit, not as established superiority. Table 2 compares its narrower contribution with existing approaches.

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Table 2. Relationship to existing approaches

Approach	Primary emphasis	Relation to the proposed framework
Relational trust and school climate	Quality of relationships and the wider school environment.	Potential explanation for all three functions; test added prediction beyond trust and climate (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).
Trauma-informed approach	Safety, transparency, collaboration and voice in organizational responses.	The proposed functions operationalise a limited access process; they do not supply trauma treatment or establish a trauma history (SAMHSA, 2014).
Restorative practices	Relationships, accountability and repair following harm.	May accompany support where appropriate. Counseling access must not depend on reconciliation or participation in a joint encounter (Augustine et al., 2018).
Proposed access framework	Initial contact, information exposure and continuity across handover.	Adds incident-specific measures and conditional tests. Its superiority and additional explanatory value remain unestablished.

Note. These approaches can coexist. The comparison identifies analytical scope, not comparative effectiveness. SAMHSA denotes the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Trauma-informed principles support transparent, safe and collaborative care (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Restorative approaches focus on relationships and repair; a Pittsburgh trial found changes in some climate and suspension outcomes but not improved academic outcomes (Augustine et al., 2018). Those findings do not validate counseling access after online harm in Ghana. The National Child Online Protection Framework also anticipates restorative approaches to harm between children (section 5.3.2.1). Appropriate support must remain available where a joint process is unsuitable or a learner declines it.

Implementation in Different School Settings

Implementation should begin with a fictional-case walkthrough of existing arrangements: who receives a concern, assesses urgency, explains information sharing and maintains support? This can reveal whether the constraint is staff time, private space, competence or referral capacity. It assesses intelligibility and readiness, not effectiveness.

Responsibilities should be allocated according to available personnel and competence. Aluede and Adubale (2020) found distinctive perceptions of appropriate counseling activities among Nigerian counselors compared with other national groups. This cautions against importing an identical professional role across settings. In Ghanaian schools, implementation planning should establish who receives concerns, assesses urgent needs, provides counseling within their competence, and arranges additional assistance. A designation on an organizational chart is insufficient without time, authority, and access to consultation.

Where possible, support and disciplinary decision making should be distinguishable. Where roles overlap, students need an explanation and an alternative contact when a relationship makes disclosure difficult. Staff should treat an account respectfully while maintaining fair investigation. School and relevant education or

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safeguarding authorities must establish applicable responsibilities, referral routes, and procedures for complaints involving staff. The proposed approach specifies questions that governance arrangements must answer; it does not prescribe Ghanaian legal thresholds.

Private space, realistic appointment times, language and disability access, and spoken as well as written routes require local testing. A channel must describe its actual availability. Family involvement and alternative contacts should be discussed in light of the learner's circumstances and applicable responsibilities; bystanders should not investigate or redistribute harmful content.

Evaluation and Accountability

The primary evaluation question is whether students with a support need can obtain acceptable assistance, not whether a school generates more incident records. The unit of analysis must match that question. A student can have several contacts about one incident, several incidents during one support episode, or a need for advice without making a formal report. Evaluation should define students, incidents, contacts, referrals, and support episodes separately before counting them. Otherwise, increased staff activity can be mistaken for improved reach.

Separate Implementation from Student Outcomes

Evaluation should distinguish whether the response was implemented from whether it improved students' lives. Proctor et al. (2011) separate implementation outcomes from service and client outcomes. For this proposal, feasibility concerns whether staff can deliver the response within available resources; acceptability concerns how students and staff experience its arrangements; fidelity concerns whether agreed functions actually occur. These questions should be examined alongside access, continuing harm, and school participation. Completion of a procedure alone cannot demonstrate benefit.

Service records should distinguish requests for advice, formal reports, and substantiated incidents. Contacts concerning one event should be linked securely to prevent inflated counts, while retaining information about the amount of assistance provided. Greater reporting may reflect improved access, increased harm, or both. Falling totals may reflect improvement or stronger reluctance to approach adults. Neither direction establishes success without independent information about students' experiences and underlying harm.

Relevant process measures include time to first response, assignment of a support contact, referral completion where applicable, and whether agreed follow-up occurred. Student feedback should examine understanding of next steps, confidence about information sharing, and whether promised assistance was received. Missing follow-up information must remain visible rather than being recorded as resolution. Academic attendance or participation may be relevant outcomes, but changes cannot automatically be attributed to counseling when other school or household influences remain unmeasured.

Test Mechanisms and Examine Unintended Effects

Table 3 proposes complementary measures and interpretation rules. The measures are candidates for local testing, not a validated instrument. Their denominators and collection periods must be specified in advance. In particular, successful follow-up should be calculated from support episodes in which follow-up was agreed and became due, retaining unknown outcomes rather than silently excluding them. Referral completion should use referrals agreed and due for completion, with non-availability, non-attendance, informed refusal, and missing information distinguished where they can be established safely.

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Table 3. Candidate measures for evaluating access and support

Domain	Candidate measure and denominator	Interpretation and limitation
Understanding	Proportion correctly describing contact options and next steps among students assessed.	Comprehension is distinct from satisfaction, intention and actual service use.
Reach and unmet need	Students receiving assistance relative to students reporting a support need during a defined period.	Requires information beyond service records. Specify sampling and retain nonusers in the assessment.
First response	Elapsed time from initial contact to an appropriate response for recorded support episodes.	A receipt notification alone is not an appropriate response. Report unresolved episodes and service availability.
Referral receipt	Referrals with confirmed receipt of agreed assistance / referrals agreed and due for completion.	Separate unavailable services, non-attendance, informed refusal and unknown outcomes; issued slips do not establish receipt.
Follow-up	Completed agreed follow-ups / support episodes with follow-up agreed and due.	Keep unknown outcomes visible. Distinguish informed withdrawal from loss of contact.
Benefit and unintended effects	Repeated student reports of continuing harm, participation, additional exposure and acceptability.	Changes require suitable comparison and timing. Examine unequal access and avoid identifiable small-group reporting.

Note. These are proposed measures for contextual development, not a validated scale. Define collection periods, units, eligibility and missing-data rules before use.

Development should begin with a small, explicitly proposed cognitive-interview study in two contrasting Ghanaian secondary schools, followed by feasibility work only if the response is understandable and deliverable. Consistent with Skivington et al. (2021), its purpose would be to resolve uncertainty about mechanisms and context. No cognitive interviews, expert validation or pilot results are reported in this article.

Proposed local development and feasibility protocol

Stage 1 would purposively invite approximately 12–16 students, including service users and nonusers, and 6–8 staff across the two schools. These are proposed development numbers, not a representative sample or a power claim. Recruitment would seek variation in gender, boarding arrangements, language and access needs without requiring a history of online harm. A local safeguarding practitioner and a referral-service representative would review safety and feasibility. Independent research approval, appropriate consent and assent, and a response plan for distress would precede recruitment.

Students would think aloud while interpreting fictional online and matched offline scenarios, then explain who could help, who might receive information and what would happen if material recirculated. Staff would separately walk through the same cases and describe referral responsibilities. Two iterative rounds would record

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misunderstandings, disagreement, unacceptable assumptions and suggested wording, with language support as required. Analysis would retain negative cases, such as clear explanations that decrease willingness or effective informal help without the proposed procedure. Revisions and unresolved disagreements would be documented rather than converted into an unsupported claim of consensus.

Stage 2 could introduce the locally revised functions over one school term, preceded by a four-week description of usual arrangements. A designated coordinator would record minimal episode-level data: initial request, agreed support, responsibility, referral availability, due follow-up and confirmed receipt. Student feedback would separately assess comprehension, additional exposure and acceptability. Existing care would continue; research participation would not determine access. No harmful posts or unnecessary identifying details would be collected. The pilot would examine delivery, workload, missing outcomes and adverse effects, with descriptive estimates and uncertainty; two schools cannot establish effectiveness or a mediation model.

Before rollout, students, staff and the oversight team would agree feasible response intervals and progression criteria. Expansion would require understandable contact and confidentiality explanations, an available responsible contact, workable referral arrangements and acceptable workload. A disclosure-related confidentiality breach, serious retaliation concern or repeated inability to deliver promised support would prompt review and correction. Thresholds and reasons for continuing, revising or stopping would be recorded prospectively. The feasibility findings would then inform a larger comparison of the three propositions, including an explicit test of added value beyond trust and climate.

A subsequent comparative evaluation should specify which parts of the response are being introduced and the outcome they are intended to change. If feasible and acceptable, allocation at school level would reduce contamination between staff delivering different procedures. A phased introduction without random allocation remains vulnerable to differences between schools and to changes over time. Baseline assessment, repeated observation, school clustering, staffing changes, and simultaneous prevention initiatives require explicit treatment. A single before-and-after comparison can inform feasibility but cannot reliably separate the intervention from those influences.

Mechanism testing requires temporal order. Comprehension and anticipated consequences should be measured before or around initial contact, experiences of information sharing after relevant decisions, and receipt of support after the agreed follow-up interval. Associations measured once at the end cannot show that the proposed mechanism preceded engagement. Adequate comparison data and attention to confounding are needed before estimating mediation; the framework alone does not justify a causal path model.

Routine records exclude students who considered seeking help but never approached the service. A confidential, appropriately approved student survey or voluntary interviews conducted independently of disciplinary decision making could examine that missing group. Recruitment must not expose individual concerns to staff or imply that participation is necessary to receive support. Analyses confined to service users should be labelled accordingly. Equity assessment should ask who could reach the service and whose needs remained unmet, rather than compare raw contact counts across groups with different levels of exposure or different population sizes.

Unintended effects deserve explicit monitoring: wider circulation of private information, perceived retaliation, burdensome repeated disclosure, and displacement of other counseling work. Data collection must protect participants and avoid reporting identifiable small groups. Research evaluation requires appropriate approval and consent. Decisions about continuation should draw on student experience, staff capacity, and evidence of benefit and harm. This approach makes accountability an examination of what support achieves, consistent with calls for policy research in school counseling (Shi et al., 2024).

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Table 4 summarises the proposed logic. Access may involve interruption and re-entry; urgent assistance can begin at any point. The transitions are hypotheses, not demonstrated causal effects.

Table 4. Proposed transitions from concern to continuing support

Transition	Institutional function	Proposed mechanism and observation
Concern to initial contact	Response clarity	Lower uncertainty; check understanding and actual contact (P1).
Contact to acceptable response	Proportionate information sharing	Less additional exposure; check sharing and continued engagement (P2).
Response to continuing assistance	Identifiable responsibility	Fewer failed handovers; check receipt of agreed support (P3).

Conditions across all transitions: staff competence, service capacity, credible practice and acceptable contact. Support receipt does not by itself establish reduced online harm.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The framework is unvalidated. Its additional explanatory value over trust, school climate and existing practice, and its staffing and financial requirements, remain unknown. Leadership, case mix and referral capacity can influence both procedural quality and outcomes. The proposed comparison and staged studies can investigate these alternatives; they do not eliminate confounding by assertion.

The six selected accounts from one unpublished doctoral manuscript cannot establish prevalence, saturation, subgroup differences or a new typology. Their selection record does not establish systematic consideration of positive and disconfirming cases. Correspondence with a manuscript does not independently validate original accounts. Published Ghanaian evidence supplies context without making the framework a national assessment.

International research concerns different forms of bullying, mental health need, age groups, and service arrangements. Its transfer to Ghana is therefore theoretical and conditional. Prospective development should include students who have not used school services, personnel with different levels of counseling preparation, and external referral providers. It should examine whether learners understand the proposed distinctions, whether staff can maintain them under workload pressure, and whether the approach distributes access fairly. Deliberate refusal of optional support must remain distinguishable from exclusion or inability to obtain it.

Finally, support after disclosure is only one component of a wider response. Continuing online harm may depend on peer networks, platform practices, family circumstances, and school climate beyond the counseling encounter. The framework should be judged first on whether it improves access to appropriate assistance without avoidable additional harm. Any subsequent claim that it reduces victimization, improves mental health, or strengthens educational participation requires its own evidence and an evaluation designed for that outcome.

Conclusion

Accessible counseling depends on what follows disclosure. The framework connects three observable transitions to response clarity, proportionate information sharing and continuing responsibility, with local capacity and credible practice as necessary conditions. Ghana’s national framework supplies policy objectives; the proposed studies would examine their translation into school encounters.

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The contribution is a testable process specification, not a validated intervention or a replacement for relational trust, trauma-informed care or restorative practice. Its value would lie in explaining interrupted access beyond those broader approaches and improving assistance without avoidable exposure. Contact, support receipt and reduced harm must remain separate outcomes.

Declarations

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics and Consent

This conceptual article involved no new recruitment or analysis of individual participant records. It reproduces anonymized accounts already reported in the first author's doctoral manuscript. The authors report ethical clearance and consent for the parent study, including informed consent for adults and parental or guardian consent with assent for minors. This article makes no separate claim of an ethics-committee exemption. No participant identities are disclosed.

Data Availability

No new empirical dataset was generated. The six illustrative passages are located in Afriyie (2026), pages 163–167, with their source identifiers retained. The published literature is identified in the references. Access to underlying research records is subject to the data custodian's consent and confidentiality arrangements; this article does not promise unrestricted access.

Author Contributions

Serwah Afriyie Danquah contributed the doctoral source material and contextual interpretation. Kadonsi Kaziya contributed supervision and critical revision. Both authors contributed to the conceptual development of the article.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

OpenAI ChatGPT assisted with conceptual development, literature discovery, checking bibliographic records and quotations against the supplied doctoral manuscript, substantive drafting and revision, and document preparation. This assistance extended beyond language editing. No participant-level dataset or original interview recording was analyzed. Responsibility for the article and its interpretation rests with the human authors.

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