

View on Counseling Ethics among School Counselors in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how school counselor for school in Perak, Malaysia define and execute ethical practice in counseling. This research design is a case study, involving three school counselors. Data was collected through interviews and was analyzed using qualitative methods. The data showed that the participants of study all agreed that a counselor should have recognized qualifications before counseling a client. They also noted that counselors often face conflicts with the school when adhering to the ethics of confidentiality, which enables them to provide information that involves client privileged communication. Participants were also found to comply with the procedure such as attending informed consent before conducting counseling sessions with clients. The findings of the study found that participants manage client cases by type: mild, simple or serious. Study participants also stressed that the personality of counselor is important in determining the effective practice of counseling ethics.

Keywords: ethics, counseling, school counselors, confidentiality and client.

Background of Study

Professional counselors are expected to always adhere to the ethics of counseling. Ethics provide the guidelines for counselors to make decisions in particular situations. School counselors who carry out regular counseling often are faced with ethical dilemmas (West, 2002). The code of ethics serves to protect the public from misconduct ethically, while also protecting professional counselors (Gladding et al, 2003; Remley & Herlihy, 2007).

In Malaysia, before the Counselors Act enforced in 1998, numerous instances of misconduct were committed under the code of ethics of the American School Counselor Association (1988). ASCA is a code of ethics guidelines for school counselors to resolve ethical issues that arise and be a reference to professional bodies around the world. Now, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has a Code of Ethics for School Counseling modified from the Code of Ethics Counselor of Malaysian Counseling Association or PERKAMA, providing guidelines for school counselors.

Theory Approach

Kitchener (1985) theory of "The Golden Five" was used in this study. This theory is based on the principles autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and fidelity (Kitchener, 1985). This theory outlines the elements that should be considered when dealing with ethical dilemmas in counseling. Kitchener provided a structured method in making judgments related to ethical issues. An understanding of the Golden Five can further provide school counselors with guidance when dealing with stressful or difficult ethical dilemmas.

Statement of Problem

Issues that arise in current society indicate that counseling must become even more meaningful for clients. Therefore it is a counselor must help seek to individuals. Problems surface when there are counselors who do not know and understand the ethics related to counseling. Nurul Hasyimah & Wan Marzuki Wan Jaafar (2013) pointed out that counselors, consciously or not, often commit ethical misconduct, considering are that they often exposed to ethical dilemmas or conflicts in their professions. This is supported by Francis and Dugger (2014), who confirm that there is a conflict between personal and professional ethics when conducting counseling. Kaplan (2014) also emphasized that ethical considerations should be made by a counselor before making appropriate any decisions.

There are many areas being investigated in the counseling ethics: ethical dilemmas in counseling and counseling research (West, 2002), cultural perspectives (Balkin, Watts and Ali, 2010), ethics of therapists who provide counseling and therapy online confidentiality (Finn & Barak, 2010, Rummell, & Joyce, 2010), personal disclosures (Bodenhorn, 2006), values and social justice in counseling (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012), professional ethics and the covenant (Ponton & Duba, 2009), and current and emerging ethical issues in counseling (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011).

Various issues that exist require counselors to have competence in ethics. A counselor must be knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of the ethical counseling before making decisions about client issues, the some can he said for school counseling conduct.

Purpose of the study

This study aimed to identify the patterns of ethical practice for counseling among school counselors in Perak, Malaysia.

Method

The method of this research is a single-case-multisite case study (Yin, 2008). This form of study is a descriptive and explanatory (Yin, 2008), explores how the counselor understands and practice ethics in their professional setting. According to Merriam (2009), case studies can be defined in terms of the process of conducting the inquiry (the case study research); the bounded system or unit of analysis selected for study (the case), or the product; or end report of a case investigation. Qualitative case studies are characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Data collected for this study was through interviews.

Research Instrument

Interview Protocol. According to Denzin & Lincons (2001), interviews should be reflective and reflect both real life and conditions of a phenomenon. In this study, interviews were conducted with three high school counselors to see their views on counseling ethics. The following topics were investigated in the interview:

1. Preparation as a school counselor.
2. Client confidentiality conflicts with the school administration
3. Steps to be taken before starting the counseling sessions with clients at school.

4. Procedures for handling cases.
5. Personal characteristics that must be present in person counseling teachers

Research Location

This study was conducted in the state of Perak, Malaysia. Researchers only focused on counselors of these different secondary school (students or clients aged between 13 to 18 years old).

Research Participant

Participants in this study were three full-time school counselors who have academic qualifications in counseling, have served five years in their respective schools and are registered with the Board of Counselors in Malaysia.

Data Analysis

Researchers used the method of pattern-matching to analyze the data. Pattern-matching is a method of matching the data with themes identified in the study. Yin (2008) asserts that the pattern-matching method is useful in comparing empirical data from one sources with the patterns of another. If the patterns match then, these data has the internal validity.

Findings

Five themes were identified after interviews were conducted with the research participants. The findings are stated as below:

Qualification a school counselor

All study participants stressed that before becoming a school counselor, and individual must receive training and professional qualifications. These credentials ensures that he/she is able to carry out he/she mandated tasks. In addition, the school counselor should also have a personal Code of Ethics without being influenced by anyone else. A school counselor also must constantly reinvent themselves by attending courses, lectures, and seminars concerned on topics of counseling and ethics. Direct quotes from the research participants:

A school counselor should get training from a recognized university. This is because without professional training, a teacher is not qualified at all to be a school

counselor. He is not able to do his job if he does not master the techniques for conducting counseling.

(P1:

L6)

The most important aspect of all is recognized approval ...because without being approved as a recognized counselor she is not eligible for the counseling session ...Counseling session is a professional ... process not carried out in a professional manner will bring negative effects to the client.

(P2:L6)

First, we must have academic qualifications recognized by the government, which means we must have received approval by PERKAMA. Without this recognition, we cannot identify him/herself as a school counselor.

(P3 L4)

We must constantly evolve with the times ...The knowledge that we have is never enough ...

(P3:L6)

Client confidentiality conflicts with the school administration

All the research participants had experience of coming into conflict with school administration in regards to some aspects of client confidentiality. Because school counselors adhere to a Code of Ethics, they cannot provide all information about the client to the school administration. This rule has resulted in some of the counselors being labeled as uncooperative. In addressing this issue, research participants had to solve problem with their own discretion. They said:

Teachers and school administrators always blame counselors and clients for refusing to disclose confidential communication especially about investigations in cases of misconduct and disciplinary action. Both parties always confront school counselors to provide information to them so they can punish the client.

(P1:L12)

Clients have put their full confidence in us, if we do not fully comply with the Code of Ethics, then we have destroyed that confidence ... I think we should continue to stand for the concept, despite pressures from our superiors.

(P2:L8)

I feel so lucky to have the recognition and cooperation of my school staff ...They have made a commitment to cooperate with the counseling unit ...Sometimes we get a complaint from a teacher because our work can be a burden to them ...

(P3:L10)

Step before counseling session

Before running the sessions, research participants were divided into three categories of clients: referred, invited, and voluntary. Before session, participants learn about their clients background, as well as their reasons for coming in. A comfortable therapeutic space is prepared for the counseling session. The research participants then make structures for the client before the counseling session begins. They asserted:

I have divided my clients into three different categories of clients : referred, invited clients, and clients who come voluntarily...

(P1:L20)

I try to provide a comfortable environment, both physically and psychologically .

(P1:L26)

I inquire about their a client's reasons for coming to meet school counselor ...Infact, most of the students who come to the school counselor has a specific problem they want to discuss.

(P1:L24)

I ask the client to fill out a personal form so that I can know his/her background. If the client was referred by the teacher I will get information from your existing personal records regarding all disciplinary matters. In other words, I will investigate the matter and background of clients before the counseling session begins.

(P2:L20)

I make appointments with the client, whether the client is referred, invited, or comes alone.

(P2:L24)

Counseling room such as individual counseling, group counseling and family counseling are divided by partitions every part is air conditioned ,with have comfortable sofas and accomodations. Clients are provided a sense of privacy and comfort.

(P2:L26)

Before running the session, I ensure that my session will be smooth and undisturbed. I block out time for the counseling sessions, so that no other activities get in the way. Counseling rooms are comfortable and away from distractions.

(P3:L14)

Before I meet my client, I clear my mind of any pre conceived idea notions regarding my client or his/her problem. I try to build friendly relationships with my clients ...

(P3:L14)

Procedures to handle cases

Research participants categorized clients cases into three categories: mild , ordinary and serious . For mild and ordinary cases, the school counselor strives to find a solution or understanding of the problem. However, for serious cases, parents will be called to the school so that the issues can be discussed together with the counselor and client. For particular problems involving security, school administrators and the police can get involved. Study participants reported:

I refer some serious cases to the administrator. Usually parents will be invited as well. The discussion will be conducted between the administrator, school counsellor, and parents. If necessary, we will also call in a police liaison to ensure the safety of clients and also the people involved.

(P1:L32)

I try to address both the problem and my client ... if the problem already involves a third party, then I invite them to come in for negotiations ... If the problem is serious and disciplinary or involving safety issues, I will consult the school, parents, or the police.

(P2:L32)

Sometimes, safety issues. the case just involves personal problems, mental and emotional. For these I refer to the REBT theory. For cases involving criminal issues, I have to involve third parties. Sometimes the parents or the police will be invited to resolve the problem.

(P3:L26)

School counselor characters

Research participants believe that a school counselor should have characteristic that are helpful to the patient ensure that ethical counseling can be practiced. They stated:

In my view, the most important personal characteristic in becoming a school counselor are being helpful others and being patience. Each client who comes to see the school counselor solely needs help to solve a problem.

(P1:L40)

What a school counselor offers is patience ...School counselors should also have love and sacrifices.

(P2:L38)

A school counselor must be responsible and ready to sacrifice time and energy....They must have a positive personality that is responsible and caring accept all clients unconditionally without judgement.

(P3:L32)

In conclusion, the data showed that study participants all agreed that ethics is crucial in conducting counseling sessions. They all practice under the ethical guidelines outlined by the Board of Counselors in Malaysia. They also have individual protocols that they follow for the counseling session.

All participants in the study also agreed that as a counselor, they should be knowledgeable, ethical, and strive to always be professional. In addition, study participants believed that positive features such as helpfulness, patience, tolerance can help school counselors perform their best. All study participants agreed that the counselor must act as role model with good personalities, and must communicate well under counseling ethics.

Discussion

Preparation as a school counselor

Research shows that there are similarities in interview data of the three study participants. The three participant are derived from the same educational background (i.e. they each have a first degree in guidance and counseling education). Participants have been appointed as a full-time school counselors under Malaysia's Ministry of Education. According to Ibrahim Ahmad (2001), special training in the field of guidance and counseling has been enforced since people began to realize the importance of counseling services. The findings are consistent with the view Rohany, Rusnani, Halim, Nik, Azniza, Shafrin, Nasir, Jazimin, Zakaria, Melati, Edris & Shuaib (2011) asserted that education counselors in Malaysia are from diverse backgrounds and psychological counseling programs. According Rohany et al. (2011) in Malaysia, institutions offering counseling program at the undergraduate, graduate and doctoral levels are as in University of Kebangsaan Malaysia , University of Putra Malaysia, University of Pendidikan Sultan Idris, University of Science Malaysia, University of Malaya, University of Technology Malaysia, University of Utara Malaysia, University of Malaysia Sabah, University of Malaysia Sarawak, University of Malaysia Terengganu, University of Sains Islam Malaysia and HELP University College. A counselor who wishes to practice, conduct or operate as a counselor must be registered and have a practicing certificate from the Board of Counselors in accordance with Act 580.

Client confidentiality conflicts with the school administration

Participants always come into conflict with the school during the counseling session. They had to solve the problems with their own discretion. They have adopted the concept of

help and compassion. According to the research participants disciplinary units will adopt the concept of strict and punitive discipline approach. They adhere to a code of ethics and do not easily provide information about the client to the school. This causes them to be labeled as a party that did not cooperate. Dillema among counselors are consistent with studies by Crethar and Winterowd (2012), Balkin, Watts and Ali (2010) and Ponton and Duba (2009).

Through interviews with the three participants, the researcher found the responses very steadfast in ethics counseling. Each participant of the research is concerned with the ethical guidelines when conducting counseling services in schools. Apparently they are very concerned about ethics throughout the duties and responsibilities as a school counselor. The findings are consistent with the view by Glosoff, Pate & Robert (2002), which stressed that maintaining client confidentiality is paramount in the essence of the profession as a counselor. According to this sources the limitations of confidentiality ends when the client is exposed to things that endanger themselves and others.

Steps to be taken before starting the counseling sessions with clients at school

Research participants said that they had planned and structured well before counseling begins. Their actions have followed ethics before the counseling session. This is consistent with the views that have been expressed by Kocet and Herlihy (2014), where they were proposing Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model (CVCM) to help counselors separating personal and professional roles when conducting counseling sessions with clients.

Procedures for handling cases

Based on the interviews, the all research participants are able to manage their clients in accordance with procedures that do not violate ethical counseling. These findings conform to what has been written by Ametrano (2014), which is that counselors to learn about how to make ethical decisions when faced with issues that exist mainly involving personal and professional roles. In addition, a study by Luke, Goodrich and Gilbride (2013) has introduced the Intercultural Model of Ethical Decision Making as a model to assist counselors in ethical decision making in handling cases in a counseling session.

School counselor characters

All participants agreed that the school counselor should have a personality that is helpful and patient. Through this personality, a school counselor is considered competent and

able to perform. This is in line with the views of Alexander, Kruczek, and Montero (2005) that the counselor should have the multicultural competencies in himself when confronted with various related cases. Barker (2000) also has a view that counselors must have a strong character to develop professional competence. In addition, Trusty and Brown (2005) asserts that a counselor should focus on improving professional skills of advocacy itself. In conclusion, the counselor should have a positive character for the welfare of themselves and their clients.

Research Implication

Overall, these studies have implications for several parties: the client, the school counselor, the school, the Malaysian Counseling Association and the Ministry of Education. If a school counselor fully follows the Code of Ethics during a counseling session, clients will benefit. If the school counselor does not have ethical training, misunderstanding with the client may occur, which may limit counseling session and client rights. School counselors can carry out their duties and responsibilities as professional school counselors if know, they understand, and appreciate the Code of Ethics Counselor. School counselors can be aware of the limitations and boundaries in counseling and will not manipulate the client. Services should be provided to clients in accordance with the guidelines set.

This study gives a message to the school counselor for more knowledge and understanding in depth about counseling ethics. School counselors should be prepared with a more holistic knowledge about all things as clients often have a variety of cases. School counselors should also know other fields related to counseling such as law, school rules, sociology in school, school administration and classroom management. In this way, school counselors can make decisions based on context and appropriate counseling ethics.

In addition, these studies have implications for the school psychologists, a psychologist should know about the ethics of counseling. A school psychologist, who knows about ethics, can be beneficial with applicable cases involving complicated clients. While the school psychologist cannot run counseling, but they can help give ideas and suggestions during the discussion with the counselor.

This study was also useful to the school, because administrators need to know about the mandates, roles, and services performed by the school counselor at school. Counseling services cannot receive adequate feedback unless the school and the community know of the counselor Code of Ethics. This research will help the Malaysian Counseling Association in

updating the guidelines that have been built and aims to further purify the existing Counselor Code of Ethics.

The results of this study can also contribute information to the Ministry of Education about the importance of monitoring of counseling services in schools. The counselors' opinion can help the State Department of Education and school districts in identifying ethical codes that have been abused by a school counselor. Ministry of Education can use the results of this study as a guide in hiring individuals who truly qualified and capable to work as a full-time school counselor. This process can ensure the quality and professional services offered to students. In addition, the Ministry, from time to time should provide courses on ethics counseling to school counselors.

Suggestion

This study should be extended by having a larger sample size of school counselors who can then be categorized into various groups depending on their academic credentials and work experience. These categorized can allow us to see differences in how a variety people understand ethical counseling. In addition, the use of the questionnaires can be used to evaluate or measure knowledge, understanding, practice, and effectiveness of the code of ethics among different school counselors. Next, there should be a special module to provide additional training to the school counselor, which can help to increase the level of knowledge and understanding about ethics counseling. This study could also include opinions from various populations of clients, school administrators, teachers, and also the parents or guardians of clients.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that study Malaysian school counselors understand and practice the ethics of counseling as delineated by Malaysian Counselor Board. However, complex issues arise when counselors must apply ethical principles to actual practice, considering that they must think of the wellbeing of the client, the school, guardians, and themselves. In addition, there needs to be legal support like the Counselors Act 580 (1988), in Malaysia to defend the privileged communication between counselor and client, especially in schools.

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