A Qualitative Study of Online School Counselors' Ethical Practices in K-12 Schools

Dakota King-White [1]
Cleveland State University
Layla Kurt
University of Dayton
Mamadou Seck
Cleveland State University

With the technological advancements of the 21st century has come a significant increase in the number of K-12 online schools, which has in turn led to an upsurge in online school counseling. In any counseling setting, maintaining ethical standards is a major concern, and online school settings present unique ethical dilemmas for counselors. In this qualitative study, researchers examined the ethical issues that online school counselors face. Ten online school counselors participated in the study and completed an online survey comprised of six questions. Five themes emerged during data analysis: protecting student confidentiality, maintaining rigor in the process of data collection for referrals, knowing and following the school crisis plan or policy, properly handling crises, and reporting to children's services. Based on these themes, best practices and recommended strategies to effectively address ethical issues that online school counselors are likely to encounter are included.

Keywords: 21st-century school counseling; K-12 counseling; online school counseling; ethical dilemmas; crisis intervention

The technological advancements of the 21st century have resulted in a significant increase in the number of kindergarten to 12th-grade (K-12) students participating in online school

---

[1]   Dakota King-White, Ph.D., Cleveland State University, 2485 Euclid Avenue, Julka Hall 274, Cleveland, OH 44115, Phone: (216) 687-5291, Email: d.l.king19@csuohio.edu

settings, and as a result, online school counseling has become a trend. As practicing professionals, school counselors are expected to uphold certain ethical standards, even in online academic settings, to ensure that students are succeeding academically, socially, and emotionally (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2016). The ASCA (2016) and the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) both outline and promote ethical standards that school counselors are expected to apply as they provide services to students.

For many years, school counselors' main ethical concerns when working with minors revolved around confidentiality, informed consent, and multicultural issues (Sori & Hecker, 2015). Now, with the current trend in virtual counseling services, additional ethical considerations related to the use of technology have become a concern, particularly as they relate to utilizing social networking sites, providing services online, keeping online records, and communicating via email (Reamer, 2013). Recent versions of the ASCA (2016) and ACA (2014) standards include specific guidance related to online counseling issues. For instance, online school counselors must recognize the challenges and limitations of online school counseling; ensure that procedures are in place to address crisis and non-crisis situations when the school counselor is unavailable; recognize and mitigate the limitations related to confidentiality when providing services online; communicate with stakeholders the benefits and limitations of providing online school counseling services; and provide guidance to students on how to engage in the online school counseling relationship to minimize any miscommunications that could occur with online communication (ASCA, 2016).

Research on ethical dilemmas facing online school counselors is still emerging, yet researchers tend to agree that dealing with legal and ethical factors is one of the most difficult facets when providing counseling services via the Internet (Baker & Ray, 2011; Iyer & Baxter-MacGregor, 2010; Mullen, Lambie, & Conley, 2014). The studies that do exist have provided some insight into the issues addressed in the ASCA (2016) and ACA (2014) guidelines. For example, Osborn, Peterson, and Hale (2014) conducted a study with four practicing Florida virtual school counselors and found that the participants were experiencing some of the same ethical dilemmas as their colleagues who counseled in traditional school settings. Participants noted that both groups experienced general ethical

dilemmas related to dual relationships with clients, confidentiality, parental rights, and addressing dangerous situations that students faced. However, participants also discussed unique situations for online school counselors related to assessing students' stress level and evaluating situations of abuse, neglect, or suicide when providing services online. Likewise, other researchers noted that although it is the counselor's ethical duty to warn or protect if a client is a danger to himself or others, in an online setting, it is more difficult to assess and to intervene if a crisis occurs (Poh Li, Jaladin, & Abdullah, 2013).

Mallen, Vogel, and Rochlen (2005) conducted a study that examined the practical aspects of online counseling. The researchers discussed necessary precautions to limit the risk of third-party recipients intersecting information when providing online counseling services, as well as the importance of informing clients of the limitations related to protecting their confidentiality and possible ways another person could view the client's information. The researchers discussed how online counselors face a technical hurdle due to the required use of a secure web system that prohibits intrusion by outsiders but is still accessible to stakeholders.

With the growing popularity of online counseling services, more research is needed on the best practices school counselors can employ to ensure ethical considerations are addressed when providing services online. Thus, the current study explored the ethical considerations and concerns that online school counselors face in K-12 schools. This study contributes to the literature by offering insight into unique ethical dilemmas in online counseling as well as current best practices and related recommendations on effective strategies to address those dilemmas.

Methodology

Three faculty members from two different universities conducted this study. The researchers chose a qualitative study design to collect individual and personal narratives related to online counselors' lived experiences as professionals via an online survey. The length and extent of the narratives reflected the variety of perceptions and interpretations of the legal and ethical issues pertaining to online school counseling.

As noted by Sandelowski (2000), qualitative descriptive research calls for "a straight descriptive summary of the instructional contents of data organized in a way that best fits the data" (p. 339). The descriptive results of this study revealed the realities of the participants in a manner that was "straight and largely unadorned" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). The descriptive data in this study had a phenomenological tone in that the researchers identified patterns and anomalies of lived experiences as told by the online school counselors and speculated on a potentially general relevance of those responses using the *Delivery* component of the ASCA (2012) National Model, which served as the theoretical framework.

These research-based interpretations create a basis for claims of rigor and validity in this study. According to Sandelowski (2000), descriptive qualitative studies' validity is derived from accurately reporting participants' responses in a manner that reflects their own truths uncolored by the researchers' epistemologies or methodologies. The researchers ensured the quality of the data in this study by examining the voices of the participants using direct quotes and not speculating about their realities and worldviews beyond the scope of the objectively observable themes yielded by the data.

Participants

To recruit participants, the researchers first searched for online schools internationally, but primarily in the United States, using various combinations of the search terms *online*, *school*, *K-12*, and *virtual*. They set contact criteria focusing on information related to the position of school counselor. Based on these criteria, the researchers selected 35 online schools and identified 52 contacts. They sent an email to all 52 contacts requesting their participation in the study. Of the 52 individuals contacted, 16 responded, but only 10 provided complete data. Thus, participants in this study ultimately consisted of 10 online school counselors. All participants were school counselors working in the United States.

Data Collection

Based on a review of the literature, one of the researchers developed a survey focusing on online school counselors' ethical considerations when working with students. The researchers chose to use an online survey in order to (a) reach participants in as many demographic areas as possible, and (b) reach the target audience of online school counselors in the most effective way—virtual communication. Participants were identified through virtual searches, and all communication (start to finish) was conducted online. Data were collected via the online survey in a shareable Google Doc accessible only to the researchers and participants. The survey research strategy was based on non-probability purposive sampling.

The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions developed to target issues and needs identified in the literature as pertaining to online counseling delivery and online education: quality of counselor-student relationships, effective modes of delivery, and advantages and disadvantages online learning. Additionally, questions were based on the theoretical framework—the Delivery dimension of the ASCA (2012) National Model—as well as the researchers' experiences as school counselor, assistant principal, and counselor educator. Two practicing professionals piloted the administration of the original survey.

Using the following questions, the researchers explored participants' perspectives and experiences when facing ethical decision-making issues:

1) What are the ethical considerations or concerns when providing online school counseling services?

2) How do online school counselors protect the confidentiality of the students with whom they work?

3) How do you gather the information you need to make community referrals or report a concern to children's services?

4) Does your school have a crisis plan or policies? If so, please describe.

5) How does your school handle crisis situations?

6) In the online school environment, how do you evaluate the need to report a concern to children's services?

Data Analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of the collected data, the researchers completed a content analysis. They transcribed the participants' responses to the survey items and agreed to individually code and identify the various themes that participants raised in their responses. Then, they met to engage in an inter-rater reliability process to enhance the dependability and credibility of the findings.

Results

Participants' responses to the survey reflected their experiences as well as their perceptions of the legal and ethical issues they face when providing services to their clients. The researchers grouped resultant themes by what each revealed about delivery of services in accordance with the ASCA (2012) National Model guiding framework. Five themes emerged from the responses: protecting student confidentiality, maintaining rigor in the process of data collection for referrals, knowing and following the school crisis plan or policy, properly handling crises, and reporting to children's services. The following subsections present detailed results for each theme and provide insight into the current best practices for addressing ethical dilemmas faced by online school counselors.

Theme 1: Protecting Student Confidentiality

Two of the school counselors noted that there were no major differences between counseling in traditional brick-and-mortar settings versus online. All participants stressed that the same confidentiality rules are applied in online and face-to-face counseling. However, five school counselors also specified confidentiality issues related to online counseling. For instance, when providing online counseling services, they made sure their students were aware that their parent/guardian had access to their emails and could respond

to them. One counselor was concerned about students possibly providing information before understanding the limitations of confidentiality. Although these rules are posted in virtual classrooms, students do not read them prior to making their statements.

Participants revealed that they were not only concerned about how to restrict access to students' emails but also about how to limit the potential exchange of threatening emails between students. If these emails were sent after work hours, there could be some delay in accessing them early enough to stop planned harmful actions. Additional concerns included misunderstanding of contents of emails, thus requiring "check-in" to clarify information, as well as deceptive and impersonal communication via email since "we are not sure that the actual person we are talking to is in reality the client" because the client could have "provided their password to another person." The concerns extended to having another person listening while they were speaking to students. The issue of privacy of records was also mentioned. Participants reinforced that their responsibilities included assuring students that the information they provided would not be shared with anyone unless it presented a threat to self or others. They noted that they were required to use secure files with passwords and that they were obligated to create a protected notetaking system that only a few individuals could open and review.

Since email is their main means of communication, online school counselors reported that they had to limit their references to students' identification numbers and last names to protect them. They would also shred any hardcopy documents after usage. The counselors had the ability to mark the conversations with students as confidential so that only administrators and other counselors would be allowed to view the information reported. Counselors had to obtain verbal and written consent from students and parents to document and share personal information. Participants revealed that because safety could become a concern, agencies were required to collaborate, and the administrative process regulated releasing documents. Confidentiality statements were disseminated so everyone was informed about policies and procedures.

Theme 2: Rigor in the Process of Data Collection for Referrals

All 10 of the participants noted that they consulted and collaborated with teachers, parents, administrators, and students to gather information to make community referrals or report a concern to children's services. However, participants noted that the inability to conduct face-to face conversations with the students made it difficult to observe behaviors that would prompt a referral for additional services.

Two participants reported that online data collection could possibly be helpful with the referral process and could expedite services. The participants stated that they collect information from various sources when making a referral. However, there was not a common theme on how the data were tracked to communicate issues to the school counselors and other stakeholders in the online setting. One participant reported that having a database of references for students and maintaining a great relationship with community agencies and partners has assisted with making referrals:

> We have a great database of references for students throughout the state and have relationships with community agencies based on other staff members' previous work, fields, network, etc. We continually update these services because we are dealing with more than just one area.

Theme 3: Knowing and Following the School Crisis Plan or Policy

Eight participants noted that online school protocols were like those of traditional settings. Eight out of the 10 school counselors acknowledged the existence of a crisis plan or policies to ensure the safety of students. They indicated that specific procedures are in place for dealing with suicide threats or similar situations: (1) call the student and stay on the phone with him or her; (2) call the parent or legal guardian; (3) call the local police for a welfare check and follow-up; and (4) complete a form and submit it to an administrator.

Six participants responded that in their institution, whenever a crisis occurred, they had to ascertain that correct authorities had been informed so those authorities would get involved in the process. One participant described the process as follows:

> If it is a mandated reporting situation, the person who first received the concern handles it. We have a password-protected reporting system for suicidal ideation

reports so that principals can see that these are being handled appropriately. For other safety concerns, we have a safety director who plans training, booklets, and reporting systems to keep people safe.

The school counselors also reported that they would (a) follow-up with family or emergency contacts; (b) contact the student; (c) have someone conduct welfare check; (d) follow the crisis plan; (e) collaborate with outside resources; and (f) utilize technology to stay in touch with the student throughout the process.

One counselor described a different crisis plan at two levels: the counselor level and the corporate level. All staff were trained to follow the plan. Another participant reported that there were safety officers, suite marshals, and crisis plan flip-books for every situation. However, one school counselor stated, "I am unaware of any plan."

Theme 4: Properly Handling Crises

In contrast to traditional counseling, participants noted that in the online counseling setting, not being able to see students face-to-face could hinder their ability to observe evidence of abuse and neglect, changes in appearance, and changes in mood that might indicate a potential crisis. The online setting could also limit collaboration with families and authorities that might promote avoiding or dealing with a crisis. Participants specifically identified suicidal tendencies and mandated reporting situations as potential crises.

Participants noted various ways that they handle crisis situations. Subthemes that emerged were involving upper administration; following up with students to ensure safety by conducting a well-being check; and utilizing technology, such as instant messaging or email, to make contact with students, parents, or other resources to ensure the safety of the student. One participant revealed:

Our school has a safety and security principal who is contacted with any concerns or issues, and we perform welfare checks by contacting the local police where the student is. If we have the student on the phone with us, we ask another counselor

or administrator to contact the local police while we stay on the phone with the student until help arrives.

This theme overlapped with the previous theme somewhat in that participants noted that following the crisis plan was an important part of handling any crisis. Participants reiterated the importance of communicating the plan for handling crises with students, parents/caregivers, and other stakeholders and then making sure related policies are posted in an easily accessible location online.

Theme 5: Reporting to Children's Services

Eight participants in this study indicated that there were no significant differences between online and traditional schools when reporting a concern to children's services. One participant explained:

> I try to get as much information from the student as possible. I let them know that their safety is my number one concern and I may have to tell someone what they tell me if I find out that they aren't safe. I will attempt to try and reach the parent to get more information if possible, though it is not always the best route if the parent is the perpetrator. I also try to gather information from teachers if they have any.

However, as mentioned with previous themes, participants noted that not being able to see students face-to-face could hinder their ability to evaluate the need for reporting abuse. When the participants feared physical abuse, participants had to request an in-person meeting to assess the situation.

Six participants stressed that there was a detailed process for evaluating the need to report events to children's services: (1) collect information; (2) notify the student of their personal concerns and requirement to report; and (3) collect additional information from parents, administrators, and teachers. One participant expressed concern about the fact that some students could be over 18 and consequently would not need parental guidance. Two participants disclosed that the need for contacting children's services was based only on the threat level and the type of information to be reported.

Discussion

School counselors responded to six questions pertaining to ethical considerations when providing online school counseling services. Although eight of the participants noted that there were no major differences between counseling in traditional settings and online, others provided specific details on unique ethical dilemmas related to ensuring confidentiality, making referrals, dealing with crises, and involving children's services. For instance, while counseling face-to-face allows consultation and collaboration with stakeholders that can be carried out through team meetings with all relevant parties present (Iyer & Baxter-MacGregor, 2010), in online counseling, consulting and collaborating with multiple parties could present several challenges. Among those, participants noted balancing students' confidentiality and privileges. Participants also talked about the challenges related to misunderstanding email communications or even being sure that "the actual person we are talking to is really the client."

The current study's findings support those of Herlihy and Dufrene (2011), who conducted a Delphi study and reported that the panel experts concluded that the most important, current, and emerging ethical issues facing the counseling profession included 59 themes. Four of the 59 themes revealed by Herlihy and Dufrene are similar to those listed for the current study: managing and maintaining confidentiality, regulating boundaries/multiple relationships, working with clients who pose a danger to self or others, and dealing with new and emerging technologies.

The current study's findings also align with Osborn et al.'s (2014) study on virtual counseling, which identified challenges related to keeping records confidential and acting on situations where students were a threat to themselves and others. Moreover, the findings agree with Crespi (2009), who identified consent, confidentiality, and notification as issues for school counselors. Although Crespi's study focused on group counseling, the findings align since online school counselors' concerns revolve around those same issues.

Limitations

Two known limitations must be acknowledged for this study: (a) small sample size, and (b) reliability and validity of the survey. Out of the online schools that consented to allowing their school counselors to participate in the study, only 10 school counselors actually completed the survey. It is unknown how many school counselors declined to take the survey. In addition, due to the limited research that has been done on the topic of online school counseling, there are no known research instruments that look at ethical considerations when providing online school counseling; thus, the researchers created their own short survey. As a result of these limitations, this study may not be a completely accurate representation of the general population of online school counselors, and consideration must be given when making inferences about this population.

Implications for School Counselors

As technological advancements drive increases in online educational platforms, online school counseling services are certain to become more prevalent. Practicing counselors will need to be prepared to address the social and emotional needs of students virtually while maintaining the high ethical standards established for professionals in the field and outlined by the ASCA (2016) and ACA (2014). To this end, based on participant responses, the researchers developed a list of recommended strategies to effectively address the identified ethical dilemmas facing online school counselors (see Table 1). The specific dilemmas and suggested strategies relate to maintaining and protecting student confidentiality; maintaining rigor in data collection for referrals; knowing and following the school crisis plan or policy; properly handling crisis situations; and reporting cases to children's services. Corresponding ethical standards from the ASCA (2016) and the ACA (2014) are included with the recommendations.

Table 1

Recommended Strategies to Effectively Address Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical Dilemmas	ASCA (2016) Ethical Standard	ACA (2014) Ethical Standard	Strategies to Address Dilemmas
Maintaining and protecting students' confidentiality	A.15.d. Recognize and mitigate the limitation of virtual/distance school counseling confidentiality, which may include unintended viewers or recipients.	H.2.b. Counselors acknowledge the limitations of maintaining the confidentiality of electronic records and transmissions. They inform clients that individuals might have authorized or unauthorized access to such records or transmissions (e.g., colleagues, supervisors, employees, information technologists).	Use secure electronic systems of communication and inform students and parents/guardians through various methods of communication about the limitations of confidentiality. For example, annually or bi-annually, send an electronic and hardcopy newsletter to parents/guardians stating the limits of confidentiality and providing a link to the school's website where the related information can be found.
Collecting data for referrals	A.6.c. Connect students with services provided through the local school district and community	H.4.d. When distance counseling services are deemed ineffective by the counselor or client,	Create a community resource list to disseminate to teachers, students,

	agencies and remain aware of state laws and local district policies related to students with special needs, including limits to confidentiality and notification to authorities as appropriate.	counselors consider delivering services face-to-face. If the counselor is not able to provide face-to-face services (e.g., lives in another state), the counselor assists the client in identifying appropriate services.	parents/guardians, and administrators. Build relationships with community agencies and collect data from various stakeholders when making referrals.
Availability of crisis plan	A.15.c. Implement procedures for students to follow in both emergency and nonemergency situations when the school counselor is not available.	H.2.a. Clients have the freedom to choose whether to use distance counseling, social media, and/or technology within the counseling process. In addition to the usual and customary protocol of informed consent between counselor and client for face-to-face counseling, the following issues, unique to the use of distance counseling, technology, and/or social media, are addressed in the informed consent process:	Ensure that an up-to-date crisis plan is in place and review the policies and procedures related to handling crisis situations annually. Make sure that the crisis plan is available online and is disseminated annually to students, parents/guardians, teachers, and administrators.

		emergency procedures to follow when the counselor is not available.	
Handling crisis situations	A.15.f. Educate students on how to participate in the electronic school counseling relationship to minimize and prevent potential misunderstandings that could occur due to lack of verbal cues and inability to read body language or other visual cues that provide contextual meaning to the school counseling process and school counseling relationship.	H.2.a. Clients have the freedom to choose whether to use distance counseling, social media, and/or technology within the counseling process. In addition to the usual and customary protocol of informed consent between counselor and client for face-to-face counseling, the following issues, unique to the use of distance counseling, technology, and/or social media, are addressed in the informed consent process:	Educate students on policies and procedures related to crisis situations and effective strategies to cope if faced with crises. Make sure that this information is available on the school's website, is disseminated annually in a brochure or newsletter, and is included in emergency medical paperwork if students are required to have such paperwork on file.
		emergency procedures to follow when the counselor is not available.	Offer an after-hour crisis line to support students and families dealing with a crisis situation at times when a counselor is not typically available.

Reporting cases to children's services	A.11.d. Develop and maintain the expertise to recognize the signs and indicators of abuse and neglect. Encourage training to enable students and staff to have the knowledge and skills needed to recognize the signs of abuse and neglect and to whom they should report suspected abuse or neglect.	B.5.b. Counselors inform parents and legal guardians about the role of counselors and the confidential nature of the counseling relationship, consistent with current legal and custodial arrangements. Counselors are sensitive to the cultural diversity of families and respect the inherent rights and responsibilities of parents/guardians regarding the welfare of their children/charges according to law. Counselors work to establish, as appropriate, collaborative relationships with parents/guardians to best serve clients.	Create a policy and procedure for reporting child abuse situations and make sure that teachers, counselors, and administrators are trained annually. Effectively communicate the information on school counseling and the limitations of confidentiality related to abuse or suspected abuse to parents/guardians and students. Ensure that this information is easily accessible on the school's website and is disseminated at least annually in written form.

Conclusion

This study examined the ethical considerations and concerns of online school counselors in K-12 settings. The participants' narratives provided insight into the unique ethical dilemmas faced by online counselors, and five themes emerged. Based on the emergent themes and best practices found in the literature review, the researchers created a list of recommended strategies to effectively address ethical issues that online counselors are likely to encounter. Although this study's findings contribute to the limited research on online school counseling, additional studies are needed to better support school counselors and students in online school settings.

References

American Counseling Association (ACA). (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Retrieved from
     https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

American School Counselor Association (ASCA). (2012). *The ASCA national model: A
     framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.

American School Counselor Association (ASCA). (2016). *ASCA ethical standards*.
     Retrieved from
     https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Ethics/EthicalStandards2016.p
     df

Baker, K. D., & Ray, M. (2011). Online counseling: The good, the bad, and the
     possibilities. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *24*(4), 341-346.
     doi:10.1080/09515070.2011.632875

Crespi, T. D. (2009). Group counseling in the schools: Legal, ethical, and treatment
     issues in school practice. *Psychology in the Schools*, *46*(3), 273-280.
     doi:10.1002/pits.20373

Herlihy, B., & Dufrene, R. L. (2011). Current and emerging ethical issues in counseling:
     A Delphi study of expert opinions. *Counseling & Values*, *56*, 10-24.
     doi:10.1002/j.2161-007X.2011.tb01028.x

Iyer, N. N., & Baxter-MacGregor, J. (2010). Ethical dilemmas for the school counselor:
     Balancing student confidentiality and parents' right to know. *NERA Conference
     Proceedings 2010*. Retrieved from
     https://opencommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent
     .cgi?referer=https://www.bing.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1017&context=nera_2
     010

Mallen, M. J., Vogel, D., & Rochlen, A. B. (2005). The practical aspects of online
     counseling: Ethics, training, technology, and competency. *The Counseling
     Psychologist, 33*, 776. doi:10.1177/0011000005278625

Mullen, P. R., Lambie, G. W., & Conley, A. H. (2014). Development of the ethical and legal issues in counseling self-efficacy scale. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development, 47*(1), 62-78. doi:10.1177/0748175613513807

Osborn, D. S., Peterson, G. W., & Hale, R. R. (2014). Virtual school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, *18*(1), 179-190. doi:10.5330/2156-759X-18.1.179

Poh Li, L., Jaladin, R. A. M., & Abdullah, H. S. (2013). Understanding the two sides of online counseling and their ethical and legal ramifications. *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences, 103*, 1243-1251. doi:10.IO16/j.sbspro.2013.10.453

Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social work in a digital age: Ethical and risk management challenges. *Social Work, 58*(2), 163-172.

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health, 23*(4), 334-340.

Sori, C. F., & Hecker, L. L. (2015). Ethical and legal considerations when counselling children and families. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, *36*, 450-464. doi:0.1002/anzf.26