

SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S ETHICAL DILEMMA: SCOPING REVIEW

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Abstract

Ethical dilemmas are an inherent part of professional practice and can arise in all fields, including the role of school counselors. In the context of educational settings, school counselors are frequently confronted with complex situations that require them to balance professional responsibilities, institutional policies, and the best interests of students. However, not all counselors are fully aware that the challenges they encounter constitute ethical dilemmas, which can lead to uncertainty and inconsistency in decision-making processes. This lack of awareness may hinder their ability to respond appropriately and professionally when faced with sensitive situations. Several common ethical dilemmas experienced by school counselors include issues related to confidentiality, mandatory reporting, professional competence, boundary management, and multiple role relationships. Confidentiality, for instance, often becomes a dilemma when counselors must decide whether to maintain student privacy or disclose information for the sake of the student's safety or well-being. Similarly, reporting obligations can create tension between ethical principles and legal requirements. Issues of competence may arise when counselors feel inadequately prepared to handle certain cases, while boundary concerns and multiple roles—such as being both a counselor and a teacher—can blur professional limits and complicate interactions with students. These dilemmas can create significant challenges for school counselors in making sound ethical decisions, particularly when clear guidelines are lacking. Therefore, this research is important as it highlights the need to identify and understand the conditions that trigger ethical dilemmas in school counseling practice. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers and counseling practitioners to develop comprehensive ethical guidelines and support systems. Ultimately, such efforts can assist school counselors in making informed, ethical, and student-centered decisions in their professional practice.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemma, School Counselor, Scoping Review

Abstrak

Dilema etika merupakan bagian tak terpisahkan dari praktik profesional dan dapat muncul di semua bidang, termasuk dalam peran konselor sekolah. Dalam konteks lingkungan pendidikan, konselor sekolah sering dihadapkan pada situasi kompleks yang mengharuskan mereka menyeimbangkan tanggung jawab profesional, kebijakan institusi, dan kepentingan terbaik siswa. Namun, tidak semua konselor sepenuhnya menyadari bahwa tantangan yang mereka hadapi merupakan dilema etika, yang dapat menyebabkan ketidakpastian dan ketidakkonsistenan dalam proses pengambilan keputusan. Kurangnya kesadaran ini dapat menghambat kemampuan mereka untuk merespons secara tepat dan profesional ketika dihadapkan pada situasi sensitif.

Beberapa dilema etika umum yang dialami oleh konselor sekolah meliputi isu-isu terkait kerahasiaan, pelaporan wajib, kompetensi profesional, pengelolaan batasan, dan hubungan peran ganda. Kerahasiaan, misalnya, sering menjadi dilema ketika konselor harus memutuskan apakah akan menjaga privasi siswa atau mengungkapkan informasi demi keselamatan atau kesejahteraan siswa. Demikian pula, kewajiban pelaporan dapat menimbulkan ketegangan antara prinsip etika dan persyaratan hukum. Masalah kompetensi dapat muncul ketika konselor merasa kurang siap menangani kasus tertentu, sementara kekhawatiran mengenai batasan dan peran ganda—seperti menjadi konselor sekaligus guru—dapat mengaburkan batas-batas profesional dan memperumit interaksi dengan siswa. Dilema-dilema ini dapat menimbulkan tantangan signifikan bagi konselor sekolah dalam mengambil keputusan etis yang tepat, terutama ketika pedoman yang jelas tidak tersedia. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini penting karena menyoroti kebutuhan untuk mengidentifikasi dan memahami kondisi yang memicu dilema etika dalam praktik konseling sekolah. Temuan ini diharapkan memberikan wawasan berharga bagi pembuat kebijakan dan praktisi konseling untuk mengembangkan pedoman etika yang komprehensif dan sistem dukungan. Pada akhirnya, upaya tersebut dapat membantu konselor sekolah dalam mengambil keputusan yang terinformasi, etis, dan berpusat pada siswa dalam praktik profesional mereka.

Kata Kunci: Dilema Etika, Konselor Sekolah, Tinjauan Lingkup

INTRODUCTION

School counselors are an integral part of the educators in schools. Although there are various terms used to refer to professionals tasked with supporting the well-being of learners in schools, such as "school counselor," "guidance counselor," "educational counselor," and "school psychologist," the authors use the term "school counselor" in this study to align with the term most commonly used in the literature. Just like other professionals, school counselors face various challenges, especially those related to morals, which make it difficult for them to make decisions, thus giving rise to ethical dilemmas. When faced with these dilemmas, they generally do not realize that the dilemmas they face are related to ethical dilemmas. The ethical dilemmas faced by school counselors are much more diverse and complex than those faced by subject teachers or educators and other education personnel. This happens because school counselors not only deal with students in carrying out their roles, but also interact with other parties such as subject teachers, parents, leaders, and other parties who can be involved both directly and indirectly.

School counselors' understanding of ethical dilemmas will greatly influence decision-making (M. K. Johnson, 2020), which will have an impact both on students as counseling clients and on the school counselors themselves. As professionals, school counselors are bound by a code of ethics that guides all members of the profession in carrying out their roles in accordance with established standards. Codes of conduct established by professional organizations, such as the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) Ethical standards for school counselors (United States), the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and Practice (Australia), the Code of Conduct of the Philippine Counseling and Counseling Association (PGCA) (Philippines), the Code of Conduct for Counseling and Psychological Guidance of the Turkish (Turkey) Counseling

and Counseling Association (Turkey), and the Indonesian Code of Conduct for Counseling and Counseling (Indonesia) It has various provisions that serve as guidelines in the implementation of counseling service practices in schools.

The code of ethics is a guideline for school counselors in making decisions related to the ethical dilemmas they face. Although it is possible that a professional code of conduct may not always be applicable to certain situations or issues (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016; Nirwana et al., 2021). Every member of the profession is expected to know and understand a professional code of ethics that can be a guide in dealing with ethical dilemmas, including school counselors at school. Confronting ethical dilemmas is a challenge for school counselors that requires the ability to see dilemmas from multiple perspectives and use critical thinking skills to analyze the complexity of ethical dilemmas in the school environment (Joe & Borland, 2023).

The issue of ethical dilemmas can trigger conflicts between school counselors and other parties, both within the school and the principal (Stone, 2022), School Administration Team (Laletas, 2019), and subject teachers, as well as outside of school such as parents and other professionals (Chenneville et al., 2024). This study uncovers the ethical dilemmas faced by school counselors and provides insights that may be useful both for those who have been in the profession for a long time and for those who want to enter the field. The purpose of this study was to identify the ethical dilemmas faced by school counselors. Several factors that influence ethical dilemmas and decision-making in ethical dilemmas are also discussed in this study.

METHODS

This study uses a scope review method (*scoping review*) to answer questions from research topics through various sources of similar research articles to be grouped and get conclusions. The main objective of the scope review is to identify and map the available evidence (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This was also stated (Munn et al., 2018), that the use of the *scoping review* In a study aims to (1) Identify the types of evidence available in a particular field (2) explain key concepts/definitions in the literature, (3) examine how research is conducted on a particular topic or field, (4) identify key characteristics or factors associated with a concept, (5) as a first step in a systematic review, (6) identify and analyze knowledge gaps.

The scoping review stage refers to the Arksey and O'Malley framework modified by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (Levac et al., 2010), namely; (1) identifying research questions according to the research objectives, (2) identifying relevant literature sources, (3) selecting literature that supports the research theme, (4) mapping and determining the literature to be used, (5) compiling and reporting the results of literature analysis, (6) consulting (not mandatory) to competent parties. The stages carried out in this study are as follows:

1. Identify Research Questions, At this stage, the researcher identifies questions that are referenced in the article search. Research questions refer to various cases or

problems that present ethical dilemmas so that school counselors have difficulty in making the right decisions for students. Based on this tendency, the question of this research is "What ethical dilemmas do school counselors face?"

2. Identification of relevant literature sources, The literature sources in this study were based on several criteria, as shown in table 1. Several databases are used such as Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and APA PsyArticles to find articles that address the ethical dilemmas faced by school counselors. The use of the term in English is Ethical Dilemma and School Counselors to adapt to the source of the database and to gain a wider reach.

Table 1. Article Selection Criteria

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| 1. | Keywords: Ethical Dilemmas and School Counselors |
| 2. | Publications between 2020 - 2025 (April 2025) |
| 3. | Document Type: Article |
| 4. | Research Scope: Social sciences, psychology |
| 5. | Language: English |

Based on the keywords "Ethical Dilemmas" and "School Counselor" through database sources, a total of 3449 documents were found consisting of 1121 documents (Scopus: 31, Google Scholar: 1090) and 2328 documents in journal databases (ScienceDirect: 1609, APA PsyArticles: 719). Article identification is carried out automatically with reference to a scanning search system from an electronic database (van Dinter et al., 2021) as well as manually using the Mendeley application. A total of 2633 documents were eliminated because they did not meet the first criterion, which was published between 2020 and 2025, leaving 816 documents (Scopus: 13, Google Scholar 280, ScienceDirect: 379, APA PsyArticles: 144).

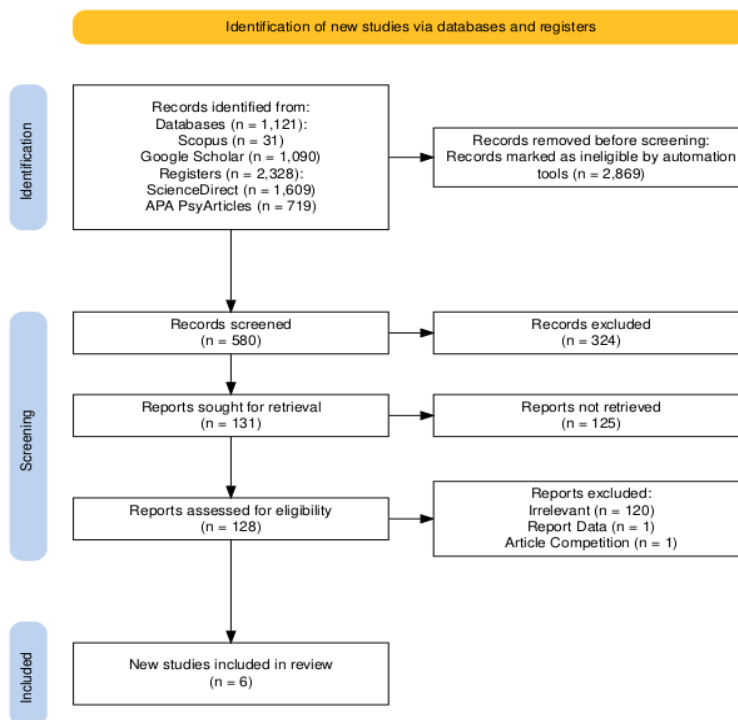
The next criterion for the selected document type was articles, and 437 documents in the form of articles were obtained through automated tools in Scopus (N = 8), ScienceDirect (N = 285) and APA PsyArticle (N = 144). Furthermore, articles written in languages other than English and subject areas other than psychology and social sciences were eliminated, leaving 580 articles to be extracted in the next stage. The author did not perform an automatic scan for criteria 3, 4, and 5 in Google Scholar because the classification of documents in this database is incomplete so identification will be done manually through the Mendeley application.

1. Literature selection, Based on the literature that has been identified, the researcher selects the literature obtained and documents this process through the PRISMA 2020 Flowchart as shown in figure 1. 580 documents and articles were collected; Google Scholar documents (N = 280) and selected articles from Scopus (N = 6), ScienceDirect (N = 150) and APA PsyArticles (N = 144) were re-screened through the Mendeley application by observing predefined criteria. The author also eliminated articles that contained ethical dilemmas from professions other than counseling teachers/trainers due to differences in responsibilities and ethical roles. There were 324 eliminated documents/articles (duplicates, N = 12; Books, N = 58;

Book section, n = 24; Dissertation, N = 37; Non-English, N = 12), some titles and abstracts use inappropriate terms (nurse/nursing, N = 8, medical/medicine, N = 6, AI/artificial intelligence, N = 8), as well as incomplete articles (N = 54) and irrelevant titles and abstracts (N = 105). Based on this process, 256 articles remained, which were then searched for the full text and obtained 131 accessible articles as well as 125 articles that could not be found either due to limited author access or missing links. The researcher then conducted a manual screening by reading the abstract to ensure relevant research. There were 122 articles eliminated (120: irrelevant, 1 data report, and 1 competition article review). Based on the screening that has been carried out, 6 relevant articles are obtained for review, as shown in the PRISMA 2020 diagram in Figure 1.

2. Literature mapping, At this stage, the researcher conducts an analysis of the selected literature to map the ethical dilemmas that are generally faced by school counselors and determine the categories of ethical dilemmas based on the results of the literature review found.
3. Preparation and reporting of the results of the literature analysis, The analysis that has been carried out on various selected literatures is then reported and presented in the discussion of the research results.
4. Consultation: The final stage of the *scope review* is to summarize the preliminary findings and ensure that data processing and analysis have been conducted appropriately and are integrated with the overall research results.

Figure 1. Article Selection Stage



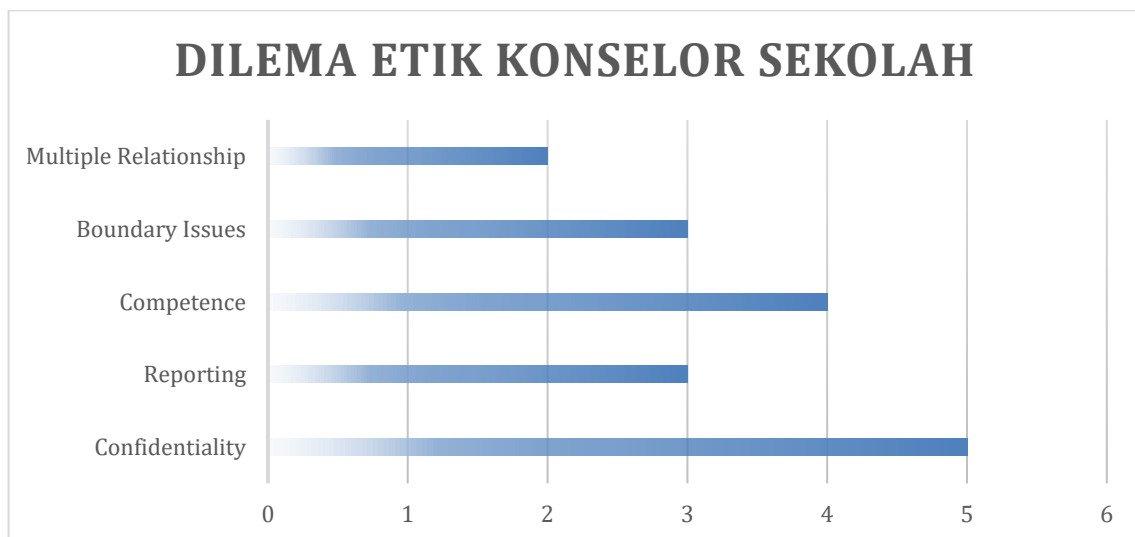
Source : PRISMA Flowchart 2020 (Haddaway et al., 2022)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the various forms of ethical dilemmas faced by school counselors in schools. The research data and research focus based on 6 selected articles are summarized in Table 2. School counselors face issues related to ethical dilemmas almost every day, and in another report it is mentioned every 2 weeks (G. S. Johnson & Purgason, 2021; Stone, 2022). Intense and ongoing ethical dilemmas can be a work stressor that affects an individual's well-being. In a study of 310 teachers in Finland, it was found that the group of teachers who frequently faced dilemmas experienced the highest levels of burnout compared to teachers who rarely or only faced four specific dilemmas (Heikkilä et al., 2023). This shows that the ethical dilemma requires attention from both the school counselor as an executor and the professional institution that oversees the role of the school counselor in the school.

Some researchers have previously found that the ethical dilemmas faced by school counselors involve not only students, but also other parties such as parents, teachers, administrative staff, principals, and even certain institutions such as the police and social services. Various ethical dilemmas faced in the school environment include issues related to undocumented students, bullying of LGBTQ students, managing multiple relationships, and reporting alleged abuse or neglect (G. S. Johnson & Purgason, 2021). This study found various ethical dilemmas of school counselors which were categorized by the author into 5 (five) themes shown in the graph in Figure 2, namely confidentiality, reporting, competence, boundary issues, and dual relationships.

Figure 2. Various Ethical Dilemmas of School Counselors



Confidentiality

The most frequently discussed ethical issues are confidentiality issues, both related to requests for personal data/information of students, the counseling process, and the types of cases handled by school counselors at school. School counselors often face dilemmas in cases related to sexual harassment (Avcı & Yıldırım, 2023; Camadan et al., 2021),

criminal shipping (Camadan et al., 2021) and physical violence against children, especially by families (Hazratji, 2021; Levkovich et al., 2023). Threats related to confidentiality come from those who feel they have the authority to know the information or cases being handled, such as the principal and the parents of the students concerned.

On the other hand, information sometimes has to be conveyed by the school counselor to certain parties to maintain the safety of students. In the case of bullying, the school counselor may tell the class teacher or teachers of certain subjects that they are considered capable of helping to take preventive measures in the classroom during the learning process. School counselors participating in the study (Şensoy & İkiz, 2023) mentioning that they do not want to disseminate any information related to the issue being addressed. However, in certain cases, notifying school authorities and the child's leaders, co-workers, and/or family members is considered appropriate by most participants in terms of safety considerations. The ethical dilemma felt by school counselors in this condition is related to respecting the privacy of students, but on the other hand they also consider the welfare of the students concerned.

Reporting

In some cases, school counselors face a dilemma as to whether or not a case needs to be reported, taking into account a variety of factors. In general, cases of violence against children (Elzamzamy et al., 2022; Hazratji, 2021) and sexual harassment (Avcı & Yıldırım, 2023; Camadan et al., 2021) are cases that often raise ethical dilemmas related to reporting. In one case study on child abuse known to school counselors, a dilemma arose when school counselors and families of child abuse victims were both Muslim minority groups in a country.

Reporting cases of violence in some countries, is a serious matter and if not done, can be considered unlawful. In one of the cases raised (Hazratji, 2021), the dilemma of a school counselor who is worried about an 8-year-old who experiences violence from his parents and intends to report the case to the authorities is explained. However, the counselor's concerns about the relationship between himself and the child's parents, who are in the same community, as well as the risk that the child will be taken by the state and taken to an orphanage contrary to the child's religious beliefs, made the school counselor reconsider his intention to report the case and choose to discuss it with the child's parents. In some studies, reporting such cases can also be considered defamation of parents and schools, and this further magnifies the dilemma felt by school counselors.

Competencies

School counselors may be aware of the ethical dilemmas they face, but in some studies it has been reported that they do not feel 'professional' enough to resolve the dilemma (Camadan et al., 2021). In some cases, school counselors are sometimes asked to be forensic interviewers in the judicial process (Şensoy & İkiz, 2023), but this particular interview requires certain competencies that ultimately pose a dilemma for school counselors who do not have competence in this area.

Ethical dilemmas related to competence also occur when students need special counseling assistance, but on the other hand school counselors have difficulty counseling with long therapy sessions (Levkovich et al., 2023) or because of their lack of competence. This is part of an ethical dilemma if students do not want to be referred to experts while school counselors do not have sufficient competence to provide the necessary help (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). In this case, if the school counselor continues the counseling session, there will be an ethical violation regarding the competence of the counselor in question. Although the length of work experience also affects the ability of school counselors, it is stated that training is needed to improve the competence of school counselors in dealing with ethical dilemmas (Brown & Armstrong, 2022; G. S. Johnson & Purgason, 2021; Mansaray et al., 2020; Sanchez-Maddela & Dela Cruz-Cada, 2024).

Limitation Issues

The unclear role and responsibilities of school counselors in schools have often been the topic of discussion in previous studies. School counselors are often burdened with administrative tasks outside of their primary duties, such as supervising exams, teaching in class, and engaging in the student discipline process (Şensoy & İkiz, 2023). This happens due to the lack of understanding of the principal and other teachers regarding the duties and functions of counseling in schools, which in turn often triggers disputes between school counselors and subject teachers and even principals.

School counselors often have difficulty defending themselves regarding the limits of their roles and refuse assignments outside of their professional responsibilities (Geesa & Enyeart, 2024). In a study (Sanchez-Maddela & Dela Cruz-Cada, 2024), a dilemma was found that made the school counselor break the boundaries by giving the student the opportunity to contact them at any time on the grounds of providing 'momentum' for the student to convey an issue that might not be conveyed in a counseling session at school.

Dual Relationship

Maintaining good relationships with all parties is something that needs to be considered by counseling teachers. However, this often raises ethical dilemmas related to the position of counseling teachers in schools and outside of school, both as counseling teachers and as educators in schools, as well as various other statuses that make counseling teachers experience dilemmas because they consider good relationships that must be maintained. In some cases, parents who are unaware of the conversation between their child and the counselor, try to ask the principal or other teacher for help to get information. Sometimes, in order to maintain a good relationship or feel uncomfortable, school counselors are forced to give or tell things that should be kept secret (Sanchez-Maddela & Dela Cruz-Cada, 2024).

Some cases sometimes present more than one ethical dilemma at the same time. In the case of parents who ask the principal or teacher for help in finding the above information, the school counselor is faced with a dilemma related to confidentiality as well as a dual relationship with the teacher or principal. Cases such as referring students to experts

known to school counselors or recommending psychologists from the same institution/body as school counselors (Chenneville et al., 2024) and providing services to family members or children, close friends, school counselors or those with special relationships (Maki et al., 2022) is an example of a case related to dual roles that poses an ethical dilemma for school counselors.

The various dilemmas faced by school counselors are challenges that require knowledge and skills to solve them. Often, counselors don't even realize that a decision has an ethical dimension, especially if the dilemma is embedded in a complex multicultural context. However, on the other hand, these dilemmas are also a threat that affects counselors in helping students at school. Without a clear settlement structure, school counselors may feel anxious and worried when trying to deal with this ethical dilemma in the school setting. Some of the ethical dilemmas discussed in this paper have also emerged in previous studies. This can be interpreted that the issue of ethical dilemmas is still a prolonged debate and requires efforts to be resolved, both from school counselors and those who make policies related to the implementation of counseling in schools.

CONCLUSION

Confidentiality, reporting, competence, boundary issues, and dual relationships are ethical dilemmas that school counselors often face based on the findings of researchers in the last five years discussed in this study. Cases of sexual harassment, crime, substance use, and physical violence are part of the cases in the theme of confidentiality that pose a dilemma because on the one hand school counselors must maintain the privacy and welfare of students, but on the other hand they must also ensure protection and handling (if necessary) involving other parties including parents and experts/professionals. The next ethical dilemma faced by school counselors is related to case reporting that will create a conflict between the impact on the reputation of parents and the school and the safety of students who should be prioritized. School counselors even receive threats if a case is reported, which makes them worry about their own safety. On the other hand, those who should be able to provide assistance in dealing with certain cases such as sexual harassment and physical violence seem to be slow to take preventive measures.

The involvement of school counselors in counseling sessions that require specialized interventions, also raises a dilemma regarding the perception of their disabilities. On the one hand, they want to help students who are facing problems, but on the other hand, they doubt their competence. Competency-related dilemmas are also felt by school counselors in providing assistance to students with special conditions that may require certain therapies in the long term and they find it difficult to refer to other professionals because they consider the lack of resources in their area and the financial condition of the learners. Understanding the limitations of the role and function of school counselors in schools often poses a dilemma. In certain situations, school counselors are forced to accept responsibilities outside of their official duties, such as supervising exams and disciplining students who break the rules. School counselors' refusal to take on tasks outside of their responsibility becomes a dilemma related to their professional standards with the

demands of collaboration in the workplace. The ability of school counselors to collaborate with a variety of parties, including stakeholders, will affect the expansion of the ethical dilemmas they face. Although school counselors are expected to maintain good relationships with all parties, they prioritize maintaining good relationships with students over other parties.

Training on ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making steps is very necessary. This needs to be considered, considering the very important role of school counselors but in a limited number and a variety of increasingly complex cases. In addition to introducing various ethical dilemmas that need to be realized by counselors and ethical decision-makers, socialization is needed to various parties, especially school principals, regarding the role of school counselors, so that they can minimize the assignment of tasks outside of their actual responsibilities. The involvement of professional organizations is also very necessary to strengthen the position of school counselors, including in enforcing a professional code of ethics that can minimize ethical dilemmas for school counselors.

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