

Exploring the crisis counseling process: A phenomenological study of guidance and school counselors' experiences



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Abstract School counselors play a crucial role in addressing critical situations involving school children, such as mental health challenges, aggressive behaviors, and suicidal tendencies. The present research explores the lived experiences of school counselors in handling crisis counseling cases, focusing on their processes and strategies. However, managing crisis counseling in a school setting presents unique challenges due to time constraints, limited resources, and the complexity of student issues. The research was qualitative in nature, and the phenomenological approach involved semistructured interviews with 11 school counselors from secondary school in Malaysia. The data analysis was thematic using Atlas.ti 24 in order to identify emerging themes among their crisis counseling processes. As a result, there are five major themes which are school counselors' self-preparation, information gathering, needs assessment, rapport building and crisis resolution and planning. This study underscores the need for crisis counseling models that are specifically designed for educational settings, considering the unique challenges school counselors face. The findings suggest that while existing intervention frameworks provide guidance, they may not fully address the distinct demands of school-based crisis counseling. Therefore, tailored models that integrate both psychological theories and practical school-based applications are essential to enhance crisis intervention effectiveness. Future research should prioritize developing and validating school-specific crisis counseling models. This includes assessing existing frameworks and designing context-specific approaches that align with real-life school counseling experiences. By advancing structured and effective intervention strategies, this research aims to better support students in crisis while equipping school counselors with essential tools for crisis management.

Keywords: school children, qualitative, strategies, crisis situation

1. Introduction

The role of school counselors has become increasingly important in contemporary schools due to the increased rate of crisis among students. Mental health disorders (Goodman-scott et al., 2023), incidents of aggression (Kurniawan et al., 2022), and suicidal ideation (Korczak et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022) are critical problems that seriously jeopardize the well-being and successful academic performance of students. These issues not only affect students' ability to focus and perform well in school; but also hinder their social development and overall growth.

The increasing prevalence of these problems calls for immediate and effective interventions to ensure the protection of students' overall development and academic achievement (Brian et al., 2023). By addressing these challenges early, schools can prevent long-term damage to students' educational journeys and emotional health. In this context, school counselors serve as the first line of defense, providing essential support when a crisis arises. A guidance and counseling teacher provides direct counseling and plays an instrumental role in referring students to broader support mechanisms. This not only means working with parents but also liaising with other teachers and mental health experts, such as psychologists and counselors, to offer students comprehensive support (Sokol et al., 2022).

In addition to providing immediate emotional support, school counselors are very important in developing preventive programs to address crises before they take a more significant turn (Jalala et al., 2020; Zakaria et al., 2024). The implementation of initiatives such as reducing the stigma attached to mental health issues and increasing secondary school students' understanding of the importance of mental health are also crucial. Creating an environment where mental health is openly discussed helps normalize ability to seek support, making it easier for students to recognize and address their struggles (Muhyatun, 2023). These preventive programs aim to break down barriers to mental health support, ensuring that students feel safe and comfortable when seeking assistance.

Moreover, school counselors play an important role in the early identification of warning signs of mental health disorders, aggression, and suicidal ideation long before these problems are exacerbated (Black & Flynn, 2020). Given their



position in the school system, they can monitor students' behaviors more closely and appropriately provide interventions. This function not only calls for specialized training in managing crises; but also involves understanding the unique challenges facing students at different developmental stages (Zyromski & Dimmitt, 2022). With the increasing demands placed on school counselors, understanding their strategies and practices during crisis counseling becomes important. These professionals must balance their responsibilities with their students and the educational system in the management of numerous difficult emotional and psychological issues. Crisis counseling requires very deliberate planning, assessment, and collaboration with external mental health professionals and other school staff (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023). For effective crisis intervention, continuous support addition to prompt action to assure children of their mental stability and recovery is needed. Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategies used by school counselors in handling crisis counseling cases in secondary schools.

2. Materials and methods

A qualitative phenomenological approach was applied in this study to investigate the lived experiences of school counselors in managing crisis counseling cases. Phenomenology can capture the depth and richness of respondents' subjective experiences (Cresswell, 2013). The empirical phenomenological approach involves revisiting the experience to gather in-depth information that serves as the foundation for a thoughtful structural analysis that captures the core of the encounter (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological research uses purposive sampling on the basis of the following criteria for selecting respondents: (i) registration as a counselor with the Board of Counselors (Malaysia); (ii) experience in handling crisis counseling; (iii) holds an academic qualification in guidance and counseling; (iv) serves as a school counselor in secondary schools for more than five years; and (v) voluntary participation in the study. These criteria ensure that the respondents have the relevant professional qualifications, experience, and willingness to share their insights into the crisis counseling process. Table 1 summarizes the background of the respondents.

Table 1 Respondents' Background.

Respondents	Academic Qualification	Age	Duration of Service as a Guidance and Counseling Teacher
R1	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	52	25
R2	Master of Educational Psychology	36	9
R3	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	47	20
R4	Master's Program in Counseling Psychology (Drug Abuse) SPADA	43	15
R5	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	32	8
R6	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	39	14
R7	Master of Education (Guidance and Counseling)	47	23
R8	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	37	9
R9	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	56	24
R10	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	44	20
R11	Bachelor of Guidance and Counseling	44	20

According to the table above, all 11 respondents met the established criteria, and the researcher conducted semistructured interviews with each of them. During semistructured interviews, a number of open-ended questions concerning the researcher's interest are asked (Eungoo & Hwang, 2021). Several options are offered during semistructured interviews to cover certain aspects associated with the research phenomenon; while allowing respondents to contribute fresh perspectives on the study's main focus (Galletta, 2013). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and were conducted at the respondents' schools. Such interviews enable respondents to devote their time and attention to sharing their experiences and insights at greater lengths-invaluable qualitative data for the study. The researcher recorded the interviews via audio tape and transcribed the recordings on the basis of the interviews. Following interview transcription and transcript analysis, a document comprising (a) themes and subthemes, (b) the researchers' operationalization of each theme and subtheme, and (c) participant quotes that were identified and reported collectively was sent to each participant via email. Every participant received instructions to either provide input on the document or set up a member check.

3. Results

Following the completion of the interviews for this study, the researcher coded and analyzed the coded data. Five major themes emerged upon completion of the interviews and analysis in this study: (1) School counselor self-preparation, (2) information gathering, (3) needs assessment, (4) rapport building, and (5) crisis resolution and planning. These themes, along with their interconnections, can be better understood through Figure 1.

3.1. School counselor self-preparation

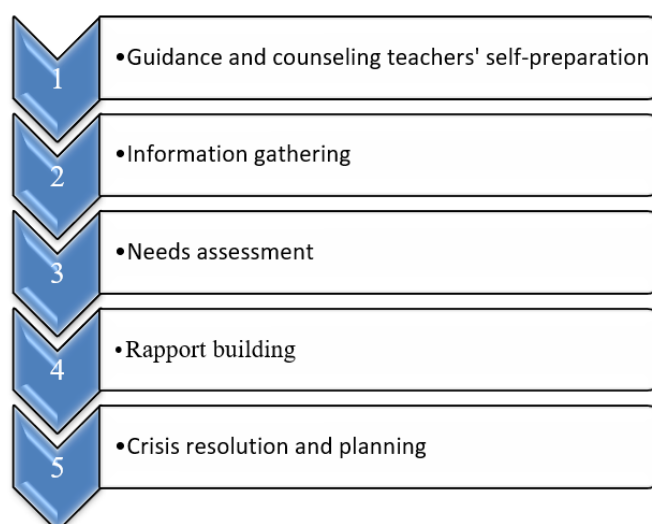


Figure 1 Themes of crisis counseling processes.

Within the context of crisis counseling management, school counselors should first prepare themselves so that they can support the students in distress efficiently. This preparation involves both personal presentation and emotional readiness, as well as creating a therapeutic environment. Respondents highlight key aspects of self-preparation and emotional regulation necessary for school counselors to manage crisis counseling effectively. These discussions demonstrate a comprehension of the ways in which both internal and environmental circumstances impact a counselor's ability to offer assistance in times of need. R7 emphasized, *"A comfortable room is the second most important aspect to consider, following our own professional appearance. Even when we are facing a crisis ourselves, it is crucial not to take on a crisis case, as we must ensure we remain composed and unaffected by the situation"*. Respondents also discussed the importance of maintaining self-awareness and managing their emotional state as part of the preparation for crisis counseling. R7 highlights the need of both a professional image and a comfortable setting. While a school counselors' appearance conveys expertise and preparedness to deal with difficult issues, a well-prepared counseling environment gives the student a sense of security and tranquility.

In avoiding emotionally enmeshed and jeopardizing capacity to help successfully, The respondent also emphasizes that counselors must be aware of their own emotional limitations and steer clear of situations in which they are directly impacted by the crisis. R11 explained, *"For this case, make sure we are emotionally stable first. If our emotions are not stable, it will be difficult to conduct a session with a student because we might struggle to control the situation and risk imposing our opinions on them"*. R11 goes into further detail by emphasizing how important emotional stability is by emphasizes how erratic emotions can make it difficult for the counselor to lead sessions effectively, which can result in an inability to manage the student or an unintentional projection of biases or emotions.

In the meantime, R8 raises awareness of customized self-care techniques by discussing her own practice of calming down with coffee before attending a therapy session. R8 shared, *"First of all, it's natural for me to have to calm down. The way I want to calm down is to have to drink coffee, that's my way. I can't do it without coffee"*. This demonstrates how important it is for counselors to identify and put into practice techniques that help them become more at ease and concentrated.

Establishing a supportive atmosphere is crucial in crisis counseling since it has a big influence on the client's capacity to feel safe, encouraged, and at ease throughout the session. In order to create such an atmosphere, respondents emphasize a variety of techniques, focusing on both sensory and bodily components that encourage calm and wellbeing. R1 provides an example on having a room with air conditioning and therapeutic features such as cozy chairs guarantees that they may relax and become comfortable. In order to create an environment that encourages comfort and openness, respondents emphasize that the counselling room needs to be quiet, private, and distraction-free. School counselors must be emotionally and psychologically ready to properly meet the requirements of their clients, thus careful planning goes beyond the physical setup. R1 stated, *"We allow the student to sit and rest first in a comfortable environment. Near the counseling room, there is air conditioning and therapeutic elements to help calm them down. Our preparations must be conducive; the space we create for the client should be comfortable, calming, and private, with minimal distractions. We, as counselors, must also be adequately prepared. We also use fragrances to create a soothing atmosphere that exudes a positive aura. Outside, we incorporate the sound of water to enhance the therapeutic environment"*. Building on this idea, another respondent elaborates on the importance of addressing students' immediate physical and emotional needs as part of creating a nurturing space. R3 explained, *"We ensure the student feels cared for by providing comfort, asking if they have eaten or drunk anything, and addressing their immediate needs to help them feel at ease. We also use aromatherapy. The psychiatrist advised us to include calming scents, emphasizing the importance of using true aromatherapy fragrances rather than regular perfumes. We specifically use lavender and rose aromatherapy, which we intentionally purchase for this purpose"*.

3.2. Information gathering

An essential stage in crisis counseling is information gathering, which gives school counselors a thorough grasp of the client's circumstances. During this process, comprehensive data regarding the crisis, the client's emotional and mental health, and any contributing variables are gathered. Good information collection guarantees that school counselors can modify their approach to fit the client's unique needs and serves as the basis for focused interventions. According to R1, pre-sessions are important for gathering client data, including brief biographies and the outcomes of psychometric tests. Personality tests, career inventories, psychological evaluations, and mental health screenings are some of the tools that give counsellors information about a client's characteristics, emotional state, and possible areas of concern. This proactive approach not only helps create a good first impression, but it also gives counsellors information that can help them organize sessions and develop intervention techniques. It highlights the need of a methodical, research-based approach in counseling to improve the counselor's capacity to successfully meet the needs of the client. R1 explained *"I believe in conducting a pre-session where the counselor gathers a brief client profile. This helps the counselor establish a connection, build rapport, and better understand the client by actively serving, listening, and empathizing with them. The data in the counseling room must be complete. For example, psychometric tests should be readily available. If I want to understand a student better, I can simply refer to their personality test results. By doing so, I can gain an initial impression of the student's traits. Important tools include mental health screenings, psychological tests, personality tests, and career assessments. These are all crucial in helping us understand and support the client effectively"*.

The necessity of expanding information collection beyond the client by consulting other sources is also emphasized by R5. Interacting with the student's peers might yield insightful opinions about their conduct, social dynamics, and difficulties. R5 shared *"Before proceeding with the counselling session, I make an effort to gather information first. Typically, I meet with the student's friends to gain insights. If the student is in Form One, I also reach out to their primary school counselor for additional background information"*. In order to provide a thorough grasp of the client's developmental journey and any persistent problems, younger students can benefit from contacting their primary school counselors, who can help close the gap between past and present experiences. This broader perspective enhances the counselor's understanding of the client's social dynamics and past experiences, further contributing to a holistic approach to supporting the client.

3.3. Needs assessment

Needs assessment is an essential part of crisis counseling, which empowers counselors to understand the immediate and underlying needs of clients in distress. This approach involves systematically collecting and analyzing information to determine the scope of the crisis, the resources required, and the best way to deliver effective support to the client. In crisis counseling, creating a feeling of safety and security is essential, especially when addressing sensitive issues such as self-harm. According to R2, ensuring that the client feels comfortable, safe, and supported during the session is the primary focus. This process includes obtaining informed consent, which not only respects the client's autonomy but also fosters trust in the counselor-client relationship. The client's safety takes precedence in more serious situations, such as self-harm. R2 stated, *"We must always inform the client and obtain their consent before proceed with counselling session. We ensure that our client feels safe and secure during the session. Ensuring the client feels safe and calm is crucial. For example, we ask questions like, 'How are you feeling today? Are you okay?' If they respond positively, we can follow up with, 'What made today okay?' If they say they are not okay, we encourage them to share why. We also explore how they felt the day before by asking, 'Was yesterday okay?' This helps us identify patterns and changes in their emotions. If they were okay yesterday and are okay today, we express our gratitude"*. In order to comprehend the fundamental causes of the crisis, the counselor must first evaluate the client's background, as stressed by R11, *"In cases of crisis counseling involving self-harm, the first step is to examine the student's background and then develop a safety plan. Ensuring the student's safety is the top priority. I always make it a point to ensure that the student is in a secure and stable condition during the session. It is also important to remember my role as a counselor. I am here to support the student, not to take on the role of their parent"*. Creating a customized safety plan guarantees the client's protection both now and in the future. Assessing the intensity of a crisis is an essential part of crisis counselling since it helps the counselor prioritize the client's needs and develop an intervention plan. According to R4, a thorough evaluation of a client's emotional state specifically, their degree of disappointment or feelings of emptiness is necessary to comprehend the possible hazard of their behaviors. R4 explained, *"The actions the client may take can either be dangerous or not. Their level of disappointment or emptiness can indicate this. By assessing the scale of their feelings, we can determine the severity of the crisis"*. These feelings are frequently used as markers of a client's susceptibility and propensity for dangerous behavior.

3.4. Rapport Building

Building rapport is a fundamental aspects of crisis counseling because it promotes communication, builds trust, and provides a secure environment for clients to share their emotions and worries. In crisis counseling, where clients frequently experience severe emotional distress, building a solid rapport is crucial to provide effective support and intervention. During

the rapport-building phase, helping clients achieve emotional stability and exploring key issues are essential tasks that counselors must address.

R7 and R1 believes that structuring the session plays a pivotal role in ensuring the client feels secure and confident in sharing their experiences. One of the primary elements of this structure is establishing confidentiality. Whereas trust is a foundational element in any counseling relationship. As R1 highlights, without trust, the counseling process cannot be effective. When the student trusts the counselor, they are more likely to open up and share essential information, which is crucial for understanding the root of the issue and developing effective interventions. R7 stated, "I believe structuring the session is still important to ensure the client feels confident that their story will remain confidential within the counseling room. First, I introduce myself as usual, but I also make it clear that we won't be talking for the entire session. I don't want to add any pressure, but I reassure them that this is a safe space where they can share freely. I explain that whatever is as it does not pose harm to others. However, if I believe the situation could cause harm to the client, especially in a way that requires further intervention, I would inform the principal, but only with the client's consent. It's crucial that informed consent is obtained before proceeding". In addition, R1 said, "Trust is essential, meaning the student must believe in the counseling process. If the student doesn't trust us, we will not be able to help effectively. When the student trusts us, they will feel comfortable sharing everything, which is crucial for the success of the session".

3.5. Crisis Resolution and Planning

Effective management of difficult events requires both crisis resolution and preparation, especially in situations that call for quick actions. These procedures address the underlying causes of a crisis, lessen its effects, and lay out plans for future readiness in an effort to restore stability. Effective communication, problem-solving techniques, and resource mobilization are all combined in crisis resolution and planning to offer a framework for overcoming hardship and building resilience in both people and organizations. R7 explained, *"This crisis clients requires help. We rarely ask her what her plan is; instead, we are the ones who present the plan. But is she willing to get into the plan, and are we equipping her with the knowledge she needs? If she follows this plan, these are the outcomes. Sometimes, she tells us the impact. For instance, 'Teacher, my mom is a good person, she wears a purdah. If she finds out I was raped, where would she put her dignity, teacher?' These are real situations that happen during sessions. But at school, what I do to help is mainly giving her rewards for her good behavior. For example, after her father was released from prison, she started skipping school more often. So, my agreement with her—I'm not sure if it's unique or not—but this is what I did: if she comes to school consistently for a week, since she really needs food, instead of buying her rice, I treat her to meals"*.

Moreover, the respondents also emphasized the termination process, which involves concluding the counseling relationship between the counselor and the client. They emphasized how crucial it is to make sure the client is emotionally stable, has learnt healthy coping strategies, and is capable of handling their circumstances on their own before terminating them. They also emphasized that ending a session should be a cooperative process in which the client and the counsellor both agree that it is time to do so. R5 shared, *"My first question is, after an hour of meeting with me, how do you feel? After half an hour of meeting me, what do you feel you should do next? Sometimes there's a change, but sometimes they say it's the same"*. Expanding on this point, R9 reflected on the importance of ending each session in a way that fosters a sense of connection and openness for future support. R9 explained, *"But for me, when we wrap things up, we need to create a situation where they feel like they want to come back and see us again. We need to do it that way. And if it's a male student, we can shake hands. For Chinese students, they usually bow, like a gesture of gratitude. After that, we should also thank them for being willing to share their emotions with us."*

This excerpt reflects a counseling technique where the counselor actively assesses the client's emotional state and self-awareness after a session. The school counselor helps the client assess their development and take responsibility for their thoughts and actions by posing thoughtful questions such "how do you feel?" and "what do you think you should do next?" This approach encourages clients to engage in self-reflection and develop a deeper understanding of their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. By fostering this sense of self-awareness, the school counselors empower clients to identify their own solutions and take ownership of their decision-making process.

4. Discussion

This study highlights the lived experiences of school counselors in navigating the complexities of crisis counseling in schools. It highlights the structured yet dynamic nature of the crisis counseling process, emphasizing five critical phases; school counselor self-preparation, information gathering, needs assessment, rapport building, and crisis resolution and planning. The first phase, self-preparation, highlights the importance of mental readiness and emotional resilience among school counselors. The respondents emphasized the need to maintain self-awareness, manage their own emotions, and prepare both mentally and physically before engaging in crisis counseling. This phase ensures that school counselors are prepared to handle the intensity of crises effectively (Handaka et al., 2022), reflecting the focus on school counselors' well-being in crisis management frameworks (Elbedour et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2024). The second phase, information gathering, is a crucial step in

understanding the context of the crisis (Adams et al., 2022). The respondents described the importance of obtaining accurate and detailed information about the client's situation, including identifying contributing factors, the severity of the crisis, and the client's immediate needs. This phase aligns with Gilliland's six-step model of crisis intervention (James, 2008), in which defining the problem is a critical step in the intervention process. Gathering comprehensive information allows school counselors to form a clearer understanding of the crisis, enabling them to tailor their response strategies to the client's unique circumstances.

The third phase, needs assessment, focuses on identifying and prioritizing the client's immediate and long-term needs. The school counselors reported that this stage often includes evaluating risks such as suicidal ideation or harm to others and determining the appropriate level of intervention. Continuous risk assessment involves adhering to specific safety protocols and guidelines while recognizing key factors and symptoms that may escalate during a crisis (Holland et al., 2021; Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2024). The fourth phase, rapport building, underscores the importance of establishing trust and a strong therapeutic connection with the client. The respondents highlighted that creating a safe and supportive environment is essential for clients to feel comfortable expressing their emotions and vulnerabilities. Investing adequate time to build rapport and gain a deeper understanding of clients' life experiences is essential (Litam & Hipolito-Delgado, 2021). Techniques such as active listening, empathy, and culturally sensitive communication were identified as key tools for fostering rapport (Zyromski & Dimmitt, 2022). The fifth phase, crisis resolution and planning, centers on stabilizing the client's emotional state, developing coping strategies, and planning for future challenges (Brown, 2020). The respondents described employing various intervention techniques, including psychoeducation, problem-solving, and emotional regulation strategies. This phase also includes preparing for the termination of the counseling relationship, ensuring that clients are equipped with the skills and resources to move forward independently.

These findings demonstrate that crisis counseling is not a fixed or linear process but rather a flexible and adaptive approach that counselors tailor to the unique needs of each situation. The study also highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity, as respondents emphasized the need to modify their approaches to align with the cultural backgrounds and preferences of their clients (Carnes-Holt et al., 2016). Additionally, challenges such as time constraints, limited resources, and the emotional toll of managing crises were consistently noted by the respondents. These challenges highlight the need for systemic support, including professional development programs, increased resources for school counselors, and policies that prioritize mental health within schools. By focusing on these five phases, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the crisis counseling process and emphasizes the critical role of school counselors in effectively addressing crises in schools.

Furthermore, the study identifies systemic barriers such as resource and time limitations and the emotional impact of responding to crises, emphasizing the importance of enhanced support systems, including professional development (Zakaria et al., 2017; Warren et al., 2013) and policies aimed at prioritizing mental health in schools. The need for cultural sensitivity and adaptability further underscores the dynamic aspects of crisis counseling. This research provides insight into crisis counseling phases and challenges while emphasizing the critical role of school counselors. The study's implications are significant for counselor training and professional development. Institutions offering counseling programs should incorporate specialized modules in crisis counseling to better equip future professionals (Zakaria et al., 2020; Zakaria et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2017). Training should focus on crisis assessment techniques, intervention models, cultural competence, and ethical decision-making (Warren et al., 2012; Warren et al., 2013). Increasing tertiary crisis counseling training will enhance school counselors' competence in managing crises more effectively and ensuring student well-being.

5. Conclusions

This research explores the lived experiences of school counselors in crisis counseling, outlining a flexible but organized five-step self-process: self-preparation, information gathering, needs assessment, rapport building and crisis resolution and planning. These stages illustrate the systematic yet flexible nature of crisis counseling, as school counselors tread the tightrope between short-term intervention and subsequent student support. The results point to important school counselor strategies, such as proactive planning, consultation with a mental health specialist or other school personnel, and utilization of an intervention model. These techniques illustrate the difficulties associated with student emergencies and improve the quality of crisis counseling. However, school counselors have their own, the intricacies of time constraints and large workloads from crisis management. Future research should take up the challenge of refining and adapting community crisis counseling models to ensure that they are applicable, respectful of cultural differences, and responsive to students' evolving mental health needs. If they do so, school counselors will have the tools to cope with emergencies better and provide the support the students need for their well-being.

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Ethical considerations

The study correctly followed the ethical policies required by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia. Approval was obtained from the relevant authorities, including the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), ensuring compliance with national research guidelines. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed on the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with personal data being stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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