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Developing School Counselor Competencies: Practices and Challenges in Sleman Junior High Schools

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to examine the development of school counselor competencies, particularly through training and the challenges encountered in its implementation. A case study approach was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews with counselors at a junior high school in Sleman, Yogyakarta. The findings indicate that continuous training, clinical supervision, and mentoring contribute to the development of counselors' professional competencies. However, implementation remains challenged by heavy workloads, limited administrative support, and inadequate resources. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing a contextual understanding of how professional learning activities and organizational conditions interact in shaping school counselor competency development. It also highlights the potential of technology-supported continuing professional education as an alternative for expanding access to training and professional learning resources. These findings suggest that competency development programs should be designed flexibly and adapted to counselors' professional needs and school contexts.
Keywords: Competency Development, School Counselor, Counseling Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Counselors in schools play a vital role in the academic and socio-emotional development of students. As the complexity of the problems students face continues to grow, the competence of professional counselors becomes increasingly critical within the school setting. This competence encompasses the ability to apply counseling theories, conduct effective assessments, and implement appropriate interventions (Borders & Drury, 1992). The development of these competencies is essential to ensure that counselors can deliver high-quality services to students. In the Indonesian school context, previous research has demonstrated that individual counseling using an Islamic counseling approach can help students understand aggressive behavior and its consequences, develop self-control, and

build behaviors consistent with Islamic values (Aulia et al., 2026). This finding further illustrates the importance of counselors' competencies in identifying student problems, selecting appropriate interventions, and conducting evaluation and follow-up to support students' behavioral and socio-emotional development.

Similarly, previous research on Islamic counseling has shown that counseling can support students in managing academic pressure through spiritual awareness, emotional regulation, self-acceptance, patience, trust in God, and positive meaning-making (Dudu et al., 2026). These findings suggest that counselors need not only theoretical knowledge but also practical competencies to adapt counseling approaches to students' psychological and contextual needs. Such competencies are particularly important as counselors encounter increasingly diverse student needs in school settings.

Recent developments in school counseling have expanded the competencies expected of professional school counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2025) emphasizes that school counselor competencies encompass professional foundations, direct and indirect student services, and the planning and assessment of school counseling programs. These competencies require counselors not only to possess counseling knowledge and skills but also to collaborate with students, teachers, families, administrators, and other educational partners. In addition, school counselors are expected to engage in continuous professional development and use data to inform the implementation and evaluation of counseling programs. Therefore, competency development should be viewed as an ongoing professional process rather than an activity limited to formal training.

The changing educational environment has also increased the need for counselors to develop competencies related to technology, digital practices, collaboration, and evidence-informed decision-making. The integration of technology can provide opportunities for counselors to access professional learning, supervision, and relevant resources more flexibly. Recent research on online supervision in school counseling indicates that technology-supported supervision can facilitate professional learning, reflection, and the application of knowledge to counseling practice (Chae, 2024). However, the availability of technology alone does not guarantee effective competency development. Counselors also require organizational support, adequate time, relevant resources, and professional networks that enable them to apply and strengthen their competencies in everyday school settings.

In the Indonesian school context, these demands may be particularly challenging because school counselors often perform responsibilities beyond their core counseling functions. When administrative duties, limited personnel, insufficient facilities, and restricted access to professional development occur simultaneously, counselors may have fewer opportunities to focus on professional growth and student-centered services. Consequently, examining how counselors currently develop their competencies and what barriers they experience is important for understanding the conditions that support or constrain professional development. This study therefore focuses on the practices used by school counselors in Sleman Junior High Schools to develop their competencies, the

challenges encountered in implementing these practices, and potential strategies for strengthening continuous professional development.

Although previous studies have discussed the importance of counselor competencies, continuous training, clinical supervision, mentoring, and technology-supported professional learning (Chae & Backer, 2024; Kitching et al., 2024; Khairun et al., 2025), less attention has been given to how these competency development practices are actually implemented within the everyday organizational context of Indonesian schools. In particular, the interaction between professional development activities and contextual barriers, such as workload, administrative support, human resources, and access to professional learning resources, remains underexplored. A recent study in Indonesia found that guidance and counseling teachers experienced challenges related to limited training, insufficient institutional support, and high counselor-to-student ratios, while also identifying areas for improvement in digital tool use, program evaluation, and supervision (Khairun et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research on school counselors' mentoring and induction has examined their relationship with work engagement and burnout (Kitching et al., 2024), and research on online supervision training has highlighted opportunities for professional learning, reflection, and application (Chae & Backer, 2024). However, these studies provide limited empirical insight into how counselors themselves experience and navigate the process of developing and applying professional competencies within their everyday school environments. This gap is particularly relevant in junior high school settings, where counselors may need to balance counseling responsibilities with broader school-related duties.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the practices used by school counselors in Sleman Junior High Schools to develop their professional competencies, the challenges encountered in implementing these practices, and potential strategies for strengthening continuous professional development. By focusing on counselors' experiences within their actual school context, this study contributes contextual evidence regarding how professional learning practices interact with organizational conditions that may support or constrain counselor competency development. In contrast to studies that primarily map competency levels or examine specific professional development interventions, this study seeks to provide a contextual understanding of the processes, challenges, and supporting conditions involved in counselors' ongoing competency development in junior high schools.

Several studies have highlighted that becoming an effective counselor requires proficiency in utilizing technology, strong communication skills, and digital literacy (Lestari, Ahman, & Yustiana, 2023). This underscores the challenging nature of the profession. In practice, however, it has been found that only 7 out of 14 counselors in the field can be confidently said to have a uniform understanding of these competencies. According to Bernard & Campbell (2014), counselors must continuously improve their professional skills through ongoing training, clinical supervision, and mentoring programs (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Campbell, 2006). Continuous training enables counselors to stay updated with the latest knowledge and best practices. Clinical supervision provides professional

support for managing complex student cases, while mentoring programs serve as platforms for the exchange of practical experiences, information, and knowledge.

However, counselors face numerous challenges that impede their ability to fulfill their duties effectively. These include a high workload, as school counselors are often perceived as having little to no work, leading to the delegation of general school tasks to guidance counselors. Furthermore, there is a lack of administrative support from the school and limited human resources, which hinder the development of counselor competencies. A heavy workload can cause counselors to feel overwhelmed, making it difficult to focus on student services. Insufficient administrative support can further undermine their effectiveness in carrying out their responsibilities, while resource constraints present a significant barrier to the development and delivery of optimal services (Leuwerke, Walker, & Qi, 2009). This study seeks to examine the practices involved in the development of counselor competencies, identify the challenges counselors face in enhancing their skills, and propose solutions to overcome these challenges to ensure optimal competency development.

Based on the research gap, this study addresses the limited understanding of how school counselors develop their professional competencies within the organizational context of junior high schools in Indonesia. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the practices used by school counselors in Sleman Junior High Schools to develop their professional competencies, identify the challenges encountered in this process, and explore potential strategies for strengthening continuous professional development. The study is expected to contribute contextual evidence for developing professional development practices that are relevant to the needs and working conditions of school counselors.

METHODS

The This study employed a case study approach with qualitative methods, enabling an in-depth exploration of the specific experiences and contexts of school counselors at SMP Sleman, Yogyakarta. The following outlines the methodological steps undertaken in this study:

Participant	Position	Number	Selection	Data Source
Counselor 1	School Counselor	1	Purposive Sampling	In-depth Interview & Observation
Counselor 2	School Counselor	1	Purposive Sampling	In-depth Interview & Observation
Counselor 3	School Counselor	1	Purposive Sampling	In-depth Interview & Observation
Total		**3**		

Case Selection: SMP Sleman was chosen as the case study location due to its relevance and representativeness in the context of counselor competency development. The school was identified as having an active and diverse counseling program, which facilitated the collection of rich, contextually pertinent data.

Data Collection were collected in two ways. In-depth Interviews: A total of three school counselors currently active at SMP Sleman were selected for interviews. Participant selection was carried out using purposive sampling to ensure that all interviewees possessed relevant experience in counselor competency development. The interviews focused on their experiences with ongoing training, clinical supervision, mentoring programs, and the challenges they encountered. Semi-structured interview guides were utilized, allowing for flexibility in addressing key topics while also permitting participants to discuss emerging issues. The other way is observations. Observational data were collected during counseling sessions and counselor team meetings to better understand the practical context and group dynamics within the counseling practice. This non-participatory observation aimed to directly observe the interactions and processes employed by the counselors in their work.

Data Analysis were conducted in three ways. The first way is transcription: All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data. Additionally, observational notes were transcribed and integrated with the interview data to provide a comprehensive dataset for analysis. The second one is thematic Analysis: Data were analyzed using thematic analysis methods as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed a systematic process that included initial coding which dentifying meaningful units within the data, theme categorization which organizing these units into categories based on patterns and relationships observed in the data, theme development which forming overarching themes that describe counselor competency development practices and the challenges they faced. The last is verification of findings which preliminary findings were shared with the interview participants to verify the accuracy and relevance of the data interpretations. Feedback from participants was incorporated to refine the analysis and ensure its validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Competency Development Practices

1. On Going Training

The findings indicate that ongoing training, particularly workshops for guidance and counseling teachers, is one of the professional development activities available to school counselors. However, participation in such activities is constrained by counselors' existing school responsibilities. As C1 explained:

> *"There are usually training sessions and workshops for guidance and counseling teachers, but the schedules often coincide with our work at school." (C1)*

This statement indicates that the availability of training does not necessarily guarantee counselors' participation. The overlap between training schedules and school

responsibilities creates a practical barrier to continuous professional development. Thus, professional development opportunities need to consider counselors' actual workload and provide flexible participation arrangements. This finding is consistent with Bernard and Goodyear (2014), who emphasize that professional development is an ongoing process requiring opportunities for continuous learning. In the Indonesian context, Khairun et al. (2025) also identified limited training and institutional support as challenges in the development of guidance and counseling teachers' professional competencies.

2. Clinical Supervision

Clinical supervision was found to be limited in the participating schools. Rather than receiving regular formal supervision, counselors often relied on informal discussions with fellow guidance and counseling teachers. C3 explained:

> *"Supervision at my school is very rare. Usually, we just talk with other guidance and counseling teachers. There is sometimes supervision from the principal, but the schedule is not regular." (C3)*

This finding suggests that supervision is not yet implemented as a systematic and scheduled professional development activity. Informal consultation with colleagues provides an alternative source of professional support, but it may not fully replace structured clinical supervision that includes systematic reflection, feedback, and professional guidance. Bernard and Goodyear (2014) emphasize that supervision is an important component of counselor professional development because it provides opportunities for reflection and feedback on professional practice. Chae and Backer (2024) similarly demonstrate the potential of supervision as a means of supporting professional learning and reflective practice.

The findings therefore suggest that establishing more systematic supervision mechanisms may strengthen counselors' opportunities to reflect on their practice and receive professional feedback, particularly when dealing with complex student cases..

3. Mentoring Program

Mentoring The findings also indicate that formal mentoring programs were not available to all participating counselors. Instead, counselors relied primarily on informal peer networks, particularly through professional communication groups. C2 stated:

> *"There is no specific mentoring program, but we have a WhatsApp group for guidance and counseling teachers. We usually discuss things there." (C2)*

The use of a professional WhatsApp group demonstrates that counselors have developed an informal mechanism for sharing information, experiences, and professional concerns. Such peer interaction can function as an accessible form of professional learning, particularly when formal mentoring is unavailable. However, informal peer support may differ from structured mentoring because it does not necessarily involve sustained guidance from an experienced mentor.

This finding is relevant to Kitching et al. (2024), who examined school counselors' experiences of induction and mentoring and highlighted the role of mentoring in supporting counselors' professional experiences. The present finding extends this perspective by showing that, in the absence of formal mentoring, counselors may use peer-based digital networks as an alternative source of professional support.

B. Challenges

1. High Workload

High workload emerged as a significant barrier to counselors' professional development. Although school counselors may not have conventional teaching schedules, participants reported receiving various additional responsibilities that reduced the time available for counseling and professional development. C2 explained:

> *"There is so much work. Even though we do not have a regular teaching schedule, other responsibilities are often assigned to us, such as being the school treasurer or organizing other activities. Guidance and counseling teachers are often considered to have a lot of free time."* (C2)

This statement illustrates that the absence of a conventional teaching schedule does not mean that counselors have limited workloads. Instead, counselors may be assigned administrative and organizational responsibilities outside their core counseling functions. Such responsibilities can reduce the time and energy available for training, supervision, mentoring, and other professional learning activities.

This finding is consistent with Gysbers (2006), who emphasized the importance of clearly defining counselors' roles and responsibilities, and with Leuwerke et al. (2009), who highlighted the influence of school organizational conditions on counselors' ability to implement effective counseling services. The findings suggest that workload management and clearer role allocation are important conditions for supporting counselor competency development.

2. Lack of Administrative Support

The The findings indicate that limited administrative support remains a challenge in the development of counselors' professional competencies. Although school administrators generally provide support for counselors' professional development, counselors may still experience difficulties in accessing sufficient time, flexibility, and assistance to participate in training and other professional development activities. C3 explained:

> "The principal actually supports us, but in practice, it is rather difficult to leave our existing duties." (C3)

This finding suggests that administrative support is not limited to providing permission or encouragement. Counselors also need practical support that enables them to participate in professional development while managing their existing responsibilities. When counselors are required to handle multiple school-related duties, opportunities to

attend training, supervision, and other professional learning activities may become limited.

Therefore, strengthening administrative support requires practical arrangements, including workload adjustments, scheduling flexibility, and adequate opportunities for counselors to engage in professional development. Such support can provide counselors with greater opportunities to strengthen their competencies and improve the quality of counseling services.

3. Limited Access to Resources

Significant Limited access to learning resources and counseling media was another challenge identified by the participants. C1 stated:

> *"There are still very few learning resources and media that we can use in providing services to students." (C1)*

This statement indicates that counselors experience difficulties in accessing sufficient and relevant resources to support their counseling services. The limitation is not only related to professional development materials but also to practical resources and media that can be directly applied in working with students. Such resources are important because counselors need updated and appropriate materials to respond to the diverse needs of students.

The findings of this study underscore that the development of school counselor competencies is a complex and multifaceted process. While ongoing training, clinical supervision, and mentoring are widely acknowledged as essential components for enhancing counselor competency, the challenges inherent in counselors' daily responsibilities present significant obstacles to their professional growth. This study highlights that high workload is the most pressing issue that requires immediate attention. According to Gysbers (2006) and Leuwerke, Walker, and Qi (2009), an excessive workload impedes counselors' ability to focus on professional development and deliver high-quality services to students. Counselors burdened with administrative tasks and heavy caseloads often lack the time and energy to engage in in-depth training or to refine their skills. Moreover, school counselors frequently report being perceived as not actively working when present on campus, leading to the delegation of all administrative responsibilities to them. This suggests a critical need for a comprehensive evaluation and restructuring of counselor workloads, alongside the addition of sufficient administrative support. Such measures would alleviate counselors' burdens, allowing them to focus on their strategic roles in delivering guidance and counseling services. Empowering counselors to concentrate on these core responsibilities is essential to effectively addressing student concerns and fostering their well-being.

The lack of administrative support further emphasizes the urgent need for policy reforms and increased allocation of resources. As Conoley and Mitchell (2009) noted, enhanced administrative support can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of counselors in managing their tasks. Some counselors at Sleman Middle School have already leveraged technology to streamline administrative duties, optimizing

their time and enabling them to prioritize direct student interaction and professional development (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014). However, findings from the interviews reveal that not all counselors possess the necessary technological proficiency to support these tasks; many still rely on manual methods that are inefficient and unsupported by technological tools. This indicates a critical gap in technological training and resource availability that needs to be addressed to increase overall counselor productivity.

Additionally, the limitations in access to resources point to the necessity for strategic investment in the development of training materials and counseling tools. Zunker (2006) highlighted the importance of allocating adequate budgets to support professional development programs and the provision of relevant resources. To ensure that counselors receive the most up-to-date and pertinent information, training programs and materials must be specifically tailored to the unique needs of counselors in the field. However, school counselors still face significant challenges in accessing these resources, as guidance and counseling materials are rarely presented in specialized seminars, workshops, or study programs. Furthermore, when training opportunities are available within the school, there is often insufficient funding to allow counselors to attend. As a result, the professional knowledge of school counselors remains outdated, which ultimately impacts their ability to provide the highest quality of service to students.

The integration of technology as a potential solution to enhance continuing education offers significant opportunities for increasing the accessibility of training materials and other critical resources. Technology can facilitate distance learning, thereby broadening access to courses, seminars, workshops, and educational materials that may otherwise be geographically or financially inaccessible. However, the implementation of technological solutions must be carefully tailored to the specific needs of counselors and the unique contexts of their respective schools. This ensures that technology is used effectively and provides tangible benefits in enhancing the competencies of school counselors.

A key solution identified by school counselors is the provision of training materials that can be accessed at any time and from any location. Such accessibility would allow counselors to engage in self-paced learning, thus accommodating the demanding schedules they often face. However, counselors also emphasize the importance of real, face-to-face practice under the guidance of seasoned school counselor experts. This hands-on experience is viewed as essential for effectively applying new knowledge in real-world counseling scenarios. Up-to-date knowledge, particularly when coupled with expert supervision, can significantly enhance the quality of counseling services provided to students. Supervision plays a critical role in ensuring that school counselors are continuously improving their practice, maintaining high standards, and adapting to evolving student needs. Additionally, the provision of clear guidelines regarding school facilities, administrative policies, and the overall quality control of school counseling services is crucial for ensuring consistent improvements year after year.

Another essential element in optimizing counselor competency development is the establishment of mentoring programs for all school counselors working in junior high

schools. Such mentoring would serve as a collaborative platform for discussing best practices, sharing insights, and addressing challenges encountered in counseling practice. By fostering a culture of peer support and knowledge exchange, mentoring can facilitate ongoing professional growth and the enhancement of counseling services offered to students.

In conclusion, this study underscores that, while there have been numerous efforts to improve counselor competency through various interventions, the practical challenges faced by counselors require a comprehensive, holistic approach. Structural reforms, increased administrative support, and strategic investment in technology are critical steps that must be undertaken to optimize counselor competency development. These efforts are essential for improving the overall effectiveness of counselors in supporting the academic, social, and emotional development of students within the school environment.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that ongoing training, clinical supervision, and mentoring are essential elements in the development of school counselor competencies. However, challenges such as high workloads, limited administrative support, and inadequate resources need to be addressed to optimize counselors' roles in supporting student development. The use of technology has the potential to expand access to professional training and resources; however, its implementation should be carefully adapted to the specific needs and working conditions of school counselors. This study is limited by its qualitative design and its focus on a limited school context in Sleman, Yogyakarta, which may constrain the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. Future research could involve a broader range of schools and participants across different regions and employ mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to further examine how professional development practices and organizational conditions influence the development of school counselor competencies over time.

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