

Critical consciousness of school counselors in Turkey

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Research Article</p> <p>Received: 3 December 2020 Revised: 20 March 2021 Accepted: 23 May 2021</p> <p>Keywords: Critical consciousness, Qualitative research, School counseling, Counseling, Content analysis</p>	<p>Critical consciousness defines as the process of continuously reflecting upon and questioning how biases, assumptions, and cultural worldviews affect the ways of perceiving the difference and power dynamics between individuals. Counselors should provide objective counseling practices to clients, students, and families to have an ethical stand. ASCA (2016) stated that school counselors should examine their own biases and prejudices, and if they have their perceptions interfering with the counseling process, they should refer the clients. Thus, school counselors should develop critical consciousness to reflect upon these issues. Furthermore, they should understand the privilege and power dynamics inside society to evaluate their students and clients by considering the socio-political context to help them effectively. This study aims to understand how school counselors in Turkey use critical consciousness in their professional practices. In this study, 12 school counselors from different regions in Turkey are conducted semi-structured interviews about the issues and the needs they encounter inside the school in connection with the aim of the study. There are four main themes due to the interviews with school counselors: awareness, context, respect, praxis, empowerment, and transformation.</p>

1. Introduction

Critical consciousness is a process of questioning and reflecting the biases, assumptions, and cultural worldviews and how it affects how to perceive the difference and power dynamics inside the society (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In other words, critical consciousness helps people to critically analyze their standpoints in society (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). It includes critical thinking skills and the awareness of the biases and prejudices of oneself. Individuals start to question their role, function, and hierarchy by realizing the functions and roles inside the society. Therefore, critical consciousness paves the way for a better understanding of society and the person himself.

Examining these different standpoints, such as identities and one's locations in their private and professional life, can be considered the first step of developing critical consciousness (Reed, Newman, Suarez & Lewis, 1997). Individuals have many identities, including race, gender, and social class, which can be affected by the historical, socio-cultural, and political factors of the society that s/he live in. Individuals may have both oppressed and oppressor simultaneously, and bringing different social statuses for the person. These individuals have their reality, and they have their narratives as well. Therefore, each group evaluates the situations and events from their reality using their narratives. Critical consciousness allows realizing these roles and criticizing the narratives from a more objective standpoint. For example, a person who belongs to the subclass of society might have been marginalized during their daily life. On the other hand, when this person becomes a teacher and might be an oppressor inside a classroom towards their marginalized students. Thus, the teacher should become aware of their identities to help those children to create a more harmonious classroom.

Critical consciousness has three vital components as critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Critical reflection is about understanding the social inequalities, including economic, racial/ ethnic, and gender

**This research has Ethics Committee Approval from Middle East Technical University with 21/11/2019 date and 443ODTU2019 number. This article was presented at 41st ISPA Conference: Empowering People for Lifelong Learning in Basel University, Switzerland on 9-12 July 2019.*

To cite this article: Özel, D. (2021). Critical Consciousness of School Counselors in Turkey. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, 7 (3), 253-260. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24289/ijsser.947570>

discrimination, and systematically evaluating these inequalities. Political efficacy aims for social and political change and leads people to create a change in society. Critical action includes the changes of policies and institutional practices. The change in critical action refers to collective action (Watts et al., 2011). Therefore, critical consciousness starts with a critical reflection by examining the inequalities inside the society. Afterward, individuals may start to think about political action to transform the inequalities inside the society. The last step is to reunite with people who realize and want to change these inequalities. Therefore, critical action requires critical reflection and political efficacy at first.

Freire's perspective on critical consciousness integrates critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Freire (1997) asserts that the relationship between reflection and action is reciprocal. Raising awareness and critically analyzing the social conditions are before the social change. As critical understanding and analysis occurs, people start to feel that they can change social conditions. Furthermore, when they change the social conditions and pave the way for a more just society, they understand social oppression. Therefore, social action and critical analysis have a double-faced structure. Freire (1973) indicates that 'the more accurately men grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be' (p. 44). Thus, especially school should help to understand this reality and help people to act inside the society.

1.1. School counselors' role and responsibilities

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Code of Ethics (2016), school counselors are obligated to provide support and direction for all school stakeholders and inform all the stakeholders about the expected behaviors, values, and ethics practices. Furthermore, school counselors should work on their own biases, prejudices, and assumptions during their counseling education to be more objective with their clients. If they have some unresolved issues that may affect the therapeutic relationship, counselors should refer them to other professionals to get help. The ASCA Code of Ethics (2016) is adopted and used by the National Psychological Counseling Association in Turkey. Thus, school counselors must serve objective counseling sessions to the students and families. It is not ethical to have sessions affected by the counselors' unresolved issues, prejudices, and assumptions. School counselors are expected to be aware of their own biases and prejudices. Thus, they recognize that they bring their biases into the school environment and counseling sessions. Since school counselors should provide counseling services to their students regardless of their gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, they need to be aware of their own biases and if they may affect the counseling relationship with the students and their families (ASCA, 2016).

Therefore, school counselors should be aware of their own biases, prejudices, assumptions, hierarchy, and privileges to build more ethical and objective therapeutic relationships with their clients. As helping professionals, counselors may use the power dynamics in their relationship with their students inevitably. Freire (1997) describes the helping profession as a process 'begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors and makes the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression.' (p.36). Counselors start the helping relationship with their biases and prejudices. These biases and prejudices may prevent school counselors from listening and objectively understand their clients. In addition, Freire (1997) asserts that helping professionals should learn to 'read the world' and then act on it with justice. Therefore, they can learn how to promote a just society. To overcome this type of cognitive bias, counselors should evaluate their own cultural backgrounds and worldviews shaped by historical, socio-cultural, and political factors. Therefore, they can criticize how dominant ideology shapes their perspective and worldview and who this ideology impacts their professional role. This critical process may help counselors prevent biases and assumptions to the counseling sessions (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

School counselors need to evaluate and understand their own identity shaped by the dominant ideology. There are various ways to develop critical consciousness, including self-interrogation (Leonard, 1997), reflexivity and reflectivity (Taylor & White, 2000), critical self-analysis (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995), critical self-reflection (Mullaly, 2002), and reflexivity (Dominelli, 1997). School counselors should have a 'critical stance' (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). They should critically analyze the society's culture, policies, and practices (Watts et al., 2011) as stated in the code of ethics. Being critical in the assessment and the treatment is a pivotal aspect of the counseling process to understand the client's cultural, social, and historical context for the presenting problem (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008). By conceptualizing the client taking political, social, and historical aspects into consideration, school counselors can evaluate the client holistically and help them more effectively.

The school counseling profession focuses more on the individual level of change, as stated as critical reflection. However, critical self-reflection that comes along with the critical consciousness allows understanding the

structure of the clients and the oppression that they are experiencing (Reed et al., 1997). Therefore, school counselors should emphasize the macro-system and exo-system of the students and shift their perception beyond the micro-system to provide positive social and emotional change within the students effectively (Smith, 2017).

1.2. Ecological perspective: a tool for understanding the critical consciousness

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model helps school counselors understand the social structures, community resources, and health care systems that directly influence children and their families' lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The ability to attend to ecological perspectives of the dominant culture and understand its effects on the students' social and emotional development requires critical consciousness. School counselors need to recognize the inequalities inside the society to help all the students effectively (Smith, 2017). Social injustice is not created by societal laws (Johnson, 2006), but it is generated by influential people (Baldwin, 2013). Thus, it is the people who understand systemic inequality and empower the oppressed to develop an equal society (Smith, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological model includes four systems initially, then one more system as chronosystem is added to this model. Micro-system includes the individuals' interpersonal relationships with others, for example, a students' relationship with their mother, father, and teacher. Mesosystem contains the interactions of the individuals at the micro-system. An example would be the interaction of the parents and the teacher. Exo-system encompasses the elements that do not affect the individual directly. For example, when a parent loses their job, this might affect the child financially and indirectly. The macro-system involves all the societal and cultural elements that influence the child's development, such as gender roles (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The last system, defined as a chronosystem, includes all the changes and all the systems that impact one another. By considering all these systems within the critical thinking perspective, school counselors evaluate the power dynamics and inequalities inside a society by examining all the systems, including family, school, political, and economic systems.

The first step of being critically conscious is the development of awareness (Harden, 1996). A deeper understanding of personal biases and social issues is the heart of both being critical and being a counselor. By developing this awareness, counselors tend to seek collaborative relationships with their clients and other colleagues to foster growth both for the client and the society (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). It is crucial to consider the issues holistically while developing therapeutic relationships with clients and raising awareness. Furthermore, to be aware of oneself and collaborate with others are the ethical conduct of being a school counselor. The study aims to understand how school counselors apply critical consciousness in their professional practices. Therefore, it is intended to glance at the professional practices of school counselors in Turkey regarding their critical standpoint.

2. Method

Since the aim of this phenomenological study is to examine the school counselors' professional practices in terms of the critical consciousness perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 school counselors about the issues and needs they encounter inside the school. The participants were mainly selected using snowball sampling to create diversity in working conditions, working area, educational level, years of experience, and age. School counselors conducted thorough phone and informed about the nature of the study. The only importance was given to finding the most comfortable place for participants during the interview. Therefore, the researcher was flexible about time, place, and the medium of the interviews. Interviews were finalized when the same patterns started to show up during the interviews.

Since different schools in different regions may have various cultural and social issues according to the phenomenon, it aims to select schools from different regions in Turkey. This selection process increases the probability of reaching and represent different points of view in different regions. Only two participants were working at a private school. Other school counselors were practicing in state schools from different parts of Turkey. Four school counselors were working at an elementary school. One of them was at preschool, one of the participants was in charge of a school for deaf children, and the other six participants were working at different high schools. Among these high schools, only one of them was a private high school in a metropolitan, Ankara. Other high schools were vocational high schools usually located in the economically disadvantaged parts of the cities, and their students have many behavioral problems.

Among those participants, eight of them have bachelor's degrees, and four have masters' degrees. Also, two of them registered for Ph.D. in guidance and psychological counseling programs as well. Demographic differences

inside the school that they are working in, such as gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, were addressed during the interviews to learn if school counselors' perceptions and attitudes differ by considering these demographic characteristics.

The researcher develops the interview protocol with the help of expert opinions and feedback from one academic of the Department of Sociology and two academics from the Department of Educational Sciences in METU. The interview protocol is designed to refer to three areas: (1) Demographic information of the participants, (2) Current Situation and the Applications of school counselors, and (3) Suggestions for developing critical consciousness. After preliminary questions about the school counselors' role in the school, current issues and applications were asked. The second part of the interview questions includes the applications of the school counselors for various ethnic groups, gender, and socio-economic status to understand the participants' applications in-depth. Interviews took 50 minutes to 105 minutes with a mean of 87 minutes and a median of 70 minutes. Audio recordings were taken during the interviews, and these recordings were transcribed.

Content analysis is used to analyze the themes and patterns of the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews with school counselors. Pre-established themes and codes are not used for this process since the aim of this study are to analyze the data with unforeseen details and provide in-depth clarification of the social reality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). As Mayring (2014) suggested, the pure verbatim protocol is used to transcribe the data. Two academics do the triangulation process in METU. Transcribed and raw data are shared with the academics. Suggested themes and codes are taken into consideration. Coding variables are decided as a result of the consensus about the meaning of each code and theme. Inter-coder reliability was calculated high (Kappa value .975).

3. Findings

Four main themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews with the school counselors; awareness, context and respect, praxis and empowerment, transformation. School counselors' statements have both ends for each theme. Therefore, there are two sub-themes for each theme: awareness, context and respect, integration, praxis and empowerment, transformation and not having a sense of awareness, context and respect, integration, praxis, and empowerment transformation. Each theme is explained with the quotations stated by participants during the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, participants are coded as P1 to P12 since there are 12 participants.

Awareness

In this section, school counselors' statements about awareness of the discriminatory behaviors and thoughts towards students who have different socio-political backgrounds such as SES, ethnicity, and gender were represented. Five school counselors are stated that they are aware of prejudiced behaviors. While talking about the suggestions for their schools, those school counselors said they might have biases and prejudices toward students. Thus, having training about multicultural education would help them as well to work on their issues. These school counselors are also aware that it is not appropriate to do "positive discrimination" to the students who have economic advantages more than other students. They asserted that teachers should behave in the same way to all students. Thus, students learn how to respect and discriminate against people who have different economic statuses. As Participant 7 stated, some school counselors are aware that they discriminate against students positively or negatively.

"I can confess that I am doing positive discrimination by making more time for female students. I was doing training to make them realize this gendered biased situation." P7

Context and respect

Five school counselors are working with refugee students from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Those school counselors stated that especially Syrian students show intensive behavioral problems such as hitting, kicking each other and Turkish students. When the triggering factors were asked to school counselors, they did not mention that these students came from the war zone, they may lose their relatives, and actually, they may witness the death of those relatives. Briefly, as it can be seen in the statement of Participant 2, they could not consider the social context of Syrian students and relate this context with their behavioral issues.

"Syrian children are usually more aggressive. I observed that the students who are bullying each other are normally Syrian. We have just differences." P2

It is expected of them to contact families and learn about the students' backgrounds from the school counselors. Therefore, school counselors should state a more specific and informative explanation rather than stating the differences. On the other hand, as a result of the interviews, it is observed that school counselors can assess their students' socio-political context according to their gender, economic status, and education level of the parents. School counselors mentioned gender stereotypes about gender and how these schemas affect the behaviors of teachers and families. They primarily emphasize that teachers behave in a "rude" way to their male students. On the other hand, they may be kind and respectful to their female students since they are fragile. As shown in Participant 7, some school counselors can analyze the gender roles inside the society and their effects on the students' relationships.

"I had seen this discrimination when I was working in the Eastern part. Female students came to me about their problems, male students referred to me more about behavioral problems. But this is not the case here... Women are strong in their social life as well. This affects the whole culture. If a female parent comes to school, the male parent comes with her as well. When the mother is working, the father may come to school to talk to me. They give each other this responsibility. You cannot see this in the Eastern part." P7

Furthermore, school counselors can discuss the problems stemming from the economic status of families. Counselors working in disadvantaged areas in their cities mentioned that it is hard to provide counseling services to students with economic disadvantages. Since those students may be working outside of the school, being hungry, and may not meet their basic needs, counselors mentioned that they could not talk about their emotions about their families and friends.

Besides the economic status, school counselors indicated that the parents' education level could filter the teachers and administration. They indicated that this education level might have differences in itself as well. If the parents have a degree from a field of education and these parents are teachers or academicians, teachers and administration behave those students and parents differently. School counselors stated that the things that happen inside the school could be explained to a 'normal' parent, but academicians and teachers might question the situation. Thus, they need to prepare in a better way to clarify the issue. Correspondingly, as Participant 10 stated, the student's academic success may affect the behavior of teachers and administration as well. School counselors stated that when successful students show unwanted behavior, teachers and administration tolerate them compared to students with low academic success.

"Academic success is a filter. If one student is successful but also s/he has negative behaviors, teachers' and administration's perspectives might be different. We had many students whose parents are academicians. They are more protective of academics' children... They think twice about referring a student whose parent's academician to a disciplinary committee, but this does not matter for other students." P10

Praxis and empowerment

In this theme, school counselors' activities to integrate their counseling skills into their profession and empowerment practices are mentioned. Ten school counselors mentioned that they are trying to find the students who need financial aid inside their schools. Thus, these school counselors consider the needs of the students and families and try to distribute the resources accordingly. They stated that they are trying to do economic and psychological empowerment to the students who need it.

Furthermore, school counselors also use their advocacy role for their particular students who need individualized education programs (IEP). These ten school counselors indicated that they have students who need IEP in their school, and every school counselor also stated that teachers and administration do not want those students in their schools. As it can be seen in the statement of Participant 5, praxis and empowerment processes are emphasized several times for the students who need IEP as participant 5 indicated.

"Teachers want to feel relieved by judging them. They try to send the students who need BEP away from school. They want to send them away and get rid of them... I tried to inform them every year and gave them notes about each student, but they continued to do that. They don't want to learn and understand them." P5

Transformation

Under the transformation theme, school counselors' statements about their transformation process regarding their assumptions, biases, and prejudices are considered. School counselors indicated that working in the field helped them realize their prejudices and gave them a chance to work with them. Thus, they use their profession as

a tool for critical consciousness, and they started to give more objective counseling sessions to their students. As Participant 12 stated, she had some biases towards Syrian people before working with them and taking training about them. Afterward, she could carry through this transformation phase in a positive way.

“I took an inclusive training about Syrians. I have got a different perspective back then. I realized that even I treated them in a discriminatory way.” P12

On the other hand, some school counselors stated that they were using counseling skills at their schools, and those skills are helpful for them. Thus, they transformed themselves and found a way to communicate even in an appropriate way. Those school counselors work primarily in economically disadvantaged areas of their neighborhood, and their students’ families have low educational levels. These school counselors stated that the socio-economic conditions of the school and the students make them realize the realities of society.

4. Discussion

This study aims to reveal the critical consciousness of school counselors in Turkey and understand how school counselors use this knowledge in their professional practice. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 12 school counselors from different parts of Turkey. Four main themes emerged; awareness, context, respect, praxis and empowerment, and transformation. School counselors’ critical consciousness skills were tried to be explained by these themes.

School counselors should know about the socio-political contexts of their schools’ environment according to the code of ethics. This concept includes the culture, economic status, educational level, and political conditions of their school stakeholders, including families, teachers, students, administration, and school environment. Following this issue, school counselors are expected to respect their students. Therefore, they should evaluate their students and the families considering this contextual knowledge (ASCA, 2016). Furthermore, school counselors are supposed to integrate their counseling skills and knowledge into their school practices. These implementations include counseling sessions with families and students, consultation with the administration and teachers. In other words, school counselors are expected to assess students and families holistically within the consideration of all systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

In addition, school counselors can intervene in the needs and issues inside the school by using empowerment as the goal. Considering this empowerment, school counselors are expected to recognize and use their advocacy role in their counseling practices inside the school (Freire, 1973). School counselors are using empowerment and the praxis process for economically disadvantaged students. A school counselor is the one who needs to know about all of the students in one school, their families, economic status, and psychological situation as well. Therefore, when the school can aid to students and their families, school counselors stated that they tried to find those students and helped them.

On the other hand, school counselors do not use this praxis and empowerment practices for students with different ethnicities. Since they do not realize that the students who have different cultural backgrounds may have problems with adaptation, they don’t realize a need for this advocacy role. In addition, school counselors are expected to use their counseling skills with teachers and administration to reduce biases to different genders and ethnicities, make them realize the ongoing situation inside the school, and take action about these issues. School counselors mainly discussed individual counseling sessions with their students. They do not do consultation necessarily, and group works with students, families, and teachers about the ongoing issues inside the school.

Furthermore, three school counselors stated that the Syrian students broke the school rules, and they are the ones who are having arguments with Turkish students and teachers since they came from a war zone. However, they also said that ‘even if they wouldn’t find any clue about it, they know that Syrians.’ This kind of labeling creates prejudice, and school counselors also mentioned that it is normal because they lived in crowded families and came from a war zone. On the other hand, many Syrian students were born in Turkey and did not see the war zone. Besides, everybody may not necessarily develop disruptive behaviors and trauma because of resiliency factors. These factors should be considered before labeling the students. Furthermore, while talking about the differences between male and female students and the teachers’ attitudes to those students, some school counselors asserted that it is a normal process since male students are more aggressive than girls are and they “understand only this language to control their behavior.” Thus, it can be said that school counselors behave differently to female and male students and consider this issue as an ‘ordinary, normal thing to do’ because of their gender.

School counselors have an awareness of the students and families who came from different socioeconomic statuses, respect them, use integration and empowerment skills for these students and families. On the other hand, it is noticed that school counselors cannot use those skills for students who have different ethnic backgrounds. They cannot assess these students' socio-political context and cannot serve proper counseling services for them. Furthermore, they may be blind to prejudices, stereotypes, and biased behaviors towards the students and families from different ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, while school counselors were giving information about the teachers' behaviors and the problems of students and families, they used stereotypes about gender roles and biased statements about ethnicity. They used these biased statements as a fact of society.

Furthermore, school counselors should integrate their experiences into their identities for transformation. Since basic counseling skills are not the abilities that school counselors can use at school and left them in there, school counselors are expected to use those skills in their personal lives and use empathy, advocacy roles, and conflict resolution skills (Freire, 1973). In addition, transformation issues involve opposite components. Some school counselors realize their own biases and prejudices. Thus, they had a chance to transform their behaviors and schema by working with students from different ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and gender.

All in all, it can be said that all themes are multifaceted. School counselors' level of awareness, respect, integration, praxis, and transformation was affected by many factors. On the other hand, it can be concluded that school counselors do not have the desired critical consciousness skills to give objective counseling services to all students, families, and teachers. Also, it was found that the critical consciousness level of school counselors does not differ according to their year of experience, level of education, and the place that they are working (private or state).

School counselors may not use critical consciousness skills efficiently to collaborate with other teachers, administration, and other institutions like NGOs and governmental organizations for the students' and the families' sake. Therefore, they are developing and fostering the inequalities inside society. As Baldwin (2013) stated, school counselors are the powerful agents inside the school, creating this injustice. During the school counselors' education, critical consciousness issues are emphasized and practiced. Three approaches to the implications of the development of school counselors' critical consciousness are suggested. At first, the training of school counselors should include the exercises, activities, supplementary readings, and books that challenge them, criticizing their own biases and prejudices for developing critical consciousness. Inter-group dialogues can be stated as the most potent pedagogical practice to teach power relationships, cultural roles and improve school counselors' critical consciousness (Anderson & Carter, 2003; Diller, 2004; Latting, 1990; Lewis, 1993; Reed et al., 1997). As a part of this technique, two peer facilitators start a face-to-face dialogue process to represent different social identities. This process helps participants understand their own social identities, develop critical consciousness, and eventually lead social change (University of Michigan, 2003).

Furthermore, supervision groups should be arranged within each region and each district. Since the districts may have the same issues inside their schools, school counselors may need to hear different perspectives and solutions for the same problems. In the interviews conducted with school counselors, almost all school counselors stated that they need structured and ongoing help from the Ministry of National Education. Since there is no single problem inside a school and the problems may evolve after time passes, one-time supervision sessions and in-service training are not practical for the school counselors. Thus, ongoing support and supervision groups should be arranged for the school counselors to give them a space to share and construct solutions together.

Author contribution statements

D. Ozel contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the whole manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics committee approval

This research has Ethics Committee Approval from Middle East Technical University with 21/11/2019 date and 443ODTU2019 number. All responsibility belongs to the researchers. All parties were involved in the research of their own free will.

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