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DEVELOPING SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH CASE-BASED SIMULATION IN MEDAN'S PUBLIC JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Junior secondary school counsellors need to communicate effectively when students are reluctant to speak, feel misunderstood, or raise concerns about confidentiality. This article develops a case-based simulation programme for strengthening the interpersonal communication competence of guidance and counselling teachers in Medan's public junior secondary schools. A narrative synthesis integrates literature on helping skills, structured simulation, feedback, and training transfer with Indonesian guidance and counselling policy. The proposed programme combines demonstration, adult-acted student scenarios, structured debriefing, and repeated practice. It targets six observable competencies: establishing rapport and explaining confidentiality, active listening, empathic responding, asking and clarifying questions, repairing communication breakdowns, and agreeing on appropriate next steps. The discussion illustrates how counsellors can practise these competencies in realistic encounters and how assessors can distinguish confidence from observed performance. A prospective evaluation is proposed using equivalent simulation cases, independent ratings, and follow-up assessment. The article contributes a training design, sample dialogue, and a behavioural assessment rubric. Programme feasibility, reliability of the rubric, and transfer to routine counselling practice remain to be examined in Medan.

Keywords: case-based simulation, communication competence, interpersonal communication, professional development, school counselling.

INTRODUCTION

A junior secondary school student arrives at the counselling room after a referral from a teacher and says, "I'm only here because I was told to come." The school counsellor's next response can shape whether the student participates. An immediate series of questions about attendance may reinforce the student's impression that the meeting is disciplinary. A brief explanation of the meeting's purpose, followed by an invitation to describe the situation in the student's own words, can make the conversation easier to enter. The professional skill lies in recognising what the moment requires and adjusting the response accordingly.

In Indonesia, guidance and counselling (*bimbingan dan konseling*, or BK) is part of primary and secondary education. The national implementation guide describes a range of services, including basic services, responsive services, individual planning, and support for the school system. Interpersonal communication cuts across these functions. In an individual session, a BK teacher may need to listen to a reluctant student, clarify a misunderstanding, explain the limits of confidentiality, or coordinate a follow-up. Each action calls for language suited to the student's age and to the purpose of the conversation.

Professional development for BK teachers can address this challenge by making communication behaviour visible and open to feedback. Case-based simulation provides a structured situation in which teachers can respond to a realistic prompt, observe how the conversation develops, receive feedback, and try an alternative response. Research on structured practice in therapeutic training provides preliminary support for this approach, although findings vary and its applicability to practising school counsellors requires local evaluation.

This article addresses three questions. Which interpersonal communication competencies should case-based simulation target for BK teachers in public junior secondary schools? How should cases and feedback be designed so teachers can practise adapting their responses? What evidence would show that the competencies improve in simulation and are subsequently used in routine school counselling? The article develops a training and evaluation framework for public junior secondary schools in Medan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal Communication as a School Counselling Competency

Interpersonal communication competence involves choosing language and behaviour that fit the purpose, relationship, and circumstances of an interaction. Hill's (2020) helping-skills framework distinguishes exploration, insight, and action. In school counselling, exploration allows the student to describe the concern and helps the counsellor check what has been understood. Insight can emerge when the student and counsellor notice a pattern or reconsider an interpretation. Action becomes relevant when they identify a feasible next step. The sequence is flexible. A student who corrects the counsellor's interpretation may need more time for exploration before a plan is discussed.

Active listening and empathy are related skills with different observable expressions. Active listening can be demonstrated by allowing the student to finish, responding to the point the student actually made, and checking a summary. An empathic response acknowledges the student's experience and leaves room for correction. For example, a counsellor might say, "It sounds like you felt embarrassed when the others laughed. Have I understood that correctly?" The student can then confirm, qualify, or reject the interpretation. This opportunity to correct the counsellor is especially important when the account is incomplete or the student feels misunderstood.

Research in Indonesian junior secondary education has also examined teacher communication through the development of a manual for classroom guidance (Erdiantoro & Nurmalasari, 2025). The present framework focuses on individual and follow-up conversations, where the counsellor must adapt to a student's responses as the interaction unfolds. Its unit of assessment is a specific communication behaviour demonstrated in a case, such as acknowledging a misunderstanding and reopening the conversation.

Case-Based Simulation and Structured Practice

The proposed simulation uses a case with a defined learning objective, a scripted opening, and a set of plausible responses that depend on what the trainee says. The case can be conducted with trained adult role-players and simple written materials. For interpersonal communication, realism depends largely on whether the conversation presents a credible decision for the counsellor, such as whether to pursue information, acknowledge discomfort, or explain a professional boundary.

Nurse et al. (2025) found promising but limited evidence for deliberate practice in acquiring therapeutic skills. The studies varied in their training procedures and outcomes. That evidence informs the proposed use of focused repetition and feedback, while the programme's value for Indonesian BK teachers remains an empirical question. Similarly, Fanning and Gaba (2007) identify debriefing as an important part of simulation-based learning. In this programme, the debrief connects a specific communication choice with its likely effect on the conversation and gives the teacher an immediate opportunity to revise it.

Performance Assessment and Training Transfer

A teacher can feel more confident after training and still struggle to use the skill in an unfamiliar conversation. Performance assessment addresses this issue by scoring a demonstrated response to a standardised scenario. Allen et al. (2024) review the use of performance tasks and ratings for facilitative interpersonal skills in clinical contexts. This article applies the general assessment principle to school counselling through a proposed rubric with school-specific behaviours.

Training transfer concerns the application and maintenance of learned skills in the workplace. An improved simulation score can show that a teacher performs better on a standardised task. Application in daily BK services also depends on whether the school provides time, privacy, access to collegial support, and an opportunity to use the skill. The proposed evaluation therefore distinguishes immediate performance, retention in a later simulation, and evidence of use in routine practice.

METHOD

Design and Sources

This article uses a narrative literature synthesis to develop a training programme and a prospective evaluation framework. Sources were identified using terms including *school counselling communication*, *helping skills*, *case-based simulation*, *structured debriefing*, *deliberate practice*, and *training transfer*. Sources were selected for their relevance to counselling communication, instructional design, behavioural assessment, or the Indonesian BK context. Indonesian guidance informs the professional setting and referral boundaries. Research from counselling

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and related simulation fields informs learning and assessment procedures. The searches were focused on programme development, so the synthesis does not claim comprehensive coverage of intervention studies.

The synthesis proceeded in three steps. First, recurring communication skills were translated into behaviours that could be observed in a school counselling encounter. Second, fictional cases were designed to elicit those behaviours under varying levels of difficulty. Third, the proposed assessment was matched to the skills taught, with separate measures for confidence, performance in simulation, and later workplace use.

Proposed Field Evaluation

The intended participants are practising BK teachers in Medan's public junior secondary schools. A pilot would first examine case realism, timing, facilitator consistency, and whether trained assessors can apply the rubric consistently. A subsequent evaluation could compare the simulation programme with a wait-list or a professional development session that covers the same communication principles and uses the same amount of training time. An active comparison would better address the specific contribution of rehearsal and feedback. If enough schools participate, assigning groups at school level could reduce sharing of training materials before the evaluation ends.

The proposed primary outcome is independently rated communication performance in new simulation cases approximately one week after training**,** taking baseline performance into account. A further simulation four to six weeks later would examine retention. When practical, assessors would be unaware of participants' group allocation and assessment time. Evaluation would use cases of comparable difficulty and report the estimated group difference with a confidence interval, accounting for school-level clustering if schools are the unit of assignment.

The programme was developed from published and public sources. It has yet to be delivered or evaluated with BK teachers in Medan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Six Competencies for Case-Based Training

The synthesis identified six competencies that can be practised and assessed within a school counselling session. Opening and boundary-setting establish the purpose of the conversation and explain confidentiality in age-appropriate terms. Active listening allows the student to complete an account and gives the counsellor an opportunity to check understanding. Empathic responding acknowledges the student's experience without assuming an emotion or accepting an unverified explanation. Questioning and clarification help the student provide relevant detail without feeling interrogated. Repairing communication breakdowns helps restore the conversation when the counsellor misunderstands or responds too quickly. Planning and follow-up turn the discussion into an agreed next step or an appropriate referral.

Communication repair deserves particular attention. A counsellor may begin with, "You were angry because your friends left you out," and the student may answer, "I wasn't angry." An effective repair could be, "Thank you for correcting me. What was it like for you?" The response accepts the correction and allows the student to describe the experience. The training objective is the ability to recognise and repair a misunderstanding when it occurs, including under time pressure or during a difficult conversation.

Designing Cases That Require the Counsellor to Adapt

A case becomes useful when the counsellor must decide what to do with the information available. In the proposed design, each scenario has an opening prompt, information available if the counsellor asks appropriately, and a specific point where the counsellor must make a professional decision. The role-player can disclose more information after a clear and respectful invitation. They can also signal discomfort if the counsellor assumes blame, asks several questions at once, or offers advice before understanding the concern. During formal assessment, the role-player follows standardised response rules so participants encounter comparable opportunities to demonstrate the skill.

Table 1. Proposed case bank for BK teacher training

Fictional case	Communication challenge	Behaviour to practise
A student attends after a teacher referral and answers in short phrases	The student is uncertain about the purpose of the meeting	Explain the purpose, acknowledge the student's reluctance, and invite an account without pressure.
A student becomes quiet after the counsellor offers an interpretation	There is a possible misunderstanding or loss of trust	Notice the change, acknowledge the assumption, and check what the student meant.

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A student fears that classmates or teachers will learn what was shared	The student needs clear information before deciding what to disclose	Explain confidentiality and its limits in plain language, then check understanding.
A student reports exclusion from a class group chat and expresses concern about returning to class	The counsellor must listen while checking whether a safety concern requires action	Clarify the report, consider immediate support, and explain the appropriate next step.
A student returns after agreeing to a plan but could not carry it out	The earlier plan may have been impractical or insufficiently understood	Explore the barrier, revise the plan collaboratively, and arrange a feasible follow-up.

Case difficulty can be increased without changing the target skill. A beginning case may involve a student who responds to a single invitation. A more difficult case may involve a student who corrects the counsellor twice or gives information gradually. Both cases assess listening and clarification. The latter also tests whether the counsellor continues to adjust when the conversation develops differently from what was expected. Scenarios should be reviewed by local BK practitioners for realistic language, school conditions, and professional responsibilities.

Feedback, Debriefing, and Repeated Practice

The proposed programme consists of four weekly sessions of approximately 90 minutes. The first addresses rapport, confidentiality, and active listening. The second focuses on empathy, questioning, and clarification. The third addresses misunderstanding and communication repair. The fourth integrates the skills into cases that require a follow-up plan or a decision about referral. Each session includes a short demonstration, practice, debriefing, and a second attempt. In practice groups, teachers can rotate through counsellor, role-player, and observer roles. Formal assessment uses trained adult role-players and separate assessors.

Debriefing begins with the teacher's account of what they were trying to accomplish. The observer then identifies one behaviour and its apparent consequence. For example, "When you asked three questions together, the student answered only the last one. What would you ask first if you tried that moment again?" The teacher repeats the relevant portion with one clear question and time for the student to respond. This is more actionable than a global judgment about communication style because it gives the teacher a response to try and the observer a change to check.

Repeated practice also helps teachers move beyond memorised phrases. A teacher may learn to begin with "How did that make you feel?" In some cases, the student may first need to explain what happened or ask who will be told. Facilitators should judge whether a response fits the situation and makes sense to the student. Practice cases can therefore vary the student's concern, level of willingness to talk, and reaction to the counsellor's first response.

Worked Example of a Confidentiality Conversation

Consider a fictional student who asks, "If I tell you what happened, will you tell my homeroom teacher?" The question presents two tasks. The counsellor should respond clearly to the student's concern about who may receive information. The counsellor should also allow the student enough control to decide what they feel ready to share. A possible training response is:

> "It sounds like you want to know who might hear about this before you tell me more. I can explain how I handle what you share. If there is a serious concern about someone's safety, I may need to involve someone who can help, following the school's procedures. What are you most worried might happen if someone else is told?"

The example lets participants practise acknowledging the concern, explaining a boundary, and checking the student's perspective. If the role-player later discloses an immediate safety concern, the counsellor should respond to the information and use the school's applicable protection and referral process. During the debrief, the group can examine whether the student understood the explanation, whether the counsellor made an unrealistic promise, and whether the proposed next step matched the situation. In actual services, explanations and disclosures should follow applicable Indonesian rules and school procedures.

Assessing Observable Communication Competence

The proposed rubric measures what the counsellor says and does in response to standardised case prompts. Each dimension is scored **0** when the behaviour is absent or inappropriate, **1** when it is partially demonstrated, and **2** when it is demonstrated appropriately for the case. If a case does not provide a genuine opportunity to demonstrate a dimension, the assessor records it as **not observable**. Formal assessment should use a case set

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designed to elicit all six dimensions. If a role-player omits a required prompt, the affected dimension should be reassessed using an equivalent case before the composite score is calculated.

Table 2. Proposed behavioural indicators for simulation assessment

Dimension	Indicator of appropriate performance
Opening and boundary-setting	Explains the purpose of the conversation and relevant limits of confidentiality in language the student can understand.
Active listening	Allows the student to complete a response, identifies the main concern, and checks that the summary is accurate.
Empathic responding	Acknowledges the student's experience in tentative, respectful language and gives the student an opportunity to correct the interpretation.
Questioning and clarification	Uses focused questions, distinguishes known facts from assumptions, and follows up on relevant information.
Communication repair	Recognises a misunderstanding, acknowledges it, and reopens the discussion without blaming the student.
Planning and follow-up	Agrees on a realistic next step and explains who will act, when follow-up will occur, or which procedure applies.

The full assessment set yields a score from 0 to 12 when all six dimensions are scorable. Dimension scores should also be reported. A total score can conceal a weakness in confidentiality or referral decisions, so serious errors in those areas should be flagged separately. Before field use, a panel of BK practitioners and relevant experts should review the indicators, and two assessors should independently score a sample of sessions to check agreement. Self-rated confidence can be measured as a secondary outcome and interpreted alongside performance.

Interpreting Changes in Performance and Routine Practice

The evaluation should distinguish three forms of evidence. Immediate performance shows whether teachers can use the skills in unfamiliar scenarios soon after training. Retention shows whether they can still do so in a later simulation. Transfer concerns use in routine BK services. Improved performance when speaking to an adult role-player creates a basis for examining transfer, while the work setting introduces additional demands, including limited time, competing duties, and the need for an appropriate space to talk.

Different patterns would guide different programme adjustments. If listening and empathy improve but communication repair remains weak, later sessions can introduce scenarios where students explicitly challenge an interpretation. If confidence increases while independently rated performance remains similar, feedback can focus on specific behaviours and include additional rehearsal. If immediate gains decline at follow-up, a brief refresher with new cases can test whether teachers regain the skill. If performance is retained in simulation but transfer is difficult to document, school leaders can review whether teachers have the time, privacy, and support needed to use the techniques.

A practical follow-up in Medan could involve peer rehearsal through a BK professional group and a short, de-identified reflection on the use of one skill in routine work. Reflections can describe the communication choice, the condition that made it difficult, and what the counsellor would change. They should omit identifiable student information. If a later study seeks independent evidence from real counselling encounters, separate ethical procedures and consent arrangements would be needed. Until then, workplace reflections should be reported as practitioner accounts of application.

Implications and Limitations

The framework gives school leaders a concrete way to support training. They can allocate time for rehearsal and follow-up, provide an appropriate space for BK services, and allow teachers to reflect on difficult moments with a colleague. Facilitators can use de-identified group patterns to select the next simulation topics. Individual results are most useful for professional development when teachers can discuss errors openly and receive feedback on how to improve them.

The evidence base has limits. Some training and measurement studies come from psychotherapy or other simulation settings. Their findings inform the design of rehearsal and assessment but provide limited direct evidence for practising BK teachers in public junior secondary schools. The proposed cases and rubric still require local review

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and reliability testing. Student trust, help-seeking, and satisfaction with BK services would require separate measures and appropriate research procedures.

CONCLUSION

Case-based simulation offers a structured approach for developing six interpersonal communication competencies among BK teachers in Medan's public junior secondary schools. The proposed programme combines realistic scenarios, feedback tied to observable behaviour, and repeated practice. Its distinctive feature is the opportunity to rehearse difficult conversational moments, including repairing a misunderstanding, explaining confidentiality, and agreeing on an appropriate next step.

The evaluation framework distinguishes performance in a new simulation, retention at follow-up, and application in routine counselling. This distinction helps identify whether teachers need further rehearsal, more specific feedback, or stronger school support. The programme and rubric are ready for local review and pilot testing. Their effectiveness in Medan remains to be established with field data.

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