

Final Project: Religious Holiday Celebration in the U.S. Public High Schools

Ziyu Mo, Dr. Rashidah Bowen White

Teachers College, Columbia University New York, USA 10002

Abstract: In U.S. public high schools, religious holidays that have vacation are mostly Christian holidays. Non-Christian holidays or holidays that are celebrated in other cultures or religions are not given days off in public schools. As a result, students and parents from other cultures or religions often face a dilemma between celebrating holidays from their own culture while missing school and skipping religious holidays while attending school. If students choose to celebrate holidays that are not given vacations, they often need to skip school for. Furthermore, absences yielded from celebrating non-Christian holidays are unexcused, which puts more pressure on students who want to celebrate important holidays from their cultures while not missing schoolwork. In this article, one case study is provided and this ethical dilemma will be analyzed by using the ethical decision making model name Solutions To Ethical Problems in Schools (STEPS).

Keywords: Religious Holidays Celebration; Public High Schools in the U.S.; Ethical decision making model; Solutions To Ethical Problems in Schools (STEPS)

1. Religious Holiday Celebration in U.S. Public High Schools

1.1 Introduction

The celebration of religious holidays has been a controversial topic in the U.S. high schools. Most celebrated religious holidays are Christian-oriented, and holidays from other cultures are excluded from being celebrated. Even though holidays from other cultures are recognized and taught in school, they are not celebrated and do not have vacation for them. For example, the Chinese holiday of Lunar New Year, the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Islamic holiday of Eid, etc. Students from other cultures may face a dilemma of celebrating holidays from their cultures while missing schoolwork. Therefore, since the duty of a school counselor is to ensure student's academic, vocational, and social well-being, one should advocate equity in religious holidays celebration from all cultures. In addition, absence which skips school to celebrate their own cultural holiday may be counted as unexcused, and students may be left behind in school progress.

The ethical debate on this topic is that both sides of the argument are acceptable. A student can choose to skip school because of the respect on one's culture and religion. However, the duty of a student is to attend school and complete schoolwork. The combination of both sides of the argument puts students in an awkward situation between choosing to respect their own culture's tradition or the school discipline. As a culturally responsive school counselor, one may struggle in providing suggestions for the students when they come in for this dilemma. For example, when a Jewish student comes into the office and says he felt frustrated and needed help, because he was marked absent when he skipped school to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, which is an obligation from his family. The school counselor faces the same ethical dilemma as the student does. The school counselor has to consider both the school rules and the student's actual reason for skipping school before consulting with the student. A part of the duty of a school counselor is to inform students about the school discipline and to warn of further violations. However, the problem becomes contentious when a student skipped school because of the celebration of a religious holiday in one's culture. It is difficult for a school counselor to tell students to attend school and not to celebrate religious holidays in their culture, because everyone has the right and freedom to follow a religious culture. On the flip side, the student has already missed school and homework because of the celebration. As a result, it is a difficult question for a school counselor to find a perfect solution that allows students to celebrate their own religious holiday while not missing schoolwork.

1.2 Significance of the topic and Ethical Debates on the topic

For students who want to celebrate holidays in their own religion or culture, they have to choose between missing schoolwork and respecting their own culture. For example, Chinese Lunar New Year typically lasts for half a month, but it is not celebrated in the U.S. When Chinese international students or Chinese Americans want to celebrate the most important holiday in the culture throughout the whole year, they have to skip school for two to three weeks. However, two to three weeks of school can mean a lot. Students may miss two chapters of a book in English class, and they may struggle or lose track in any classes after they return to school. Even though students do not want to celebrate religious holidays in their own culture because of the pressure of missing schoolwork, family obligations could be another reason that they choose to skip school. The ethical problem from the view of a student is that they have to choose between missing a lot of materials in school and celebrating religious holidays in their own culture (from either their own willingness or family obligation).

From parents or guardians' perspective, they have to risk the possibility of their children's poorer performance at school to celebrate holidays in their family culture. In general, parents want their children to maintain a good grade at school. However, when they face a dilemma that religious holidays from their own culture are not celebrated in the U.S. public school contradicts with their children's school performance, they are likely to struggle as much as their children do. For example, East Asian parents, who care about their children's performance in school more than other races and ethnicities, are often frustrated about whether their children should attend the school to keep up the performance or leave the school to celebrate their own culture. This is a primary ethical debate for parents.

Similarly, school administrators, teachers and staff members in school also have an ethical question on this topic. Even though they encourage students to follow school's discipline on vacation, which are mostly Christian-oriented, they could not prevent students from leaving the school to celebrate a religious holiday in their culture or religion. Teachers and staff members in the school want their students not to miss any schoolwork in school, but students also have the freedom to celebrate their own religious holiday. School administrators worry that if students leave the school and celebrate their religious holidays for two to three weeks, it is much harder for them to catch up with the learning progress. After the students return to school, it will also be a burden on students until the end of the semester.

For legal professionals, the ethical question is whether religious holidays from other cultures should also be celebrated with vacation in the U.S. For most states in the U.S., public schools celebrate holidays that are Christian and do not give vacation for religious holidays of Jewish, Islamic, Chinese, etc. The law administrators should show equity in respecting all cultures in the U.S. However, if all religious holidays are celebrated in the U.S., students spend less than ten weeks at school each semester. Therefore, the ethical question for legal professionals is how to maintain enough days at school for students, while giving them freedom to celebrate non-Christian holidays.

2. Case Study

Mike Liu is a Chinese American student in New York High school. He moved to the U.S with his family before he started high school. Mike's parents were from the working class, and both of Mike's grandparents are retired. Currently, Mike lives in a house with his parents and grandparents. Although the whole family moved to the U.S., Mike's grandparents promoted and encouraged celebrating traditional Chinese holidays, instead of western holidays like Christmas, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. Two weeks after spring semester started, Mike came into the school counselor's office and looked hopeless. The school counselor asked what the reason behind his depression was, and Mike answered: "my grandparents and parents wanted me to spend two weeks with them on a vacation, because it is Chinese Lunar New Year in the coming week. However, I asked the school administrator, and she said the school does not have a vacation on Chinese Lunar New Year, which is different from what I had before I came to the U.S. Schools in China have vacation on Lunar New Year. In addition, she also said my absences will not be excused if I choose to skip school to celebrate Lunar New Year. I understand the cultural difference and I respect the holidays in the U.S. But what is wrong if I wanted to celebrate the most imperative holiday in my culture. I have to make the decision between celebrating religious holidays in my culture and getting a good grade on my classes. I am really frustrated right now. Our family has been celebrating Lunar New Year every year, and if we don't celebrate this year, it's just different. Additionally, my grandparents said I have to celebrate Lunar New Year because of my cultural identity. On the other hand, I want to get good grades at school and do not want to disappoint my parents." After looking at Mike's file, he got straight A's in all of his classes in fall semester and is getting A's in this semester as well.

3. Analysis by using ethical decision making model

School counselors should obtain moral principles when counseling with students and making ethical decisions. According to Stones (2017), school counselors can use five moral principles, which includes autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and loyalty, as a guidance when they are making ethical decisions. For autonomy, school counselors should encourage and foster student's making their own decisions, and in Mike's case, the counselor can encourage Mike to decide on his own. In addition, the school counselor should be doing or saying something that is beneficial to Mike, which is another one in the five moral principles. Beneficence indicates school counselor helps with the growth and development of the student (Stones, 2017)¹. Moreover, the school counselor should not harm Mike, since the rule of nonmaleficence demonstrates avoiding hurting children in any circumstances. Justice, which illustrates providing equal services to all students in the school, can also be applied in Mike's case. For instance, Mike's friend, who is Jewish and having trouble with not celebrating Rosh Hashanah in late September, comes into the office and looks for help. The school counselor should provide equal assistance to him and any other students having the same issue, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc. It is imperative for a school counselor to remain connected with students and to let them know you are available for them if they need help. A loyal school counselor tells Mike to visit the counseling office anytime he wants, or one can meet him occasionally at the classroom he is in.

In Mike's case, the most commonly used ethical decision in school setting is the Solutions To Ethical Problems in Schools, also known as STEPS, which combines the seven steps in the American Counseling Association (ACA) model and contextual application in school setting (Stones, 2017)¹. According to Stones (2017)¹, STEPS contemplates parental rights, chronological and developmental appropriateness and addresses the problem from an emotional influential perspective. Additionally, STEPS can help school counselors determine ethical dilemmas in a school setting, while the ACA seven-step model mainly focuses on private or community counseling.

The first step in the STEPS is to define the problem in both emotional and intellectual perspective. Questions that are often asked in a school counselor's head are: "what is my initial reaction to this problem?" and "how do I define this problem intellectually/unemotionally?". For example, when Mike walked into my office with a depressed mood, my initial reaction would be sympathetic, such as why is he looking frustrated and is there anything I can do to help him. Therefore, sympathy and sadness would be my initial reactions for later reference. These initial reactions are helpful in protecting students' confidences. As a school counselor, I care for

Mike, which is also the reason why I do not want to throw away my initial emotional reactions. However, this is the first step, and I should follow other steps in the ethical decision making model to further define and solve Mike's problem. Additionally, I should take hearsay or humor into consideration, because they can help me better understand information about the student (Stones, 2017)¹.

The ethical dilemma in Mike's case is celebration of Chinese Lunar New Year that has no vacation in the U.S. public school, which is undocumented in any standards and laws and is difficult to find a definite answer. Therefore, it is important for me to make a good decision by following each step in the ethical decision making model and applying ACA ethical codes and laws and ASCA ethical standards for school counselors (Stones, 2017)¹. Moreover, I should consider Mike's age, which indicates his ability in making decisions. Mike is a high school student, who can make decisions on his own. Therefore, I could encourage him to make his own decision without considering others' influences. School counselors should also note that younger students need more help from them, but Mike is a high school student that is mature enough to make his own decisions. Considering a student's developmental and chronological levels is also required in the ethical decision making process. Another thing that must be considered by school counselors is the school setting, parental rights and student's rights. In Mike's case, I need to inform Mike's parents after the meeting with Mike, because parental rights are the guidance in his life. It is the right thing to do because parents and guardians are always the one that should be informed in any circumstances. Ethical dilemmas in school settings also differ from those in other settings, so I need to be cautious counseling with Mike.

The next step is to apply the moral principles, which includes autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice and loyalty, to Mike's case (Stones, 2017)¹. In addition to the previously mentioned, I need to decide which principle applies to Mike's case and find out which principle takes priority. Autonomy is the prioritized principle because Mike is a high school student who needs to make decisions on his own and to be responsible for his decisions. As a result, encouraging Mike to make his own decision is my advice to him. After applying the moral principles, I could ask for help from another school counselor and brainstorm possible solutions in Mike's case. For example, if I plan to help Mike by asking his teachers for class recordings, I can jot down my plan and ask other school counselors in school if this is a good decision, while keeping Mike's information confidential. During the conversation with other school counselors, we can determine probable consequences of my plan and list the pros and cons for my plan together. This is beneficial to Mike because the best solution is selected from many possible solutions and is examined by other school counselors.

The review and evaluation part of my selected plan is a significant step in the ethical decision making model. This process keeps going until there is no new ethical dilemma presented. As a school counselor, I need to eliminate solutions that do not gain desired results for Mike. For instance, continuing to attend the school during Chinese Lunar New Year may not be the best option for Mike, because his family wants him to spend some time together. In addition, the selected solution also needs to pass the tests of justice, publicity, and universality and to satisfy the school counselor (Stones, 2017)¹. After evaluating the solution, I should consult with an experienced professional, who can help me with Mike's ethical dilemma. Some professionals I could consult with include colleagues, school counselors that work in other schools, staff working in state or national associations. However, I should protect Mike's information while consulting with other professionals. By doing the consultation step, I can provide increased feelings of security and safety for Mike. The last step in the STEPS ethical decision making model is implementation of the selected plan, even though the best plan may be risky. After implementing my solution, which is helping Mike connect with school teachers to get class recordings and set up virtual meetings for him and his teachers twice a week, I should follow up with Mike to see if the plan goes well and has the desired effect during the weeks that Mike celebrate with his family during Chinese Lunar New Year. In addition, I need to keep myself updated with ethical standards and laws, maintain a counseling network with other counselors, and educate parents/guardians and other stakeholders in the school if necessary (Stones, 2017)¹. Ethical standards, local policies of the state and the school, and applicable statutes need to be considered as a school counselor.

References:

[1] Stone, C. B. (2017). Ethics and law: School counseling principles[M]. American School Counselor Association. CCPJ 4560.03: Professional Issues and ethics in School Counseling