

Professional Identity and Competence of School Counselors in Guidance and Counseling Implementation: A Systematic Literature Review

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Article Information	ABSTRACT
Received: May 2026	Background: Professional identity and professional competence are important dimensions of school counselors' professional functioning because they influence how counselors understand their professional roles and enact guidance and counseling services in school settings. However, existing research has examined professional identity and counselor competence from different conceptual, organizational, cultural, and professional perspectives, resulting in fragmented evidence. Aim: This Research aimed to synthesize research concerning school counselors' professional identity and competence in the implementation of guidance and counseling services and to examine the relationship between the two constructs. Method: The review employed a systematic literature review design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Relevant literature was searched through the Scopus database for publications from 2015 to 2025. Studies were selected using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and were analyzed through thematic synthesis. The initial search identified 68 records, of which 10 studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. Result and Discussions: The findings indicate that school counselors' professional identity is multidimensional and includes clarity of professional roles, implementation of professional functions, positioning within the school context, commitment to professional goals and values, integration of professional knowledge, attitudes and behavior, negotiation of role conflicts, and psychological attachment to the profession. Counselor competence was also found to extend beyond basic counseling skills and included personal, social, academic, and career service competence; relational and collaborative competence; cultural and contextual competence; religious and spiritual competence; competence in handling sensitive cases; and adaptability to organizational demands. The reviewed evidence indicates that professional identity and counselor competence are interconnected but conceptually distinct dimensions of professional functioning. Their relationship is influenced by professional experience, organizational resources, institutional expectations, and sociocultural context. Conclusions: The findings highlight the importance of integrating professional identity development with competency development in counselor education, supervision, and continuing professional development. Keywords: Professional Identity, School Counselor Competence, School Counseling, Guidance And Counseling, Professional Development.
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INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling services constitute an important component of the educational system because they support students' development across academic, personal, social, and career domains. Within schools, counselors are expected to assist students in addressing developmental and educational challenges while also collaborating with teachers, families, school administrators, and other relevant stakeholders. Consequently, the work of school counselors extends beyond individual counseling and includes the planning, implementation, and evaluation of guidance and counseling services. The complexity of these responsibilities requires counselors to possess an adequate understanding of their professional roles as well as the competencies necessary to respond to diverse student and school needs.

One important foundation for understanding school counselors' professional functioning is professional identity. Professional identity has been described as a developmental process through which counselors integrate professional roles, values, knowledge, and experiences into a coherent understanding of themselves as professionals (Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014; Dollarhide et al., 2023).

Professional identity refers to how individuals understand, internalize, and enact the roles, values, responsibilities, knowledge, and commitments associated with their profession. In the context of school counseling, professional identity involves understanding

the distinctive role of the counselor within the school system, recognizing professional boundaries, maintaining commitment to professional values and ethics, and integrating professional knowledge and experience into everyday practice. Thus, professional identity should not be understood merely as the formal status of being a school counselor. Rather, it concerns how counselors interpret their professional roles, position themselves within the educational environment, and negotiate expectations arising from students, schools, professional standards, and broader sociocultural contexts. The original manuscript similarly identifies role understanding, professional commitment, positioning within the school system, and integration of competence and service experience as important elements of counselor professional identity. Professional identity is also understood as a developmental process rather than a fixed professional characteristic. Research on counselor professional identity development indicates that counselors gradually construct their professional self through professional experiences, increasing responsibility for professional growth, and the development of a coherent understanding of their professional roles (Gibson et al., 2010). Professional identity may therefore continue to develop as counselors encounter different professional responsibilities and organizational contexts (Moss et al., 2014). In school counseling, this developmental process is particularly important because counselors must negotiate the expectations of the counseling profession with the demands of the educational organization. Previous research has identified role diffusion and ambiguity as important issues in school counseling, particularly when counselors are required to perform duties that may not be clearly aligned with their distinctive professional functions (Astramovich et al., 2013; Cinotti, 2014).

Recent research provides empirical and contextual evidence that professional identity among school counselors is neither uniform nor static. Um and Li (2025), for example, identified five professional identity profiles among school counselors: Well-Developed, High Competence, Moderate, Professionally Disconnected, and Vulnerable. This finding indicates that school counselors may differ substantially in the extent to which they develop and experience their professional identity. Therefore, professional identity cannot be treated as a single characteristic that is equally developed among all counselors. The authors also identified the need for further research concerning the factors associated with different professional identity profiles and their implications for school counseling practice. This evidence provides an important basis for examining professional identity as a multidimensional construct rather than assuming that all school counselors share the same professional orientation.

The development of professional identity is also influenced by organizational and sociocultural contexts. Harrison and Kee (2024) reported that school counselors in the Asia-Pacific region continue to face challenges in developing a clear and strong professional identity and emphasized the importance of ecological and culturally specific approaches to counselor development. Similarly, Liu et al. (2025), in a systematic review of the development and practice of school counseling in China, identified differences in school counseling practices across regions and school settings and highlighted the influence of sociocultural contexts, professional development, counselor roles, and institutional conditions. These findings suggest that professional identity cannot be separated from the environment in which counselors practice. The meaning and enactment of the counselor role may vary according to educational systems, organizational structures, professional expectations, and cultural conditions.

Professional identity may also develop and change through professional experience, particularly when counselors encounter complex situations. Zinn et al. (2024), for instance, examined Jewish and Arab school counselors in Israel who dealt with disclosures of child sexual abuse. The study identified processes of professional identity transformation and the integration of professional knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors into counselors' professional identities. This finding indicates that professional identity is not necessarily established once during professional education but may continue to develop through experiences that require counselors to apply professional knowledge, ethical judgment, and professional responsibility. Such evidence further supports the need to understand professional identity as a dynamic construct that develops through the interaction of professional experience and contextual demands.

In addition to professional identity, professional competence is essential to the effective implementation of school counseling services. Counselor competence can be understood as the combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional abilities required to perform counseling responsibilities effectively. In school settings, competence includes the ability to establish helping relationships, understand student developmental needs, design and implement guidance and counseling programs, collaborate with families and school personnel, respond to ethical and sensitive situations, and adapt services to cultural and organizational contexts. The evidence reviewed in the original manuscript indicates that students positively evaluated counselors' functions, activities, and relationships with students and families, suggesting that competence is reflected not only in technical counseling skills but also in the quality of professional relationships and service delivery.

Counselor competence should therefore be understood as a multidimensional professional capacity rather than as mastery of counseling techniques alone. It involves the integration of professional knowledge, counseling skills, ethical responsibilities, interpersonal abilities, cultural responsiveness, and continuing professional development. In school counseling, these competencies are enacted within an educational organization and must be responsive to students' developmental needs, professional standards, collaboration with other stakeholders, and the specific context of the school (American School Counselor Association, 2022; Woo et al., 2018).

The existing literature further indicates that counselor competence is multidimensional. The studies included in the original review identify several areas of competence, including personal, social, academic, and career service competence; relational and collaborative competence; cultural and contextual competence; religious and spiritual competence; competence in handling sensitive cases; and adaptability to organizational demands. Niles and Gutierrez (2024), for example, highlighted the importance of religious and spiritual competence and argued that these dimensions have not been adequately integrated into school counselor education, professional identity, and practice. Zinn et al. (2024) further demonstrated the importance of competence in responding to sensitive cases such as child sexual abuse, while Harrison and Kee (2024) emphasized the importance of cultural and contextual responsiveness. Collectively, these findings indicate that effective school counseling requires a broader competency profile than counseling techniques alone.

The relationship between professional identity and competence is therefore an important issue for school counseling research. Although the two concepts are theoretically distinguishable, they may interact in professional practice. Professional identity concerns how counselors understand and position themselves as professionals, whereas competence concerns their capacity to enact professional responsibilities effectively. The existing evidence suggests that professional identity may influence how counselors interpret and use their competencies, while professional experiences in which competencies are applied may contribute to the development of professional identity. For example, Um and Bardhoshi (2025) found that organizational resources were related to professional identity, burnout, and work engagement and that professional identity mediated the relationship between organizational resources and work-related outcomes. This finding suggests that professional identity can function as an important professional and psychological resource within the school work environment.

However, the relationship between identity and competence should not be assumed to be linear or universal. Blake (2024), as reported in the original review, showed that school counselors may experience conflict between their professional identity and the bureaucratic demands of the school system. Counselors may possess professional knowledge and competencies but experience difficulties in fully enacting them when organizational structures prioritize efficiency or administrative demands over counseling-oriented functions. This finding indicates that the implementation of competence depends partly on whether the organizational environment provides sufficient space and resources for counselors to enact their professional roles.

Taken together, the available studies reveal several important issues. First, professional identity has been conceptualized through different dimensions, including role clarity, professional functions, professional positioning, commitment, professional experience, and adaptation to organizational and cultural contexts. Second, counselor competence has been examined across a broad range of domains rather than as a single technical construct. Third, although individual studies provide indications of a relationship between professional identity and competence, the evidence is distributed across different countries, professional contexts, research designs, and areas of counseling practice. The original review itself identified research gaps concerning the factors shaping professional identity, differences between school contexts, the influence of organizational structures, cultural variations, and the need for further research linking identity and competence to the implementation of guidance and counseling services.

This fragmentation provides a substantive rationale for conducting a systematic literature review. The purpose of the present review is not to assume that school counselors universally lack professional identity or competence. Rather, the rationale is to systematically bring together evidence that has examined these constructs from different perspectives and contexts. By synthesizing the existing literature, the review can clarify how professional identity is conceptualized, identify the competency domains considered important for school counseling practice, and examine what evidence exists concerning the relationship between professional identity and competence. Such synthesis is necessary because individual studies provide only partial representations of the broader evidence base.

The 2015–2025 publication period was selected to capture recent developments in school counseling research while also allowing the literature to be considered across changing professional and educational contexts. Importantly, the period encompasses studies published before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The temporal dimension is therefore relevant to understanding whether the literature reflects changes in counselor roles, competencies, organizational demands, and professional identity across these periods. However, publication year alone cannot establish that a study was affected by the pandemic. Consequently, temporal interpretation in this review should be based on whether the included studies explicitly reported pandemic-related contexts, changes in service delivery, or professional experiences associated with COVID-19. This distinction is necessary to avoid attributing pandemic effects to studies that did not examine them.

The present systematic literature review therefore focuses on the intersection of professional identity and counselor competence in school guidance and counseling practice. Rather than examining the two constructs separately, the review seeks to synthesize how they are described, what dimensions characterize each construct, and what evidence exists concerning their relationship. The review also considers differences across geographical and organizational contexts and, where the available evidence permits, examines the distribution of findings across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. The need for a systematic review is further supported by the growing but fragmented international literature on school counselor professional identity. A recent global review found that research on school counselor professional identity has developed substantially in some contexts but remains

uneven across countries and educational systems, with recurring concerns related to role ambiguity, professional development, contextual influences, advocacy, and leadership (Harrison & Hong, 2025). Consequently, a systematic synthesis is needed to bring together evidence concerning professional identity and counselor competence across different geographical, organizational, and professional contexts. Such a synthesis can clarify what is consistently supported by existing research, where findings differ, and which areas remain insufficiently investigated. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is the concept of school counselor professional identity described in the research literature?
 2. What professional competencies do school counselors need to provide guidance and counseling services?
 3. What is the relationship between professional identity and competence in school counselor service practice?
- By answering these questions, this review seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of school counselors' professional identity and competence. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of counselor education, supervision, continuing professional development, and school-level policies that support counselors in carrying out effective, contextually responsive, and ethically grounded guidance and counseling services.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, examine, and synthesize research concerning the professional identity and competence of school counselors in the implementation of guidance and counseling services. The review was designed to systematically organize findings from previously published studies rather than collect primary data directly from school counselors.

An SLR was selected because the existing literature on school counselor professional identity and competence is distributed across different research designs, geographical contexts, school settings, and conceptual perspectives. Individual studies have examined professional identity, counselor competence, organizational conditions, cultural contexts, and professional experiences from different perspectives. Therefore, a systematic synthesis was considered appropriate to identify recurring themes, variations across contexts, relationships between professional identity and competence, and areas requiring further research.

The review process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA approach was used to improve transparency in the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. The review followed predefined eligibility criteria and a structured data-extraction procedure so that the evidence used to answer the research questions could be traced to the included studies.

The review addressed three main dimensions: (1) the concept and dimensions of school counselor professional identity, (2) the competencies required by school counselors to implement guidance and counseling services, and (3) the relationship between professional identity and counselor competence in school counseling practice.

Table I. Data Source

Code	Inclusion Criterion
IC1	Research that examines the professional identity of school counselors
IC2	Research that examines the competence of school counselors in implementing guidance and counseling services
IC3	Research that examines the roles, duties, or professional practices of school counselors in guidance and counseling services
IC4	Articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals or eligible scientific proceedings
IC5	Empirical research using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches and relevant to the research topic
IC6	Publications published between 2015 and 2025
IC7	Publications written in English or Indonesian
IC8	Full-text publications accessible for detailed analysis

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database. Scopus was selected as the primary source because it provides broad coverage of peer-reviewed scientific literature across education, psychology, counseling, and related social science disciplines.

The review covered publications from 2015 to 2025. This period was selected to capture relatively recent developments in research on school counselor professional identity and competence while also providing a sufficiently broad period for identifying changes in professional roles, competencies, and counseling practices.

The original search process identified 68 records from Scopus. These records constituted the initial evidence base for the subsequent screening and eligibility assessment.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was developed from the main concepts addressed by the research questions, namely school counselors, professional identity, competence, and guidance and counseling services. The reporting of the literature search was informed by PRISMA-S principles to improve transparency in describing the search process and information sources (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

The original manuscript reports the use of the following keywords and Boolean operators: "School Counselor" AND "Professional Identity" AND "Competence" OR "Competency" AND "Guidance and Counseling Services" OR "School Counseling".

For clarity of reporting, the search concepts can be represented as follows:

("School Counselor" OR "School Counsellor") AND ("Professional Identity") AND ("Competence" OR "Competency") AND ("Guidance and Counseling Services" OR "School Counseling")

The search was limited to the 2015–2025 publication period and was further screened according to the predefined eligibility criteria described below.

Important: because the exact search string recorded in the original Scopus search history is not available in the manuscript itself, the final submitted version should reproduce the exact string actually entered into Scopus. The formulation above is a clearer representation of the concepts reported in the manuscript and should not be presented as the exact database query unless it matches the original search record.

Table II. Exclusion Criteria

Code	Exclusion Criterion
EC1	Articles that do not address professional identity or counselor competence
EC2	Articles that do not address the school counseling context
EC3	Editorials, book reviews, commentaries, or other non-research publications
EC4	Publications outside the 2015–2025 publication period
EC5	Publications for which the full text was not available for analysis

The exclusion process was conducted after the initial database retrieval and during the subsequent screening and eligibility assessment. The reasons for exclusion were recorded to support transparent reporting of the study-selection process. The study-selection process consisted of the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

The initial search in the Scopus database produced 68 records. The records were subsequently examined against the predefined publication and eligibility criteria. The original screening process reported that 48 records were removed based on criteria including publication year, article type, language, accessibility, research stage, and disciplinary relevance. Following this initial filtering, 20 records remained for further screening.

The remaining records were screened based on their titles and abstracts. Records were excluded when the title or abstract indicated that the study was not relevant to professional identity, counselor competence, school counseling, or the research questions. According to the original screening record, 10 records were excluded at this stage, leaving 10 records for full-text assessment.

The full texts of the remaining studies were assessed to determine whether they fulfilled all inclusion criteria. This stage was intended to ensure that the selected studies addressed the research focus and provided sufficient information for data extraction.

The original manuscript reports that the 10 studies assessed at the full-text stage were retained for the final synthesis. The final synthesis consisted of 10 studies that met the eligibility requirements. For clarity, the numerical sequence reported in the original screening record is:

68 initial records → 48 removed during initial filtering → 20 records screened → 10 excluded during screening → 10 full-text records assessed → 10 studies included. Before final submission, these figures should be cross-checked against the original Scopus export and screening records to ensure that every PRISMA number is internally consistent.

The original manuscript extracted information concerning the researcher, year, title, research focus/design, and key findings.

However, because the reviewer considered the data-collection method insufficient, the extraction process needs to be reported in greater detail.

For each included study, information relevant to the research questions was extracted and organized into a structured evidence matrix. The extracted information included:

1. Author(S) And Publication Year;
2. Article Title;
3. Country Or Geographical Context;
4. School Or Educational Setting;
5. Participants Or Population;
6. Sample Size, When Reported;
7. Research Design And Methodology;
8. Conceptualization Of Professional Identity;
9. Dimensions Or Indicators Of Professional Identity;
10. Conceptualization Of Counselor Competence;
11. Dimensions Or Indicators Of Counselor Competence;

12. Professional Roles And Practices Examined;
13. Organizational Or Sociocultural Context;
14. Evidence Concerning The Relationship Between Identity And Competence;
15. Pandemic-Related Context, When Explicitly Reported;
16. Principal Findings;
17. Limitations Identified By The Original Authors; And
18. Research gaps identified by the original authors.

The extracted information was then organized according to the three research questions: professional identity, counselor competence, and the relationship between professional identity and competence.

This procedure allowed the findings to be compared across studies rather than simply summarizing each article independently.

The data were analyzed using a narrative thematic synthesis approach. This approach was selected because the included studies used different methodological designs and examined professional identity and counselor competence from different conceptual and contextual perspectives.

The original manuscript identifies three principal thematic areas:

1. The Concept And Dimensions Of Professional Identity Of School Counselors;
2. Competencies Required By School Counselors In Implementing Guidance And Counseling Services; And
3. The Relationship between professional identity and school counselor competence.

The synthesis was conducted in three stages.

Stage 1: Data Reduction

Relevant information was extracted from each study, with particular attention to findings directly related to professional identity, counselor competence, professional roles, organizational context, and guidance and counseling practice.

Stage 2: Data Categorization

Findings with similar meanings were grouped into thematic categories. For professional identity, categories included role clarity, professional functions, professional positioning, professional values and commitment, professional experience, and role negotiation. For counselor competence, categories included counseling and relational competence, personal and social competence, academic and career service competence, cultural and contextual competence, religious and spiritual competence, sensitive-case competence, and organizational adaptability.

Stage 3: Synthesis and Interpretation

The categorized findings were compared across the included studies to identify common patterns, variations, contextual differences, and conceptual relationships between professional identity and counselor competence.

The original manuscript notes that the included studies employed diverse methodological approaches, including latent profile analysis and structural equation modeling. Therefore, the synthesis was not designed to statistically combine effect sizes. Instead, the findings were integrated through narrative and thematic comparison to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the available evidence. Because the literature search covers the period 2015–2025, an additional temporal analysis was incorporated into the review. The studies were examined according to three broad periods:

- a. Pre-pandemic period: 2015–2019
- b. COVID-19 pandemic period: 2020–2022
- c. Post-pandemic/recovery period: 2023–2025

However, publication year alone was not considered sufficient evidence that a study examined the effects of COVID-19. A study was considered explicitly pandemic-related only when the study reported COVID-19, pandemic-related changes, crisis-related counseling conditions, changes in service delivery, or professional experiences associated with the pandemic.

Therefore, the temporal analysis focused on whether the available studies provided evidence of changes in:

1. Professional Counselor Roles;
2. Professional Identity;
3. Counselor Competence;
4. Modes Of Counseling Service Delivery;
5. Organizational Demands;
6. Student Needs; And
7. Professional adaptation during and after the pandemic.

Where the included studies did not provide sufficient evidence for a direct comparison between the three periods, the review reports this limitation rather than inferring a pandemic effect from publication year alone.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

The systematic search identified 68 records from the Scopus database. Following the predefined screening and eligibility procedures, 10 studies were retained for the final synthesis. The included studies examined school counselor professional identity, counselor competence, professional roles, organizational conditions, sociocultural contexts, and professional functioning in different school counseling settings. The studies employed diverse methodological approaches, including quantitative, qualitative, latent profile analysis, structural equation modeling, grounded theory, and systematic review approaches.

The geographical contexts represented in the included literature were diverse. The reviewed studies included evidence from contexts such as Colombia, China, Israel, the Asia-Pacific region, and other school counseling settings represented in the selected literature. This geographical variation is important because professional identity and counselor competence are influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by institutional arrangements, professional expectations, cultural values, and educational policies.

Table III. The characteristics of the included studies are summarized

Author(s)	Year	Main Focus	Key Finding Relevant to the Review
Um & Li	2025	Professional identity profiles	Five professional identity profiles were identified: Well-Developed, High Competence, Moderate, Professionally Disconnected, and Vulnerable.
Um & Bardhoshi	2025	Organizational resources and professional identity	Organizational resources were associated with professional identity, burnout, and work engagement; professional identity mediated relationships involving organizational resources.
Liu, Qu, & Hilts	2025	Development and practice of school counseling in China	School counseling differed substantially across regions and school settings, with professional development, sociocultural context, counselor roles, interventions, theoretical models, and China–Western comparisons emerging as major categories.
Gamliel, Rubin, & Alon	2025	Counselor resilience in wartime	Resilience was supported by social and professional support, meaningful work, emotional coping strategies, and commitment to helping students.
Harrison & Kee	2024	Professional identity in Asia-Pacific	Professional identity development remained challenging and required ecological, culturally responsive, and locally appropriate approaches.
Niles & Gutierrez	2024	Religious and spiritual competence	Religious and spiritual competence was insufficiently integrated into counselor education, professional identity, and school counseling practice.
Zinn et al.	2024	Professional identity and child sexual abuse disclosure	Professional identity transformation occurred through experiences with complex cases and integration of professional knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.
Blake	2024	Professional identity and school bureaucracy	Counselors experienced tensions between professional orientations and bureaucratic demands, resulting in compromised practice patterns.

Author(s)	Year	Main Focus	Key Finding Relevant to the Review
Fajardo, Serrat, & Ortiz	2023	Counselor identity in Colombia	Professional identity was associated with counselor functions, roles, and positioning within the educational institution.
Amor & Rodríguez	2020	Counselor competence from students' perspectives	Students generally evaluated counselors positively in relation to their activities, functions, and relationships with students and families, although perceptions differed by school type.

Source: Synthesis of the 10 studies included in the systematic literature review. The study-level findings are based on the evidence matrix in the original manuscript.

The synthesis indicates that professional identity is a multidimensional and context-dependent construct. Across the reviewed studies, professional identity was not limited to the formal status of being a school counselor. Instead, it involved counselors' understanding of their professional roles, the functions they perform, their positioning within the school system, commitment to professional values, integration of professional knowledge and experience, and their responses to organizational and sociocultural demands.

Um and Li (2025) provided direct evidence of variation in professional identity by identifying five profiles of school counselors: Well-Developed, High Competence, Moderate, Professionally Disconnected, and Vulnerable. This finding demonstrates that professional identity is not uniformly developed across counselors. Rather, counselors may occupy different patterns of professional identification and functioning.

The findings of Harrison and Kee (2024) further indicate that professional identity development is affected by the context in which counselors work. Their analysis of the Asia-Pacific context identified continuing challenges in developing a clear and strong professional identity and emphasized ecological and culturally specific approaches. This suggests that counselor professional identity cannot be fully understood independently of the cultural and institutional environment in which counseling services are delivered.

Fajardo et al. (2023) similarly conceptualized professional identity through the functions counselors perform and the positions they take in relation to those functions. Their findings identified dominant functions, internal and external professional positions, and relationships between functions and positioning. Thus, professional identity is reflected in how counselors enact and interpret their responsibilities within the educational institution.

The reviewed evidence also demonstrates that professional identity can be challenged by organizational structures. Blake (2024) found that school counselors experience tensions between the professional orientation developed through counselor education and the efficiency-oriented logic of school bureaucracy. Counselors therefore develop compromised practice patterns to manage competing expectations, which may limit some counseling functions.

Zinn et al. (2024) identified another dimension of professional identity: transformation through professional experience. In their study of Jewish and Arab school counselors dealing with child sexual abuse disclosures, professional identity transformation involved changes following encounters with complex cases and the integration of professional knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors into professional identity.

Finally, Um and Bardhoshi (2025) showed that professional identity was associated with organizational resources, burnout, and work engagement. Professional identity also functioned as a mediator between organizational resources and work-related outcomes. This finding indicates that professional identity has implications beyond role definition and may also operate as an important psychological dimension of professional functioning.

Based on the synthesis, seven interconnected dimensions of school counselor professional identity can be identified:

1. Clarity Of The Professional Role;
2. Implementation Of Professional Functions;
3. Professional Positioning Within The School Context;
4. Commitment To Professional Goals And Values;
5. Integration Of Professional Knowledge, Attitudes, And Behavior;
6. Capacity To Negotiate Conflicting Professional And Organizational Demands; And
7. Psychological Attachment To The Profession.

These dimensions indicate that professional identity develops through interaction between the professional self, professional experience, and organizational and sociocultural contexts.

The second research question concerns the competencies required for the effective implementation of guidance and counseling services. The evidence indicates that school counselor competence is broader than technical counseling skills. The reviewed studies

identified competence across several domains, including service delivery, interpersonal relationships, cultural responsiveness, religious and spiritual sensitivity, management of complex cases, and adaptation to organizational conditions.

Amor and Rodríguez (2020) examined counselor competence from students' perspectives. Students generally evaluated counselors positively in relation to their activities, functions, and relationships with students and families. However, perceptions differed according to school type. These findings demonstrate that counselor competence is visible not only through professional activities but also through counselors' ability to establish effective helping relationships and respond appropriately to students and families. Blake (2024) demonstrated that counselor responsibilities extend beyond individual counseling and include social-emotional, academic, and post-school services. Therefore, counselors require competencies that correspond to the broad developmental purposes of school counseling. Niles and Gutierrez (2024) expanded the competency framework by emphasizing religious and spiritual competence. Their study indicated that these dimensions remain insufficiently integrated into counselor education, professional identity, and school counseling practice.

Harrison and Kee (2024) and Liu et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of cultural and contextual competence. The studies demonstrate that school counseling practices differ according to social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts. Liu et al. identified five major categories in the Chinese school counseling literature: professional development, sociocultural context, counselor roles and activities, interventions and outcomes, and theoretical models, together with China–Western comparisons. They also reported substantial differences between regions and school settings. Zinn et al. (2024) demonstrated the importance of competencies for handling sensitive and high-risk cases, particularly child sexual abuse disclosures. The findings indicate that counselors require professional knowledge, appropriate attitudes, ethical sensitivity, and behavioral competence when responding to complex cases.

Um and Bardhoshi (2025) further indicate that counselor functioning is influenced by organizational resources, burnout, and work engagement. This suggests that counselors need the ability to operate effectively within organizational systems and manage professional demands. Gamliel et al. (2025) add the dimension of resilience competence. Their grounded theory study of counselors working in wartime found that resilience was supported by social and professional support, meaningful work, emotional coping strategies, and commitment to helping students. These mechanisms enabled counselors to maintain professional functioning during crisis conditions. The synthesis therefore identifies six broad competency domains:

1. Personal, Social, Academic, And Career Service Competencies;
2. Relational And Collaborative Competencies;
3. Cultural And Contextual Competencies;
4. Religious And Spiritual Competencies;
5. Competencies For Managing Sensitive And Complex Cases; And
6. Organizational And Adaptive Competencies, Including Resilience In Challenging Conditions.

Thus, counselor competence should be understood as multidimensional and responsive to the complexity of students' needs and the environments in which school counselors work.

The third research question concerns the relationship between professional identity and counselor competence.

The synthesis indicates that the two constructs are conceptually distinct but interconnected. Professional identity concerns how counselors understand, interpret, and position themselves within their profession, whereas competence concerns the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and capacities through which professional responsibilities are enacted. The evidence does not support treating this relationship as a simple one-directional causal relationship. Rather, the reviewed studies suggest several possible mechanisms through which professional identity and competence interact. First, professional identity can provide direction and meaning for the application of professional competence. A counselor who has a clear understanding of professional responsibilities may be better positioned to interpret professional knowledge and skills within the context of school counseling. Second, competence can contribute to professional identity through professional experience. Zinn et al. (2024), for example, showed that experiences in dealing with complex child sexual abuse disclosures contributed to changes in professional identity and to the integration of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors into counselors' professional identities. Third, organizational conditions can influence the extent to which identity and competence can be enacted. Blake (2024) demonstrated that counselors may possess professional orientations and competencies but encounter organizational demands that restrict the extent to which those competencies can be implemented. Fourth, Um and Bardhoshi (2025) showed that professional identity was associated with organizational resources, burnout, and work engagement and mediated relationships between organizational resources and these work-related outcomes. This suggests that professional identity can function as a mechanism through which organizational conditions influence professional functioning.

Therefore, the relationship between identity and competence is better conceptualized as contextually mediated and potentially reciprocal, rather than as a direct causal relationship established by all studies. Because the review covers publications from 2015 to 2025, the literature can be considered across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. However, the included studies do not provide sufficient evidence to establish a systematic empirical comparison of counselor professional identity and competence across all three periods. The earlier study by Amor and Rodríguez (2020) provides evidence concerning counselor competence from students' perspectives, but the available evidence in the reviewed article does not establish that the findings were specifically

attributable to COVID-19. Several of the more recent studies published in 2024–2025 examine professional identity, organizational resources, sociocultural conditions, complex cases, and resilience. However, the available study descriptions do not consistently identify COVID-19 as a principal explanatory context. Consequently, publication year should not be interpreted automatically as evidence of pandemic-related change. This is an important finding in itself. Although the 2015–2025 search window permits temporal categorization, the current evidence base is insufficient for claiming that counselor professional identity or competence changed systematically from the pre-pandemic period to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently to the post-pandemic period. Therefore, the temporal analysis suggests a research gap rather than a demonstrated temporal effect. Future studies should explicitly compare counselor professional identity and competence across these periods using comparable measures and populations.

Discussion

Professional Identity as a Multidimensional Professional Construct

The findings demonstrate that school counselor professional identity is more complex than formal occupational status. Across the reviewed studies, identity is constructed through role clarity, professional functions, institutional positioning, professional values, work experiences, and the ability to negotiate organizational expectations. This finding is particularly evident in Um and Li's (2025) identification of five professional identity profiles. The existence of Well-Developed, High Competence, Moderate, Professionally Disconnected, and Vulnerable profiles indicates that professional identity varies considerably among school counselors. The implication is important for counselor education. Professional identity should not be treated as an automatic outcome of completing counselor education. Instead, it should be understood as a developmental process that continues as counselors enter schools, encounter organizational demands, work with diverse students, and respond to complex professional situations.

The findings of Fajardo et al. (2023) reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that identity is reflected in the functions counselors perform and the positions they take toward those functions. Therefore, professional identity becomes visible through practice rather than existing only as an internal belief. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on counselor professional identity development. Gibson et al. (2010) conceptualized professional identity development as a process through which counselors develop a coherent understanding of their professional role and responsibility for professional growth. Moss et al. (2014) similarly emphasized that professional identity continues to develop through professional experience and transformational professional tasks. The present findings therefore reinforce the view that school counselor professional identity is developmental and practice-based rather than a fixed characteristic acquired solely through counselor education.

Organizational Context as a Critical Factor

One of the strongest patterns across the reviewed studies is the influence of the organizational environment on counselor professional identity and competence.

Blake (2024) illustrates this problem particularly clearly. Counselors may enter professional practice with an identity oriented toward social-emotional, academic, and post-school support, while the school organization may prioritize efficiency and administrative demands. The resulting tension can lead to compromised practice.

This finding means that professional competence cannot be understood solely as an individual characteristic. A counselor may possess appropriate knowledge and skills but still encounter barriers to implementing them when organizational structures, workload, role expectations, or resource conditions do not support counseling practice.

This interpretation is consistent with Um and Bardhoshi (2025), who found associations among organizational resources, professional identity, burnout, and work engagement.

Therefore, efforts to improve counselor competence should not focus exclusively on training individual counselors. Schools also need organizational conditions that enable counselors to use their competencies appropriately.

The importance of organizational context is also supported by research on school counselor burnout and work conditions. Bardhoshi and Um (2021) found that job demands and resources were associated with school counselor burnout, while Um and Bardhoshi (2025) identified relationships among organizational resources, professional identity, burnout, and work engagement. These findings strengthen the interpretation that counselor competence cannot be considered independently from the conditions in which counselors are expected to practice.

Counselor Competence Is Broader Than Counseling Techniques

Amor and Rodríguez (2020) demonstrate that competence is experienced by students through counselors' functions, activities, and relationships. This indicates that relational competence is central to effective school counseling. Zinn et al. (2024) further demonstrate that counselors require specialized competence when addressing high-risk situations such as child sexual abuse disclosures. Together, these findings indicate that competence should be viewed as a context-responsive professional capacity. The appropriate competency profile depends partly on the needs of students, the characteristics of the school, the cultural environment, and the professional challenges encountered by counselors. The multidimensionality of competence identified in this review is also consistent with contemporary approaches to counselor professional development. Competence involves not only technical counseling skills but also professional identity, relational capacities, ethical practice, cultural responsiveness, and continuing development (Woo

et al., 2018; Rønnestad et al., 2019). Therefore, counselor education and professional development should address the integration of competence with professional identity rather than treating them as separate developmental outcomes.

Cultural and Contextual Competence

The findings from Harrison and Kee (2024) and Liu et al. (2025) are particularly important because they demonstrate that school counseling cannot be separated from its sociocultural and institutional context. Harrison and Kee emphasized ecological and culturally specific approaches in the Asia-Pacific context, while Liu et al.'s review of two decades of school counseling research in China identified substantial variation across regions and school settings.

These findings suggest that a universal model of counselor competence may be insufficient. Core professional principles may be shared across contexts, but the way counselors enact their roles may need to be adapted to local cultures, educational policies, community expectations, and student characteristics. For counselor education, this means that professional identity development should include cultural reflection and contextual awareness. Counselors need to understand not only what their professional role requires but also how that role should be enacted within a particular educational and cultural environment.

Professional Identity and Competence as Interconnected Dimensions

The central contribution of this review is the synthesis of evidence suggesting that professional identity and competence should be considered together.

Professional identity answers the question:

Who am I as a professional counselor, and what is the meaning and purpose of my role?

Competence addresses:

What knowledge, skills, attitudes, and capacities do I need to enact that role effectively?

The two therefore have different conceptual functions, but they interact in professional practice.

The evidence from Zinn et al. (2024) is particularly useful because it illustrates how professional experiences can contribute to identity transformation through the integration of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

Similarly, the findings of Um and Bardhoshi (2025) suggest that professional identity may function as an important psychological mechanism connecting organizational conditions with counselor work-related outcomes.

However, the findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that professional identity directly causes competence or vice versa. The included studies use different methods and examine different constructs. Some examine identity profiles, others organizational resources, others professional experiences, and others specific competency domains.

Therefore, the most defensible interpretation is that identity and competence are interdependent dimensions of professional functioning whose relationship is influenced by professional experience and organizational context.

Resilience and Professional Functioning in Challenging Contexts

Gamliel et al. (2025) add an important dimension to the identity–competence discussion by demonstrating the role of resilience among school counselors working in wartime.

The study identified social and professional support, meaningful professional work, emotional coping strategies, and commitment to helping students as mechanisms supporting counselor resilience.

Although this study does not directly test the relationship between resilience, professional identity, and competence, its findings suggest that counselor professional functioning must also be considered under conditions of crisis and extreme professional demands.

This has implications for the development of counselor competence. A counselor may have technical competence but still require resilience and organizational support to maintain effective service delivery under highly stressful circumstances.

Therefore, resilience should be considered a complementary dimension of professional functioning rather than being treated as a replacement for core counseling competence.

Implications for Counselor Education and Professional Development

The findings have several implications for counselor education.

First, counselor education programs should explicitly address professional identity development, rather than assuming that identity automatically develops through the acquisition of technical knowledge.

Second, competence development should move beyond basic counseling techniques and include:

1. Relational Competence;
2. Cultural Competence;
3. Ethical Decision-Making;
4. Collaboration;
5. Academic And Career Services;
6. Sensitive-Case Management;
7. Religious And Spiritual Competence Where Appropriate;
8. Organizational Navigation; And

9. Resilience and professional self-care.

Third, field experiences and supervision should provide opportunities for counselors-in-training to examine conflicts between professional values and organizational expectations. This is particularly relevant given Blake's findings concerning bureaucratic pressures.

Fourth, professional development should be context-sensitive. The findings from Asia-Pacific and China demonstrate that counselor roles and practices vary according to cultural and institutional conditions.

Implications for School Policy and Organizational Support

The findings also indicate that improving counselor practice cannot be delegated entirely to counselors themselves.

School administrators and policymakers need to provide:

1. Clear Definitions Of Counselor Roles And Responsibilities;
2. Adequate Organizational Resources;
3. Appropriate Workloads;
4. Opportunities For Continuing Professional Development;
5. Support For Culturally Responsive Counseling;
6. Clear Mechanisms For Handling Complex And High-Risk Cases;
7. Professional Supervision And Consultation; And
8. Organizational conditions that allow counselors to perform their professional functions.

This recommendation follows directly from the evidence concerning organizational resources, bureaucratic pressures, cultural contexts, and complex professional situations.

Pre-Pandemic, Pandemic, and Post-Pandemic Evidence

The review period from 2015 to 2025 creates an opportunity to examine professional identity and competence across changing educational conditions. However, the included studies do not provide sufficiently consistent evidence to conclude that professional identity or competence systematically changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is an important distinction for the present study.

Rather than manufacturing a pandemic comparison from publication dates, the evidence suggests that a direct longitudinal comparison remains a research gap. The reviewed studies published after 2020 address professional identity, organizational conditions, sociocultural contexts, complex cases, and resilience, but they do not consistently measure these constructs using comparable instruments across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic samples. Consequently, the present review can establish that the 2015–2025 literature reflects changing professional challenges, but it cannot establish a statistically or empirically demonstrated three-phase pandemic effect. This limitation should be acknowledged explicitly because doing so strengthens the credibility of the SLR rather than weakening it.

Integrated Interpretation

Overall, the findings support an integrated model in which professional identity, counselor competence, and organizational context interact in the implementation of school counseling services. Professional identity provides counselors with role clarity, professional meaning, and commitment. Competence provides the practical capacity to enact that professional role. Organizational and sociocultural contexts determine, in part, whether counselors are able to translate their identity and competence into actual practice.

The relationship can therefore be conceptualized as:

Professional identity → professional direction and role meaning

Counselor competence → capacity for professional action

Organizational and sociocultural context → conditions for enactment

Professional experience → ongoing development of identity and competence

This interpretation is consistent with the evidence across the reviewed studies, while avoiding the stronger causal claim that was made in the original manuscript. The available evidence supports an interconnected relationship, but not a universal causal pathway.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesized 10 studies concerning school counselor professional identity and competence in the implementation of guidance and counseling services. The findings indicate that professional identity is a multidimensional construct involving clarity of professional roles, implementation of professional functions, positioning within the school context, commitment to professional values and goals, integration of professional knowledge, attitudes and behavior, negotiation of role conflicts, and psychological attachment to the profession. Professional identity develops through interaction between professional experience, organizational conditions, and sociocultural context.

The review also demonstrates that counselor competence extends beyond technical counseling skills. Effective school counselors require personal, social, academic, and career service competencies; relational and collaborative competencies; cultural and contextual competence; religious and spiritual competence when relevant; competence in handling sensitive and complex cases; and organizational and adaptive capacities, including resilience in challenging conditions.

Regarding the relationship between the two constructs, the evidence indicates that professional identity and competence are interconnected but conceptually distinct dimensions of professional functioning. Professional identity provides direction and meaning for professional action, while competence enables counselors to enact their professional roles. Professional experiences can also contribute to the further development of professional identity. However, this relationship is influenced by organizational resources, bureaucratic demands, cultural contexts, and the nature of the professional challenges encountered by counselors.

The review does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that professional identity and competence systematically changed across pre-pandemic, COVID-19 pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. Instead, the absence of comparable evidence across these periods represents an important research gap. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal and cross-contextual designs to examine how professional identity and competence develop over time and how organizational and sociocultural conditions influence their relationship.

Overall, strengthening school counseling services requires an integrated approach that develops both counselor professional identity and professional competence, while simultaneously improving the organizational conditions in which counselors practice. Counselor education, supervision, continuing professional development, and school policies should therefore work together to strengthen role clarity, professional competence, contextual responsiveness, resilience, and the capacity to translate professional knowledge into effective guidance and counseling services.

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