

TRAINING, PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN SCHOOL CAREER GUIDANCE: EVIDENCE FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN GREEK SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Evidence from a Qualitative Study in Greek Secondary Education, Greece

ABSTRACT

School Career Guidance has progressively evolved from a predominantly informational service into a complex educational practice that supports students' academic, personal, and vocational development. Within this evolving landscape, the professional competences of School Career Guidance counselors—and particularly the role of initial and continuing training in shaping these competences—have become a central concern for educational research and policy. Drawing on an interpretive qualitative research design, this study explores how counselors conceptualize the contribution of their training experiences to the development of relational, methodological, and ethical competences, as well as to the construction of their professional identity. The empirical material consists of transcribed individual and group counseling sessions conducted in Greek secondary education. The findings indicate that while initial training is perceived as a necessary theoretical and institutional foundation, continuing professional development plays a decisive role in fostering reflexivity, ethical awareness, and adaptive professional practice. The discussion situates these findings within international literature on counselor education and lifelong professional learning, highlighting implications for training design and educational policy in School Career Guidance.

KEYWORDS

School Career Guidance; Counselor Training; Professional Competence; Professional Identity; Continuing Professional Development; Qualitative Research

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational systems, School Career Guidance (SCG) has progressively emerged as a critical component of students' academic, personal and professional development. Beyond the provision of information on educational pathways and labour market opportunities, modern career guidance increasingly emphasizes relational, reflective and pedagogical dimensions, positioning counselors as key educational actors within secondary education settings. This shift has amplified scholarly interest in the professional competences required by School Career Guidance Counselors and in the role of initial and continuing professional training. International research highlights that effective career guidance practice relies on a complex combination of competences, including counseling and communication skills, ethical awareness, reflective practice, and adaptability (Hooley et al., 2015; OECD, 2021).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary approaches in educational sciences conceptualize professional competence as a multidimensional and dynamic construct, encompassing cognitive, methodological, relational, and ethical dimensions. Within this perspective, competence is not understood as a fixed repertoire of skills acquired during initial training, but as an evolving configuration shaped through experience, reflection, and participation in professional practice (Schön, 1983; Tardif, 2012).

In the field of School Career Guidance, international literature increasingly emphasizes the centrality of relational and reflexive competences. Guidance practice is embedded in complex educational contexts and involves continuous negotiation

between institutional expectations, students' needs, and ethical considerations (Watts, 2009; Hooley et al., 2015).

Professional identity constitutes a key analytical lens for understanding competence development in this domain. Research has shown that professional identity is constructed through ongoing interaction between training, practice, and professional communities, rather than being fully formed at the point of entry into the profession (Beijaard et al., 2004; Bimrose & Barnes, 2011).

Framing CPD as an educational process rather than a purely technical update allows for a more nuanced understanding of counselor training. It highlights the importance of learning environments that support reflexivity, ethical deliberation, and professional agency—elements that are essential for sustaining high-quality guidance practices within contemporary educational systems. (OECD, 2021; Cedefop, 2014).

Contemporary research in educational sciences increasingly conceptualizes professional competence not merely as a set of technical skills, but as a dynamic process closely linked to professional identity formation. In the field of School Career Guidance, counselors operate at the intersection of education, counseling, and social regulation, a position that requires constant negotiation of roles, values, and ethical responsibilities. Within this context, professional identity emerges as a central dimension of effective practice.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has been widely recognized as a key mechanism through which counselors develop and sustain their professional identity over time. Unlike initial training, which often emphasizes theoretical frameworks and standardized methodologies, CPD enables practitioners to engage reflexively with their own experience, to reinterpret their role in relation to changing educational contexts, and to integrate ethical considerations into everyday practice. From this perspective, training is not a finite stage preceding professional practice, but an ongoing educational process embedded within it.

Studies grounded in constructivist and interpretive paradigms underline that professional identity is shaped through interaction, reflection, and participation in professional communities. For School Career Guidance counselors, CPD activities such as supervision, peer exchange, and case-based reflection contribute to the development of relational competences, ethical sensitivity, and professional confidence. These dimensions are particularly salient in secondary education settings, where counselors must respond to students' diverse trajectories, institutional constraints, and societal expectations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Epistemological Positioning and Research Design

The present study is grounded in an interpretive qualitative research paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena through the meanings that actors attribute to their experiences. Within educational research, such an approach is particularly suited to exploring professional practices that are complex, context-dependent, and deeply embedded in relational and institutional dynamics. School Career Guidance constitutes precisely such a field, where professional action cannot be reduced to standardized procedures but must be interpreted in relation to counselors' perspectives, values, and experiential knowledge.

Adopting an interpretive stance, the study does not aim at statistical generalization but at analytical depth and conceptual understanding. Knowledge is approached as co-constructed through interaction between researcher and data, and meaning is derived through systematic interpretation rather than measurement. This epistemological positioning allows for an in-depth exploration of how counselors conceptualize the role of training in the development of their professional competences and identity.

3.2. Corpus and Research Context

The empirical corpus consists of transcribed individual and group School Career Guidance sessions conducted in Greek secondary education. The material was collected within authentic educational settings and reflects real counseling interactions between counselors and students. The counselors involved in the study present diverse professional trajectories in terms of initial education, continuing training, and years of experience, thus allowing for a nuanced analysis of training-related discourses.

The choice to focus on naturally occurring counseling sessions rather than self-report questionnaires or structured interviews was guided by the intention to capture professional practice as it unfolds *in situ*. This methodological choice enhances the ecological validity of the study and provides access to counselors' implicit professional knowledge, which often remains under-articulated in more formalized research settings.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a thematic qualitative approach, combining inductive coding with iterative interpretation. Transcripts were analyzed through multiple cycles of reading and coding, allowing themes to emerge progressively from the data. Particular attention was paid to segments of discourse referring to training experiences, professional learning, ethical considerations, and competence development.

The analytical process involved constant comparison across cases, enabling the identification of recurrent patterns as well as divergences in counselors' representations. Coding categories were refined throughout the analysis in order to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical depth. Rather than seeking frequency-based validation, the analysis focused on the interpretive significance of themes in relation to the research questions.

3.4. Ethical Considerations and Research Trustworthiness

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. All data were anonymized, and identifying information was removed from transcripts to ensure confidentiality.

The study adheres to established standards of qualitative research ethics within educational sciences.

To enhance trustworthiness, analytical transparency was maintained through systematic documentation of coding decisions and interpretive steps. Reflexivity was also a central component of the research process, with continuous attention paid to the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on interpretation. These strategies contribute to the credibility and rigor of the findings presented.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Analytical Framework

The analysis of the empirical corpus revealed a coherent set of thematic axes through which counselors articulated the relationship between training, professional competences, and everyday guidance practice. Rather than referring to training as a uniform or linear process, counselors constructed nuanced representations that differentiated between initial training, continuing professional development, and experiential learning within practice. These representations were embedded in discourse that foregrounded relational engagement, ethical judgment, and professional self-positioning.

The analytical framework presented below is structured around four interrelated thematic dimensions. These dimensions do not function as isolated categories but as analytically distinct yet interconnected axes that together illuminate how counselors make sense of their professional learning trajectories.

1. Training as a Foundational but Insufficient Starting Point

Across the corpus, initial training was consistently framed as a necessary point of entry into the profession. Counselors associated it with the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, basic methodological tools, and institutional legitimacy. Initial training was described as providing a common language and a sense of professional orientation, particularly during the early stages of practice.

At the same time, counselors emphasized the limitations of initial training in preparing them for the complexity of real counseling situations. References to gaps between theory and practice were recurrent, especially in relation to managing uncertainty, emotional involvement, and ethical dilemmas. Within this framework, initial training emerged as foundational but insufficient, functioning more as a starting point than as a comprehensive preparation for professional practice.

2. Continuing Professional Development as a Space for Reflexivity

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) constituted a central analytical axis in counselors' discourse. Unlike initial training, CPD was predominantly associated with reflexive learning processes. Counselors described CPD as enabling them to revisit their practices, question habitual ways of acting, and reinterpret their professional role over time.

This reflexive dimension was closely linked to learning formats that encouraged dialogue, supervision, and peer exchange. Counselors emphasized that CPD allowed them to articulate tacit knowledge and to transform experience into professional learning. Within this analytical

framework, CPD is conceptualized not merely as skill updating but as a pedagogical space that supports ongoing professional sense-making.

3. Relational and Ethical Competences as Core Outcomes of Training

A third analytical dimension concerns the centrality of relational and ethical competences in counselors' representations of professional competence. Counselors repeatedly foregrounded their capacity to establish trust, listen attentively, and respect students' autonomy as core elements of effective guidance practice. These competences were rarely attributed to initial training alone; instead, they were described as emerging through experience and reflective training processes.

Ethical awareness, in particular, was articulated as a competence developed over time through exposure to complex situations and critical reflection. Counselors emphasized the need to balance guidance and influence, to navigate power asymmetries, and to act responsibly within institutional constraints. Training, especially in its continuing forms, was presented as a crucial resource for developing ethical judgment rather than for applying predefined rules.

4. Professional Identity and the Integration of Experience

The final analytical axis relates to the construction of professional identity. Counselors frequently linked their training experiences to changes in how they perceived themselves as professionals. Professional identity was not described as fixed or given but as progressively shaped through the integration of training, experience, and reflection.

Within this framework, training contributed to counselors' sense of professional legitimacy and confidence. CPD, in particular, was associated with feeling recognized as a professional actor capable of making informed judgments. This identity dimension functioned as an integrative axis, connecting methodological choices, relational practices, and ethical positioning into a coherent sense of professional self.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study resonate with international research that challenges technocratic models of counselor education focused primarily on the transmission of techniques. Counselors' representations underscore the importance of reflexive learning processes and relational engagement, confirming earlier studies that emphasize the situated and interpretive nature of guidance practice (Schön, 1983; Savickas, 2012).

The prominence attributed to continuing professional development in the data supports the view that professional competence develops over time through experience-based learning rather than through initial training alone. Similar conclusions have been drawn in comparative studies highlighting CPD as a key factor in sustaining professional quality and adaptability in career guidance services (Cedefop, 2014; OECD, 2021). In this respect, the present study contributes empirical support to policy discourses advocating lifelong professional learning for guidance practitioners.

The centrality of relational and ethical competences identified in the findings further aligns with literature emphasizing guidance as an educational and ethical practice rather than a neutral service. Counselors' concern with student autonomy and power asymmetries echoes normative frameworks that position career guidance as a process of empowerment within educational systems (Watts, 2009; Sultana, 2012).

Finally, the role of training in shaping professional identity emerges as a key contribution of this study. Consistent with identity-oriented research in education, the findings suggest that training functions as a space where counselors negotiate their professional self-understanding and legitimize their professional judgments (Beijaard et al., 2004; Bimrose & Barnes, 2011). This insight reinforces the argument that counselor education programs should integrate reflective and identity-focused components alongside methodological instruction.

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