Exploring the Evolving Professional Identity of Novice School Counselors

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Focus of Current Study

1. Evolution of school counselor professional identity
2. Career changers from other helping professions
Study Overview

- Personal Interest
- Existing research
- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussion & Implications
- **Brott and Myers (1999)**
  - 10 professional school counselors - professional identity development & self-conceptualization of school counselor roles through their process of resolving conflicts.

- **Mellin, Hunt, and Nichols (2011)**
  - 236 practicing counselors - explored practitioners professional identity development through their understanding of counseling as a profession when compared to other helping professions (social work & psychology).

- **Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010)**
  - 43 counselors-in-training - transformational tasks at different points in training and found participants professional identity evolved through the tasks of definition of counseling, responsibility for professional growth, and transformation to systemic identity.

- **Nelson and Jackson (2003)**
  - 8 Hispanic counseling interns - Explored the central themes distinct to professional identity development based on ethnicity and found 7 major themes ranging from gaining and applying knowledge including lifelong learning to perceptions of the counseling profession.
Study Significance

- Explain the process of professional identity development for individuals not initially trained in school counseling, also described as career changers.
- Address how professional identity presents in the practice of novice school counselors.
- Examine how novice school counselors are experiencing the process and the unique challenges they face.
- Provide information on how we as counselor educators currently assist with the professional identity development process of novice counselors.
- Contribute to curriculum development and future practice in optimizing the school counselor identity of school counselor career changers specifically and school counseling training programs in general.
- Finally, findings can support advocacy for the profession as we gain clarity on the processes involved in school counselor professional identity development.
Overview of Literature Review

- Historical Overview
- Professional Identity Concept
- School Counselor Professional Identity
- Career Changer Frameworks
Historical Overview

Vocational Guidance Movement (1900s - 1940s)
- Teachers without formal training in the role
- Focus on vocational counseling (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001)

Mental Health Movement (1940s - 1960s)
- Counseling replaced guidance in the literature & profession
- Increase of formally trained counselors
- ASCA instrumental to the changes

Transformation of School Counseling
- Developmental guidance movement (1960s – 1980s)
- Comprehensive School Counseling Program (1980s - current day)
- School counselors viewed as advocates, leaders, collaborators, & systemic change agents (Wingfield, Reese, West-Olatunji, 2010).
Professional Identity

- Professional identity consists of “the possession of a core set of values, beliefs, and assumptions about the unique characteristics of one's selected profession that differentiates it from other professions” (Weinrach, Thomas, & Chan, 2001, p.168).

- A solid professional identity supports advocacy for clients, the profession, and increases inter-professional collaboration and credibility (Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002), minimizes ethical violations (Mascari & Webber, 2006), and reduces the potential for role ambiguity or role confusion (Woo, 2013).
School Counselor Professional Identity

Components

- Occurs in context of a profession - ASCA & CACREP
- Linked to core set of values, beliefs, attitudes, roles & responsibilities, ethical standards, professional memberships & learning styles connected to higher cognitive functioning (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Weinrach, Thomas, & Chan, 2001).
- Certification (Milsom & Akos, 2007) or licensure
- Process is developmental, evolving, requires integration of professional training and personal attributes (Gibson, Dooley, Kelchner, Moss, Vacchio, 2012).
School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Challenges**
  - Informs the research problem
  - Linked to role ambiguity & difficulty defining the profession and the roles that distinguish it from other professions.
    - Professional roles, responsibilities, and expectations shifted to adapt to changing educational policies, philosophies, federal legislation, & societal needs (Borders, 2002; DeKruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013; Perkins, Oescher, & Ballard, 2010).
    - External forces and administrative stakeholders defining school counselor roles and professional development (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Mason, Ockerman, & Chen-Hayes, 2013).
    - Inconsistent implementation of ASCA model (Cinotti, 2014; Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, and Skytte, 2012)
    - Difficulty experienced by novice school counselors translating learning to practice (Gibson et al., 2012).
Career Changer Frameworks

- Integration of Transtheoretical Model and Life-Span, Life-Space Approach (Barclay, Stoltz, & Chung, 2010) - provides understanding of the stages, processes, & tasks career changers go through.

- Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides a basis for understanding the decision-making intentions and process adopted by career changers.
Methodology
Grounded Theory Approach

- Grounded theory based on works of Corbin and Strauss (1990)

- Grounded theory allows research to extend beyond description to generate theory on a particular process (Creswell, 2013) especially in areas where there is minimal research relevant to the population under study (Thai, Chong, & Agrawal, 2012).

- Provided a guide for development of a proposed theoretical framework.
Participants

Recruitment Procedure

- Chosen through theoretical sampling, to reflect the phenomenon and context under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).
- Recruited through snowballing and convenience sampling

Participant Criteria

- Graduates from a School Counselor Certificate Program (SCCP) at a Mid-Western University who completed partial requirements towards the professional educator license with an endorsement in school counseling.
- Career changers from other helping professions such as clinical/mental health counseling, clinical psychology, or social work.
- Currently working as school counselors with pre-K, K-12 children
- 1-4 years-experience in the field
Participants self-identified as 3 males and 5 females, majority White or Caucasian, with ages ranging from 27-42 years of age. A majority of participants had at least 1 year experience.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>School Counselor Position</th>
<th>Qualifications and Licensure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Naveen</td>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>3 yrs</td>
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<td>Samantha</td>
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<td>Nicole</td>
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<td>1 year</td>
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Research Questions

- What are novice school counselors’ perceptions of their developing professional school counseling identity?
- What are novice school counselors’ perceptions of the various components (supervision, ethical, teaching/education, professional membership, and clinical practice) that contribute to their evolving professional counseling identity? What components supported the transition from one professional identity to their current evolving school counselor professional identity?
Research Questions Contd.

- What factors create challenges for the evolving professional school counselor identity of novice school counselors? What factors create challenges in the transition from one professional identity to their current evolving school counselor professional identity?
- What factors enhance the evolving professional school counselor identity of novice school counselors? What factors enhance the transition from one professional identity to their current evolving school counselor professional identity?
Data Collection Procedures

- Interviews
  - Conducted in person with individual participants at mutually agreed venues and one phone interview.
  - 60-90 minutes in length, semi-structured, open-ended, and cautiously followed an interview question schedule (Seidman, 2013)
  - Audio-recorded and transcribed for purposes of analysis and coding
- Written documentation from participants’ schools and school counseling programs
Results
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<td>Components supporting and enhancing transition</td>
<td>Dimensions of Career Change</td>
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<td>Factors challenging evolving professional identity</td>
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<td>Non-counselor related tasks</td>
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<td>Factors supporting and enhancing evolving professional identity</td>
<td>Achieving School Counselor Outcomes</td>
<td>Prior clinical mental health experience</td>
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<td>Understanding of lifespan development</td>
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<td>Adjusting to role challenges</td>
<td>Professional relationships Building</td>
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Personal Definitions of School Counselor Professional Identity

Multifaceted Roles: The many roles performed by school counselors

- **Naveen**
  “So for me that’s another aspect of this identity you know, I truly believe that I’m a one stop shop for a lot of my students and I try to convey that to them, so then they don’t feel like oh I can only come to my counselor with this problem.”

- **Grant**
  “My identity as a school counselor is something that is broad ranging, I think for me it incorporates and encapsulates every aspect of my life. I’ve always been kind of a jack of all trades master of none, I have always had a lot of varied interests, and I think that plays very well into being a counselor and especially a school counselor.”
Personal Definitions of School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Student relationship and engagement**: refers to school counselors work and interaction with students and includes an emphasis on intentional attempts to generate awareness on the school counselor presence and responsibilities.
Personal Definitions of School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Wealth of knowledge:** the level of expertise or knowledge school counselors have in the role. For some participants it was linked to experience.

- **Carly**
  
  “I just wish I had all the answers and the experience that comes from doing it for a long time, but at the same time I understand that it’s going to be a process. I still see myself as new and learning . . . compared to where I was when I started my internship I think I have a lot more knowledge . . . so I look forward to down the road at some point when I just have that experience.”
Dimensions of Career Change

- Attraction to School Counseling: the various reasons participants chose school counseling as their preferred career transition over other helping professions.

- Nicole
  “School counseling just based off of the school counselor that I had in high school. You know coming from first generation and low income, I felt my school counselor was very helpful for me and just seeing what she does currently, she’s still a counselor, so I’m just looking at her and I’m thinking that I want to give this a try.”
Dimensions of Career Change Contd.

- **Program accessibility:** participants’ views on the ease with which they were able to change professions especially as it related to obtaining additional qualifications.

- **Internship experience:** addresses factors within participants internship experience that supported the transition process.
Dimensions of Career Change

- Learning Environment: addresses factors within the program that supported participants’ transition and maintained their interest.

- Carly

“One thing that we talked about at the program a lot was equity in education and what that looks like. That equal doesn’t necessarily mean everybody gets the same thing, but identifying where things did not appear to be equal, and where those gaps were, and maybe certain groups weren’t achieving at the same rate as the other groups. And instead of there’s something wrong with that group, looking at more systematically what can we do as counselors.”
Challenges to School Counselor Professional Identity

- Undefined teacher-counselor relationships: reflect challenges participants’ experienced developing or negotiating relationships with teachers and the possible impact on their ability to perform specific school counselor roles for instance delivering counseling curriculum.

- Anne
  “So you know we’ve had meetings where I’ll sit there and I encourage the teachers to talk among themselves and solve a problem or to identify patterns and I’ll get feedback sometimes, well that meeting wasn’t helpful because you didn’t give us any solutions. And I’ll say well the point wasn’t for me to give you the solutions, the point was just to facilitate the discussion.”
Challenges to School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Non-counselor related tasks**: references the roles and responsibilities performed by participants, which are outside the remit of school counselor tasks. Such tasks are mandated by the district or performed due to limited personnel or financial resources within the school.
Supports to School Counselor Professional Identity

- Achieving School Counselor Outcomes: Reflects participants’ views on the benefits derived from engaging in non-counselor related tasks such as access to additional training and opportunities to develop relationships with students, they would not ordinarily have seen.

- Anne
  “Sometimes I become a dumping ground, which is fine because I like the variety . . . And then a lot of just like non-academic tasks fall to me . . . And these are things I don’t mind doing because, I think, to go back to one of your earlier questions, those tasks have helped me form relationships with a lot of students, who I wouldn’t ordinarily have gotten the chance to see.”
Supports to School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Previous experience and knowledge**: considered those components transferred over from participants’ previous careers, which inform current practice.
  - Comprises prior clinical mental health experience and understanding of lifespan development.

- **Adjusting to role challenges**: refers to the strategies participants employed to address a) the challenge of undefined teacher-counselor relationships and b) the challenge of utilizing prior clinical skills within a school setting.
  - Professional relationship building
  - Adapting clinical skills to school context
Supports to School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Samantha** – Professional Relationship Building

“So we started having lunch with everyone else, and just being more friendly, and out there, and talking more, and just being available, and even available to teachers. Like I’ve had teachers come in, and just want to talk, and get stuff off their chest, and being a welcoming environment, that’s made a difference. I think explaining why we’re seeing the kids and stuff, and giving them a heads up, like we’re going to be doing conferences so your students are going to be leaving, and giving them the option. Like we’ve told teachers, if you have a test going on or a quiz or something you can tell the student, no. So giving them that permission to do that, I think has helped.”
Supports to School Counselor Professional Identity

- **Administrative support**: explored participants’ perceptions on the support they received from administrators and the impact of this on their profession and evolving professional identity.

- **Stakeholder perspectives**: explores participants’ self-reported views on other stakeholders’ (students, administrators, and teachers) expectations and perceptions of them and their school counselor roles.

- **Continuing education**: explores participants’ active engagement with professional development opportunities that support and enhance their profession as school counselors and their evolving professional identity.
Discussion & Implications
Challenges to professional identity

Framework of Career Transition & Professional Identity Development for School Counselors

Proposed Theoretical Framework

Dimensions of Career Change

- Learning environment
- Internship experience
- Attraction to School Counseling
- Program Accessibility

Employment Secured

- Personal Definitions of School Counselor Professional Identity
- Supports to professional identity
- Challenges to professional identity

Counselor roles

Student Relationship & engagement

Wealth of Knowledge
Counselor educators with responsibility for programing should consider factors, like cost, program length, prior qualification/education, as being integral to the career transition process.

Work with site supervisors, to provide supervisory experiences that support and reinforce benefits of internship.

Internship experiences should include discussions on ethical practice and advocacy, dialogue and strategies for negotiating relationships with significant stakeholders, and strategies for managing identified discrepancies between practice idealism and reality.

Engage in active dialogue on professional identity development in context of roles and the implications of non-counselor related tasks on professional identity development.

Support school counselors-in-training to understand the benefits of reframing non-counselor related tasks.
Understand student engagement and relationship as an integral component of the school counselor role and work more expansively with students around what constitutes student relationship and engagement.

Recognize wealth of knowledge as contributing to or enhancing the competence of school counselors-in-training, so they can assume leadership roles within school counseling programs.

Support school counselors-in-training to manage the challenge of undefined teacher-counselor relationships through professional relationship building strategies.

Support school counselors-in-training to engage in direct professional advocacy with administrators and other stakeholders.

Support school counselors-in-training to understand how to balance and adapt clinical skills to their school counseling practice.
Limitations

- Uniqueness of study participants and setting from where they graduated might have implications for generalizability.
  - Study could benefit from participants who graduated from multiple settings with similarly intensive programs.

- Participant demographics might have had implications for viewpoints and perspectives shared.
  - Future studies should seek to achieve a more balanced participant sample to provide a further expansive account of school counselor professional identity.
Future Research

- Explain school counselors perspectives on the significance of their professional identity to the field.
- Investigate unexplored areas such as differences between school counseling in urban vs suburban areas and public vs private schools, to see if the inherent complexities of these areas impact school counselor professional identity.
- Explore how school counselors increased responsibility with 504 case management plans and special needs impacts professional identity development.
- Validate the proposed theoretical framework and expand on the structure especially in dimensions of career change & employment secured.