PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES IN SCHOOL AND CAREER GUIDANCE COUNSELING: A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the multidimensional nature of professional competence in school and career guidance counseling. Grounded in qualitative and interpretive research, it explores how counselors enact and interrelate communicative, relational, informational, reflexive, and ethical competencies in practice. Drawing on a corpus of anonymized counseling sessions, the study integrates theories of situated action, reflective practice, and dialogical ethics to construct a comprehensive understanding of professionalization in guidance work. Findings indicate that competence functions not as a fixed attribute or measurable skill but as an ongoing, context-dependent process of reasoning, reflection, and ethical judgment. The discussion highlights the implications of this conceptualization for counselor training, continuing professional development, and policy frameworks in the field of educational and career guidance.

KEYWORDS

Professional competence; guidance counseling; reflective practice; professionalization; dialogical ethics; qualitative research.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing labor markets, shifting educational structures, and increasing uncertainty regarding career pathways, the role of guidance counselors has expanded. The practice of counseling is no longer limited to vocational placement or information dissemination but now encompasses interpersonal communication, ethical sensitivity, and the ability to support individuals in constructing meaning and agency in their life choices.

In an era characterized by rapid labor-market transitions, shifting educational structures, and growing uncertainty about career pathways, the role of guidance counselors has expanded in both scope and complexity. The practice of counseling is no longer limited to information delivery or vocational placement. Instead, it entails sophisticated interpersonal communication, ethical sensitivity, and the ability to support individuals in constructing meaning and agency in their educational and professional trajectories (OECD, 2021; CEDEFOP, 2023).

Within this landscape, the notion of *competence* has become central to debates on professional standards, counselor training, and the quality of guidance services. Yet the term itself remains contested. Is competence a measurable set of technical skills, a repertoire of professional attitudes, or a form of situated judgment that evolves through reflective engagement with practice? The present study adopts the third view: competence as a dynamic, reflexive, and relational process that is continuously reconstructed through interaction and ethical awareness.

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Accordingly, this article pursues two primary objectives:

To conceptualize professional competence in guidance counseling as a multifaceted, evolving system that integrates cognitive, relational, and ethical dimensions.

To analyze empirically how these dimensions are mobilized in counselors' discourse and action, drawing on qualitative evidence from authentic counseling sessions.

By linking theoretical reflection and empirical observation, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the counselor's professional identity as both reflective practitioner and ethical mediator of meaning.

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Professional competence in school and career guidance counseling is multidimensional, consisting of communicative, relational, informational, reflexive, and ethical competencies. This study integrates theories of situated action, reflective practice, and dialogical ethics to explore how these competencies are enacted in practice. Building upon the work of Schön (1994), Perrenoud (2001), and Le Boterf (2015), the research views competence as a dynamic, context-dependent process.

2.1. Competence and the Evolution of Professionalism

Since the late twentieth century, the concept of competence has progressively replaced that of *qualification* as the organizing principle of professional work. Whereas qualification traditionally referred to certified knowledge or formal credentials, competence emphasizes the **ability to mobilize and integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes in context** (Le Boterf, 2015; Tardif, 2019).

Zarifian (2012) describes competence as an act of initiative and responsibility: it is constructed in the course of action and always embedded in a specific situation. This situated perspective shifts the focus from what professionals know to how they reason, act, and adapt in complex, unpredictable environments.

In the context of guidance counseling, such a view underscores the counselor's capacity to interpret, communicate, and make ethical judgments in relational encounters. Competence thus entails both **technical expertise** and **human sensitivity**, aligning with the reflective-practitioner model developed by Schön (1994), who defines professionalism as "knowing-in-action."

2.2. From Technical Skill to Reflective and Ethical Competence

Earlier models of counseling competence often emphasized procedural mastery—accurate information delivery, standardized interview techniques, or the ability to apply assessment tools. Contemporary scholarship, however, has moved beyond this instrumental paradigm. Perrenoud (2001) and Le Boterf (2015) argue that professional competence is an *ability to mobilize diverse resources*—conceptual, practical, and ethical—within a coherent system of action.

In this sense, competence cannot be reduced to behavior or output. It is better conceived as a **reflective and ethical capability**, involving judgment, interpretation, and contextual decision-making (Boutinet, 2020; Jorro, 2019). The counselor's expertise emerges in dialogue: listening

actively, reformulating meaning, and facilitating self-understanding on the part of the client (Rogers, 2003; Egan, 2014; Ivey & Ivey, 2019).

This shift represents a broader epistemological transformation in the helping professions—from *doing for* clients to *working with* them—grounded in dialogical ethics and mutual construction of meaning.

2.3. Core Dimensions of Competence in Guidance Counseling

Based on the literature and international frameworks, five interrelated dimensions of competence can be distinguished:

1. **Communicative competence:** mastery of verbal and non-verbal interaction strategies; ability to structure dialogue, use open questions, and ensure semantic clarity.
2. **Relational competence:** emotional intelligence, empathy, and the capacity to establish trust while maintaining professional boundaries (Goleman, 2018).
3. **Informational competence:** ability to gather, synthesize, and contextualize educational and labor-market information into meaningful narratives for clients (CEDEFOP, 2023).
4. **Reflexive competence:** awareness of one's own interpretive framework, continuous self-evaluation, and adaptability in practice (Schön, 1994; Mezirow, 2000).
5. **Ethical competence:** commitment to confidentiality, respect, and autonomy; moral reasoning that guides professional judgment (Jorro, 2019).

These five dimensions form a **systemic structure** rather than discrete categories. They interconnect dynamically, shaping the counselor's professional identity and performance in real time.

2.4. The Competence Triad: Knowledge, Action, and Ethics

Building on this synthesis, competence can be modeled as a triadic system uniting:

- Knowledge and understanding — theoretical and procedural mastery;
- Action and adaptability — the capacity to act effectively in variable contexts;
- Ethical and reflective judgment — the ability to evaluate and justify action within a moral and relational framework.

This triad situates competence at the intersection of cognition, praxis, and ethics. In guidance counseling, it encapsulates the discipline's dual nature: analytical and humanistic, rational and relational, technical and moral.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is grounded in an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm, focusing on understanding how professional competence is constructed through discourse and practice. A qualitative design was employed, with a focus on analyzing anonymized counseling session transcripts. The research design was purposive and theoretical, aiming to capture the nuances of reflective practice, ethical judgment, and relational dynamics in guidance counseling.

3.1. Research Paradigm and Design

The study was grounded in an **interpretive and constructivist paradigm** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Within this paradigm, reality is viewed as socially and linguistically constructed through the interactions and meanings that participants create. Rather than measuring predefined variables, the research sought to **understand how counselors construct and express professional competence through discourse and interaction**.

A **qualitative research design** was therefore adopted, suitable for exploring complex cognitive and relational phenomena in depth. The qualitative approach privileges understanding over prediction, and interpretation over measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In guidance and counseling research, it allows investigators to capture the nuances of professional communication, the implicit ethical reasoning, and the situated reflexivity that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative metrics.

This study thus aligns with the hermeneutic tradition, emphasizing iterative interpretation and the constant dialogue between data, theory, and reflexive insight. The researcher acts not as a detached observer but as an interpreter engaged in the co-construction of meaning (Ricoeur, 1990).

3.2. Corpus and Sampling

The empirical corpus consists of **anonymized transcripts of real counseling sessions**, both individual and group, involving counselors and students engaged in educational or vocational decision-making processes. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stripped of any identifying information to ensure ethical integrity and confidentiality.

The **sampling procedure** was *theoretical and purposive* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead of aiming for representativeness or large-scale generalization, cases were selected for their **informational richness** and **diversity of professional contexts and interactional patterns**. Each transcript was treated as a *discursive unit of analysis* — a microcosm of counseling practice where competence could be observed as it unfolded.

The final corpus included a balanced range of counseling episodes reflecting different situations such as exploration of career options, clarification of values, and negotiation of academic choices. The focus remained on the *discursive performance* of competence rather than the specific demographic or institutional characteristics of participants.

3.3. Data Analysis and Coding Procedures

Data analysis followed a **reflexive thematic and discursive approach**, drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2019). The process was **iterative and inductive**, combining thematic categorization with discourse-analytic interpretation.

3.3.1. Open and Emergent Coding

The analysis began with an open coding phase aimed at identifying *meaning units* — lexical, semantic, or pragmatic segments that revealed professional acts of communication, reflection, or ethical judgment.

3.3.2. Thematic Categorization

In the second phase, these meaning units were grouped into higher-order *conceptual categories*, corresponding to the five dimensions of competence previously defined: communicative, relational, informational, reflexive, and ethical.

3.3.3. Discursive and Interactional Interpretation

The third phase focused on *how* competence was performed in discourse: turn-taking structures, use of modal expressions, repair sequences, reformulations, and rhetorical strategies that served to guide or empower the client.

The open-source software **RQDA** was used for data management, coding consistency, and category triangulation. The analytic logic was cyclical: categories were continuously refined in light of emerging data and theoretical insights, in accordance with grounded-theory principles (Charmaz, 2014).

3.4. Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness

The rigor of the study was ensured through multiple strategies corresponding to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of qualitative trustworthiness:

1. **Credibility:** achieved through triangulation of data, iterative reading, and cross-validation among coders.
2. **Transferability:** supported by thick description and detailed contextualization of interactions, enabling readers to evaluate the applicability of findings across settings.
3. **Dependability:** guaranteed through systematic documentation of the analytic process, including coding logs and decision trails.
4. **Confirmability:** maintained by reflexive journaling and explicit acknowledgment of researcher positionality and interpretive bias.

Rather than striving for statistical reliability, the study emphasized **coherence, transparency, and interpretive depth**. Trustworthiness was further reinforced through constant comparison between data and theoretical constructs, ensuring that interpretations remained empirically grounded.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of counseling interactions, ethics constituted a central concern at every stage of the research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all involved, and data were anonymized immediately after transcription. No identifying information—names, institutions, or locations—was retained.

The ethical approach followed the principles outlined in the *American Counseling Association Code of Ethics* (2014) and in qualitative research ethics frameworks (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Ethical competence was treated both as a **research imperative** and as an **object of analysis**: how counselors embodied confidentiality, neutrality, and respect for autonomy within their discourse was examined as part of the thematic coding. This double attention—to ethical procedure and ethical content—ensured that the study itself enacted the very reflexivity it sought to describe.

3.6. Researcher Reflexivity

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is not a passive instrument but an active interpreter. Reflexivity was therefore embedded throughout the project. The researcher maintained a detailed *reflexive journal* to monitor assumptions, reactions, and evolving interpretations.

Following Finlay (2012), reflexivity was conceptualized as a dialogue between *self*, *participants*, and *text*. This process enhanced analytic transparency and prevented the imposition of preconceptions on the data. The final interpretations thus represent a synthesis of empirical observation and theoretical reasoning, emerging from the constant negotiation between experience and understanding.

3.7. Limitations of the Methodology

Like any qualitative study, this research acknowledges certain limitations. The non-generalizable nature of the data restricts external validity but enhances **contextual and theoretical transferability**. The interpretive stance inevitably involves subjectivity, yet this was counterbalanced by methodological transparency and reflexive awareness.

Rather than a limitation, this interpretive subjectivity constitutes a **defining strength** of qualitative inquiry: it allows for nuanced comprehension of meaning, interaction, and ethical practice in counseling — dimensions that quantitative metrics often fail to capture (Tracy, 2020).

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS: MANIFESTATIONS OF COMPETENCE IN COUNSELING PRACTICE

4.1. Overview of the Analytical Structure

The analysis of anonymized transcripts revealed a **multilayered structure of professional competence** enacted within counseling discourse. Competence emerged not as an isolated skill or fixed category, but as an integrated process of *situated reasoning*, *relational regulation*, and *ethical self-awareness*.

Through iterative coding and interpretation, five interconnected dimensions of competence were identified:

1. Communicative competence
2. Relational competence
3. Informational competence
4. Reflexive competence
5. Ethical competence

Each dimension represents a facet of the counselor's professional identity, co-constructed through dialogue and responsive interaction. These dimensions interweave dynamically within counseling conversations, forming a cohesive ecology of professional practice.

4.2. Communicative Competence: Structuring Dialogue and Meaning

Communicative competence underpins all other professional functions. It is expressed through the counselor's ability to structure discourse, manage conversational flow, and employ language as a tool for cognitive and emotional mediation.

Typical indicators include the use of **open-ended questions**, **strategic silences**, **reformulations**, and **linguistic mirroring**. In one representative segment, the counselor invites reflection by balancing inquiry and support:

Counselor: "You mentioned feeling uncertain about which direction feels more meaningful for you. Could you tell me what comes to mind when you think about the kind of work that would make sense in your life right now?"

This interaction illustrates *discursive scaffolding* (Vygotsky, 1978): the counselor uses language to help the client articulate and organize thought, thus co-constructing meaning.

Linguistic flexibility also emerged as a hallmark of communicative competence. Counselors adapted their tone, vocabulary, and pacing according to the client's emotional state, demonstrating the **pragmatic intelligence** that distinguishes expert practitioners (Ivey & Ivey, 2019).

4.3. Relational Competence: Emotional Intelligence and Presence

Relational competence refers to the counselor's ability to establish a **trust-based, empathic, and professionally boundaried relationship**. Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2018) is its defining element — encompassing recognition of the client's affect, regulation of one's own emotional responses, and alignment of verbal and nonverbal communication.

An excerpt from a session illustrates the counselor's relational tact:

Client: "I don't think I'm capable of handling that path. Everyone seems more confident than I am."
Counselor: "It sounds like you're comparing yourself to others quite harshly. Let's take a moment to look at what you've already accomplished — would that be alright with you?"

The counselor neither minimizes the client's anxiety nor reinforces self-deprecation. Instead, they **reframe** the client's perception, redirecting attention to self-efficacy. This demonstrates *empathic attunement* combined with cognitive guidance — a synthesis central to relational competence (Rogers, 2003; Egan, 2014).

Relational competence thus manifests as a form of **ethical empathy**: the ability to recognize emotional complexity without losing professional neutrality.

4.4. Informational Competence: Mediation and Meaning-Making

While counseling often involves providing information about educational programs or labor markets, informational competence goes beyond data transmission. It concerns the **interpretive mediation of information** — transforming abstract data into personally meaningful knowledge.

In one transcript, a counselor reframes technical details about study options through narrative contextualization:

Counselor: "There are several pathways that could lead you toward that field. One involves a shorter program that emphasizes practical training; another offers a broader academic foundation. Which approach feels more aligned with how you like to learn?"

Here, the counselor transforms informational content into **dialogical material**, prompting reflection rather than compliance. Information becomes relationally situated; the counselor acts as a *translator* between institutional systems and personal aspirations (CEDEFOP, 2023).

Informational competence is therefore epistemic and ethical: it requires discernment, accuracy, and a commitment to empowering the client as an informed decision-maker.

4.5. Reflexive Competence: Thinking-in-Action

Reflexive competence is the meta-cognitive dimension of professionalism — the counselor's capacity to analyze, question, and regulate their own practice while it unfolds. Reflexivity was frequently observed in *metacommunicative statements*, in which counselors explicitly acknowledged uncertainty or reframed their own interventions:

Counselor: "I realize I may be focusing too much on practical details here. Let me step back — what feels most important for you right now in this decision?"

Such self-monitoring demonstrates what Schön (1994) calls **"reflection-in-action."** Rather than undermining authority, these moments of transparency strengthen the counselor's credibility by modeling adaptive reasoning and authentic presence.

Three modes of reflexivity were identified:

- **Situational reflexivity:** adjusting communication based on moment-to-moment dynamics;
- **Strategic reflexivity:** evaluating whether interventions serve the client's broader goals;
- **Ethical reflexivity:** reconsidering the implications of guidance for the client's autonomy.

Reflexivity thus functions as a *regulatory mechanism* of professional competence — integrating cognitive insight, relational awareness, and moral responsibility.

4.6. Ethical Competence: Responsibility and Dialogical Integrity

Ethical competence permeates all aspects of counseling practice. It refers to the **internalized moral awareness** guiding professional choices and ensuring that the counselor's actions respect the client's dignity and freedom.

Indicators of ethical competence include linguistic neutrality, transparent boundaries, and deliberate acknowledgment of the client's agency:

Counselor: "There's no single correct choice here. My role is to help you clarify what feels right for you — not to decide on your behalf."

Such formulations embody *dialogical integrity* (Buber, 1970): the ethical stance that honors the client as a subject, not an object, of the process. Ethical competence thus combines respect, discretion, and accountability — a moral practice enacted through everyday linguistic and relational micro-decisions.

In the analyzed corpus, ethical competence often appeared intertwined with reflexivity: counselors explicitly questioned the power dynamics of the interaction and adjusted their approach accordingly. This awareness underscores ethics as an active, situated component of competence rather than an external code of conduct (Jorro, 2019; Boutinet, 2020).

4.7. Integrative Model of Competence: A Dynamic System

Across all cases, competence emerged as a **systemic configuration** rather than a linear hierarchy. Communicative skill enabled relational trust; relational awareness fostered ethical reflection; informational accuracy supported empowerment; and reflexivity unified these dimensions into coherent professional action.

This **ecological model** aligns with Le Boterf's (2015) concept of competence as "knowing how to act in situation" — an adaptive orchestration of resources in response to context. Professional competence in guidance counseling is thus best described as a *living system of meaning*, constantly reorganized through reflection, dialogue, and ethical discernment.

4.8. Summary of Findings

Dimension	Core Function	Manifestations in Practice
Communicative	Structuring meaning through discourse	Open questions, reformulation, linguistic alignment
Relational	Establishing trust and empathy	Emotional attunement, active listening, boundary management
Informational	Mediating knowledge	Contextualized explanation, narrative framing
Reflexive	Regulating and interpreting practice	Metacommunication, self-assessment, situational awareness
Ethical	Safeguarding autonomy and dignity	Neutrality, transparency, dialogical responsibility

The five dimensions form a **synergistic matrix** that defines counseling professionalism. Together, they demonstrate that competence is less about "what one knows" and more about "how one relates, reflects, and reasons" within complex human interactions.

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION

5.1. Reconceptualizing Competence as a Dynamic System

The findings of this study invite a reconceptualization of professional competence not as a static accumulation of knowledge or skills, but as a **dynamic and relational system** that evolves through interaction, reflection, and ethical engagement. This reframing aligns with contemporary models of *reflective professionalism* (Schön, 1994; Perrenoud, 2001; Eraut, 2004), in which competence is viewed as a continual process of learning-in-action.

Competence in guidance counseling thus emerges as an *ecology of action*—a complex interplay between communicative precision, relational intelligence, informational accuracy, reflexive awareness, and moral integrity. Each component sustains the others, producing an adaptive professional identity capable of addressing the inherent uncertainty of human development and vocational decision-making.

This integrative perspective moves beyond reductionist or behaviorist understandings of competence. It conceptualizes professional performance as the **integration of cognition, emotion, and ethics**, allowing counselors to interpret and respond creatively to the uniqueness of each counseling encounter.

5.2. Epistemological Implications

From an epistemological standpoint, the study reinforces the view that competence must be understood as **situated, constructed, and dialogical**. It cannot be adequately assessed through static indicators or standardized evaluations. Instead, it manifests in *how* practitioners reason and make meaning in unpredictable contexts (Guichard, 2022; Jorro, 2019).

Professional knowledge is thus both **practical and moral**—what Ricoeur (1990) calls a "knowledge of action." Competence involves not only doing the right thing but **understanding why** it is right in relation to others. This implies that assessment and training frameworks should prioritize reflexivity, ethical sensitivity, and interpretive judgment over mere technical compliance.

Such an epistemology positions professional competence as a form of *practical wisdom* (*phronesis*), echoing Aristotelian and Deweyan traditions of experiential learning (Dewey, 1933). It restores human agency and moral responsibility to the core of professional practice.

5.3. Implications for Counselor Education and Continuing Professional Development

The results point to an urgent need to **rethink counselor training models** in light of this holistic view of competence. Traditional approaches often emphasize the acquisition of theoretical knowledge or procedural techniques. However, these alone are insufficient to foster the kind of reflective and ethical adaptability that real counseling practice demands.

Three major pedagogical implications emerge:

1. **Learning through Reflexivity:** Counselor education programs should incorporate structured opportunities for reflection-on-action (Schön, 1994) and critical self-analysis. Supervision, case discussions, and reflective journals help trainees recognize their interpretive assumptions and ethical dilemmas in practice.
2. **Integrating Ethics as Practice, Not Doctrine:** Ethical competence must be cultivated not merely through abstract codes, but through dialogical exercises—simulated interviews, ethical case analyses, and peer feedback—that enable students to *experience* ethical reasoning in action (Arthur & McMahon, 2019).
3. **Promoting Lifelong Professionalization:** Competence must be regarded as **a continuous developmental process**. Ongoing professional learning, peer supervision, and research engagement are essential for sustaining reflexivity and resilience in evolving socio-economic and educational contexts (CEDEFOP, 2023).

Collectively, these implications underscore the need for an **educational paradigm shift**—from teaching "what to do" to cultivating "how to think, reflect, and act responsibly."

5.4. Policy and Institutional Perspectives

Beyond the level of individual training, the study carries implications for **institutional and policy frameworks** in career and guidance services.

First, competence frameworks should explicitly recognize **reflexivity and ethics** as central domains of professional performance, alongside communication and technical knowledge.

Second, policy initiatives should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, psychologists, and labor-market analysts to strengthen systemic coherence in guidance practices.

International bodies such as the OECD (2021) and UNESCO (2021) emphasize the role of guidance systems in promoting equity, inclusion, and lifelong employability. Embedding the relational and reflective dimensions of competence into policy definitions could therefore contribute to more humane, adaptable, and sustainable guidance systems.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a qualitative inquiry, this study does not aim for statistical generalization. Its contribution lies in theoretical and conceptual generalizability—the ability to offer **transferable insights** about professional competence across contexts.
Future research could build upon this foundation by:

- Conducting **cross-cultural studies** comparing counselors' professional practices and competence models internationally;
- Combining **qualitative and quantitative approaches** to examine correlations between reflective competence and client outcomes;
- Exploring **digital mediation of competence**, particularly as virtual counseling and AI-based guidance tools become increasingly prevalent.

Such extensions would further refine the conceptualization of competence as both an individual and systemic construct

6. CONCLUSION

This study proposes an integrative framework for understanding professional competence in school and career guidance counseling. Competence is redefined as a **reflexive, dialogical, and ethical process**—a synthesis of knowledge, action, and moral judgment enacted through language and relationship.

The analysis of authentic counseling discourse revealed that competence cannot be detached from the lived complexity of practice. It is simultaneously *cognitive* (knowledge-based), *pragmatic* (situationally adaptive), and *ethical* (responsible and human-centered).

By emphasizing meaning-making, autonomy, and relational intelligence, this framework offers both a theoretical lens and a practical foundation for counselor education, supervision, and policy development.

Ultimately, professional competence in guidance counseling represents an **ethic of meaning and responsibility**—the ability to think, feel, and act wisely in the service of others' development. As the field continues to evolve, this humanistic and reflective vision of competence may serve as a guiding principle for the future of professional practice.

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