

Two Approaches to School Counseling as a Profession: From Boundaries to Core

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Abstract

The literature on school counseling as a profession has emphasized the classic boundaries approach, which perceives the profession's jurisdiction as a product of a power struggle for a distinct uniqueness. This paper aims to provide an alternative approach, in line with current approaches to professions. The author establishes a core-characteristics approach, highlighting the profession's core character as its source of legitimacy, encouraging continuous education and adapting to dynamic contexts. This mixed-methods study investigated the perceptions of school counselors and teachers regarding the status and sources of the counselor's legitimacy. The findings show that school counselors were recognized as influential professionals, and their main source of legitimacy was deemed to be character attributes, more than knowledge and education. Differences in perceptions were found vis-à-vis the profession's multi-specialist contexts. Further examining the core characteristics of the profession may enhance its legitimacy and help it thrive.

Keywords

School-counseling, profession, core, boundaries, specialization, teachers

Introduction

Counseling has historically struggled to consolidate its status as a profession (Mellin et al., 2011). The challenge of defining school counseling as a profession is intensified by having role ambiguity and multiple role definitions (Havlik et al., 2019), accelerated alterations (Chandler et al., 2018), and an overlap with similar professions (Antunes-Alves, 2010).

School counseling is set in a frequently changing landscape. It was initiated from vocational counseling at the turn of the 20th century; then, following the emergence of humanism and world wars, its focus shifted toward supporting students at risk as child and adolescent specialists; subsequently, legislation for the mainstreaming of special education students moved the focus toward diversity and needs of special populations (Blake, 2020).

Consequently, the school counselor's role often varies among schools (Popov & Spasenovic, 2020) and includes promoting the mental, social, academic, and career development of students and staff and advancing their optimal functioning and well-being. Their tasks span diverse areas of activity, including working with wide populations within and outside the school and assisting with various needs. By operating individual, group, and system interventions, they function "in a manner similar to" (Kolbert et al., 2022, p. 2) mental health therapists and provide individual counseling to at-risk students, assist special needs students, accompany educational teams in their work, and more.

Although differences exist among school counselors in different countries, they commonly share the vague nature of the profession, resulting in a low public understanding of its value, and an ongoing seek for recognition as unique and influential within both the mental health care services and the educational system (Harris, 2014; Heled et al., 2022; Phi Delta Kappan, 2016; Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). This recognition is significant in achieving satisfaction among the counselors and their clients, reinforcing counselors' sense of capability, and ensuring their commitment to the profession. A well-recognized professional identity grants practitioners a sense of stability, security, and pride in the practice of their profession (Remley & Herlihy, 2014). The future of a profession depends largely on the extent to which its members develop a sense of commitment, yet studies indicate a low degree of counselors' commitment to continue practicing counseling (Heled et al., 2022; Kim & Lambie, 2018).

The literature on school counseling as a profession has emphasized the prevalent ambiguity of school counseling in terms of a lack of the profession's distinctiveness due to poor boundaries. This classic boundaries approach perceives the profession's jurisdiction as a product of a power struggle for a distinct uniqueness. However, current discussions about professions highlight the importance of trustworthiness in the context of dynamic workplaces, based on the inner nature of professions. This discourse offers new insights into the process of recognition of school counseling as a profession.

In line with current approaches to professions, this paper establishes a new core-characteristics approach to school counseling as a profession, aiming to enhance its recognition as unique and influential. The present study examines the views of counselors and teachers on aspects that may indicate their preferences regarding the (new) core versus the (classic) boundary approaches.

Two approaches to the profession: Boundaries and core

This paper is the first to discern two approaches to the profession of school counseling: the classic boundaries approach and a new approach, which will be termed the core approach, developed by the author in line with the literature on current approaches to professions. While both strive to legitimize the profession as unique, they differ in their perspectives on the purpose and the sources of legitimacy. The boundaries approach emphasizes the profession's legitimacy as a product of a power struggle for a distinct uniqueness, where professionalism is grounded in formal education. On the other hand, the core approach presents the legitimacy of a profession based on continuous education, focusing on the core character of the profession, which is ever-adapting to dynamic contexts.

The classic boundaries approach

According to the boundaries approach, professions are shaped out of conflicts on boundaries as a turf-driven matter. They gain recognition over subfields that remained securely protected within their bosom, while other occupations had taken some subfields away from them (Abbot, 1988, 1995).

Therefore, *the purpose of defining the profession* is to achieve recognition of a monopoly of expert knowledge, by the professionals and others. Insofar, literature on school counseling as a profession has focused on its struggle for legitimacy and status. Its essence has been described in terms of distinctive boundaries and unique features:

[...] by those who belong to it and by those who do not practice it, enabling distinction between groups. The perception of the profession's unique features by its practitioners, professionals in adjacent fields, supplementary professionals [...] affects professional status and practitioners' appreciation of the historical sources and building blocks that comprise the profession. (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021, p. 65)

The nature of the counseling profession makes it difficult to agree on what distinguishes counselors from other helping professionals (Antunes-Alves, 2010). Antunes-Alves (2010) elucidated that school counseling can be described as falling somewhere between psychology and social work, based on its history, and as falling somewhere between education and psychology because its literature, theories, and role models come from these two fields.

According to Antunes-Alves (2010), while other mental health practitioners, such as psychologists, have earned unchallengeable professional recognition, school counselors are still

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fighting for their recognition. The literature on the school counseling profession has been following this hierarchy perspective of the professions as constantly struggling for upward movement and/or against downward movement (Liljegren, 2012), and called to define the profession's unique identity rather than only one that "imitates" other professions in the field of mental health or education (Pelling & Whetham, 2006), and thus to promote its significant legitimacy as perceived by others (Reiner & Hernandez, 2013).

According to the classic boundaries approach, boundaries are what constitutes a profession, focusing on the jurisdiction of what is done and by whom (Liljegren, 2012). While counseling has similarities with mental health therapy (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003), in many schools the role of the school counselor has been limited to referring students to specialists when responding to mental health or diagnostic needs (Zagelbaum et al., 2014). Mecadon-Mann and Tuttle (2023) elucidated that this approach delineates the scope of work for school counselors as to not diagnosing students but recognizing how a student's diagnosis can potentially affect the student's ability to achieve success, providing brief counseling in the school setting and supporting the student in obtaining outside services if long-term clinical/mental health counseling is needed.

According to Dimmitt and Zyromski (2020), this is a limited focus of the counselor's role that weakens the counselor's recognition as a unique powerful professional, within both the mental health care services and the education systems. Referral of students to community mental health professionals may undersell the competencies of school counselors, assuming they cannot adequately serve students with mental health needs, while schools are not benefitting from the work that could be provided by a high-level educated mental health professional who is already on site (DeKruyf et al., 2013).

Blurred boundaries coexist also between school counselors and one of the important groups of professionals within the school system, the teachers. Teachers constitute an integral part of the vision of school counseling, whose perceptions of school counseling as a profession might have an impact on its status as a profession (Beames et al., 2022; Cholewa et al., 2016). Teachers generally believe that counselors have a greater role in screening for mental health problems, teaching social-emotional lessons, and referring to other services (Franklin et al., 2017). Yet, teachers want more mental health training to increase their own literacy and competence, and a growing number of teachers participate in in-service courses studying counseling "tools" (Whitley et al., 2013; Winter et al., 2005). To the boundaries approach, these conditions exacerbate the difficulty of school counselors in defining their unique role and their professional "added value" in the school workplace.

In sum, according to the boundaries approach the purpose of defining the school counseling profession is to achieve a recognition of its status based on distinctiveness, as perceived by the professionals and by those who do not practice it.

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Source of legitimacy: Theories that underline boundaries conceptualize professions in terms of conflicts, power, and exclusiveness, and describe professions as competing for expertise-based jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). The strength of a profession's claims is based on the possession of expert knowledge, the “currency of competition” (Abbot, 1988, p. 102). These claims have warranted professionals their elevated roles in society (Larson, 2013). Accordingly, the professionals' unique knowledge, not possessed by others, constitutes a source of power and status (Moore, 1970) and may accord practitioners a sound basis for understanding their work. Knowledge and expertise are central to claims of the professions (Mellin et al., 2011).

School counseling strived to attest to its quality and to distinguish itself from a *semi-profession*, based on a recognition of the possession of unique knowledge and exclusive tasks that constitute its sources of power. A semi-profession is a field whose status as a profession is perceived as less legitimized, missing the systematic theoretical body of knowledge that reflects unique expertise (Burrage & Trosendhal, 1990; Howsam et al., 1976). To empower the status of the profession, counseling communities have joined the agenda of attributing importance to an advanced level of education. Following early definitions of professions (Greenwood, 1957), in many countries (according to Popov and Spasenovic, 2020, this includes most of the states of the U.S.; countries in Europe such as Ireland or Croatia; and Israel which was studied in the present research), school counseling involves common abstract knowledge acquired by a master's-level degree education, as a source of legitimacy and status.

The boundaries approach focuses on controlling distinct subfields based on formal education, which positions legitimized professionals within the hierarchy of professions. These distinct fields should be based on clear role definitions, while the roles of school counseling are vague, constantly changing, and all-encompassing. As a consequence, professionals are trained to be proficient in a wide range of roles and tasks, resulting in confused school counselors with low self-efficacy (Chandler et al., 2018).

The core approach

The core approach suggests that professions are shaped out of recognition of their core character. They attract and lose various subfields because they are closer to or further from their inner nature.

The purpose of defining the profession, according to discussions on professions in the last two decades, has shifted from questions of structure and function, power and privilege, to highlighting the fluidity of a professional workplace and the mobilization of occupational groups (Münste & Scheid, 2017; Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). Changing needs, professionals' personal inclinations, and diverse expectations, are linked to extensive transformations in the modern working world, with epochal changes accompanying transformations in the system of professions. Instead of focusing on occupations striving towards constructing boundaries that will

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distinguish them from competing occupational groups, this process is perceived as signifying a need for a narrative of recognition, trust and accountability in a dynamic world.

Sources of legitimacy: According to the core approach, a profession is defined by its core "character" rather than its functions or boundaries. This core is manifested in the internalization of attitudes and perspectives, adopting the professional culture, language, and ethics, and acquiring a personal commitment to professional ideas (Hill, Bandfield, & White, 2007; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Indeed, counselors develop professionalism by undergoing a change both at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, starting from the stage of counseling students (Brott & Myers, 1999).

Abbott (1988, 1995, 2005) offered a re-analysis of the social work profession. Similar to school counseling, this profession is dealing with concerns about the profession's sources of legitimacy, which Abbott (1995, p. 561) termed "the heart of the field." To Abbott, social work has emphasized formal education as its foundation. However, the public's image of work was to help people. The central public legitimacy comes not from science; instead, it is based on a character trait, that the public trusts.

The core of the profession in these terms is set within the professional character. The aim of the profession is not a stable entity, nor a final achievement, but a continuous and dynamic process of interpretation and customization, which is shaped by contextual workplace factors. Within these ever-changing processes the profession's core character is firmed rather than its boundaries.

The Australian Council of Professions provided an agreed definition of professions, in which expert knowledge is combined with trustworthiness (Baumfield et al., 2023). The legitimacy of who can perform the work and what is needed to perform and evaluate it (Freidson, 2001) may be strengthened based on two central sources: the profession's knowledge that adapts to new niches following changes in the workplace (Abbott, 1995), and having the trustworthiness of the public-partners in its character.

The legitimacy of the profession may stem from the ability of professionals to abstract their knowledge, to trustworthily solve novel problems, and to adapt their practices to new niches (Abbott, 1995). Moreover, the identity of a profession reflects its unique knowledge, as manifested by the respective professionals in relations with colleagues, clients, and members of complementary professions (Antunes-Alves, 2010; Woo et al., 2014). These should be examined within and adapted to changing contexts. Frost (2001) elaborated on these connections, arguing that continuing education is needed for professions to replenish their knowledge base, thereby renewing their claims of expertise and maintaining their status in society. Frost (2001) stated that if the claims for professionalism are based on learning and expertise, and this claim for expertise is vulnerable, continuing education and defining specializations within the profession should be seen as a central question in terms of the future of the profession.

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The profession is perceived as always predisposed to change, with other parties interacting with the professionals and influencing the content of their roles. Opening up to new niches and specifications may serve as sources of legitimacy.

Lengthy and systematic continuous learning is particularly central to counseling as a helping profession (American School Counselor Association, 2019; Smith & Robinson, 1995), but the tracks for counselors' continuing professional expertise are unclear and further complicated by their vague nature (Konstam et al., 2015; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Many professions, including the "ideal-typical" professions such as law and medicine, are moving rapidly away from rigid structures, having more internal diversity in terms of careers, with several subfields and different levels of certification (Abbott, 1995). Abbott suggested that professions would be forwarding their claims within the workplace and before the public.

The present study

Despite the change in its status in recent years, the preoccupation with establishing a "distinct definition" of school counseling has increased in many countries (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). For example, in Israel, where the present study was conducted, the role of the school counselor may vary among schools, but they share the ambiguity, changes, and overlap with similar professionals. Heled and Davidovitch (2021) described school counseling in Israel and elucidated that since the profession of school counseling has not yet managed to develop a clear sense of professional identity and role definition, others define the role of the school counselors and dictate what counselors should do in the schools, resulting in counselors' engagement in various administrative and educational tasks that are not unrelated to the counselor's work. Moreover, their role combines the performance of planned tasks and providing immediate responses to unexpected demands of the education system.

According to Casula et al. (2021), inquiry is a *process* where inductive and deductive activities can occur simultaneously or in a back-and-forth manner. They suggest using a *working hypothesis* as a conceptual tool that furthers investigation in its early or transitioning phases (instead of inductive/deductive dualities) and to describe how a topic is new or reference change. When using a working hypothesis, the picture's interpretation is new, and its application is anchored in resolving problematic situations by the inclusive of the many views of participants (multiple realities). Mixed methods support such research (Casula et al., 2021).

Aiming to resolve the problematic situation of the school counselors' ongoing seek for recognition as unique and influential professionals within the mental health care services and the education systems, this research utilized a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design (Hirose & Creswell, 2023), in which the findings of the first qualitative phase of the research guide the development of the quantitative survey.

This paper presents the quantitative phase of the study, following the qualitative phase findings. The qualitative phase included 20 in-depth interviews with school counselors about

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sources of strength and difficulty and perceived future. The qualitative findings encompassed three main themes: the struggle and need to be recognized as unique and influential; personal characteristics over knowledge and education as the main school counselors' sources of legitimacy; and school counselors' future picture including optional specializations and positions.

This led to a deductively quantitative examination of a new approach to school counseling through the multiple realities views of both counselors and teachers, as teachers constitute a dominant part of the vision of school counseling and impact its nature and its status as a profession (Beames et al., 2022; Cholewa et al., 2016). The study examined their perceptions regarding three aspects that may indicate the applicability of the core approach to contribute to resolving the problematic situation:

1. Present status of the profession: To what level is the school counselor perceived by teachers and counselors as unique and influential? The boundaries approach fits where power is the source of the problematic situation, that is where the professional is perceived as influential to a low degree, and the counselors perceive their uniqueness to a higher degree than the teachers. However, a core approach fits if school counselors are perceived as influential and their uniqueness as vague, by both teachers and the counselors themselves.
2. Sources of legitimacy: Is professional knowledge and education (following the classic boundaries approach) perceived as the school counselors' main source of legitimacy, or their intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics (following the core approach)?
3. School counseling domain: The profession should be studied not as a fixed thing, but rather as a contested matter (Abbott, 1995). If the core approach is to be applicable, it needs to be explored while understanding its context. The challenges of school counseling are rooted in its workplace and demands. Therefore, participants were asked about their preferences regarding school counselors' specialization (therapy/academic-oriented), and their anticipations concerning optional positions of the school counselor (within and outside the school context).

The study further examined whether and to what extent differences exist in the way each of those aspects is perceived regarding role (counselor/teacher) and level of education (bachelor's degree versus advanced degrees).

Method

Participants

In the quantitative phase, there were 311 participants (134 school counselors and 177 teachers). Of the *counselors*: 88.1% were women; 29.3% held bachelor's degrees, 70.7% advanced

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degrees; 38.6% worked in elementary schools, 61.4% in secondary schools; the average age was 37 years (SD=8.77); an average of nine years in professional practice (SD=7.45). Of the *teachers*: 84.1% were women; 73.1% held bachelor's degrees, 26.9% advanced degrees; 51.6% worked in elementary schools, 48.4% in secondary schools; the average age was 38 years (SD=10.28); an average of 15 years in professional practice (SD=10.15).

Procedure

Based on the theoretical background and a content analysis of the interviews in the qualitative phase, a questionnaire was formulated; it was subjected to the review of three experts from the fields of counseling and methodology, and only items for which there was 100% consensus were left in; The questionnaire was administered to a pilot sample of 34 students who were studying toward their master's degree in counseling; some of them were teachers and some were actual counselors. Pursuant to the participants' comments and reliability tests, several alterations in style and editing were made and the final version of the questionnaire was prepared. Questionnaires were distributed personally to counselors and teachers using a snowball sampling method. The response rate was 95%. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and honored.

Instruments

Parallel versions of the questionnaire were administered to counselors and teachers, and included the following items and scales:

1. Perceptions of the school counselor as a unique and influential professional

This aspect was measured in three parts: (a) A scale including six-point Likert scale items, examining the perceptions regarding the school counselor in terms of being influential in schools. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .819, reflecting good internal consistency. Example items are: "The counselor has a central position at school"; "The counselor has the power to influence the school system".; (b) A question concerning the uniqueness of the assistance rendered by the counselor: "If the school were to obtain additional hours, would it be preferable: to give them to the counselor / to give them to assistance inside classrooms?"; (c) A scale including six-point Likert scale items, regarding the uniqueness of the counselor in the education settings. Example items are: "If teachers had the time, they would almost not need a counselor at school"; "If every teacher were to learn 'counseling' principles, he would almost not need a counselor at school". The Cronbach's alpha was acceptable (.639).

2. Sources of legitimacy

This aspect was measured in a question in which the participants were asked to choose the counselor's main source of legitimacy (one option) from a list. A categorical index — *the source of legitimacy* — was constructed, containing two categories: *Professional* (knowledge, education, skills) and *Personal* (personality and relationships with others at school).

3. School counseling domain

This aspect was measured in two parts: (a) Participants were asked to indicate their preferences on six-point Likert scale items, including fields of additional specialization for the school counselor. A Varimax free factor analysis with an orthogonal rotation yielded two factors that contributed jointly to the explained variance of 49.07% (the first 30.51% and the second 18.56%): Factor 1 — *a therapy-oriented specialization* (e.g., family-therapy, group-therapy, coaching) and Factor 2 — *academic-oriented specialization* (e.g., assessments and special needs teaching methods). Table 1 presents the factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha measures; (b) A question about various anticipated positions of the school counselor asked the participants to choose one out of a list of options, that included positions inside and outside the school (a full-time job in school counseling; supervision; school-management; private clinic).

Table 1

Continuous Education Specializations: Factor Loadings and Cronbach Alpha Reliabilities

Item	Factor loading	
	1	2
Factor 1: Therapy-Oriented		
Family therapy	.708	
Parental guidance	.693	
Group therapy	.691	
Coaching	.618	
Therapy methods (art, music etc.)	.604	
Factor 2: Academic-Oriented		
Assessments		.845
Special needs teaching methods		.749
Psychodidactic diagnosis		.701
Cronbach alpha reliability	.712	.707

Findings

Perceptions of school counseling were as follows:

1. Perceptions of the school counselor as a unique and influential professional

A scale consisting of 6-point Likert items was used to measure to what level counselors and teachers perceive school counselors as influential professionals in schools. The results indicate that school counselors were perceived as influential professionals in schools by both counselors (M=5.20, SD=0.64) and teachers (M=4.48, SD=0.95). However, a two-way (2 x 2) (role x level of education) analysis of variance indicates that teachers perceived the counselor

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as less influential than counselors [$F(1,296)=51.96$; $p<.001$]. No effect of level of education was found.

To test differences regarding the question of whether to give extra hours either to the counselors or to assistance inside classrooms, a χ^2 analysis was performed, yielding significant differences as regards role [$\chi^2(1)=59.64$; $p<.001$]. 80.7% of the counselors believed that it was preferable to give counselors extra hours, while only 30.9% of the teachers did. No differences were found regarding level of education.

On the scale consisting of 6-point Likert items regarding the uniqueness of the counselor in the education settings, both counselors ($M=3.76$, $SD=0.79$) and teachers ($M=3.49$, $SD=1.04$) perceived the uniqueness of the school counselor to a moderate degree. A two-way (2×2) analysis of variance was conducted to examine the differences as regards roles (counselor/teacher) and level of education (bachelor's degree/advanced degrees). Results showed a significant effect of role [$F(1,295)=10.96$; $p<.001$] where counselors perceived the uniqueness of the counselor at a higher level than teachers. Additionally, a significant main effect of level of education was found [$F(1,295)=6.69$; $p<.01$], revealing that holders of advanced degrees ($M=3.45$, $SD=0.88$) perceived the uniqueness of the counselor at a lower level than holders of bachelor's degrees ($M=3.76$, $SD=1.00$). No interaction was found.

Sources of legitimacy: The participants were asked to choose the counselor's main source of legitimacy from a list including *professional* (knowledge, education, skills) and *personal* (personality and relationships) aspects. 37.9% of the participants chose the professional aspect as the main source of the counselor's legitimacy (32.5% chose skills, 4.3% chose knowledge, and 1.1% chose education), while 62.1% of them chose the personal aspect as the main source of the counselor's legitimacy (44% chose personality and 18.1% chose relationships). No significant differences were found as regards role and education.

2. School counseling domain

Participants were asked to indicate their preferences related to an option of an additional specialization in counseling, including *therapy-oriented specialization* and *academic-oriented specialization*. An analysis of variance with repeated measurements found an interaction [$F(1,302)=32.48$; $p<.001$]: there were differences between counselors who preferred *therapy-oriented specialization* more than the teachers [$t(302)=4.05$; $p<.001$] and a preference among the teachers for an *academic-oriented specialization* [$t(302)=3.33$; $p<.001$].

As to the anticipated positions of school counselors, among counselors, 35.1% chose a private clinic, followed by supervision (33.3%), a full-time job in school counseling (26.3%), and school management (5.3%). Among teachers, percentages of choices were: supervision (37.3%), a full-time job in school counseling (31.4%), a private clinic (23.5%), and school management (7.8%).

Discussion

In the last decade, the preoccupation of school counseling with questing for recognition has increased (Chandler et al., 2018; Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). This paper marks the first attempt to apply current approaches to defining the profession of school counseling.

The findings revealed that school counselors were perceived as influential professionals in the education system, both by counselors and teachers. However, the exclusivity of the counselor was perceived to a moderate degree. According to the boundaries approach, the school workplace's nature may pose a threat to the counselor as an exclusive professional who cannot be replaced. Yet, the boundaries approach fits where power is the source of the problematic situation, that is, where the professional is perceived as influential to a low degree. However, the results seem to support the core approach, as the school counselors were perceived as influential by both teachers and the counselors themselves.

The classic boundaries approach has been fueled by the ambiguity of whether the school counselor is a special professional, or an educator with special training for counseling in the school (Cashwell et al., 2009; Cinotti, 2014). The fact that the counselor is a part of the available staff at school makes it necessary to gain uniqueness, opposing claims by which the need for counselors is due to time constraints of the teachers who therefore are not able to respond to their students' emotional and more personal needs (Tatar & Bekerman, 2009). If teachers view school counselors as supplements to their own role in teaching and learning, they may seek support from any available source without considering the unique professionalism of the counselor.

On the other hand, the core approach suggests a different view and a solution to the profession's problem of ambiguity and low status. If school counselors' uniqueness is perceived as vague by the counselors themselves, and if character rather than formally acquired knowledge is the school counselor's main source of legitimacy, as the findings demonstrate, then while teachers can acquire basic counseling courses, a long-term study dedicated to the character core of a counselor is necessary to professionally fulfill the role. To earn the recognition of uniqueness, developing the core is needed.

Antunes-Alves (2010) found that counselors did not value the advantages of having a Ph.D., indicating that it would not make them better counselors as will a continued practical experience: "Participants valued wisdom over knowledge" (Antunes-Alves, 2010, p. 134). Similarly, in the present study, professional characteristics of knowledge and education were perceived to a lower degree as the main source of legitimacy of the counselor than the intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics. The present findings align with previous research findings (Amin et al., 2016), where the host of personal attributes was considered a major factor in counseling, along with the combination of interpersonal skills and sufficient knowledge about the issues involved, with no difference as regards level of education. This coincides with

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Abbott's (1995) suggestion to focus on character, and therefore on what can be done by no other professional.

Continuous learning and specialization are significant components of a profession and may serve as legitimizers (Abbott, 1995; Frost, 2001). While teachers preferred that counselors specialize in their upskilling continuous education in *academic-oriented skills* (e.g. assessments and special needs teaching methods), counselors tended to specialize in *therapy-oriented skills* (e.g. coaching and therapy). According to the boundaries approach, these well-expressed differences in preferences between teachers and counselors may result in undervaluing counselors' uniqueness, leading to dissatisfaction among counselors (Blake, 2020; Havlik et al., 2019). As a result, counselors may feel unfulfilled when they spend their time helping students with academic administration, despite their desire to focus on counseling activities that reflect their professionalism (Mau et al., 2016). Moreover, Astramovich et al. (2013) suggested that teachers are equally competent to perform duties in all domains except for mental health counseling, inasmuch as teachers are typically trained at the bachelor's level, which is adequate for academic and career domains that may not require graduate-level training. However, school counselors are typically trained at the master's level and possess more advanced skills (see Harris, 2014: Globally, school counseling is a graduate profession, where a master's degree in counseling is either required or highly desirable, and internationally the majority of school counselors have a teaching qualification or a teaching experience in addition to their bachelor's degree in teaching, psychology, guidance, and counseling, or social work).

However, the core approach to professions suggests that differences in preferences between teachers and counselors regarding the counselors' specialization do not reflect a disagreement between teachers and counselors. Instead, they map onto the multi-specialist domain of school counseling (Beames et al., 2022) and highlight precisely the advantage of the profession being flexible and contested, as school counseling allows for these two domains. Since the core is the character and the tasks may vary, this raises the question of whether school counseling can be placed not only in schools but also in private clinics, as the counselors have opted.

Contribution

The core approach contributes to the school counseling profession by offering an alternative to the boundaries approach by shifting the focus from conflicts over status and analyzing lists of roles, to crystallizing the profession's character. However, the attributes of this core are yet to be studied. In striving to distinguish the counseling profession, past studies have noted the counselors' need for differentiation vis-à-vis other helping professions (Hill et al., 2007), and found that, unlike psychology, which counselors have perceived as emphasizing testing, and unlike social work, which they perceived as focusing on systemic issues, counseling was

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perceived as grounded in a developmental, prevention, and wellness orientation toward helping (Mellin et al., 2011). It is important to continue clarifying this issue both through research and through policy to shape and define the unique core and develop the expertise of school counselors. Further studies are needed to examine the profession's language, culture, attitudes, and ethics through qualitative and quantitative studies, and to characterize the profession. It is suggested to single out specializations that utilize a language that is common to professionals in their ecosystem while holding a unique counseling methodology that might serve their practice (Astramovich et al., 2013; Kress & Eriksen, 2010).

This research may contribute to the field of professions in several ways. The case of school counseling demonstrates that a profession can be perceived as having an influential and central role although not perceived as having discernable knowledge. Knowledge can be acquired by others as well, but the professional owns the profession's 'character'. Furthermore, the research demonstrates a desire of professionals for a non-fixed profession, which allows them to apply the 'character' in diverse contexts such as a private clinic. This aspiration may characterize professionals from other professions as well. Finally, the approach that professions are shaped out of recognition of their core and inner nature can serve other professions (Abbott, 1995), particularly the helping professions, and it is recommended to continue and explore this approach.

The study was conducted in a single country and, as mentioned, school counseling practices may vary between countries and among different schools. Therefore, the objective of this paper is not to establish an international claim but to emphasize the importance of exploring the profession's core characteristics in a dynamic view. Further research is required in other contexts and with additional stakeholders such as students, parents, psychologists, principals, and policymakers, to understand their interactions and better comprehend the contextual issues associated with the nature of this profession. The recognition of counselors' expertise is influenced by evidence of specialized training, in addition to the behavioral evidence of expertness and reputation as an expert (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Heppner & Pew, 1977; Strong, 1968; Woo et al., 2017). These elements need to be further studied by examining perceptions as well as behavioral interactions in various contexts. We should understand the processes of learning the core, both through formal programs and informal workplace interactions and at various career stages (Baumfield et al., 2023).

Finally, policymakers should acknowledge the need to entice high-level counselors to remain in the school system. In the present study, counselors opted for a position in a private clinic. While this position may uphold a core dynamic approach, it weakens the bond between professionals and the school system. Moreover, advanced degree holders found the counseling profession less unique. These findings highlight the importance of placing continuous education and specialization, elements that have been neglected so far, in the foreground as factors to be examined in future studies, re-focusing on education not only as a formal source of

legitimacy but as a source for the development of the core and the legitimacy of the profession in the eyes of the professionals themselves. Among the various factors that may influence choosing a workplace, offering continuing education on the core of the profession is one way to support professionals and grant them the status of vital professionals.

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