

Finding Meaning in Professional Identity Amid Role Ambiguity: A Thematic Analysis of Indonesian School Counselors' Experiences

Maya Rahadian Septiningtyas¹, Lobby Loekmono²

^{1,2}Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga, Jawa Tengah, (0298) 321212

e-mail: *¹maya.septningtyas@uksw.edu, ²lobby.loekmono@uksw.edu

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Abstract. *This qualitative study examines how Indonesian guidance and counseling (GC) teachers construct and negotiate their professional identity amid role ambiguity in schools. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 GC teachers from elementary and secondary schools across 12 districts/cities in Central Java. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal two interconnected patterns. First, participants understood counseling as a source of personal fulfillment and a specialized profession grounded in competence, empathy, and confidentiality; however, some regarded counseling as secondary to teaching duties. Second, overlapping teaching, disciplinary, administrative, and inclusive-education responsibilities blurred professional boundaries and sometimes undermined students' trust. Participants also demonstrated adaptability by seeking professional development and integrating supportive practices into additional roles. These findings suggest that professional identity is continuously negotiated between counselors' professional values and institutional expectations. Clearer role boundaries, relevant competency development, and sustained institutional support are needed to strengthen school counseling practice in Indonesia.*

Keywords: *Professional identity, Guidance Counselors, Role ambiguity, Professional challenges, Professional development*

A. INTRODUCTION

Professional identity is fundamental to the career development of guidance and counseling (GC) teachers because it provides direction, meaning, and boundaries for their professional responsibilities. A strong identity shapes not only how GC teachers understand themselves as professionals but also the quality of services, work ethics, and commitment to the profession (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Gibson et al., 2012). In counseling, professional identity underpins ethical decision-making, interprofessional communication, and role clarity in educational settings (Atici, 2015; Nelson & Nelson, 2017).

In practice, counselors' professional identity is generally supported by certification systems, continuing education, and structured supervision (Moss et al., 2014). In Indonesia, however, guidance and counseling continues to face significant challenges. GC services are often viewed merely as a student discipline function rather than a psychopedagogical service focused on student mental well-being (P. . C. Bhakti, 2015; Handayani, 2013). This narrow perception creates role ambiguity: GC teachers are frequently assigned duties outside their professional remit, including teaching general subjects, handling school administration, or serving on disciplinary teams.

Since the 1960s, guidance and counseling in Indonesia has undergone a paradigmatic transformation, particularly with the establishment of the Indonesian Guidance and Counseling Association (ABKIN), which sets competency, ethical, and qualification standards. Minister of National Education Regulation No. 27 of 2008 establishes academic qualifications and professional standards for counselors. Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent. Many schools do not assign GC teachers duties aligned with their professional capacity, and institutional recognition of counseling functions remains limited.

Inconsistent implementation of regulations and weak professional identity directly affect service effectiveness. GC teachers experiencing administrative pressures and role ambiguity often report emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction (Woo & Henfield, 2015), potentially undermining counseling interactions and students' trust in GC services.

Furthermore, in the Indonesian sociocultural context, GC teachers' professional identity is influenced by cultural values such as respect for hierarchy, reluctance to discuss personal difficulties, and stigma surrounding counselling (Rachmadhani, 2016). These values require culturally sensitive navigation of social dynamics to establish effective and meaningful therapeutic relationships.

Although previous studies have highlighted professional challenges faced by GC teachers, relatively few empirical studies have examined in depth how

Indonesian GC teachers construct and interpret their professional identity amid role ambiguity and limited institutional support. Accordingly, this study aims to:

1. Explore how GC teachers themselves understand the meaning of professional identity;
2. Analyze how GC teachers interpret and perform their professional roles amid structural ambiguity; and
3. Identify challenges that hinder the strengthening of professional identity in schools.

The findings are expected to contribute to scholarly discussions of school counselor professionalism in Indonesia and provide an empirical basis for strengthening national GC policy and professional practice.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Professional Identity

Professional identity is a multidimensional construct encompassing how individuals understand, interpret, and present themselves as members of a profession (Beijaard et al., 2004). Rather than merely an occupational label, it is a dynamic process through which professional values, beliefs, competencies, and commitments acquire meaning (Beijaard et al., 2004). In counseling, professional identity is a key marker of legitimacy and role effectiveness in schools. According to Rønnestad and Skovholt (2014), counselor identity develops through ongoing reflection and internalization of professional experience. Early-career GC teachers are strongly influenced by counselor education and field supervision. Over time, their identity is continually negotiated through social interaction, school culture, and institutional expectations (Shores, 2011).

In Indonesia, GC teachers' identity formation frequently involves tensions between the ideals of the counseling profession and educational realities. Diverse academic backgrounds, administrative demands, and additional non-counseling duties require GC teachers to adapt creatively while maintaining their

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professional identity (Handayani, 2013). Thus, identity develops not only through formal education but also through social negotiation within school structures and cultures.

Role Ambiguity in the Guidance and Counseling Profession

Role ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity or predictability regarding the scope, methods, and expected outcomes of a professional role (Gilboa et al., 2008). In schools, it often arises from discrepancies between stakeholders' understanding of GC services and the profession's actual mandate (P. . C. Bhakti, 2015). GC teachers face competing expectations as academic educators and personal counselors, creating psychological pressure and professional dilemmas (Nelson & Nelson, 2017).

Woo & Henfield (2015) show that role ambiguity contributes to emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and weakened professional identity clarity among school counselors. In Indonesia, these issues are compounded by social norms positioning teachers as moral and administrative authorities, often relegating counseling to a secondary function (Rachmadhani, 2016).

GC Teacher Professionalism and Its Challenges in Indonesia

Normatively, GC teacher professionalism in Indonesia is explicitly regulated. Minister of National Education Regulation No. 27 of 2008 concerning Academic Qualification and Competency Standards for Counselors establishes professional expectations for services in four domains: personal, social, academic, and career development, delivered through responsive services, individual planning, and systems support. ABKIN has also established ethical codes and practice standards guiding comprehensive psychopedagogical services.

However, studies (P. . C. Bhakti, 2015; Handayani, 2013) consistently reveal a substantial gap between regulatory ideals and everyday practice. GC teachers remain subject to the outdated stereotype of the "school police," focused on discipline. Consequently, they encounter structural challenges that generate role

ambiguity, including subject-teaching assignments, administrative workloads, and inadequate institutional support for core counseling functions.

The literature suggests that professional identity involves negotiating meaning within organizational contexts. Although professional standards for Indonesian GC teachers are defined, practice remains characterized by role ambiguity arising from implementation gaps and misconceptions. This study addresses that gap by examining not simply whether challenges exist, but how GC teachers subjectively interpret, negotiate, and construct their professional identity under persistent role ambiguity.

C. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of GC teachers' subjective experiences of constructing and negotiating professional identity. Participants were 33 GC teachers from elementary, junior secondary, and senior secondary schools across 12 districts/cities in Central Java Province. They included 11 men and 22 women, aged 25–60 years, with 2–33 years of work experience. Purposive sampling was based on the following criteria:

- 1) actively providing GC services in formal schools;
- 2) having at least two years of experience; and
- 3) being willing to participate in an in-depth interview.

Interviews were digitally audio-recorded after participants signed written informed consent forms ensuring confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth exploration of professional identity, professional roles, and influencing factors.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews lasting 60–120 minutes, preceded by a demographic questionnaire. The interview guide explored professional identity, counselor roles and functions, and factors affecting them. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012),

involving (1) verbatim transcription, (2) data familiarization, (3) inductive coding, (4) theme development, (5) theme review, and (6) theme naming and narrative reporting. Trustworthiness was supported through member checking, whereby summaries of findings and themes were presented to selected participants to assess whether the researchers' interpretations reflected their experiences, and through the inclusion of direct quotations. These procedures aimed to ensure accurate representation of counselors' authentic experiences.

D. FINDINGS

Meaning of the Profession and Professional Identity Formation

Indonesian GC teachers' professional identity emerges from an interplay of personal meaning, humanistic values, and school-based experience. Participants understood their profession not merely as formal employment but as a vocation and an avenue for self-actualization. Three main dimensions emerged:

a. A Source of Personal Fulfillment

Most participants viewed the profession as a form of self-actualization expressed through a commitment to students' holistic development, including character, behavior, and psychosocial well-being. One elementary school GC teacher explained:

"I have a major responsibility to build students' character. I teach them basic values and help them develop attitudes such as politeness and independence."

(TM, ES, 60)

This statement suggests that fulfillment comes not simply from teaching but from shaping students' moral foundations. The responsibility to "build character" was understood as central to the profession.

Beyond this formative role, fulfillment also emerged from protective and mediating work. GC teachers frequently confronted the risks and challenges of adolescence:

"I fight to keep students who are considered problematic from being expelled from school ... they need time to change." (AS, JHS, 44)

This finding places GC teaching within a humanistic practice requiring empathy, moral courage, and emotional dedication. Counseling is not merely an administrative procedure but an ethical act that protects students' dignity and well-being.

GC teachers also served as symbolic and inspirational figures. As YH (SHS, 43) stated, *"One of my students wants to become a counselor like me."* Warm, reflective counseling relationships allow students to internalize positive values modeled by their GC teachers. This symbolic dimension shows that professional identity develops as teachers recognize the personal and social impact of their role as exemplars. They offer more than advice: they model behavior and inspire changes in students' actions and future aspirations.

b. Guidance and Counseling as a Career

Participants emphasized that the GC profession requires specialized knowledge and skills. Theoretical knowledge, practical competence, and professional attitudes provide the foundation for counselors' legitimacy in schools.

"Guidance and counseling services require specialized knowledge and skills ... without a scientific foundation, anyone could do this work, and the profession would lose its meaning." (PA, JHS, 55)

Beyond formal education, professional identity rests on academic awareness and a commitment to continued development. Continuing professional development is an important strategy for maintaining relevant competencies.

"I regularly attend workshops and seminars ... professional discussions help me apply new techniques" (AS, JHS, 44)

Professional identity is also expressed through empathetic and supportive counseling relationships. Participants identified three skill foundations of ethical practice. First, listening: NL (JHS, 53) emphasized that *"Active listening encourages*

students to open up." This shifts teachers from advice-givers to facilitators who respect students' perspectives. Second, objectivity and confidentiality were regarded as markers of professionalism. KA (SHS, 30) stated, *"Objectivity must underpin a GC teacher's approach,"* while MJ (SHS, 55) added, *"The confidentiality of student information must be protected."* Together, these accounts show that GC teachers' identity is grounded not in formal authority but in trust. Objectivity and confidentiality distinguish professional counselors from informal confidants. Competence, interpersonal skills, and ethical character therefore constitute the core of professional identity and differentiate GC teachers from other teaching professionals.

c. Counseling as a Secondary Profession

Some participants perceived counseling as a secondary role subordinate to institutional duties. Eight GC teachers reported that teaching responsibilities often dominated their daily work, taking precedence over counseling. One participant explained:

"Being a GC teacher is my second job ... besides counseling, my main responsibility is teaching religious education" (YN, ES, 50)

This quotation illustrates the fragmentation of professional identity. Such dual workloads are intensified by pragmatic school policies, including covering staff shortages:

"I am often asked to substitute for absent teachers, even though this falls outside my responsibilities." (PP, ES, 25)

These findings suggest that pragmatic organizational needs shift the meaning of professional roles and blur the boundary between educator and counselor. Participants experienced these dual demands as a professional dilemma that could undermine service quality.

Role Ambiguity in School Practice

In Indonesian education, GC teachers' responsibilities often occupy a gray area between pedagogical, administrative, and psychosocial functions. Role ambiguity emerged as a major barrier to consistent professionalism when GC teachers were assigned duties outside their professional mandate, obscuring their identity.

a. Teaching Assignments That Diminish the Counseling Role

Teaching general subjects was the most common finding that reduced counseling to a secondary responsibility. Eight participants experienced such assignments: one taught theology, three served as substitute teachers, and four were assigned homeroom responsibilities. PA (ES, 60) described this dual role:

"My daily responsibilities include implementing the elementary school curriculum and providing guidance and counseling services to students who need them." (PA, ES, 60)

Such assignments were perceived as departures from the core purpose of counseling and generated role dissonance. Participants reported fatigue and time devoted to lesson planning rather than core counseling services. This directly affected professional identity and students' perceptions:

"These teaching duties do not align with my professional expertise. Teaching obligations prevent students from recognizing my professional identity." (AF, JHS, 33)

These dual responsibilities demonstrate how pragmatic organizational needs shift role meanings and blur the educator-counselor boundary. Consequently, GC service effectiveness may decline, creating dilemmas that threaten service quality.

b. Overlapping Roles: The Counselor as "School Police"

Role ambiguity also arose when GC teachers were involved in disciplinary matters that often conflicted with counseling principles. Some were asked to take punitive action against students:

"In some cases, the principal even asked me to administer physical punishment to students as a way to change their behavior ..." (FA, SHS, 25)

This role conflict directly undermined therapeutic relationships because disciplinary duties changed students' perceptions of GC teachers from supportive professionals to authority figures:

"As a counselor, I am expected to be friendly and approachable. However, my responsibilities on the disciplinary team make students see me as the 'school police.' As a result, they are reluctant to seek my guidance." (AF, JHS, 33).

These findings indicate that involving GC teachers in disciplinary sanctions creates psychological barriers that erode students' trust, a fundamental basis of counseling.

c. Additional Administrative Duties and Professional Resilience

Another form of role ambiguity involved assigning responsibilities beyond counseling, such as extracurricular coordinator, librarian, or principal. These assignments often reflected an institutional assumption that GC teachers had lighter workloads.

"This is because the principal thinks my workload is lighter than that of other teachers." (BW, ES, 28)

This distribution of duties reinforces professional ambiguity. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated professional resilience by creatively integrating counseling practices into non-counseling roles.

"Extracurricular activities provide valuable opportunities to interact with students and build relationships." (RD, SHS, 35)

"Through extracurricular activities, I can directly observe students' potential and development." (FA, SHS, 25)

In an extreme case, one participant was appointed principal because of staffing shortages, creating a dual-role conflict between managerial responsibilities and counseling services.

"As the only GC teacher, I try to help students, but I also have to ensure that school programs run smoothly." (UK, ES, 57)

d. Working Beyond Professional Expertise in Inclusive Education

The final theme concerned role ambiguity in supporting students with special educational needs. Participants felt expected to serve these students without adequate training.

"I am unsure which services are appropriate for students with special needs ... so I simply accompany them, talk with them, and teach basic skills." (AS, JHS, 44)

This quotation reflects a moral commitment to helping students alongside professional uncertainty. Participants responded by proactively seeking external support and collaboration.

"I learn alongside special education practitioners to understand effective strategies for supporting students with special needs." (AS, JHS, 44)

"I create a supportive environment so that students with special needs can learn alongside their peers." (AN, JHS, 52)

These efforts illustrate GC teachers' adaptability while revealing systemic gaps in inclusive education support that place demands beyond their core expertise.

E. DISCUSSION

Professional Identity of Guidance and Counseling Teachers in Indonesia

The findings confirm that Indonesian GC teachers' professional identity is not static but continually negotiated amid structural pressures and role ambiguity. They understand their profession as a humanistic vocation, yet implementation realities—including teaching assignments, disciplinary duties, and inadequate

facilities—systematically diminish their professional autonomy and legitimacy. This aligns with Zamroni & Rahardjo (2015), who identified overlapping roles between school counselors and general educators. Indonesian regulations require GC teachers to hold at least a bachelor's degree in guidance and counseling. However, 97% of respondents in this study held only a bachelor's degree, and only one had a professional counselor license. Minister of National Education Regulation No. 27 of 2008 and ABKIN provisions emphasize that professional counselors undertake further education and training to master theoretical and practical counseling competencies.

These circumstances limit GC teachers' capacity to provide comprehensive psychological services meeting professional standards. They may contribute to lower counseling quality and increase the risk of unethical practice or malpractice. Weak certification and licensing systems further undermine professional identity. Prasetyo (2013) reported a significant difference in individual counseling service effectiveness between licensed (87.82%) and unlicensed counselors (68.14%). Nevertheless, GC teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to improving their competencies through training, seminars, and professional association participation, reflecting growing professional awareness. Puglia (2008) emphasized that internalizing ethical codes and participating in professional communities are central to developing a coherent professional identity.

Professional supervision systems in Indonesia, however, remain weak. Many GC teachers work independently without systematic guidance or oversight. Supervision is important for maintaining practice quality, developing competence, and providing space for professional reflection (Foster, 2010). Limited intensive fieldwork experience also presents challenges, particularly for novice GC teachers. High-quality practical experience helps teachers understand counseling relationship dynamics and develop contextually responsive approaches (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Nelson & Nelson, 2017).

Beyond structural factors, sociocultural contexts also play an important role in shaping GC teachers' professional identity. In Javanese cultural contexts, for example, norms surrounding privacy, interpersonal harmony, and the disclosure of personal concerns may influence students' willingness to seek counseling services. Rachmadhani (2016) highlights the importance of students' perceptions of school counselors in the implementation of individual counseling services. These cultural and interpersonal considerations align with Ratts et al. (2016), who emphasize that multicultural counseling competencies require counselors to recognize cultural differences, reflect critically on their professional assumptions, and adapt counseling practices to clients' sociocultural backgrounds. In Indonesian schools, GC teachers must therefore negotiate their professional identity not only in response to institutional expectations but also through their ability to establish trust and provide culturally responsive services. Strengthening multicultural competence through professional development, reflective practice, and institutional support may enhance counselors' professional identity while promoting more inclusive and accessible guidance and counseling services.

Functions and Roles of Guidance and Counseling Professionals in Indonesia

In Indonesian education, counseling is broadly understood as encompassing both educational and mental health support roles, as reflected in Minister of National Education Regulation No. 27 of 2008. However, interpretations of these roles often differ between policymakers and school practitioners. GC teachers are frequently assigned duties outside core counseling functions, including teaching (24%), discipline management (9%), library management (6%), inclusive education support (9%), and extracurricular supervision (6%). The accumulation of responsibilities blurs professional identity boundaries (Handayani, 2013; Zamroni & Rahardjo, 2015).

Because of limited professional experience in delivering appropriate GC services, many teachers undertake responsibilities beyond their core competencies. This weakens their standing as professional providers of psychopedagogical services. GC teachers are also often expected to address violations of social norms and develop students' character in accordance with national cultural values, consistent with the direction of national policy under Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 23 of 2017 on Strengthening Character Education.

In rural areas, GC teachers encounter problems such as truancy, smoking, and alcohol consumption. Studies by Bhakti et al. (2017) and Tentama et al. (2016) report that 28% of adolescents smoke with peers and 10–20% regularly consume alcohol. These figures underscore the importance of GC teachers in supporting students through consultation, counseling, and home visits. However, these responsibilities frequently overlap with school disciplinary authorities, further obscuring professional boundaries.

Ideally, GC teachers should not act as disciplinary enforcers but as strategic partners in developing preventive and promotive policies that support conducive learning environments (ASCA, 2012). Unfortunately, differing stakeholder perceptions lead to disproportionate assignments. For instance, principals may assign subject teachers to provide counseling without professional training, particularly in resource-constrained areas (Tumanggor, 2020).

Unequal workloads further aggravate these difficulties. The ideal GC teacher–student ratio is stated as 1:250 in Indonesian policy and 1:300 by ASCA; these targets are often unmet. In practice, many GC teachers serve more than 300 students, shifting services toward reactive rather than preventive and developmental approaches (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Scott, 2018).

These structural issues call for comprehensive oversight and evaluation of GC service implementation. Professional associations and government agencies have important roles in ensuring that counselors' roles, status, and competencies

are consistently recognized and aligned with ethical and professional frameworks. Indonesian GC teachers' professional identity is strongly shaped by curricula, bureaucratic structures, and institutional policies. Strong regulatory and institutional support is therefore necessary for them to perform effectively (Wambu & Fisher, 2015).

F. CONCLUSION

Overall, this qualitative study concludes that Indonesian GC teachers' professional identity is a dynamic, continually negotiated construct shaped by three major challenges: competency dilemmas arising from the absence of licensing and formal clinical supervision systems; structural ambiguity reflected in overlapping teaching, disciplinary, and administrative roles that blur professional boundaries and diminish core counseling services; and cultural barriers, including social stigma that discourages students from seeking help (Rachmadhani, 2016; Sen, 2019). GC teachers' professional identity has not achieved full autonomy and remains strongly influenced by institutional policies and misconceptions about their roles in schools. Theoretically, the findings enrich discussions of professional identity by identifying identity negotiation and professional boundary shifting as adaptive mechanisms. Practically, they call for ABKIN to strengthen licensing and supervision, principals and education authorities to clarify the separation of counseling and disciplinary roles, schools to provide adequate facilities, and counselor education institutions to incorporate role-conflict management and ethics into their curricula to prepare graduates for structural challenges in practice.

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