

Designing an Empowerment Model for School Counselors in the Field of Educational Guidance

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the present study was to design an empowerment model for school counselors in the field of educational guidance for ninth-grade students.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed a grounded theory approach. The research population consisted of principals, counselors, and teachers working in lower secondary schools in District 10 of the Tehran Department of Education during the 2025–2026 academic year. Using purposive sampling, 30 participants, including 10 principals, 10 counselors, and 10 teachers who met the inclusion criteria, were selected. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The data were analyzed based on the Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory approach.

Findings: The findings from the perspectives of the three groups of participants revealed components including academic and professional competence, ethical competence, communication and professional skills, coordination with families and schools, cognitive and emotional maturity, psychological well-being, psychological hardiness, emotional intelligence, and an influential personality. Accordingly, an empowerment model was designed in the form of eight online training sessions covering counselors' professional knowledge and roles, the educational guidance process, assessment and integration of information, interviewing and communication skills, professional ethics, decision-making and emotion regulation, coordination with schools and families, and the integrated application of acquired knowledge and skills. The content of the model was reviewed and approved by seven professors specializing in educational counseling.

Conclusion: The findings indicated that empowering school counselors in the field of educational guidance is a multidimensional process that, in addition to specialized knowledge and skills, requires strengthening ethical, communication, and psychological competencies, as well as the ability to interact and coordinate effectively with families and schools. Accordingly, the designed eight-session model can provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing counselors' professional competence and improving the quality of the educational guidance process for ninth-grade students.

Keywords: School Counselor Empowerment; Educational Guidance; Psychological Well-being; School Counselors; Grounded Theory.

1. Introduction

Educational systems increasingly recognize that students' academic success cannot be understood solely in terms of classroom instruction, curriculum content, or individual cognitive ability. Students' educational trajectories are also shaped by their capacity to understand themselves, identify realistic academic and occupational possibilities, make informed decisions, and successfully manage developmental transitions. Accordingly, contemporary educational interventions increasingly emphasize psychological, motivational, and guidance-related processes alongside conventional academic instruction. Evidence concerning educational-psychological interventions among secondary-school students indicates that systematic interventions can strengthen important educational outcomes such as academic enthusiasm, engagement, and students' readiness to participate actively in their educational development (Yaghoobi et al., 2025). Within this broader framework, educational guidance represents a critical school function because it connects students' personal characteristics, academic experiences, interests, abilities, and future aspirations with the educational opportunities available to them.

Educational guidance becomes particularly important during adolescence, when students encounter decisions that may have long-term consequences for their educational and occupational development. Career development at this stage is not a single decision but a progressive process through which students become aware of their preferences, acquire information about possible pathways, examine alternatives, and develop the competencies required for future transitions. Research demonstrates that appropriately structured career guidance can improve students' career readiness by strengthening career knowledge, decision-making self-efficacy, adaptability, exploration, and future orientation (Wang & Wang, 2025). Likewise, participation in career guidance activities has been associated with measurable improvements in students' readiness to manage educational and occupational transitions, suggesting that effective guidance should produce developmental outcomes rather than merely provide information about available courses or occupations (Dodd et al., 2022). Thus, educational guidance should be viewed as an integrated developmental process that enables students to understand both themselves and the educational environment in which they must make consequential choices.

One of the major challenges of adolescence is that students are frequently expected to make educational and career-related choices before they have fully developed the knowledge and decision-making resources required for such choices. Career decision-making difficulties may originate from inadequate readiness, insufficient information about oneself or available alternatives, inconsistent information, internal conflicts, and conflicts involving significant others (Gati & Saka, 2001). These difficulties underscore the importance of professional guidance during secondary education. In the Iranian educational context, educational guidance during the first period of secondary school assumes particular significance because students are required to consider different educational branches and fields when planning their subsequent studies. Models developed for educational guidance in this context emphasize the necessity of integrating information about students' characteristics, academic performance, interests, abilities, environmental conditions, and available educational pathways rather than relying on isolated indicators (Nazarinia et al., 2022). More recent qualitative evidence concerning aptitude assessment has similarly emphasized that educational guidance requires a comprehensive appraisal process in which different sources of information are interpreted jointly and cautiously (Shahsavāri et al., 2024).

The complexity of educational guidance places school counselors at the center of this process. School counselors are expected not merely to administer tests or communicate field-selection results but to help students interpret educational information, understand their own characteristics, examine alternatives, resolve conflicts, and make increasingly autonomous decisions. Career counseling in school settings may incorporate individual counseling, group interventions, psychoeducation, career exploration, goal setting, decision-making exercises, and other developmentally appropriate activities (Falco & Shaheed, 2021). Digital environments have further expanded the forms through which such services can be delivered. Evidence regarding online career counseling indicates that technology-mediated guidance can contribute meaningfully to career-related outcomes when it is accompanied by psychological resources and appropriate counseling processes (Pordelan & Hosseini, 2021). Similarly, online group career counseling has demonstrated the potential to foster reflection, planning, adaptability, and career development under circumstances in which traditional face-to-face services are constrained (Santilli et al., 2022). Consequently, contemporary school counselors must

possess competencies that enable them to provide guidance flexibly across individual, group, and technology-assisted formats.

The effectiveness of these services, however, depends substantially on counselor competence. School counseling is a professional activity requiring the integration of knowledge, practical skills, attitudes, ethical judgment, communication abilities, and context-sensitive decision-making. Competency assessment in school counseling has therefore been regarded as an important mechanism for supporting counselor trainees, supervisors, educational programs, and professional development because it clarifies what counselors must know and be able to perform in practice (Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021). Competency frameworks developed specifically for counseling teachers also demonstrate that effective professional functioning encompasses several interconnected domains rather than a narrow collection of technical techniques (Lee & Sung, 2022). Iranian research similarly identifies counselor competence as multidimensional, encompassing knowledge, abilities, skills, personality characteristics, ethical attributes, attitudes, insight, and professional credibility (Naseri et al., 2022). These perspectives collectively suggest that effective educational guidance requires counselors who can transform specialized knowledge into appropriate professional action.

This distinction between possessing knowledge and being capable of using it is particularly important in school settings. Counselors regularly encounter complex situations involving uncertain student preferences, conflicting family expectations, academic limitations, psychological concerns, incomplete information, and institutional requirements. Research examining the occupational success of school counselors has indicated that professional success is associated not only with knowledge but also with its practical application, professional abilities, social and occupational interactions, and administrative functioning (Haghshenas & Abolmaali Alhoseini, 2022). At the same time, counselors themselves may perceive career and college readiness counseling as highly important while feeling less adequately prepared to carry out some of its professional responsibilities (Novakovic et al., 2021). Such discrepancies between perceived importance and perceived preparation indicate that initial education alone may not be sufficient to ensure professional readiness for the evolving demands of educational guidance.

The challenges encountered by newly employed counselors further demonstrate the need for systematic empowerment. Recent evidence from school settings has

identified inadequate preparation before entering professional practice, difficulties in managing educational guidance responsibilities, problems concerning professional identity, and practical barriers within schools as significant concerns among newly hired counselors (Vojdani Hemmat & Ansarikia, 2025). These difficulties are consequential because educational guidance involves decisions made within an institutional environment where counselors must interpret regulations, evaluate students, communicate with families and teachers, manage competing expectations, and remain professionally accountable. Therefore, strengthening counselors' capabilities requires a framework that extends beyond transmitting factual information and instead develops the capacity to respond effectively to complex and changing professional situations.

In this regard, the concept of empowerment offers a broader conceptual basis for understanding counselors' professional development. Employee empowerment has been associated with more positive occupational experiences and with conditions that enable employees to exercise competence, autonomy, and meaningful professional judgment (Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2015). Psychological empowerment is generally concerned with employees' perceptions that their work is meaningful, that they are competent to perform it, that they possess some degree of autonomy, and that their actions can produce meaningful effects. Structural empowerment, in contrast, emphasizes organizational access to resources, information, support, and opportunities that facilitate effective performance. Research examining structural and psychological empowerment demonstrates that the organizational conditions provided to employees can influence their psychological experience of empowerment and subsequent engagement with work (Monje-Amor et al., 2021). Empowerment should therefore not be equated with training alone; rather, training constitutes one mechanism within a broader system through which professional knowledge, confidence, autonomy, resources, organizational participation, and opportunities for competent action are developed.

This broader understanding is highly relevant to educational organizations. Evidence regarding empowerment among education professionals indicates that organizational antecedents inside and outside schools can influence employees' perceptions of their authority, professional capability, participation, and opportunities for meaningful professional action (Kang et al., 2022). Organizational support and psychological empowerment have likewise been associated with improved work-related

outcomes, highlighting the importance of creating conditions in which employees perceive that their competencies can actually influence organizational functioning (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012). For school counselors, empowerment consequently involves both personal-professional resources and contextual conditions that permit those resources to be used. A counselor who possesses counseling knowledge but lacks role clarity, cooperation from colleagues, access to appropriate information, or opportunities to participate meaningfully in educational processes may remain unable to provide high-quality guidance.

Collaboration constitutes one of the most important contextual dimensions of school counseling. Counselors operate within an interpersonal system involving students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other educational personnel. Examination of school counselors' professional activities has shown that counselor efficacy is closely connected to collaboration with school staff and to the counselor's ability to perform professional functions within the broader school system (Atici, 2014). Studies of novice school counselors have also shown that collaboration with teachers and administrators can be both essential and challenging, particularly when professional expectations, role boundaries, institutional cultures, and understandings of counseling responsibilities differ (Sadana & Kumar, 2023). Recent research examining supports and constraints on counselors' practices similarly demonstrates that professional functioning is shaped by an interaction among individual characteristics, relationships, institutional arrangements, and available organizational supports (Chaaban et al., 2025). Consequently, counselor empowerment should include competencies for consultation, teamwork, communication, role negotiation, and constructive participation in school decision-making.

This collaborative dimension is especially important in educational guidance because relevant information about students is distributed across multiple sources. Students possess knowledge of their own preferences and aspirations; families contribute information concerning expectations and circumstances; teachers observe academic performance and classroom behavior; and counselors integrate these sources with assessment results and educational information. Interventions designed to empower teachers, parents, and students and increase their awareness have demonstrated the importance of involving different stakeholders in improving the educational guidance process (Naseri et al., 2023). However, expanding stakeholder involvement also increases

the professional demands placed on counselors, who must coordinate information, communicate findings clearly, manage disagreement, protect confidentiality, and preserve the student's participation and autonomy. Accordingly, counselors require not merely interpersonal friendliness but advanced consultation, interviewing, negotiation, and professional communication skills.

Professional agency is another important dimension of counselor empowerment. Career counselors frequently work with diverse populations whose educational and occupational possibilities are affected by social, cultural, institutional, and contextual conditions. Research examining career counselors' work with migrants has shown that professional agency emerges through counselors' capacity to interpret situations, respond flexibly to clients' circumstances, navigate institutional constraints, and exercise professional judgment (Kekki & Linde, 2024). Although school contexts differ from career services for migrants, this perspective is relevant because educational guidance likewise requires counselors to respond to individual differences rather than mechanically applying standardized recommendations. Empowered counselors must be able to integrate formal procedures with contextual judgment, recognize the limitations of assessment information, and adapt counseling practices to students' developmental, academic, familial, and social circumstances.

The development of such competencies requires sustained professional learning. Evidence from professional development programs suggests that structured and prolonged training can strengthen school counselors' self-efficacy across domains including academic and career development, collaboration, leadership, evaluation, and personal-social counseling (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2024). This is important because professional confidence is strengthened not merely by exposure to theoretical material but through opportunities for practice, reflection, application, feedback, and progressive mastery. In educational guidance, counselors must learn to conduct interviews, interpret assessments, communicate educational and occupational information, facilitate decision-making, respond ethically to conflicting demands, and coordinate with families and school personnel. An empowerment model should therefore translate abstract competencies into learnable and observable professional behaviors.

At the same time, counselor empowerment cannot be separated from counselors' psychological functioning. School counseling exposes professionals to emotionally

demanding situations involving distressed students, family conflicts, organizational pressures, workload, role ambiguity, and responsibility for consequential decisions. Research has identified relationships among emotional intelligence, school climate, and counselor burnout, indicating that counselors' emotional resources and organizational environment can affect their capacity to sustain effective professional functioning (Wahyuni et al., 2019). Iranian qualitative research has similarly documented burnout and occupational imbalance among school counselors, highlighting the psychological costs associated with demanding or poorly balanced professional roles (Shariatmadar et al., 2021). These findings suggest that empowerment programs limited to technical competencies may remain incomplete if they do not address emotional regulation, resilience, self-management, psychological well-being, and the ability to maintain professional effectiveness under pressure.

The multidimensional nature of counselor empowerment therefore creates an important challenge for model development. Existing literature has produced valuable knowledge concerning counseling competencies, professional preparation, school collaboration, organizational empowerment, career interventions, educational guidance, psychological resources, and counselor development. Yet these areas are often investigated separately. Competency research emphasizes what counselors should know and perform; empowerment research focuses on autonomy, resources, meaning, and organizational conditions; career-guidance research evaluates interventions for students; and occupational studies identify burnout, workload, collaboration, or preparation problems. What remains necessary is an integrated framework that connects these strands and translates them into a coherent model tailored to the practical realities of school counselors responsible for educational guidance.

Such integration is particularly necessary when guidance is conducted during a consequential educational transition. Students require accurate information, careful assessment, opportunities for self-exploration, assistance in resolving decision-making difficulties, and support for making choices consistent with their characteristics and circumstances. Counselors, in turn, require scientific knowledge, professional competence, assessment literacy, ethical judgment, communication and interviewing skills, collaboration with schools and families, psychological resources, and the capacity for independent yet accountable

professional judgment. The literature therefore supports a shift from viewing counselor development as the accumulation of isolated techniques toward conceptualizing empowerment as the coordinated development of professional, interpersonal, psychological, and organizational capabilities. An empirically grounded model can help specify these capabilities, clarify how stakeholders understand effective counselor functioning, and provide a foundation for professional-development programs that correspond more closely to actual school needs.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to design an empowerment model for school counselors in the field of educational guidance for ninth-grade students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of method, and it was conducted using a grounded theory approach. The aim of the study was to identify and explain the dimensions, components, and relationships among them in order to design an empowerment model for school counselors in the field of educational guidance. The research population consisted of principals, counselors, and teachers working in lower secondary schools in District 10 of the Tehran Department of Education during the 2025–2026 academic year, who were considered experienced and knowledgeable individuals due to their direct involvement in the educational guidance process and school counseling activities. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, and the sampling process and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Ultimately, 30 individuals, including 10 principals, 10 counselors, and 10 teachers, participated in the study.

2.2. Measures

The research data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The duration of each interview was approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Before conducting the interviews, the research objectives were explained to the participants, and after obtaining their informed consent, the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and then fully transcribed. The interview questions were developed with a focus on the dimensions and components of counselors' empowerment in the field of educational guidance, the required competencies of counselors,

professional and organizational requirements, barriers to and facilitators of empowerment, and strategies for enhancing their capabilities. During the interview process, exploratory questions were also asked based on the participants' responses in order to achieve a deeper understanding of their concepts and experiences.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with the data collection process and based on the Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory approach. In the first stage, the interview transcripts were examined line by line, and initial concepts were extracted through open coding. Then, related codes were organized into main and subcategories based on their characteristics and conceptual relationships, and the relationships among categories were identified during axial coding. In the final stage, selective coding was used to identify the core category, and other categories were integrated around it, leading to the formation of the final empowerment model for school counselors in the field of educational guidance. Throughout all stages of analysis, continuous comparison of data, codes, and categories was conducted in order to identify existing similarities and differences and to explain the relationships among the components of the model.

To increase the validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, strategies appropriate to qualitative research were employed. These included purposive sampling of individuals with relevant experience and knowledge, continuation of the data collection process until theoretical saturation was reached, review of codes and categories, continuous comparison of data, and the use of participants' perspectives in the process of interpreting the findings. Furthermore, the coding process and the formation of categories were conducted systematically to ensure that the final findings could be traced back to the initial data.

Finally, by integrating the categories extracted from the interviews and explaining the relationships among them, the conceptual empowerment model for school counselors in the

field of educational guidance was designed. This model was developed based on the findings derived from the experiences and perspectives of principals, counselors, and teachers and included dimensions such as specialized knowledge of counseling and adolescent psychology, knowledge and skills related to the educational guidance process, knowledge of fields of study and occupations, the ability to use educational tests and information, communication and interviewing skills, professional ethics, decision-making and problem-solving skills, self-regulation and emotion control, collaboration with parents and school staff, and professional influence.

3. Findings and Results

The results obtained from examining the demographic characteristics of the participants showed that, out of the total 30 participants, 10 were principals, 10 were counselors, and 10 were teachers. Regarding gender, 16 participants, equivalent to 53.3%, were female and 14 participants, equivalent to 46.7%, were male. In the group of principals, there were 5 females and 5 males, among whom 7 participants held a bachelor's degree, 2 participants held a master's degree, and one participant held a doctoral degree. The group of counselors included 4 females and 6 males, with 7 participants holding a bachelor's degree and 3 participants holding a master's degree. Furthermore, the group of teachers consisted of 7 females and 3 males, among whom 8 participants held a bachelor's degree and 2 participants held a master's degree. Overall, in terms of educational level, 22 participants, equivalent to 73.3%, held a bachelor's degree, 7 participants, equivalent to 23.3%, held a master's degree, and one participant, equivalent to 3.3%, held a doctoral degree.

After transcription, analysis, and coding of the interviews conducted with teachers using the Strauss and Corbin approach, 28 open codes were extracted. These codes were organized into 6 axial codes and 6 selective codes. The results obtained from the analysis of interviews with teachers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Categories, subcategories, and initial codes extracted from interviews with teachers

Selective codes or main categories	Axial codes	Open codes	Sample interview quotations
Factors contributing to counselors' efficiency and knowledge enhancement	Scientific competence	Being interested in research and study; being up-to-date with information; mastery of adolescent psychology; possessing a valid and relevant academic degree; mastery of the	"A school counselor should be interested in research and study, and their knowledge and information should be up-to-date. They should have awareness and mastery of psychology and adolescent issues. Their field of study and degree should be related to their work and

Counselors' ethical characteristics	Ethical competence	educational guidance process; awareness of counseling regulations; mastery of counseling tests Confidentiality; follow-up; being thoughtful and logical; being open to criticism; organizational commitment and responsibility; facilitation rather than imposition	profession. They should have sufficient mastery of the educational guidance process, its related regulations, and counseling tests." "A counselor should keep students' problems confidential and follow up on their issues. They should be logical and open to criticism, have organizational commitment and responsibility, and should not impose their own beliefs on students when they seek counseling."
Counselors' characteristics in maintaining balance and psychological health	Psychological well-being	Emotional and psychological balance; positive thinking and possessing positive energy; strong self-confidence	"A school counselor should have emotional and psychological balance, be positive-minded and have positive energy in their work, and perform their duties with self-confidence."
Counselors' positive interpersonal characteristics and communication abilities	Communication skills	Good speaker; patient and active listener; empathy; possessing an appropriate and gentle tone	"A counselor should have good speaking ability, should not interrupt others while they are speaking, should be a good listener, empathize with clients, and use a gentle and appropriate tone during conversations."
Counselors' personality characteristics and qualities toward cognitive maturity	Cognitive maturity	Creative thinking; being a capable manager and planner; high decision-making ability; strong determination and perseverance; high work motivation	"A counselor should be able to solve clients' problems through appropriate decisions. They should proceed with creative thinking, be a capable manager and planner, not surrender in the face of difficulties, and be motivated in the workplace."
Counselors' emotional characteristics and qualities	Emotional maturity	High resilience; supporting clients in facing problems; being cheerful and good-natured	"A counselor should have greater perseverance in facing problems, support clients, and be a cheerful, kind, and patient person."

The results of the analysis of interviews with teachers showed that they defined school counselors' competence within six main domains: scientific competence, ethical competence, psychological well-being, communication skills, cognitive maturity, and emotional maturity. From the teachers' perspective, possessing specialized knowledge and up-to-date information alone does not indicate counselor competence; because, in addition to scientific knowledge, counselors should also possess professional ethics, communication abilities, psychological stability, and decision-making skills. In the dimension of scientific

competence, the greatest emphasis was placed on study and research, familiarity with adolescent psychology, mastery of the educational guidance process, and knowledge of counseling tests. In the ethical dimension, confidentiality, following up on students' problems, organizational commitment, and avoiding the imposition of personal viewpoints were considered important. Furthermore, possessing psychological balance, positive energy, self-confidence, speaking ability, active listening, empathy, creative thinking, perseverance, and resilience were among the other characteristics emphasized by teachers.

Table 2

Categories, subcategories, and initial codes extracted from interviews with counselors

Selective codes or main categories	Axial codes	Open codes	Sample interview quotations
Factors contributing to counselors' efficiency and knowledge enhancement	Scientific competence	Mastery of interviewing techniques; awareness of adolescent psychology; awareness of counseling theories; mastery of the educational guidance process; being interested in research and study; possessing updated information	"A counselor should first of all have sufficient mastery and skill in interviewing techniques. They should be familiar with counseling theories and adolescent issues, have mastery of educational guidance, be interested in research and study, and not use outdated information."
Factors affecting the enhancement and improvement of counselors' professional characteristics	Professional competence	Complete familiarity with administrative regulations; familiarity with educational regulations; familiarity with educational issues; knowledge of local occupational capacities; familiarity with assessment and measurement scales	"A counselor should be familiar with counseling-related regulations and educational rules, understand students' educational and academic issues and problems, have information about local and regional occupations, and be familiar with assessment and evaluation tests."
Counselors' ethical characteristics	Ethical competence	Sense of commitment and responsibility; providing useful suggestions to staff	"A counselor should feel responsible in their work, have organizational and occupational commitment, and be able to provide useful solutions and suggestions to school staff."

Counselors' positive interpersonal characteristics and communication abilities	Professional skills	Eye contact; asking purposeful questions; being a good listener; being a skilled speaker; using body language; strong motivation; positive thinking	"A counselor should maintain eye contact with clients, ask purposeful and challenging questions, be a good listener, and use body language appropriately. They should also work with motivation and optimism."
Counselors' activities toward achieving the educational goals of the school	Coordination	Providing consultation to parents and staff; familiarity with and development of counseling culture	"A counselor should be able to provide useful consultation to parents and school staff, be familiar with the counseling culture, and develop it in the school environment."
Counselors' personality characteristics toward cognitive maturity	Cognitive maturity	Providing useful and creative suggestions; transferring knowledge and awareness to clients; deep understanding of learners' problems	"A counselor should provide useful and new suggestions in response to clients' problems, transfer appropriate educational and occupational information to students, and understand their problems well."
Counselors' characteristics in improving verbal and negotiation skills	Communication skills	High concentration and work attention; appropriate tone and expression; appropriate and timely responses	"When talking with clients, a counselor should have clarity of expression and an appropriate tone, concentrate on their work, and provide appropriate and timely responses during interactions with clients."
Counselors' characteristics in improving self-control and self-regulation skills	Psychological hardiness	Strong determination and perseverance; possessing decision-making ability; working with strong motivation	"A counselor should be able to resist work-related difficulties, make firm decisions, and work with positive thinking and high motivation."
Distinctive and unique characteristics of counselors	Charismatic personality	Power of expression and positive influence	"A counselor should have such verbal ability and communication power in school that they can have a positive influence on clients."

The results of the interviews with counselors showed that their professional empowerment includes more diverse dimensions. Scientific and professional competence, professional ethics, professional and communication skills, coordination with families and school staff, cognitive maturity, psychological hardiness, and possessing an influential personality were among the most important extracted categories. In describing the characteristics they required, counselors emphasized not only theoretical knowledge but also practical and applied skills. From their perspective, familiarity with educational regulations and guidelines, knowledge of regional educational and occupational opportunities, mastery of counseling tests, the

ability to establish eye contact, use body language, ask purposeful questions, and provide timely responses are among the requirements of a school counselor's professional activities.

Furthermore, counselors did not consider their role to be limited to direct communication with students and emphasized cooperation with parents, principals, and teachers, as well as the development of a counseling culture in schools. In their view, an empowered counselor should possess, in addition to professional knowledge and skills, decision-making ability, perseverance, motivation, the ability to provide creative suggestions, and the power to influence others.

Table 3

Categories, subcategories, and initial codes extracted from interviews with principals

Selective codes or main categories	Axial codes	Open codes	Sample interview quotations
Factors contributing to counselors' efficiency and knowledge enhancement	Scientific competence	Skill in counseling interviews; mastery of counseling concepts and techniques; familiarity with adolescent psychology; mastery of the educational guidance process; being interested in research and study; possessing new and up-to-date information	"A school counselor should first of all be skilled in counseling interviews, have mastery of counseling concepts and techniques, understand adolescent psychology, have mastery of educational guidance for ninth-grade students, be interested in research and study, and keep their information up-to-date."
Factors affecting the enhancement and improvement of counselors' professional characteristics	Professional competence	Familiarity with occupational duties and roles; familiarity with educational issues and problems; knowledge of local and regional occupations; mastery of evaluation tools and tests	"A counselor should be familiar with their occupational duties and roles, understand students' educational issues and problems, be familiar with theoretical, technical, and vocational branches and local occupations, and have mastery of counseling tools and assessment tests."
Counselors' positive interpersonal characteristics and communication abilities	Professional skills	Being a good listener; being an accurate observer; being an experienced speaker; providing appropriate suggestions; providing purposeful and timely responses	"A counselor should be a good listener, carefully observe clients' behaviors, be an experienced speaker, provide appropriate suggestions for students' problems, and give purposeful and convincing answers to questions."

Counselors' activities toward achieving educational goals	Coordination	Active presence; holding specialized workshops; providing appropriate consultation; continuous collaboration	"A counselor should have an active presence in the school, hold specialized educational and career workshops for students and parents, be a good consultant, and have continuous cooperation with school staff."
Counselors' characteristics toward enhancing emotional intelligence	Emotional intelligence	Accuracy and organization; positive energy; empathy and sympathy	"A counselor should be accurate and organized, have positive energy in their activities, and show empathy and sympathy with clients when problems arise."
Counselors' characteristics in creating and maintaining psychological health balance	Psychological well-being	Anxiety control; emotional and psychological balance	"A counselor should first be able to control their anxiety and possess emotional and psychological balance."
Counselors' characteristics in improving verbal and negotiation skills	Communication skills	Appropriate tone and speech; respectful interaction; being goal-oriented	"When interacting with clients, a counselor should have an appropriate and respectful tone and speech, should not respond with anger, and should provide appropriate and purposeful answers."
Distinctive and unique characteristics of counselors	Charismatic personality	Appropriate expression ability; ability to encourage others; openness to criticism	"A counselor should have good expression skills, attract people through encouraging words, and should not adopt a biased or defensive attitude toward others' comments and criticisms."

The results of the analysis of interviews with principals showed that they placed greater emphasis on the counselor's role in achieving the educational and organizational goals of the school. From the principals' perspective, an empowered counselor should possess, in addition to specialized knowledge, interview skills, knowledge of students' educational issues and problems, awareness of professional duties, knowledge of local fields of study and occupations, and mastery of assessment and evaluation tools. Principals also emphasized the counselor's active presence in the school environment, continuous interaction with staff, holding specialized workshops, and providing appropriate consultation to students, parents, and teachers.

From the principals' perspective, a school counselor should not limit their activities to conducting individual interviews and being present in the counseling room. An empowered counselor should participate in the school's educational and developmental activities, identify and follow up on students' educational problems, and play an effective role in achieving school goals through cooperation with the principal, teachers, and families. Active presence in the school, holding specialized educational and career workshops, participating in school meetings, and providing practical suggestions were among the most important expectations of principals from counselors.

In addition to scientific and professional competencies, principals also paid attention to counselors' psychological and communication characteristics. From their perspective, counselors should have emotional and psychological balance, control their anxiety, and use a respectful and

appropriate tone when interacting with students, parents, and school staff. Possessing positive energy, the ability to empathize and sympathize, accuracy and organization, communication ability, encouraging others, and accepting criticism were also among the other characteristics emphasized by principals. Overall, the findings obtained from interviews with principals showed that they defined counselors' competence in eight domains: scientific competence, professional competence, professional skills, coordination, emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, communication skills, and charismatic personality. From the principals' perspective, an empowered counselor is an individual who combines specialized knowledge and professional skills with active presence, organizational collaboration, psychological balance, and the ability to establish effective communication.

Subsequently, based on the content extracted from the qualitative findings, the empowerment model for school counselors in the field of educational guidance was developed in the form of eight online training sessions lasting 60 to 70 minutes. The sequence of sessions was designed in such a way that, first, counselors' specialized and professional knowledge would be strengthened; then, interviewing, communication, and ethical skills would be practiced; and subsequently, their psychological abilities and organizational coordination would be developed. The final session was also dedicated to integrating the acquired knowledge and applying it in a complete educational guidance situation. The content program of the school counselors' empowerment model is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

The Content Program of the School Counselors' Empowerment Model in the Field of Educational Guidance

Session	Title and Components Underlying the Session	Educational Objectives and Content	Teaching-Learning Activities and Implementation Method	Session Assignment	Expected Indicators for Assessing Learning
First	Professional role of the counselor, knowledge enhancement, and understanding of adolescence; scientific competence, professional competence, and professional growth	Familiarity with the program objectives; examining the role and scope of school counselors' responsibilities; recognizing counselors' specialized duties in educational guidance; examining the importance of study, research, and keeping information up-to-date; becoming familiar with cognitive, emotional, social, and educational characteristics of adolescence; paying attention to individual differences among ninth-grade students; examining the relationship between adolescent characteristics and educational field selection and academic decision-making	Interactive presentation; initial self-assessment of professional competencies; discussion of counselors' real experiences; brief analysis of two students with different developmental and educational characteristics; identifying differences between developmental, academic, and family problems	Selecting a real case while maintaining confidentiality and preparing a brief report on developmental characteristics, educational needs, the main problem, and the information required for a more complete understanding of the student	Ability to identify characteristics of adolescence; distinction between developmental needs and academic problems; clear explanation of the counselor's role; identification of areas requiring improvement in one's professional performance
Second	Educational guidance process, regulations, fields of study, and occupational opportunities; scientific competence and professional competence	Explaining the stages of ninth-grade educational guidance; examining the role of aptitude, interests, abilities, academic performance, students' opinions, and family conditions; familiarity with relevant regulations and guidelines; knowledge of theoretical, technical-vocational, and vocational branches; examining the characteristics of each branch; familiarity with educational continuation opportunities and local and regional occupations; teaching the method of transferring information about fields of study without directing or imposing opinions	Interactive presentation; analysis of a student situation in which the student is uncertain between two fields; completing a field comparison table; group discussion about conflicts between students' interests and family opinions; designing a professional response for students and parents	Preparing an information sheet about one educational branch or field, including admission requirements, required characteristics, educational continuation opportunities, limitations, and examples of related occupations; the content should be understandable for ninth-grade students	Ability to explain the stages of educational guidance; providing accurate and understandable information; simultaneous consideration of interests, abilities, performance, and student conditions; avoiding definite recommendations based on a single factor
Third	Assessment, student recognition, and integration of information; scientific competence, professional competence, professional skills, and cognitive maturity	Familiarity with the application of interest, aptitude, ability, and other counseling tools; recognizing test limitations; examining academic records, observation, interviews, and parents' and teachers' opinions; teaching the integration of information obtained from different sources; identifying inconsistencies among test results, academic grades, and student interests; developing reasoned and explainable conclusions	Analysis of a hypothetical case file including academic grades, test results, student interests, parents' opinions, and teachers' views; group work to identify consistent and inconsistent information; presentation of groups' reasoning; examining common errors such as decision-making solely based on grades or tests	Completing an analysis form for an anonymous case file and writing three sections: available information, additional required information, and an initial suggestion with reasons and limitations of the conclusion	Ability to integrate multiple sources of information; identifying data limitations; providing suggestions with reasoning; avoiding definitive interpretation of a single test; recognizing the need for additional information
Fourth	Counseling interview and communication skills; professional	Training in the stages of beginning, continuing, and ending interviews; creating a sense of security; active	Demonstration of a sample interview; analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the	Preparing a text or conducting a five-to-seven-minute practice conversation with a	Using purposeful questions; listening without interruption; establishing eye contact;

	skills, communication skills, emotional intelligence, and influential personality	listening; not interrupting the client; eye contact; observing nonverbal behaviors; appropriate use of body language; asking open-ended and purposeful questions; reflecting content and feelings; summarizing; using a calm and respectful tone; timely responses; clear transfer of educational and occupational information	sample; three-person role play as counselor, student, and observer; changing roles; using a communication indicators checklist for feedback; repeating parts of the interview after receiving feedback	colleague acting as a student; identifying open questions, reflections, summarization, and conversation ending methods; real students were not considered for this assignment	appropriate use of tone and body language; demonstrating empathy; providing clear responses; improving performance after feedback
Fifth	Professional ethics, responsibility, and facilitating educational choice; ethical competence, professional commitment, and openness to criticism	Examining confidentiality and limits of privacy; responsibility; following up on students' problems; respecting individual differences; maintaining the right to choose; avoiding prejudice; paying attention to students' interests; distinguishing between guidance, persuasion, and imposition; dealing with pressure from parents or school staff; accepting criticism; accountability for professional decisions; proper recording and maintaining of information	Analysis of ethical situations; discussion about parents' requests to disclose information; examining conflicts between students' interests and family insistence; role play of counselor conversation with dissatisfied parents; writing reasons for and against a decision; reviewing responses based on confidentiality, right to choose, and professional responsibility	Written analysis of an ethical situation in four sections: the main issue, individuals and rights involved, possible options, and final decision with reasons; explaining how a counselor can facilitate students' decision-making without imposing opinions	Identifying ethical conflicts; maintaining confidentiality; considering students' rights; presenting justified decisions; avoiding imposing fields of study; accepting feedback; predicting consequences of decisions
Sixth	Creative thinking, decision-making, emotion regulation, and professional resilience; cognitive maturity, emotional maturity, psychological well-being, and psychological hardiness	Training in problem-solving and decision-making stages; examining ways to generate different options; identifying rushed decisions; controlling anxiety in difficult situations; recognizing personal emotional reactions; maintaining calm in response to objections or pressure; resilience and persistence in follow-up; professional self-confidence; realistic positive thinking; supporting students without making them dependent on the counselor; maintaining motivation under difficult working conditions	Analysis of a stressful situation; identifying thoughts, emotions, and behavioral responses; practicing stopping and reconsidering before responding; group problem-solving of an educational guidance issue without a clear answer; comparing solutions; role play of dealing with an angry parent or student; reflection on personal experiences	Recording a real occupational pressure situation in a self-review form including situation, emotional reaction, behavioral response, consequences, and alternative response; developing a personal strategy for maintaining calm and responsible follow-up	Providing more than one solution; selecting options based on reasons; recognizing one's emotions; maintaining professional tone; controlling impulsive reactions; demonstrating perseverance; ability to revise decisions after receiving new information
Seventh	Coordination with school and family and strengthening professional influence; coordination, communication skills, and charismatic personality	Examining the counselor's role in collaboration with principals, teachers, and parents; principles of consultation; collecting information from staff without violating confidentiality; providing practical suggestions; active participation in school activities; designing educational and career workshops; developing counseling culture; communication ability; encouraging students; gaining trust; dealing with resistance from staff or parents; receiving and using criticism	Simulation of a consultation meeting among counselor, principal, teacher, and parent; designing a short message for parents; practicing a three-minute presentation about the importance of educational guidance; analyzing barriers to cooperation; designing a school action to increase students' and families' awareness	Designing a short information or consultation program for parents, teachers, or students including goal, audience, main messages, activity, time, and feedback method; preparing an opening statement for a meeting or invitation for cooperation	Clear and convincing expression; providing feasible suggestions; respecting individuals' roles; maintaining confidentiality boundaries; ability to provide consultation; encouragement without pressure; acceptance of criticism; designing actions appropriate to school needs
Eighth	Integrated application of learned content in educational guidance and final evaluation; all	Reviewing the relationship among specialized knowledge, assessment, interview, ethics, decision-making, emotion regulation, and organizational	Presentation of a comprehensive case; individual and group analysis; role play of student interview; simulation of	Final assignment including case analysis, interview plan, ethical reasoning, educational guidance suggestion, method of cooperation	Ability to simultaneously apply learned content; integration of information; implementation of professional communication; adherence

extracted components	cooperation; complete analysis of an educational guidance case; identifying incomplete information; conducting a short interview; presenting an initial suggestion; explaining decisions to students and parents; determining the method of cooperation with teachers and principals; developing a personal plan for continued professional growth	conversation with parents; oral presentation of suggestions and reasons; receiving feedback from instructor and peers; revising initial decisions; completing final self-assessment	with family and school, and a short professional performance improvement plan; the assignment was summarized at the end of the program	to ethics; reasoned decision-making; coordination with school and family; clear presentation of suggestions; improving performance based on feedback
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Finally, the content of the sessions was approved by seven professors specializing in educational counseling.

4. Discussion

The present study was conducted to design an empowerment model for school counselors in the field of educational guidance for ninth-grade students. The qualitative findings showed that counselor empowerment is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing scientific and professional competence, ethical competence, professional and communication skills, coordination with families and school personnel, cognitive and emotional maturity, psychological well-being, psychological hardiness, emotional intelligence, and an influential or charismatic professional personality. Although teachers, counselors, and principals differed somewhat in the dimensions they emphasized, all three groups conceptualized an empowered counselor as a professional who combines specialized knowledge with practical counseling skills, ethical conduct, psychological readiness, effective communication, and active participation in the school system. Accordingly, the final model was organized into eight educational sessions addressing counselors' professional roles and knowledge, educational guidance processes, assessment and information integration, interviewing and communication, ethics, decision-making and emotion regulation, school-family coordination, and integrated application of competencies. These findings support the view that counselor empowerment cannot be reduced to the acquisition of theoretical counseling knowledge and instead requires the coordinated development of multiple professional and personal capacities.

One of the most consistent findings across the three stakeholder groups was the central importance of scientific and professional competence. Participants emphasized up-to-date knowledge, mastery of adolescent psychology, familiarity with counseling concepts and theories,

understanding educational guidance regulations, knowledge of educational fields and occupational opportunities, and competence in assessment tools. This finding can be explained by the complexity of educational decisions made during the transition from lower to upper secondary education. Ninth-grade students must evaluate their interests, aptitudes, academic records, abilities, and educational opportunities while often dealing with uncertainty and conflicting influences. The classical work of Gati and Saka demonstrated that adolescents experience various career decision-making difficulties related to lack of readiness, insufficient information, inconsistent information, and conflicts between alternatives (Gati & Saka, 2001). Consequently, counselors require sufficient scientific competence to recognize the origins of students' difficulties and guide them toward reasoned rather than impulsive decisions. The present finding is also consistent with competency frameworks that conceptualize effective school counseling as requiring an integrated body of knowledge, practical skills, attitudes, and professional behaviors (Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021; Lee & Sung, 2022). Similarly, Iranian research has identified counselor competence as comprising knowledge, abilities, skills, attitudes, insight, ethical characteristics, and professional credibility (Naseri et al., 2022). Thus, the prominence of scientific and professional competence in the current study appears to reflect the need for counselors to combine conceptual understanding with competent implementation.

The emphasis on knowledge of the educational guidance process and the integration of multiple sources of information also represents a particularly important finding. Participants did not consider test results or academic grades sufficient grounds for recommending an educational pathway. Instead, they emphasized integrating assessment results with student interests, classroom performance, observations, interviews, and the perspectives of teachers and parents. This finding is consistent with the qualitative study of Shahsavari and colleagues, which emphasized that

aptitude assessment in academic guidance should be understood as a multidimensional process rather than as reliance on a single psychometric indicator (Shahsavari et al., 2024). Likewise, educational guidance models developed for secondary-school students have highlighted the importance of considering multiple personal, academic, and contextual dimensions in guidance decisions (Nazarinia et al., 2022). Research on increasing the awareness and empowerment of students, teachers, and parents has further demonstrated that academic guidance becomes more effective when the relevant stakeholders possess sufficient information about the process and contribute appropriately to it (Naseri et al., 2023). The findings of the present study therefore suggest that empowerment should strengthen counselors' assessment literacy as well as their capacity to interpret, reconcile, and communicate diverse forms of information.

Another major finding was the importance of professional and communication skills. Participants repeatedly referred to active listening, purposeful questioning, appropriate eye contact, accurate observation, use of body language, empathy, clear expression, respectful tone, and timely responses. This indicates that counselor competence becomes meaningful only when knowledge can be translated into effective interpersonal behavior. Career and educational counseling are fundamentally relational activities in which students construct understanding through dialogue, reflection, exploration, and feedback. Falco and Shaheed emphasized that school-based career counseling requires structured application of counseling theory through developmentally appropriate group and interpersonal processes (Falco & Shaheed, 2021). The present findings are also consistent with research showing that school counseling competencies should be evaluated in terms of observable professional performance rather than theoretical knowledge alone (Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021). Furthermore, the importance of counselors' preparedness for career readiness counseling has been demonstrated by evidence indicating that counselors may acknowledge the importance of such responsibilities while nevertheless feeling insufficiently prepared to implement them effectively (Novakovic et al., 2021). Therefore, the emphasis placed on role-play, simulated interviews, feedback, and applied exercises in the proposed model is consistent with the need to bridge the gap between knowing counseling principles and being able to enact them in actual school situations.

Professional ethics emerged as another foundational component of counselor empowerment. Participants

emphasized confidentiality, responsibility, follow-up, respect for individual differences, openness to criticism, accountability, and avoiding the imposition of personal beliefs or predetermined educational choices on students. This finding is particularly important in educational guidance because counselors may face pressure from families, students, teachers, or administrators regarding preferred educational pathways. Empowerment in this context should therefore not be interpreted as increasing counselor authority to make decisions for students, but rather as strengthening the counselor's ability to facilitate autonomous, informed, and ethically defensible student decision-making. The competency framework developed by Naseri and colleagues similarly identified ethical characteristics as an integral aspect of counselor competence (Naseri et al., 2022). Moreover, professional agency in career counseling requires counselors to exercise contextual judgment while maintaining professional responsibilities and responding appropriately to clients' individual circumstances (Kekki & Linde, 2024). The present finding therefore extends the concept of empowerment beyond technical proficiency by positioning ethical judgment and respect for students' agency as essential indicators of professional capability.

The findings also demonstrated that empowerment requires systematic collaboration with parents, teachers, principals, and other school personnel. Counselors and principals especially emphasized active school participation, consultation with parents and staff, educational and career workshops, continuous cooperation, and the development of a counseling culture in schools. This finding reflects the systemic nature of educational guidance. Students' decisions are influenced by academic experiences, family expectations, teachers' observations, peer environments, and institutional opportunities, meaning that counselors cannot operate effectively in professional isolation. Atici showed that school counselors' professional activities are closely related to counselor efficacy and their collaboration with school staff (Atici, 2014). Similarly, novice school counselors have reported that working collaboratively with teachers and administrators is central to professional functioning but can also be difficult when roles, expectations, and institutional relationships are unclear (Sadana & Kumar, 2023). Recent research has further demonstrated that school counselors' practices are simultaneously facilitated and constrained by individual, relational, and organizational conditions (Chaaban et al., 2025). Therefore, the present findings support the inclusion

of consultation, collaborative problem-solving, and school-family coordination as explicit components of counselor empowerment.

The importance of collaboration can also be interpreted from an organizational empowerment perspective. The effectiveness of professionals is affected not only by their personal competencies but also by whether the organizational environment provides access to information, support, opportunities, and meaningful participation. Structural and psychological empowerment are interrelated, and organizational conditions that provide resources and opportunities can strengthen employees' engagement and their perception of professional efficacy (Monje-Amor et al., 2021). Similarly, research in educational settings has shown that empowerment is influenced by both internal and external organizational antecedents and is associated with opportunities for professional growth, participation, autonomy, and support (Kang et al., 2022). Perceived organizational support and psychological empowerment have also been linked to improved work performance and constructive organizational behavior (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012). From this perspective, the present study suggests that counselor empowerment cannot be accomplished exclusively by training individual counselors. Schools must also create conditions in which counselors are able to apply what they learn, collaborate with colleagues, participate in educational processes, and exercise appropriate professional judgment.

Psychological well-being, emotional maturity, emotional intelligence, and psychological hardiness constituted another important cluster of findings. Teachers and principals emphasized emotional balance, anxiety control, empathy, positive energy, self-confidence, resilience, perseverance, and the ability to maintain composure in demanding interactions. Counselors themselves similarly emphasized persistence, motivation, decision-making ability, and resistance to occupational difficulties. These findings can be explained by the emotionally demanding nature of school counseling. Counselors routinely interact with students experiencing uncertainty and distress and may also face conflicting family expectations, administrative pressures, and occupational demands. The study by Wahyuni and colleagues demonstrated significant relationships among emotional intelligence, school climate, and counselor burnout, suggesting that emotional resources and contextual conditions are closely related to counselors' occupational functioning (Wahyuni et al., 2019). Iranian qualitative evidence has likewise identified burnout and

occupational imbalance as important professional concerns among school counselors (Shariatmadar et al., 2021). Consequently, a counselor who possesses technical knowledge but lacks emotion regulation, resilience, and psychological stability may experience difficulty sustaining effective performance under real-world pressures. The inclusion of emotional regulation, decision-making, and professional resilience in the model therefore represents an important expansion beyond traditional knowledge-based professional development.

The findings concerning psychological competence are also consistent with broader evidence on empowerment. Empowered employees are more likely to experience competence, autonomy, meaning, and influence in their professional activities, while supportive work conditions facilitate more effective professional functioning (Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2015; Monje-Amor et al., 2021). Furthermore, participation in sustained professional development can increase school counselors' self-efficacy across multiple areas, including academic and career development, collaboration, leadership, evaluation, and personal-social counseling (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2024). This evidence helps explain why empowerment programs should incorporate opportunities for successful practice and feedback. As counselors repeatedly practice interviewing, ethical reasoning, assessment, and collaborative problem-solving, they can develop not only skills but also greater confidence in their ability to respond effectively to difficult professional circumstances.

Another noteworthy finding concerned the importance attributed to counselors' influential or charismatic personality. Participants described empowered counselors as individuals capable of clear expression, encouragement, positive influence, openness to criticism, and establishing trust. This dimension should not be interpreted as a fixed personality trait that counselors either possess or lack. Rather, within the present findings, it appears to reflect professionally relevant interpersonal behaviors that enable counselors to establish credibility and motivate participation without coercion. This interpretation is consistent with the broader understanding of professional agency, in which counselors must be able to exercise judgment, negotiate institutional relationships, and engage clients effectively within changing circumstances (Kekki & Linde, 2024). It also corresponds with findings emphasizing the importance of relational supports and professional relationships in shaping school counselors' effectiveness (Chaaban et al., 2025). Therefore, the interpersonal influence identified in

this study appears to be closely related to communication competence, trust, consultation, and professional credibility rather than personal dominance.

The structure of the eight-session empowerment model is also supported by prior evidence concerning career guidance interventions and professional development. The model progresses from professional knowledge and understanding of adolescence to educational guidance regulations, assessment, communication skills, ethics, emotional regulation, coordination, and finally integrated application. This sequence reflects the principle that professional competence develops through progressive integration of knowledge, skill, judgment, and application. Systematic reviews indicate that career interventions delivered through counseling, workshops, educational programs, computer-assisted approaches, and life-design strategies can enhance students' career readiness, adaptability, future orientation, and decision-making self-efficacy (Wang & Wang, 2025). Career guidance has likewise been shown to produce measurable improvements in students' readiness to manage educational and vocational transitions (Dodd et al., 2022). Online career counseling and group-based online interventions have also demonstrated the potential to facilitate career development when appropriately structured (Pordelan & Hosseinian, 2021; Santilli et al., 2022). These findings indirectly reinforce the importance of preparing counselors to deliver varied and structured forms of guidance rather than limiting their role to administrative field-selection procedures.

The proposed model can also be understood in relation to broader educational-psychological interventions. Research indicates that systematic educational and psychological interventions can strengthen students' academic enthusiasm and engagement (Yaghoobi et al., 2025). Counselors may contribute to such outcomes by helping students establish clearer educational goals, understand the relevance of academic choices, and develop a stronger sense of direction. Empowered counselors therefore have the potential to influence outcomes extending beyond immediate field selection. Through effective assessment, communication, career education, and collaborative work with families and teachers, they may support students' engagement with schooling and their longer-term preparedness for educational and occupational transitions. This broader developmental perspective reinforces the need to conceptualize educational guidance as an ongoing counseling process rather than a single administrative event.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the convergence between the present findings and previous research indicates that school counselor empowerment is best understood as an integrated professional-development process. The findings extend earlier competency and empowerment research by bringing scientific knowledge, practical counseling competence, ethical behavior, psychological resources, communication, school-family collaboration, and professional influence together within a single context-specific framework for ninth-grade educational guidance. Rather than emphasizing a single determinant of counselor effectiveness, the model recognizes that effective performance emerges from the interaction between what counselors know, what they can do, how they regulate themselves, how they interact with others, and the extent to which they can function effectively within the organizational structure of the school. In this sense, the developed model responds to both the developmental complexity of students' educational decision-making and the multifaceted professional demands placed on counselors.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study was qualitative and was conducted with a purposively selected sample of principals, counselors, and teachers from lower secondary schools in one educational district; therefore, the identified dimensions may reflect contextual characteristics of the participating schools and should not automatically be generalized to all educational settings. Second, although three important professional groups were included, ninth-grade students, parents, educational policymakers, and counselor educators were not directly represented in the interview sample. Third, the findings were based on participants' reported perceptions and experiences rather than direct observation of counselor performance in actual educational guidance situations. Fourth, although the content of the developed model was reviewed by specialists, the present study did not experimentally evaluate the effectiveness of the eight-session program on counselors' competencies or student outcomes. Finally, the qualitative nature of the model means that the relative importance and statistical relationships among its components have not yet been established.

Future studies are recommended to examine the proposed empowerment model with larger and more diverse samples

from different educational districts, provinces, and sociocultural contexts. Researchers could use quantitative and mixed-method designs to develop standardized instruments for measuring the dimensions identified in this study and to test the structural relationships among scientific competence, professional skills, ethics, psychological resources, collaboration, and counselor performance. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies should also evaluate the effectiveness of the eight-session empowerment program by comparing trained counselors with control or alternative-training groups and assessing outcomes at pretest, posttest, and follow-up. Future research may additionally incorporate the perspectives of students and parents to determine whether the competencies identified by educational professionals correspond with the needs experienced by recipients of counseling services. Longitudinal studies could investigate whether improvements in counselor empowerment are maintained over time and whether they are associated with better educational decision-making, career readiness, academic engagement, satisfaction with guidance services, and reduced counselor burnout. Further research could also examine whether particular components of the model require modification for rural schools, vocational schools, culturally diverse populations, or online counseling environments.

From a practical perspective, educational authorities and school administrators are encouraged to use the findings when designing in-service professional-development programs for school counselors. Training should move beyond lecture-based transmission of regulations and theoretical information and incorporate case analysis, simulated counseling interviews, role-playing, ethical decision-making exercises, assessment interpretation, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving. Particular attention should be given to strengthening counselors' ability to integrate multiple sources of student information, communicate educational and occupational options without imposing decisions, regulate emotions during difficult interactions, and cooperate effectively with parents, teachers, and principals. Schools should also clarify counselors' professional roles, minimize assignment of unrelated duties, facilitate access to updated educational and occupational information, and provide opportunities for counselors to participate meaningfully in school planning and student-support activities. Periodic supervision, peer consultation, professional workshops, and competency-based evaluation could further support continued professional growth. Implementing empowerment as both an

individual-development and organizational-support strategy may ultimately improve the quality, consistency, and responsiveness of educational guidance provided to ninth-grade students.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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