

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

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E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Introduction, the paragraph beginning with “Identifying the important and influential factors affecting the improvement of students’ educational quality and academic success...” moves quickly from general academic success to educational guidance without sufficiently establishing the specific problem that necessitates counselor empowerment. The introduction would benefit from a sharper problem statement that separates three related but conceptually different issues: deficiencies in students’ educational/career readiness, weaknesses or challenges in counselors’ professional functioning, and organizational conditions restricting counselor effectiveness. The manuscript should then demonstrate why an empowerment model—not simply a competency framework, professional-development program, educational guidance model, or counselor-training package—is theoretically necessary. This distinction is particularly important because several constructs currently discussed in the introduction overlap substantially.

The conceptualization of “empowerment” requires substantially greater theoretical precision. The manuscript discusses competence, psychological empowerment, structural empowerment, training, professional development, and counselor effectiveness, but subsequently operationalizes empowerment mainly as a set of counselor knowledge, skills, psychological

characteristics, and training sessions. The authors should provide an explicit working definition of school counselor empowerment and explain its conceptual boundaries relative to “competency,” “professional development,” “self-efficacy,” and “training.” Without this clarification, it is difficult to determine whether the grounded theory actually generated an empowerment theory or primarily identified desirable counselor competencies. This issue is especially important because the manuscript itself acknowledges a literature gap concerning integration of individual, psychological, professional, and structural dimensions. The final model should demonstrate how these domains relate rather than merely assemble them.

There is an important inconsistency in the Introduction’s citation architecture that should be corrected systematically. For example, the manuscript invokes sources such as “Zhou and Chen (2021)” and “Brinkerhoff and Montesino (1995)” in its conceptual discussion of empowerment, whereas these sources are not part of the reference set supplied for the article. Conversely, the manuscript’s bibliography and in-text naming contain spelling variants such as Yaghoubi/Yaghoobi, Nazari-Nia/Nazarinia, Pourdolan/Pordelan, Vojdani-Hemat/Vojdani Hemmat, and Ansari-Kia/Ansarikia. The authors should conduct a complete cross-check between every in-text citation and every reference-list entry and standardize author transliteration throughout. This is not merely stylistic: inconsistently rendered author names can interfere with citation indexing, DOI matching, and bibliometric identification.

The presentation of open, axial, and selective coding needs conceptual revision. For the teacher data, the manuscript states that “28 open codes were extracted” and “organized into 6 axial codes and 6 selective codes.” Having the same number of axial and selective codes raises questions about whether Strauss and Corbin’s coding procedures have been applied conceptually or whether the terms “axial” and “selective” are being used merely as hierarchical labels. Selective coding ordinarily integrates major categories around a central explanatory phenomenon rather than simply renaming each axial category as a corresponding selective category. The authors should provide a coding-tree example showing raw quotation → initial/open code → subcategory → category → core category, and explain how relationships among categories were established. If the analysis ultimately used thematic hierarchical coding rather than grounded-theory selective coding, the methodology should be renamed accordingly.

The Results should explain why the three stakeholder groups were coded and presented primarily as separate category systems rather than being integrated into a single grounded theoretical structure. For example, principals generated eight domains—“scientific competence, professional competence, professional skills, coordination, emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, communication skills, and charismatic personality”—whereas teachers and counselors produced partially overlapping but non-identical categories. This comparative stakeholder structure is potentially a major strength, but the manuscript needs an explicit cross-group comparative matrix showing convergent categories, stakeholder-specific categories, and discrepant perspectives. The authors should then demonstrate analytically how these three systems were synthesized into the final model rather than simply aggregating all categories. Grounded theory requires theoretical integration, and that integration should be visible to the reader.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the Method section, the statement that “The participants were selected using purposive sampling, and the sampling process and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved” is insufficient for a grounded theory study. Strauss and Corbin grounded theory ordinarily requires movement from initial purposive sampling toward theoretical sampling, in which emerging categories guide subsequent participant selection and questioning. The manuscript should explain whether theoretical sampling actually occurred, how emerging codes influenced later recruitment or interviews, at what interview saturation was first suspected, how many additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation, and what criterion was used to determine that no substantively new properties or relationships were emerging. Simply reporting a final sample of 30 does not establish theoretical saturation.

The fixed distribution of “10 principals, 10 counselors, and 10 teachers” requires methodological explanation. An exactly equal allocation across three groups appears more characteristic of quota sampling than emergent theoretical sampling. If equal representation was predetermined to achieve triangulation of stakeholder perspectives, the authors should state this explicitly and explain how this decision was reconciled with grounded theory methodology. If the allocation emerged during theoretical sampling, the manuscript should document that process. Additionally, eligibility criteria should be reported for each group, including minimum years of experience, direct involvement in ninth-grade educational guidance, relevant academic qualifications, and any exclusion criteria. The Abstract presently states that participants “met the inclusion criteria,” but those criteria are not sufficiently specified in the Method.

The participant description is inadequate for evaluating information richness and transferability. The Findings section reports gender and academic degree but does not appear to report age, years of professional experience, years working in educational guidance, school type, employment status, counselors’ academic specialization, or previous professional training. These variables are more methodologically informative than gender alone in a study of professional empowerment. In particular, because the study concerns counselors’ competence and empowerment, readers need to know whether counselor participants were formally trained in counseling/psychology, how long they had practiced as school counselors, and whether principals and teachers had sustained experience collaborating with counselors in ninth-grade guidance. A detailed participant-characteristics table should therefore be added.

The description of the semi-structured interviews is too general to permit methodological appraisal or replication. The Method states that questions addressed “the dimensions and components of counselors’ empowerment,” required competencies, organizational requirements, barriers, facilitators, and strategies, and that exploratory questions followed participants’ responses. The authors should provide the principal interview questions, either in the Method or a supplementary appendix, and explain how the interview protocol was developed, piloted, and modified during theoretical sampling. It is also important to state whether principals, counselors, and teachers received identical questions or stakeholder-specific versions. Because the study seeks an emergent grounded theory, the authors should demonstrate that questions were sufficiently open-ended and did not predetermine categories such as competence, psychological hardiness, emotional intelligence, or organizational coordination.

The manuscript should provide greater methodological transparency regarding the researchers’ roles and reflexivity. There is currently no substantive discussion of who conducted the interviews, that researcher’s academic/professional background, prior relationships with participants, assumptions about counselor empowerment, or measures taken to reduce the influence of preconceptions during coding. This is particularly important because the authors work within educational and curriculum-related disciplines and may have had pre-existing views concerning the desired structure of counselor-training programs. A reflexivity statement should therefore explain the interviewer’s position, the analytic team’s expertise, how disagreements were handled, and whether reflexive memos or analytic journals were maintained. Such information is essential for evaluating confirmability in qualitative research.

The trustworthiness paragraph is presently too generic. The manuscript states that trustworthiness was increased through purposive sampling, theoretical saturation, “review of codes and categories,” continuous comparison, and “the use of participants’ perspectives in the process of interpreting the findings.” These statements should be replaced by operational details mapped to recognized qualitative criteria such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. For example, specify whether member checking was conducted and with how many participants; whether a second coder independently coded any transcripts; whether peer debriefing occurred; whether an audit trail was maintained; whether negative/deviant cases were actively sought; and how category definitions were revised after comparison. If inter-coder agreement was not calculated, this need not be artificially added, but the actual process by which coding interpretations were challenged and stabilized must be transparent.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.