

June 2024

## The Pursuit of a Combined Educator-Counselor Identity: Gaps and Opportunities in School Counselor Training Scholarship

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### Recommended Citation

Levy, Ian; Edirmanasinghe, Natalie A.; Ieva, Kara; and Steen, Sam (2024) "The Pursuit of a Combined Educator-Counselor Identity: Gaps and Opportunities in School Counselor Training Scholarship," *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc06kzja>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/tsc/vol6/iss2/1>

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## Introduction to the Special Issue

DOI: 10.7290/tsc06kzja

# The Pursuit of a Combined Educator-Counselor Identity: Gaps and Opportunities in School Counselor Training Scholarship

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### Abstract

This special issue focuses exclusively on the training of future school counselors to adopt a non-dual and non-hierarchical identity as an EducatorCounselor. It is long documented that the school counselors' straddling the worlds of education and counseling have led to identity and role confusion. Concerns about school counselors' identity have persisted amidst changes in the counseling profession and resulted in a notable schism among leaders and professional associations. Building on the Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) proposition that school counselors are EducatorCounselors, or school-building educators who consistently engage in educational tasks while being oriented by counseling, articles within this special issue offer the field of counselor education an opportunity to understand how shifts in our professional practice, preparation, supervision, and research dissemination can operationalize a clear and distinct EducatorCounselor identity for school-counselors-in-training.

### Significance to the Public

This special issue addresses the longstanding identity confusion of school counselors by proposing a unified EducatorCounselor identity. It explores how counselor education can prepare future school counselors to seamlessly integrate educational tasks with a counseling orientation, potentially resolving professional divides and clarifying roles within school settings.

**Keywords:** educator–counselor, school counselor education, school counseling

This current special issue amplifies an ongoing issue in school counselor education related to professional practice, preparation, supervision, and research dissemination. Initially, the special issue focused on how the non-dual, non-hierarchical, school counselor identity of an EducatorCounselor (EC) can pervade counselor education preparation coursework and school counselor development. Instead, it resulted in a handful of articles that help frame where gaps in school counselor education live. For this special issue, we asked authors to illustrate how they address the EC identity framework, consistently as both educator and

counselor, with an antiracist lens in standalone school counseling coursework, school counselor peer and/or clinical supervision, and preparation for doctoral students in school counselor education. Building on the Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) special issue in the *Professional School Counseling (PSC)* journal, which focused on how school counselors embody the EC identity in their work within educational contexts, this current special issue aimed to consider how school-counselors-in-training (SCITs) are taught to adopt this identity. While the articles in this corpus accomplish aspects of this goal, they ultimately

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reiterate systemic issues embedded within the field of counselor education. We build on the scholarship in this special issue to gain a deeper understanding of opportunities for professional practice, preparation, supervision, and research dissemination to operationalize a clear and distinct EC identity for SCITs.

## Professional Practice

The EC (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021) helps to practically define the school counseling profession as uniquely able to deliver counseling services through educational tasks/systems. As situated within educational contexts, school counselors are responsible for taking on educational tasks like individual/small group counseling, classroom instruction, consultation, collaboration, referrals, appraisal, advising and/or leadership and advocacy. As counselors, each of these educational tasks is carried out in the service of counseling, or what Myers (1992) explained as services that are focused on prevention and development toward wellness and social justice outcomes for youth.

Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) proffered the EC framework to guide school counseling practitioners through the identity tensions they face within the fields of education and counseling. For example, research suggests that school counselors experience role-confusion (Fye et al., 2020), or feelings of having to choose between a counselor-first or educator-first identity (Better-Bubon et al., 2021). At the professional organization level, school counselors are left to choose between the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2023) and the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014), which in turn forces an alignment with either an educator-first identity (ASCA) or a counselor-first identity (ACA). At a moment of national attention toward mental health in a “post-pandemic” world, discussions about mental health support for youth in schools have come to the forefront (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). This is a moment for alignment within counselor education, where school counselors and clinical mental health counselors

(CMHCs) might collaborate to address youths’ mental health via a range of preventative and responsive approaches. For example, counselor educators can work with professionals and students by pursuing training and practice approaches that are evidential and unique to school counseling (Kim et al. 2024) or work to cross-train school counselors and CMHCs in schools to carry out different yet complementary identities (Christian & Brown, 2018). However, more attention is given to the growth of school-based mental health counselors while ASCA advocates that school counselors are not mental health professionals. In effect, rather than standing between both counseling and education, and merging both to support youth development, counselor education is forced to choose a side.

Missing from this professional practice narrative are decisions around how school counselors preventively serve youths’ development through wellness and socially just intervention work in school contexts. A variety of articles in this special issue help us begin to make sense of this complex concern. Lee and Lemberger-Truelove present a phenomenological study of school counselor educators’ non-dual EC and antiracist school counselor identity. In this article, they share results from a series of interviews with school counselor educators wherein the school counselor educators demonstrated an acknowledgement of both the counselor and educator identities (consistent with the EC identities) while also feeling as if the modern context of schooling privileged CMHC. Concerning professional practice, results from Lee and Lemberger-Truelove confirm a belief amongst a handful of school counselor educators that school counselors must be equipped to address student’s mental health within educational contexts specifically. To help further guide professional practice, Carlson and colleagues present *The Agile School Counselor Training Model*, which places professional school counseling practices on a continuum from mental health to educational roles, while also distinguishing the work school counselors do directly with students from their systemic responsibilities. Carlson and colleagues present a more granular look at the counseling and

educator identities of school counseling specifically, toward helping the field solidify a non-binary EC identity.

## Preparation

A true valuing of the EC identity within counselor education means, in part, that school counseling coursework teaches SCITs to deliver counseling services through educational tasks/systems. One notable challenge in the teaching of school counseling-specific counselor education coursework pertains to counseling theory. That is, Dollarhide and Lemberger-Truelove (2018) have demonstrated that traditional counseling theories were not built with educational contexts in mind, suggesting a need for a specific base of school counseling theories from which to educate. In fact, a recent content analysis of 45 school counseling intervention research articles published in *ACA*, *ASCA*, and related journals over the past 20 years, found that only 9 articles (20%) utilized theories to inform intervention outcomes - evidencing our lack of knowledge of the use of counseling theories in school counseling contexts (Kim et al., 2024).

The lack of attunement to the differences between the training and knowledge of school counselor- and CMHC-leaning counselor educators is also reflected in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2023) standards. While CACREP (2023) has done tremendous work advocating that counselor educators possess an appropriate counselor education identity to teach pre-service counselors, and SCITs in particular, they do not formally require counselor educators to have actual school counseling experience to qualify as core faculty in school counselor education programs. This lack of specificity from CACREP contributes to counselor-first identity in counselor education programming broadly. Conversely, ASCA (2022) published standards for school counselor education programs which suggest that graduates of school counseling programs must “demonstrate knowledge of established and emerging counseling and

educational theories and methods and evidence-based techniques, and utilize relationship-building skills that are foundational to successful outcomes for students” (Content Section, Standard 2). Although ASCA does acknowledge the existence of both educator and counselor identities and theories for school counselors, they do not ask candidates to demonstrate an understanding of a non-dual EC identity, or the ability to apply and evaluate the effectiveness of their counseling skills through educational tasks.

Several articles within this special issue offer some direction for school counselor educators to begin to imbue the EC identity into their programs and coursework. In navigating the role of school counselors in suicide response, Brown and colleagues emphasize the need to incorporate case study discussions that emphasize cultural components of suicide response in schools across program courses. Brown and colleagues begin a much-needed discussion regarding collaborations between school counselors and CMHCs in schools to address suicide response from prevention to intervention. Considering other coursework, results from Lee and Lemberger-Truelove’s phenomenological study in this special issue suggest that school counselor educators believe it is necessary to teach school counselors to carry out antiracist and social justice advocacy practices within educational settings. They also name a challenge for school counseling graduate programs who are situated within general counselor education departments, which might privilege working with mental health agencies over K-12 school settings.

Responding to this concern, Levy and colleagues offer a review of an innovative Hip Hop and school counselor education course wherein school counseling students were afforded the opportunity to learn how a culturally responsive and social justice-anchored school counseling model (Hip Hop and Spoken Word Therapy) can be applied in school settings. In particular, Levy and colleagues describe the outcomes of a course where students practiced Hip Hop and counseling micro-skills, engaged in immersive small-group work, and co-facilitated small-groups within a K-12 school under

the supervision of their course professor. Results of this study demonstrated students' understanding of how Hip Hop and school counseling interventions can be delivered through varied educational roles and responsibilities, while also noting growth in the SCITs multicultural self-efficacy and, by proxy, their culturally responsive clinical skills.

Also in this special issue, Lopez-Perry and colleagues explore the use of the EC identity to promote antiracist practices. The authors explicitly mention their intentionality at deviating from traditional, and what they name limiting, counselor education practices due to their lack of affiliation with CACREP and ASCA. Their self-study focuses on a non-CACREP school counseling program and centers an antiracist and social justice framework from admissions to coursework. In their opportunity to think beyond the constraints of an educator-first or counselor-first identity, these scholars describe the freedom to develop course sequence and content that aligns with the current needs of the profession. Their school counselor preparation program is an excellent model that pushes beyond the limitations of our flagship training and professional organizations to ensure SCITs are well prepared to handle the current realities within school settings which require an EC identity.

## Supervision

Building on the coursework supporting the EC identity are the clinical experiences that students engage in throughout their school counselor education programming. Central to counselor education, clinical supervision is the hallmark of counselor preparation during students' practicum and internship experiences. Traditionally, counselor education has many models of supervision (Borders, 2014). For example, some programs use school counseling practitioner adjuncts to supervise students, some are in blended groups supervised by CMHC supervisors, and some are supervised by school counselor educators with a non-hierarchical EC identity. These variations, which are non-specified by training and professional organizations

(e.g., CACREP, ASCA, ACA) and contribute to various school counselor identities depending on the identity of the course instructor (Better-Bubon et al., 2021), lead to diverse implementation of school counseling practice in schools and ultimately to different perceptions from SCITs regarding how counseling is carried out in educational settings. Additionally, clinical supervision is not a mandatory post-graduation requirement for school counselors, in contrast to their CMHC peers. Scholars have increasingly called for transformation from conventional clinical training methods to more holistic and inclusive models that incorporate school counseling supervision needs (Ieva et al., 2022; Luke & Bernard, 2006). Coupled with an examination of school counseling literature that suggested less than 0.1% of studies represented intervention research (Griffith et al., 2019), we are presented with a reality where school counselor educators must collaborate on developing school counseling interventions and subsequent supervision models that are used in the training of SCITs. Even if clinical supervision was suddenly required for professional school counselors, there would be significant professional issues, including supervisors' acknowledgement of an EC identity (compared to counselor-first or educator-first), who is qualified to supervise (given different state-level laws), supervisors' practical experience working as a school counselor and knowledge of effective interventions, and concerns for the models chosen for the provision of school counseling supervision.

In this special issue, Peng and colleagues provide a framework for supporting CMHC doctoral students who serve as supervisors for SCITs. This paper highlights the benefits of having doctoral students as supervisors, as they are supervised by experienced faculty and have formal training in supervision prior to, or concurrently with, their role. To meet the systemic needs of SCITs for an EC identity, Peng and colleagues offer an integration of empirically supported school counseling supervision models into doctoral supervision curricula. Specifically, the authors purport that the ASCA National Model (2019) and ethical standards (ASCA, 2022) should be implemented in doctoral training as it is critical to how emerging school



counselors are expected to inform their thought- and decision-making. Offering nuances of how to incorporate into supervision, the authors provide a comprehensive way to support CE identity while equipping CMHC doctoral students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively support SCITs' development.

## Dissemination of Research

In addition to exploring how the non-dual, non-hierarchical, school counselor identity of an EC is developing across school counselor training, we proposed this special issue because we saw a gap in avenues where school counselor educators could publish scholarly work related to their teaching and supervision of SCITs. ASCA has made strides in developing the *PSC* journal, emphasizing research that informs practices within the school counseling profession, mostly focused on the educator context. ACA houses *The Journal of Counseling and Development (JCD)* in which only 10% of the articles the last 20 years centered on academics, career or schools, demonstrating their propensity to publish mostly CMHC research (Anderson et al., 2021). However, the emphasis for both of these publication venues is on professional practice rather than teaching and supervision of SCITs and ultimately lean towards either a counselor- or educator-first identity, depending on the professional organization they are affiliated with.

We are grateful for *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling* and their willingness to collaborate with us on a special issue dedicated to school counselor education, as well as the development of a special section in a previous issue dedicated to the school counseling preparation in suicide intervention. In most cases, school counselor educators must fit within the either/or context of our identities to publish scholarly works. Even in the development of this special issue, we saw the need for more avenues to publish works with an emphasis on school counseling preparation, receiving over 50 proposals from our call. However, in the challenges school counselor educators have seen in finding a

home for the immersion of the EC identity, we continue to see glimpses of the need to (re)imagine how to always hold both the educator and counselor identity at the same time, in a non-hierarchical capacity. We hope to continue to advocate for spaces where school counselor educators can highlight the ways they develop SCITs who see the EC in their professional identity.

## Conclusion

As you reflect on the body of research provided in this special issue on a combined EC identity, and the critical examination we offer in this editorial, we leave you with several questions to ponder in your own school counseling practice, preparation, supervision, and/or research dissemination. First, how will you engage in practical intervention research that explores the application of counseling skills through different educational tasks and responsibilities of school counselors? Second, how can you advocate, within your counselor education program or department, for the teaching of the EC identity across all coursework (e.g., lifespan, counseling skills, counseling theories)? Third, how will you support school counseling university/college and site supervisors in developing a deeper understanding of the EC identity to inform their work with SCITs? Fourth, how will your published scholarship reflect work in each of these domains as part of your EC advocacy? Lastly, where are you on your EC professional identity journey? Are you leaning to one side or the other? If so, consider these specific follow-up questions to explore and develop tangible ideas to blend this way of being and increase the impact of your practice, teaching, supervision, and scholarship.

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## Author Information


The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The author reported no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


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#### How to Cite this Article:

Levy, I. P., Edirmanasinghe, N., Ieva, K., & Steen, S. (2024). The pursuit of a combined educator-counselor identity: Gaps and opportunities in school counselor training scholarship. *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*, 6(2), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc06kzja>