

Professional Readiness in Counselor Education and Training: A Systematic Review of Key Dimensions and Influencing Factors.

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Abstract

Professional readiness is an important element in ensuring that pre-service guidance and counseling teachers are able to perform professional roles competently, ethically, and responsively to environmental demands. However, the literature indicates that the concept of professional readiness remains fragmented and is often discussed through related constructs such as self-efficacy, professional competence, professional dispositions, and career readiness. This study aims to identify and synthesize factors associated with professional readiness within the context of counselor education and training. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 framework. The literature search was carried out using the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases with combinations of keywords related to professional readiness, professional preparedness, counselor, counsellor, and counselor-in-training. Articles were screened according to predefined inclusion criteria, including a publication period of 2021-2026, journal articles, the social sciences field, and publications in English or Malay. Data from articles that met the criteria were analyzed using thematic synthesis. Five main themes were identified: (i) self-efficacy as a major predictor of career readiness; (ii) the role of cognitive-affective processes through mindfulness and self-compassion; (iii) challenges in professional competence and the outcomes of remediation interventions; (iv) the influence of ecological and environmental factors on competence; and (v) barriers to readiness involving professional self-doubt and caseload. The findings indicate that professional readiness is a multidimensional construct influenced by individual, psychological, competence-related, training-experience, and environmental-support factors. Future studies are recommended to develop comprehensive professional readiness frameworks and instruments and to conduct longitudinal and mixed-methods studies to validate the relationships among these dimensions among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers...

Keywords: professional readiness, pre-service guidance and counseling teachers, self-efficacy, professional competence, systematic literature review, PRISMA 2020.

Introduction

The professional readiness of pre-service guidance and counseling teachers is an important aspect in ensuring that individuals who are about to enter the profession can translate professional knowledge, skills, and values into practice that is competent, ethical, and responsive to students' needs. In counselor education, preparation for professional practice is not limited to mastery of theory and technical skills, but also includes professional dispositions, professional identity, the ability to make ethical judgments, competence in working with diverse populations, and the ability to apply skills through practicum and internship experiences. CACREP emphasizes that counselor education programs should continuously monitor trainees' development of knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions, while practicum and internship experiences provide opportunities to apply theory and develop counseling skills under supervision (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2024). (CACREP) In parallel, professional school counseling standards also emphasize the need to prepare new counselors with the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies required to meet professional demands and students' needs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). (American School Counselor Association) Therefore, professional readiness should be understood as a multidimensional construct that reflects not only what trainees know, but also the extent to which they are prepared and confident to use those competencies when confronted with the demands of actual practice.

Although the importance of professional readiness has received increasing attention, the literature indicates that this construct has not been discussed consistently within counselor education and training. Some studies focus directly on counselling career readiness, whereas others examine related constructs such as counselor self-efficacy, professional competency, professional self-doubt, mindfulness, self-compassion, problems of professional competence, and professional environmental factors. For example, Vaz and Kamat (2024) found that self-efficacy and professional self-doubt together explained a substantial proportion of the variance in trainees'

counselling career readiness. Latorre et al. (2023) further showed that mindfulness and self-compassion were associated with counselor self-efficacy and self-assessed professional competency among counseling and clinical psychology trainees. Meanwhile, Salpietro et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of problems of professional competence and remediation processes in counselor education, while Middleton et al. (2026) showed that counselor competence was also associated with psychosocial and ecological factors such as cultural acceptance self-efficacy, characteristics of the student population, and structural empowerment.

The diversity of constructs, populations, and outcomes used in previous studies reveals an important gap in the literature. Based on these research patterns, evidence on professional readiness remains fragmented across individual psychological factors, cognitive-affective processes, professional competence and dispositions, training experiences, and organizational and environmental factors. In addition, not all studies focus directly on pre-service teachers or guidance and counseling trainees. Some involve psychology trainees or school counselors who are already engaged in professional practice (Latorre et al., 2023; Middleton et al., 2026). This situation makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors that are genuinely relevant to a trainee's transition from education and training to the performance of professional responsibilities. In other words, although numerous studies have examined competence, self-efficacy, and counselor development, there remains a need to synthesize this evidence to explain how these factors collectively relate to professional readiness.

The need to conduct this study also arises from the limitations of traditional or narrative literature review approaches. Snyder (2019) explains that traditional literature reviews are often conducted on an ad hoc basis without clear methodological procedures, which may raise concerns regarding the rigor, transparency, and reliability of the literature selection and synthesis process. In a field characterized by overlapping concepts and evidence distributed across diverse populations, such as counselor professional readiness, a non-systematic approach may produce selective and less comprehensive synthesis. In contrast, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) provides a more explicit and structured process for searching, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing studies, enabling researchers to identify patterns of findings, inconsistencies, and knowledge gaps more systematically (Snyder, 2019).

The use of an SLR approach also increases the transparency and reproducibility of the research process when each stage of article searching and selection is clearly documented. In this regard, PRISMA 2020 provides updated systematic reporting guidelines to help researchers transparently describe the processes of identifying, screening, determining eligibility, and including studies in a systematic review (Page et al., 2021). This approach is particularly appropriate for research on professional readiness because the existing literature uses various interrelated terms and constructs that do not necessarily measure the same phenomenon. Through a systematic synthesis process, studies on career readiness, self-efficacy, professional competence, cognitive-affective processes, competence problems, and ecological factors can be critically examined to identify consistent dimensions and gaps that remain unexplored.

Based on these issues, this SLR was developed to answer the main research question: 'What factors are associated with the professional readiness of pre-service guidance and counseling teachers based on empirical evidence in the current literature?' Accordingly, the objective of the study is to systematically identify, analyze, and synthesize factors associated with professional readiness within the context of counselor education and training, as well as to identify the major themes, patterns of findings, and research gaps in the literature. Through this synthesis, the study is expected to provide a more structured conceptual foundation for understanding professional readiness as a multidimensional construct and subsequently support the development of conceptual frameworks, measurement instruments, training curricula, and future research agendas concerning the professional readiness of pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

Research Question and Objective

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the key dimensions of professional readiness identified among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers and counselors-in-training?

RQ2: What individual, educational, and contextual factors influence the development of professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers?

RQ3: What competencies, professional dispositions, and psychological characteristics are associated with professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers?

RQ4: What research gaps and future directions can be identified in the existing literature on professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers?

Research Objectives

RO1: To identify and synthesize the key dimensions of professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers and counselors-in-training.

RO2: To examine the individual, educational, and contextual factors that influence the development of professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

RO3: To analyze the competencies, professional dispositions, and psychological characteristics associated with professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

RO4: To identify research gaps and propose future research directions for the development and assessment of professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

Rationale for Conducting the Systematic Literature Review

Professional readiness is a critical outcome of counselor education because pre-service guidance and counseling teachers are expected to enter professional practice with adequate knowledge, counseling skills, self-efficacy, professional identity, ethical dispositions, reflective capacity, and the ability to respond appropriately to diverse client needs. However, the existing literature does not consistently conceptualize **professional readiness** as a unified construct. Instead, studies frequently examine related constructs separately, including professional competence, counseling self-efficacy, professional dispositions, practice readiness, and preparedness for professional practice. For example, research with counseling trainees demonstrates that theoretical knowledge does not necessarily correspond directly with demonstrated counseling competence, highlighting the complex and multidimensional nature of professional development (Henrich, 2021). Similarly, counseling self-efficacy has been identified as an important component of trainees' professional development and can change through structured counseling-skills training (Hunsmann et al., 2024). Such variation indicates that the evidence concerning professional readiness is dispersed across different constructs, populations, training contexts, and measurement approaches. Consequently, a systematic synthesis is required to clarify how professional readiness has been conceptualized, identify its key dimensions and influencing factors, and determine the competencies, dispositions, and psychological characteristics associated with readiness for professional practice among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers. Conducting a systematic literature review also enables the available evidence to be identified, selected, appraised, and synthesized transparently and systematically in accordance with PRISMA 2020 principles (Page et al., 2021). Therefore, this review is expected to consolidate the fragmented evidence, identify research gaps, and provide an empirical foundation for developing a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of **professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers**.

2.0 Methodology

Review Protocol

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) uses the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 as its primary guideline to ensure that the literature review process is conducted systematically, transparently, and reproducibly. PRISMA 2020 was selected because it provides a clear reporting framework for the processes of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and article selection, thereby enhancing the rigor and reliability of the study findings (Page et al., 2021). The use of PRISMA 2020 is also appropriate in the field of guidance and counseling because research on professional readiness for pre-service guidance and counseling teachers involves multiple constructs such as professional competence, knowledge, counseling skills, self-efficacy, professional identity, and ethics. Based on the principles of PRISMA 2020, this study protocol was operationalized through four main methodological steps: formulation of the research question, systematic search strategy, article quality appraisal, and data extraction and analysis. These four steps enable articles to be identified through a planned search strategy, screened according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, evaluated in terms of methodological quality, and systematically analyzed to identify patterns of findings, key constructs, research trends, and research gaps related to the professional readiness of pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

Research Question Formulation

The research question for this SLR was formulated using the PICo mnemonic proposed by Lockwood et al. (2015), namely Population (P), Phenomenon of Interest (I), and Context (Co), to ensure that the scope of the literature search was defined systematically and aligned with the study objectives. Based on this framework, the Population refers to pre-service guidance and counseling teachers, including related terms such as pre-service counselors, counselor trainees, counselors-in-training, and school counselor trainees. The Phenomenon of Interest focuses on professional readiness, with alternative terms such as professional preparedness, practice readiness, and readiness for professional practice. Meanwhile, the Context encompasses professional education and training settings such as counselor education, guidance and counseling education, teacher education, counselor training, practicum, and internship. The use of PICo helps clarify the relationship between the target population, the phenomenon being explored, and the professional context of the study, thereby enabling a more focused and comprehensive search strategy to be developed (Lockwood et al., 2015). Based on these three components, the main research question was formulated as follows: 'What are the key dimensions and factors that characterize professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers within counselor education and training contexts?' This question enables the SLR to identify and synthesize the key dimensions and factors that shape professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

Systematic Search Strategy

i) Identification

At the identification stage, a systematic search strategy was implemented to identify research records potentially relevant to the focus on professional readiness for pre-service guidance and counseling teachers. The search was developed around two main keywords, namely 'professional readiness' AND 'counselor', and was expanded using synonyms, related terms, and spelling variations to increase the breadth and sensitivity of the search. The identification process employed two main techniques: manual searching and advanced searching. Manual searching was used as a complementary strategy to identify related sources, whereas advanced searching was systematically conducted using database search functions. This strategy involved the use of field codes, particularly TITLE-ABS-KEY for searches in Scopus, Boolean operators OR and AND to combine keywords and synonyms, phrase searching using quotation marks to preserve phrase precision, and wildcard and truncation (*) to capture variations of terms. This transparent and reproducible search approach is consistent with the reporting principles of PRISMA 2020 and PRISMA-S, which emphasize detailed documentation of information sources and search strategies (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). Overall, the identification process, through the combination of these two search techniques, yielded 1,604 potentially relevant article records for the subsequent screening stage.

Table 1

The search string used for the systematic review process

Database	Keyword
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("professional readiness" OR "professional preparedness" OR "practice readiness" OR "professional practice readiness" OR "readiness for practice" OR "readiness for professional practice" OR "practice preparedness" OR "professional competenc*") AND (counselor* OR counsellor* OR "guidance counselor*" OR "guidance counsellor*" OR "school counselor*" OR "school counsellor*" OR "guidance and counseling teacher*" OR "guidance and counselling teacher*") AND ("pre-service" OR preservice OR trainee* OR "counselor* in training" OR "counsellor* in training" OR "counselor education" OR "counsellor education" OR "counseling student*" OR "counselling student*"))
Web of Science	TS=(("professional readiness" OR "professional preparedness" OR "practice readiness" OR "professional practice readiness" OR "readiness for practice" OR "readiness for professional practice" OR "practice preparedness" OR "professional competenc*") AND (counselor* OR counsellor* OR "guidance counselor*" OR "guidance counsellor*" OR "school counselor*" OR "school counsellor*" OR "guidance and counseling teacher*" OR "guidance and counselling teacher*") AND ("pre-service" OR preservice OR trainee* OR "counselor* in training" OR "counsellor* in training" OR "counselor education" OR "counsellor education" OR "counseling student*" OR "counselling student*"))

Google Scholar	("professional readiness" OR "professional preparedness" OR "practice readiness" OR "readiness for professional practice") (counselor OR counselors OR counsellor OR counsellors OR "guidance counselor" OR "guidance counsellor" OR "school counselor" OR "school counsellor" OR "counselor trainee" OR "counsellor trainee")
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Screening

At the screening stage, all records identified through the systematic search process were screened according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the selected articles were consistent with the scope of the study. Four main criteria were applied in the screening process: publication years from 2021 to 2026, publication type limited to journal articles, field of study within the social sciences category, and publication language in English or Malay. These criteria were established to ensure that the studies analyzed consisted of current, relevant scholarly sources with disciplinary alignment to the focus on professional readiness for pre-service guidance and counseling teachers. Based on this screening process, 207 articles were excluded because they did not meet one or more of the specified criteria, while 174 articles that met the initial criteria proceeded to the eligibility stage for further assessment.

Table 2

Screening and eligibility criteria Scopus

Timeline Publication	2021-2026
Subject Area	Social Sciences
Document type	Journal Articles
Language	English
Focus of study	Professional Readiness and Counsellors
Type of data	Primary

Table 3

Screening and eligibility criteria Web of Sciences

Timeline Publication	2021-2026
Subject Area	Social Sciences
Document type	Journal Articles
Language	English
Focus of study	Professional Readiness and Counsellors
Type of data	Primary

Table 4

Screening and eligibility criteria Google Scholar

Timeline Publication	2021-2026
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Eligibility Process

At the eligibility stage, a more detailed assessment was conducted to determine whether the articles that passed the screening process were genuinely relevant to the predefined SLR research question. This process involved a systematic examination of the title and abstract of each article to assess the alignment of the study focus, population, professional readiness concept, counselor education or training context, and its relationship to pre-service guidance and counseling teachers. Articles that were not directly related to the research question, involved irrelevant populations, or did not address aspects of professional readiness were excluded from subsequent

synthesis. As a result of this process, 104 articles were excluded because they did not meet the established eligibility criteria, while the remaining 70 articles identified as relevant were taken to the next stage, namely article quality appraisal.

Quality Assessment

Article quality appraisal was conducted to ensure that only studies with adequate methodological rigor and reporting quality were included in the final SLR synthesis. The assessment used six Quality Assessment (QA) criteria: clarity of the study purpose (QA1), significance and usefulness of the study (QA2), clarity of the methodology (QA3), clarity of the concept or approach used (QA4), comparison with relevant previous studies (QA5), and reporting of study limitations (QA6). Each criterion was assigned a score of 1 if fulfilled and 0 if not fulfilled, with a maximum total score of 6.0. Articles scoring above 3.0 were considered to meet the minimum quality threshold and were eligible for inclusion in the SLR. Based on the assessment, the studies by Salpietro et al. (2026) and Middleton et al. (2025) each obtained a full score of 6.0 out of 6.0, indicating that both articles met all six established assessment criteria. These results indicate that both articles had clear objectives, well-described methodologies, clearly defined concepts, links to previous research, and adequate reporting of limitations. Therefore, both articles were categorized as high quality and accepted for inclusion in the final SLR synthesis.

Article Quality Assessment Data Table

Assessment Criteria	Salpietro et al. (2026)	Middleton et al. (2025)	Latorre et al. (2021)	Vaz & Kamat (2024)
QA1. Is the study purpose clearly stated?	1 (p.17)	1 (p. 08)	1 (p. 213)	1 (p. 270)
QA2. Is the significance of the study presented?	1 (p. 3)	1 (p. 90)	1 (p. 203)	1 (p. 265)
QA3. Is the methodology clearly specified?	1 (p. 8)	1 (p. 109)	1 (p. 214)	1 (p. 270)
QA4. Is the concept/approach clearly defined?	1 (p. 6, 20)	1 (p. 89, 98)	1 (p. 210)	1 (p. 268)
QA5. Is comparison with other work provided?	1 (p. 4)	1 (p. 134)	1 (p. 230)	1 (p. 279)
QA6. Are the study limitations clearly stated?	1 (p. 68)	1 (p. 60)	1 (p. 241)	1 (p. 281)
Total Score	6.0 / 6.0	6.0 / 6.0	6.0 / 6.0	6.0 / 6.0
Status (Pass if > 3.0)	Accepted	Accepted	Accepted	Accepted

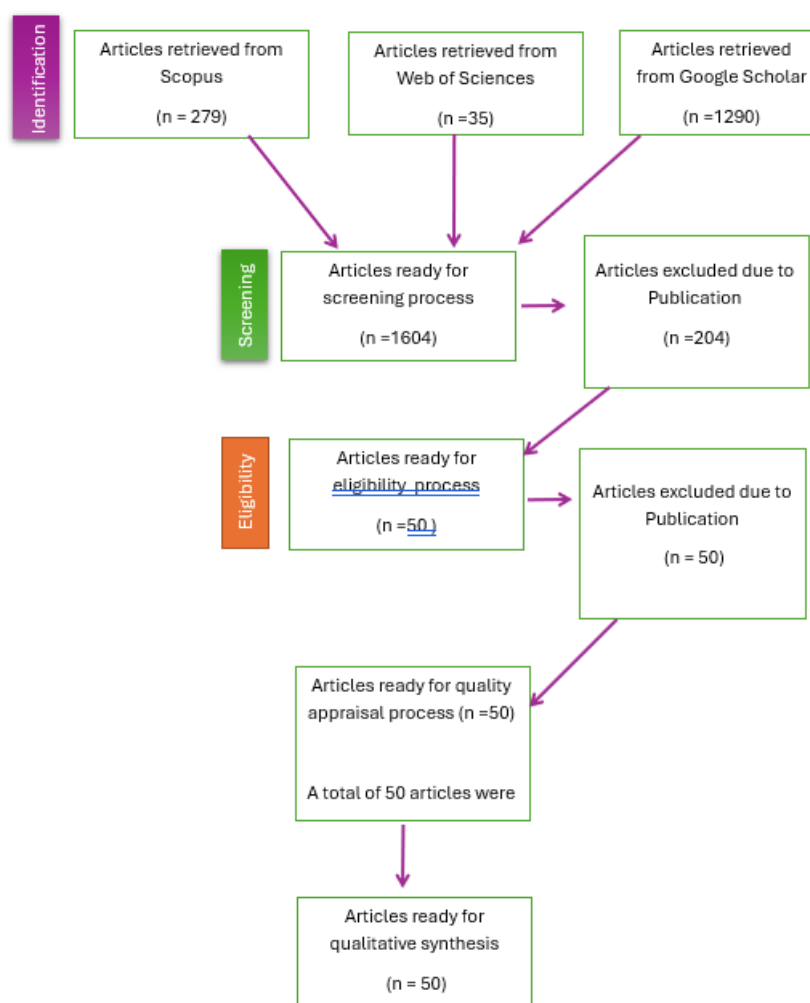


Figure 1: SLR Flow Diagram

Analysis and Extract Data

Data analysis in this SLR was conducted using deductive thematic analysis guided by the principles of thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke's approach provides a systematic process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within a dataset. In this study, the approach was adapted to the SLR context and implemented through four main processes: theme determination, theme validation, data extraction for thematic analysis, and theme reporting. A deductive approach was selected because the analysis was guided by the research question and the conceptual focus on factors associated with professional readiness in counseling. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis may be conducted theoretically or deductively when the analysis is guided by predetermined analytical interests and research questions. (Taylor & Francis Online)

1. Theme determination. In the first stage, the researcher repeatedly read the findings sections of articles that met the inclusion criteria to become familiar with the data and identify information relevant to the research question. Initial coding was conducted deductively, with attention given to constructs, factors, relationships between variables, and study outcomes associated with professional readiness and competence in counseling. Codes with conceptual similarities were then grouped to form preliminary themes. This process is consistent with the phases of familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, and developing themes recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). (Taylor & Francis Online) Based on this process, five main themes were identified: self-efficacy as a major predictor of career readiness; the role of cognitive-affective processes through mindfulness and self-compassion; challenges in professional competence and the outcomes of remediation interventions; the influence of ecological and environmental factors on competence; and barriers to readiness involving professional self-doubt and caseload.

2. Theme confirmation or validation. The preliminary themes were subsequently reviewed by comparing them against the codes, extracted data, and overall findings of each article. At this stage, the researcher ensured that each theme had sufficient empirical data, demonstrated internal coherence, and could be conceptually distinguished from other themes. Overlapping themes were reassessed, while the scope and names of the themes were refined to ensure that they accurately represented the article findings and answered the research question. This process is an adaptation of Braun and Clarke's (2006) reviewing themes and defining and naming themes phases, which emphasize reviewing the relationships among coded data, themes, and the entire dataset before finalizing the thematic structure. (Taylor & Francis Online) In this study, a theme was retained only when clear evidence was available from the analyzed articles and the theme had direct relevance to the focus on readiness or the development of professional competence.

3. Data extraction for thematic analysis. Once the thematic structure had been validated, empirical information from each article was systematically extracted according to the established themes. The extracted data included author and year of publication, study population, measured constructs, analytical methods, relationships between variables, relevant statistical values, and key findings supporting each theme. For example, data on self-efficacy, professional self-doubt, mindfulness, self-compassion, problems of professional competence, remediation, caseload, and structural empowerment were identified and placed according to their conceptual relevance to the corresponding themes. Extraction was conducted while preserving the original study findings so that thematic interpretations remained grounded in the reported empirical evidence. This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) emphasis that the analytical process should involve iterative movement among data, codes, and themes to ensure that the identified patterns are genuinely supported by the dataset. (Taylor & Francis Online)

4. Reporting themes in the SLR article. At the final stage, the finalized themes were reported through narrative synthesis by integrating findings from relevant articles within each theme. The reporting did not merely list the results of individual studies separately; instead, it compared similarities, differences, strengths of relationships, and patterns of findings across studies to generate a more comprehensive interpretation. Each theme was supported by empirical evidence and citations from the analyzed studies, followed by a synthesis explaining its relationship with professional readiness. This process is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) producing the report phase, which emphasizes that a thematic analysis report should move beyond mere description by developing a clear analytical argument that is relevant to the research question. (Taylor & Francis Online)

3.0 Results

3.1 Background of the Selected Studies

The studies included in this systematic literature review reflect a growing scholarly interest in the professional preparation of pre-service guidance and counseling teachers, counselors-in-training, and counseling students. Across the selected literature, professional readiness is rarely examined as a single, clearly defined construct. Instead, it is represented through interrelated dimensions such as professional competence, counseling self-efficacy, professional identity, professional dispositions, psychological readiness, reflective capacity, adaptability, resilience, career readiness, and readiness for practice. This diversity suggests that professional readiness is a multidimensional construct shaped by both individual characteristics and the quality of professional training.

The selected studies were conducted across a range of counselor education and training contexts, including practicum, internship, field experience, counselor education programs, teacher professional education, and specialized counseling preparation. Several studies focused on the development of professional competence through supervised practice, remediation, reflective learning, and experiential training. Others examined psychological and intrapersonal factors such as self-efficacy, professional self-doubt, mindfulness, self-compassion, adaptability, resilience, vocational personality, and emotional readiness. In addition, some studies emphasized contextual influences, including supervision quality, accreditation standards, institutional support, curriculum structure, professional training environments, and opportunities for applied learning.

Methodologically, the selected studies demonstrated considerable diversity, including quantitative correlational designs, regression analysis, experimental studies, qualitative phenomenological research, comparative studies, descriptive designs, psychometric investigations, and practice-based innovations. This methodological variation indicates that professional readiness has been investigated from multiple perspectives, ranging from measurable competencies and psychological predictors to lived experiences and developmental processes. Collectively, the selected studies suggest that readiness for professional practice among future guidance and counseling practitioners develops through the interaction of **competence, professional identity, self-efficacy, professional**

dispositions, psychological resources, supervised field experience, reflective practice, and training quality. However, the literature remains fragmented because these dimensions are often examined independently rather than integrated within a comprehensive framework of professional readiness. This gap provides a strong rationale for systematically synthesizing the existing evidence to clarify the core dimensions and influencing factors of professional readiness among pre-service guidance and counseling teachers.

3.2 The Developed Themes

Theme 1: Self-Efficacy as a Major Predictor of Career Readiness

Self-efficacy is an important factor in explaining a trainee's readiness to perform professional roles in counseling. Vaz and Kamat (2024) found that self-efficacy and professional self-doubt together explained 54% of the variance in counselling career readiness, $R^2 = .54$, $F(2, 72) = 41.35$, $p < .001$. Specifically, self-efficacy showed a positive relationship with career readiness, whereas professional self-doubt showed a negative relationship. These findings indicate that trainees who are more confident in their abilities tend to report higher levels of career readiness, while doubts about professional ability are associated with lower levels of readiness (Vaz & Kamat, 2024).

The importance of self-efficacy is further supported by Middleton et al. (2026) in the context of school counselors' professional competence. Their study showed that when self-efficacy and psychological empowerment factors were entered into the microsystem model, the total variance explained in SDoH competency increased to 39.7%, with an additional 24.7% of variance, $\Delta R^2 = .247$, $p < .001$. Cultural acceptance self-efficacy emerged as a significant predictor, $B = .179$, $\beta = .315$, $p < .001$, while collaboration self-efficacy was also significant, $B = .118$, $\beta = .198$, $p = .013$ (Middleton et al., 2026). In the final model, which incorporated micro-, meso-, and exosystem factors, cultural acceptance self-efficacy remained significant, $B = .148$, $\beta = .260$, $p < .001$, indicating that confidence in functioning effectively within culturally diverse contexts was consistently associated with the level of school counselors' professional competence.

In synthesis, both studies show that self-efficacy is an important construct in professional development, both at the stage of preparing to enter a career and when performing professional functions. Vaz and Kamat (2024) demonstrated the relationship between self-efficacy and career readiness among trainees, whereas Middleton et al. (2026) showed that more specific forms of self-efficacy, particularly in cultural acceptance and collaboration, were associated with professional competence in school counseling practice. Although the two studies involved different populations and professional outcomes, their findings collectively suggest that professional readiness depends not only on knowledge and skills but also on the extent to which individuals are confident that they can effectively apply those competencies in actual professional situations.

Theme 2: The Role of Cognitive-Affective Processes: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

Cognitive-affective processes such as mindfulness and self-compassion play an important role in the development of trainees' self-efficacy and professional competence. Latorre et al. (2023), who studied 192 doctoral trainees in counseling and clinical psychology, found that mindfulness was positively associated with self-compassion ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), counselor self-efficacy ($r = .23$, $p < .01$), and self-assessed professional competency ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). In addition, self-compassion was positively associated with counselor self-efficacy ($r = .25$, $p < .01$) and professional competence ($r = .31$, $p < .01$). Regression analysis showed that mindfulness predicted self-compassion, $B = .29$, $\beta = .39$, with the model explaining 22% of the variance in self-compassion ($R^2 = .22$). These findings indicate that awareness of present-moment experience is associated with trainees' ability to develop more balanced and less self-critical self-evaluations (Latorre et al., 2023).

The role of self-compassion becomes clearer when its relationships with self-efficacy and professional competence are analyzed. Latorre et al. (2023) found that self-compassion had a significant positive relationship with counselor self-efficacy, $B = .18$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .05$, and the overall model explained 21% of the variance in self-efficacy. For professional competence, self-compassion was a significant predictor, $B = .22$, $\beta = .29$, $p < .01$, with the model explaining 16% of the variance in self-assessed professional competency. In contrast, mindfulness no longer showed a significant direct relationship with self-efficacy or professional competence after self-compassion and control variables were entered into the model. More importantly, the analysis showed that self-compassion functioned as a mediator in the relationship between mindfulness and counselor self-efficacy, as well as between mindfulness and professional competence (Latorre et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings of Latorre et al. (2023) indicate that cognitive and affective processes are significantly associated with a trainee's professional development. Mindfulness may not directly influence self-efficacy and professional competence when other factors are controlled, but its influence may occur through the development

of self-compassion. The ability to be openly aware of one's experiences, accept limitations, and engage in more balanced self-evaluation may help trainees build confidence in their ability to perform counseling tasks and evaluate their professional competence more positively. Therefore, mindfulness and, in particular, self-compassion may be considered relevant internal psychological aspects in understanding the development of professional readiness, alongside the knowledge and technical skills acquired through formal training (Latorre et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Challenges in Professional Competence and Outcomes of Remediation Interventions

Challenges in professional competence within counselor education can be observed through the presence of problems of professional competence (PPC), which involve various intrapersonal, interpersonal, and professional-behavioral aspects. Salpietro et al. (2026), who examined 80 remediation cases in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs, found that each case involved between one and 24 PPCs, with a mean of 7.05 PPCs ($SD = 4.65$). The most frequently identified problems included awareness of one's impact on others (56.25%), acceptance of personal responsibility (53.75%), receptiveness to feedback (47.50%), ability to integrate feedback (45.00%), and interpersonal skills (38.75%). These findings indicate that professional competence issues are not limited to counseling skills alone but also encompass self-awareness, responsibility, openness to feedback, and interpersonal functioning required in professional practice (Salpietro et al., 2026).

Remediation most frequently occurred during practicum (37.5%), followed by introductory skills courses (31.25%) and internship (26.25%), indicating that competence problems were often identified when trainees began applying knowledge and skills in actual professional training contexts (Salpietro et al., 2026). Various forms of intervention were used, including formal remediation plans (81.25%), written communication regarding concerns or warnings (78.75%), informal discussions between faculty and students (72.50%), formal meetings with committees or stakeholders (61.25%), personal counseling (43.75%), and increased clinical supervision (31.25%). Overall, each case involved an average of 9.60 interventions ($SD = 4.68$), demonstrating that remediation is a multidimensional process that typically requires a combination of several support and professional monitoring strategies (Salpietro et al., 2026).

In terms of outcomes, 61.3% of remediation cases were categorized as successful, while 38.7% were categorized as unsuccessful. More specifically, 33.8% of cases showed improved understanding and outcomes, 27.5% successfully completed the program, 18.8% were dismissed from the program, 11.3% required additional remediation, and 8.8% did not successfully complete the program (Salpietro et al., 2026). Regression analysis showed that the number of PPCs was a significant negative predictor of remediation success, $B = -.15$, $OR = .86$, $p = .031$; each additional PPC was associated with a 14% reduction in the odds of achieving a successful remediation outcome. In contrast, the number of interventions was not a significant predictor of success, $OR = 1.03$, $p = .66$ (Salpietro et al., 2026). These findings indicate that the complexity and accumulation of professional competence problems may be more closely associated with remediation outcomes than the number of interventions provided alone.

Theme 4: Influence of Ecological and Environmental Factors on Competence

Ecological and environmental factors play an important role in shaping counselors' professional competence because the ability to perform professional tasks is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the social and organizational contexts in which counselors work. Middleton et al. (2026) used an ecological perspective to examine the relationships between factors at the micro-, meso-, and exosystem levels and perceived social determinants of health (SDoH) competency among 367 school counselors. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that the model incorporating factors at all three levels explained 45% of the variance in SDoH competency, $R^2 = .450$, $p < .001$. At the microsystem level, adding self-efficacy and psychological empowerment factors increased the explained variance from 15.0% to 39.7%, $\Delta R^2 = .247$, $p < .001$. Cultural acceptance self-efficacy, $B = .179$, $\beta = .315$, $p < .001$, and collaboration self-efficacy, $B = .118$, $\beta = .198$, $p = .013$, were identified as significant predictors of SDoH competency (Middleton et al., 2026).

At the mesosystem level, characteristics of the school environment also contributed to counselor competence. Adding these factors increased R^2 to .426, representing an additional 2.9% of explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .029$, $p < .001$. The percentage of students receiving free-and-reduced lunch (FRL) showed a positive relationship with SDoH competency, $B = .003$, $\beta = .174$, $p = .002$, whereas the percentage of English as a Second Language (ESL) students showed a negative relationship, $B = -.003$, $\beta = -.179$, $p = .018$ (Middleton et al., 2026). In Model 4, caseload also emerged as a significant predictor, $B = .106$, $\beta = .089$, $p = .048$, along with critical motivation, $B = .062$, $\beta = .140$, $p = .026$. However, both variables were no longer significant when structural empowerment was

entered into the final model, indicating that the relationship between work context and competence changes when broader organizational factors are taken into account (Middleton et al., 2026).

At the exosystem level, structural empowerment was a significant predictor of SDoH competency, $B = .127$, $\beta = .153$, $p = .005$, and increased the variance explained by the final model by 1.3%, $\Delta R^2 = .013$. In the final model, cultural acceptance self-efficacy, FRL, ESL, and structural empowerment remained significant predictors, while the overall micro-, meso-, and exosystem factors explained 45% of the variance in SDoH competency (Middleton et al., 2026). Overall, these findings indicate that counselors' professional competence is not developed through individual capability alone but is also influenced by the characteristics of the populations served and the structures and supports of the organizational environment. Therefore, professional competence development should be viewed ecologically by considering the interaction among individual factors, the school context, and organizational structures that support the effective performance of counselors' roles.

Theme 5: Barriers to Readiness: Self-Doubt and Caseload

Professional self-doubt is one psychological factor that may hinder the development of career readiness among counseling trainees. Vaz and Kamat (2024) found that professional self-doubt had a negative relationship with counselling career readiness, with a regression coefficient of -1.5781 , $p < .001$. This finding indicates that increased doubt regarding professional ability is associated with lower levels of career readiness. Together with self-efficacy, professional self-doubt explained 54% of the variance in counselling career readiness, $R^2 = .54$, $F(2, 72) = 41.35$, $p < .001$ (Vaz & Kamat, 2024). These findings suggest that professional readiness depends not only on mastery of knowledge and skills but is also influenced by the level of confidence individuals have in their ability to function as counselors. However, the article by Vaz and Kamat (2024) contains an inconsistency in the reporting of the statistical significance of professional self-doubt; therefore, the finding should be interpreted cautiously.

In addition to internal factors, work-environment demands such as caseload are also associated with counselors' professional competence. Middleton et al. (2026) found that caseload was a significant predictor of perceived social determinants of health (SDoH) competency in Model 4, $B = .106$, $\beta = .089$, $p = .048$. However, this relationship was no longer significant in the final model after structural empowerment was included, with $B = .100$ and $\beta = .084$. In contrast, other environmental factors, such as the percentage of students receiving free-and-reduced lunch (FRL), the percentage of ESL students, and structural empowerment, remained significant predictors in the final model (Middleton et al., 2026). Therefore, the findings of Middleton et al. (2026) do not support the conclusion that caseload is a consistent independent predictor of competence once broader organizational factors are taken into account. Moreover, this study measured SDoH competency among practicing school counselors rather than directly measuring trainees' career readiness.

In synthesis, barriers to professional development may arise from internal factors and the demands of the work context. Professional self-doubt has more direct evidence of an association with trainees' career readiness, as increased doubt about one's abilities is associated with lower readiness levels (Vaz & Kamat, 2024). In contrast, the effect of caseload reported by Middleton et al. (2026) is more contextual and does not remain significant when structural empowerment is taken into account. Accordingly, this literature suggests that efforts to enhance professional readiness should focus on building confidence and reducing self-doubt, while also providing organizational environments that support the performance of professional tasks. Nevertheless, specific empirical evidence linking caseload to the professional readiness of counseling trainees remains limited and requires further investigation.

4.0 Discussion

Overall, the situations identified across the five themes can be explained through the interaction among personal agency, cognitive-affective processes, professional dispositions, training experiences, and environmental resources. Self-efficacy increases confidence in performing tasks and sustaining effort, whereas self-doubt can undermine perceptions of professional readiness (Larson & Daniels, 1998; Lent et al., 1994). Mindfulness and self-compassion help trainees manage self-evaluation and emotional experiences during training, which in turn are associated with self-efficacy and perceived competence (Crego et al., 2022; Latorre et al., 2023). At the same time, professional competence requires more than mastery of technical skills because professional dispositions, receptiveness to feedback, responsibility, and interpersonal functioning also determine trainees' ability to develop as professionals (CACREP, 2024; Salpietro et al., 2026). Finally, these abilities must be enacted within real organizational contexts, meaning that resources, structural support, and workload also shape counselors' professional experiences (Middleton et al., 2026; Um & Bardhoshi, 2025).

5.0 Conclusion

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) aimed to systematically synthesize empirical evidence on factors that influence professional readiness and competence in counseling, particularly in the context of trainees' development toward professional practice. Based on the analysis of studies that met the selection criteria, the findings indicate that professional readiness is a multidimensional construct and does not depend solely on mastery of knowledge and technical skills. Rather, professional readiness is also influenced by individual psychological factors, cognitive-affective processes, professional dispositions, training experiences, and ecological or environmental factors. The synthesis generated five main themes: (i) self-efficacy as an important predictor of career readiness, (ii) the role of cognitive-affective processes such as mindfulness and self-compassion, (iii) challenges in professional competence and outcomes of remediation interventions, (iv) the influence of ecological and environmental factors on competence, and (v) barriers to readiness involving professional self-doubt and caseload demands. Overall, the findings show that self-efficacy is positively associated with readiness and professional competence, whereas professional self-doubt is associated with lower levels of readiness (Vaz & Kamat, 2024). Processes such as mindfulness and self-compassion are also associated with the development of counselor self-efficacy and the assessment of professional competence (Latorre et al., 2023). At the same time, professional development also depends on professional dispositions, receptiveness to feedback, professional responsibility, practicum and supervision experiences, as well as organizational support and structural empowerment (Middleton et al., 2026; Salpietro et al., 2026).

Although the findings provide a meaningful overview of factors associated with professional readiness, several limitations require attention. First, the number of studies that directly measure professional readiness or counselling career readiness remains limited because some studies use related constructs such as professional competency, counselor self-efficacy, SDoH competency, and problems of professional competence as indicators that approximate the concept of professional readiness. Second, there is heterogeneity in study populations because the samples include counseling trainees, psychology trainees, and practicing school counselors, thereby limiting the direct applicability of the findings to the population of pre-service guidance and counseling teachers. Third, most studies use cross-sectional designs, self-report measures, and correlational or regression analyses, meaning that the identified relationships cannot be interpreted as causal. In addition, differences in instruments, training contexts, education systems, and professional environments across countries also limit direct comparisons and the generalizability of findings to different counselor education contexts.

Accordingly, future studies are recommended to focus on the development and validation of more comprehensive professional readiness frameworks and instruments, particularly for guidance and counseling trainees before entering the profession. Longitudinal research is needed to examine changes in professional readiness from academic training through practicum and internship to the transition into employment. Mixed-methods studies may also be used to integrate quantitative measurement with the experiences of trainees, supervisors, and counselor educators so that the development of professional readiness can be understood more deeply. Future research should also test the roles of mediators and moderators such as self-efficacy, self-compassion, professional self-doubt, supervision quality, practicum experience, organizational support, and workload in developing a more robust empirical model of professional readiness development.

From a policy and training perspective, the findings of this SLR suggest that counselor education programs should move beyond an emphasis solely on content mastery and technical skills toward a more holistic professional development approach. Training curricula can systematically strengthen components related to self-efficacy development, self-reflection, self-compassion, multicultural competence, stress management, and professional dispositions. At the same time, training institutions should provide mechanisms for continuous assessment of competence development, high-quality clinical supervision, and early remediation systems for trainees who demonstrate problems of professional competence. At the organizational and policymaking levels, attention should also be given to structural support, resources, reasonable workloads, and conducive practicum environments because professional readiness develops not through individual characteristics alone but through interactions among the individual, the training process, and the professional environment. Therefore, this SLR emphasizes that professional readiness should be understood as a multidimensional construct integrating beliefs about one's capabilities, cognitive-affective processes, professional competence and dispositions, practical experiences, and ecological support, and that this integrative approach should provide the foundation for the future development of professional readiness models and instruments..

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