

# PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND SELF-EFFICACY AMONG SENIOR EDUCATION COUNSELLORS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this narrative review was to synthesize and critique the extant literature pertaining to the conceptualization of professional identity and self-efficacy development in educational and counselling contexts. Both professional identity and self-efficacy are widely recognized as key elements for effective and ethically-oriented professional practice. Professionals working in contemporary educational and counselling settings experience increasingly complex roles, and ambiguous expectations, therefore, it is even more necessary to establish a strong sense of professional identity and confidence in one's practice. Though both concepts have been studied extensively, the literature continues to be fragmented between disciplines; and there continue to be debates about the developmental processes underlying these constructs, and the relative impact of the individual and the environment. A narrative review methodology was used to facilitate the conceptual integration and critical examination of the various sources of data. Searches of the main electronic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar) along with screening of reference lists were used to identify relevant literature. Empirical studies, theoretical papers, and review articles published in English were synthesized to provide insight into both current thinking in addition to historical foundations. The review indicates that professional identity and self-efficacy are dynamic and interdependent constructs which are developed through reflective practice, experiential learning, mentoring and organizational culture. There is general consensus among researchers about the reciprocal nature of these constructs; however, there is inconsistency related to the directionality of causation, environmental influences and developmental paths. Of note, the literature lacks longitudinal research and lacks consistency in theoretical frameworks across studies. This evaluation provides a comprehensive overview of how the development of professional identity and the development of self-efficacy are interrelated as a way of promoting long-term sustainable professional growth and development. Additionally, this evaluation highlights the need for studies that use longitudinal designs and take into account context and provide interventions which are designed to enhance both professional identity and self-efficacy in educational programs and policies related to professionals.*

**Keywords:** *Professional identity, Self-efficacy, Professional development, Education and counselling, Narrative review*

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## Introduction

The processes of forming a professional identity and building self-efficacy are understood by some as essential in the professional development of competent, resilient and ethically responsive professionals across and about education, counselling and human service-related fields (Carlisle, 2026). Professional identity is the way an individual conceptualizes their professional role, values, normative behaviours, and duties or responsibilities, and self-efficacy, derived from social cognitive theory, is the belief that individuals are capable of arranging and doing the necessary actions to obtain a desired result (Byram et al., 2022). Collectively, each of these constructs contributes to professional decision-making, commitment, wellbeing and performance.

Indeed, the literature on professional identity and self-efficacy indicates that these concepts are not static entities, but complex, interactive processes that can change over time as practitioners are exposed to various environmental influences (e.g., educational and training environments, social circles) or practice reflection (Li et al., 2025). These constructs have been investigated more recently in the context of professional preparation programmes and workplace settings, increasing our understanding of their role in the context of coping with the complexity of task demands, role ambiguity, and changes in the profession (Schmidt et al., 2014). Yet, previous research remains dispersed among fields, and also has not reached consensus on how professional identity changes over time, whether self-efficacy is buffered by different mechanisms (e.g., context, or individual), and the relative effects of contextual vs. individual difference factors (Barbarà et al., 2017).

This narrative review aims to consolidate and critically investigate current literature on professional identity formation and enhancement of self-efficacy, with a focus on its conceptions, interplays, and pathways of development (Franco & Rodrigues, 2018). It will cover theoretical perspectives, main empirical findings, factors that seem to weight, and implications for educational and professional practice (Postholm, 2012)) In light of persistent issues around professional readiness, adaptability, and sustainability in contemporary contexts of practice, this review, by offering an integrative summary, is both timely and important (Young et al., 2025).

## Method

The purpose of this narrative review was to integrate and interpret the literature in education, counselling, and related professional domains regarding formation of professional identity and self-efficacy. An un-systematic approach was chosen as flexible strategy in order to ensure that conceptual integration and critical appraisal of heterogeneous sources would be possible in accordance with the nature of a narrative review.

## Sources of Information

The search strategy was then implemented in the principal electronic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO and Google Scholar) to ensure comprehensive interdisciplinary coverage. Education, psychology, counselling and professional development were the reasons why these databases have relevance to study selected. Backward citation tracking was also

conducted by handsearching through the reference lists of identified articles, to retrieve seminal or commonly cited papers not found in the original search.

### **Search Strategy**

Search terms were constructed using the main concepts of the review and then combined with Boolean operators.

#### ***Performing Keyword Search***

("professional identity" OR "identity formation" OR "self-concept" OR "self-identity") AND ("self-efficacy" OR "self-confidence" OR "self-belief" OR "personal efficacy") AND ("education" OR "educational" OR "learning" OR "teaching") AND ("counselling" OR "counselling" OR "guidance" OR "advising")

Searches were restricted to English language peer-reviewed articles published 2021-2026 to represent both foundational and current perspectives. Initial filters aimed to preference empirical research, theoretical articles and good quality reviews on professional education and practice.

#### ***Selection Criteria***

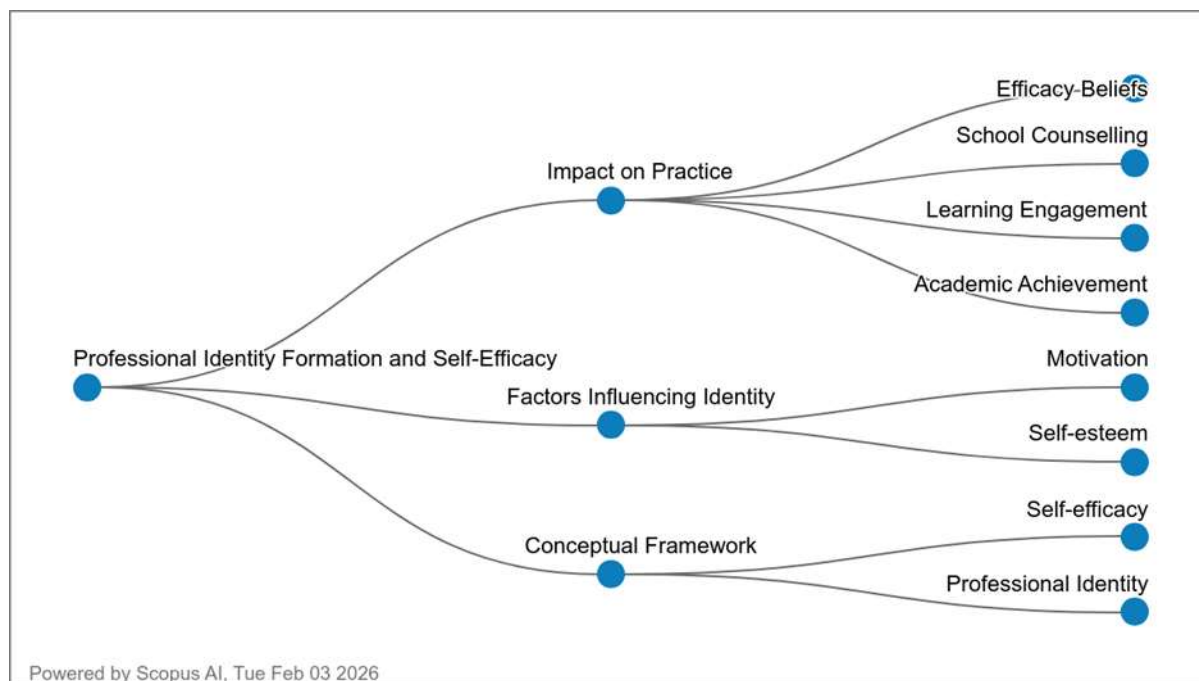
Papers were selected if they specifically dealt with professional identity or/and self-efficacy in the field of education, counselling, and related professions and provided original theoretical, empirical or practical perspective for furthering professional growth. Excluding criteria were studies not conducted in a professional setting, publications that discussed the phenomenon of learning technical skills without referencing identity or self-beliefs, and papers where there was insufficient methodological and/or conceptual clarity. In contrast to strict quality scoring, relevance to the review question, theoretical contribution and compliance with review aims were weighted heavily aiming for a balanced and meaningful synthesis of the literature.

## **Discussion**

### **Synthesis Analysis**

#### **Conceptualising Professional Identity and Self-Efficacy**

Studies have continually defined professional identity as a constantly evolving and socially constructed development process that enables individuals to internalize the values, roles, and norms of the profession, instead of being something acquired at the point of qualification (Caza & Creary, 2016). Scholars have also noted that professional identity continues to develop throughout one's career through education, work experience, reflection, and involvement within professional communities and networks (Nyström, 2009). Self-efficacy, developed from social cognitive theory, is concerned with an individual's belief in their ability to carry out job-related activities effectively (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). "Who am I as a professional?" is what professional identity attempts to answer; "What do I believe I can accomplish?" is what self-efficacy attempts to answer. Overall, across multiple studies, it has been concluded that professional identity and self-efficacy are highly interdependent, although they are separate concepts (Tam, 2013). However, there has been ongoing debate regarding how the two concepts relate to each other. Some authors have suggested that self-efficacy is an antecedent to developing a professional identity, while others have argued that for self-efficacy to be sustainable, a professional identity that is consistent must first be established (Huu Hoang, 2025).



**Figure 1: Professional Identity Formation and Self-Efficacy**

The figure shows a conceptual network map indicative of core themes and relationships identified in the narrative review on professional identity formation and self-efficacy. In the middle of the figure is the main concept professional identity formation and self-efficacy, from which three major thematic clusters radiate outwards.

The first bundle conceptual framework is directly associated with professional identity and self-efficacy and places these two constructs as the theoretical underpinning of the review. This subbranch illustrates the notion of identity and efficacy, portrayed as central concepts in the literature as intertwined.

The second cluster, factors influencing identity, relating to the theme's motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy pertains to the more personalized, psychological elements often referenced in discussions on professional identity development. Such pathway is a reflection of the theoretical literature, which highlights the importance of inward, beliefs and affective components in identity development.

The third cluster, impact on practice branches out into efficacy beliefs, school counselling, learning engagement, academic achievement, and motivation. This branch demonstrates how professional identity and resultant self-efficacy manifests in practice with respect to their expected outcomes, specifically with respect to educational and more counselling environments which align and inform areas such as engagement, performance and effectiveness of professional practice.

In summary, the figure visually integrates (1) the conceptual foundations of the review; (2) the factors that influence concepts and (3) practice related outcomes, which strengthen the reciprocal and practical aspect of professional identity formation and self-efficacy.

### **Relationship Between Professional Identity Formation and Self-Efficacy**

A common thread in the literature is the connection of PIF and self-efficacy formation (Huang et al., 2024). We empirically know that higher self-efficacy usually accompany clearer professional identity, role confidence and little sense of professional commitment (Canrinus et al., 2012). On the contrary, a positive professional identity seems to enhance self-efficacy by affording meaning and significance and interpretive models for work challenges (Weston, 2027). Despite the general agreement about this circular dependency, divergences persist when elements of context are taken into account (Avgerou, 2019). While some works emphasize individual cognitive factors like mastery experiences as well as self-reflection, other work focus on structural and social facilitators, such as mentorship, organizational culture or professional recognition (Bocoş et al., 2024). This contrast highlights an unresolved tension between explanations centred on individual agency and those centred on the context (Kim, 2015).

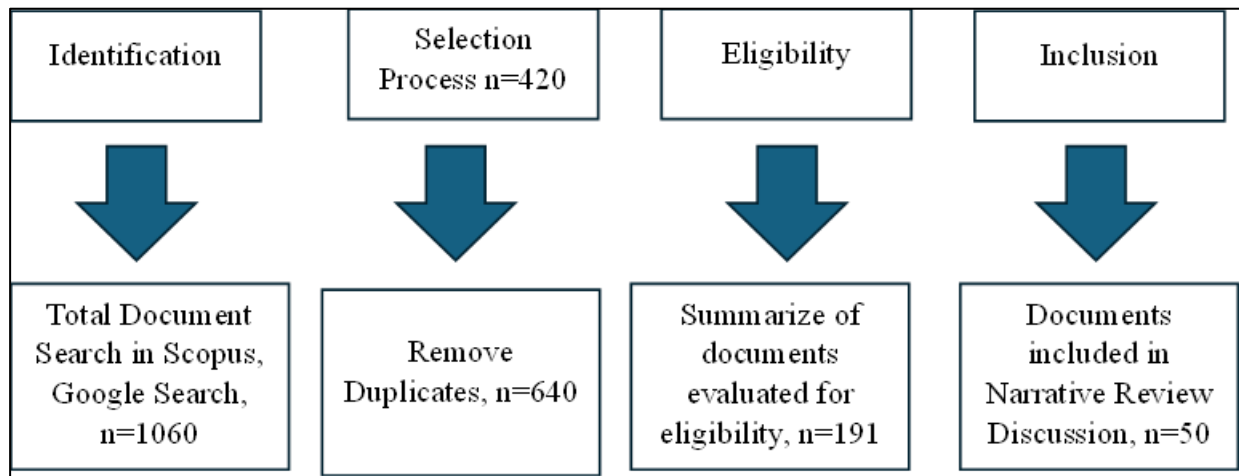
### **Influencing Factors and Developmental Pathways**

Several interrelated factors that shape professional identity and self-efficacy have been outlined in the literature including the types of educational experiences, supervised practice, feedback, peers interaction, self-reflective learning (Nikoçeviq-Kurti, 2021). Real-world practice setting/-'on the job' and doing is repeatedly identified as essential in building self-efficacy and consolidating identity. It is, however, less conclusive about the relative weight of formal curricula and informal workplace learning (Mattila et al., 2018). Some suggest that formal professional organization plays a central role (Hafferty, 1998), while others argue that identity and agency are primarily forged through informal processes of socialization (Hafferty, 2016). Specifically, it is unclear how these factors change within a single individual over time as we age in our careers, and longitudinal work of this type has been lacking, thereby stifling our understanding of the long-term development of these constructs (Dobrow, & Weisman, 2021).

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research**

Collectively the literature has shown that targeted support for both professional identity formation and enhancing self-efficacy is effective in supporting professional resilience, performance and retention (Day, 2018). This informs the practice-based benefits of reflective supervision, mentoring and positive organisational culture. In terms of policy, it is possible that professional education systems that incorporate identity and self-efficacy focused strategies will lead to improved workforce sustainability (Brown, 2024). The future research agenda should include addressing some of the methodological limitations of previous studies through the use of longitudinal and mixed-method study designs, as well as the examination of the experience of different professional groups and diverse cultural contexts (Mertens, 2019). This type of research will help to develop clearer theory and provide evidence-based direction for professional development interventions.

## Limitations



**Figure 1: PRISMA-based Flow Diagram of Document Selection Process for Narrative Review**

To provide maximal diversity of everything from constructs, populations, and interventions to barriers, adjacent professions, and supports, we employed eight unique search groups.

This narrative review has some limitations that should be taken into account before extrapolating its results. Our study has some limitations; first, as a narrative review, the methodology is not performed with full procedural rigor of a systematic review. While a PRISMA-informed flow diagram and structured search strategy were used to enhance transparency, even a systematic review of literature is interpretive in nature. This leads to an increased risk of selection bias, as the inclusion of studies was based to some degree on the authors' purposive judgement on relevance and conceptual contribution, rather than via use of predefined quality appraisal tools.

Second, there are limitations in the evidence base itself. There are abundant conceptual richness and methodological diversity among the literature on professional identity formation and self-efficacy, but much of the research conflates population, discipline, and research design. Although this diversity is a strength it makes direct comparison across studies and generalisability of conclusions difficult. Moreover, most of the available literature is cross-sectional, limiting our understanding of developmental trajectories and the causal pathways between professional identity and self-efficacy.

Third, the variety of definitions and theoretical frameworks used across studies may potentially lead to oversimplifying results during synthesis challenges. Further limitation of evidence is likely to have resulted from publication bias which favours positive findings between primary studies and consider only studies published in English.

In the future, these limitations could be tackled by longitudinal and mixed-methods studies, increasing inclusion of non-English and underrepresented contexts, and hybrid systematic–narrative approaches to integrate methodological rigor and conceptual richness.

## Conclusion

This narrative review aimed to review and critically analyse the literature on professional identity development and self-efficacy broaden-and-build, with a focus on their theoretical

underpinnings, relationships and developmental trajectories in education and counselling settings. The review illustrates that professional identity and self-efficacy are the dynamic interlocking building blocks that underpin professional competency, resilience and sustained engagement. There is consistent evidence that self-efficacy promotes identity consolidation through increased confidence or role clarity and in turn a sense of professional identity offers support to an individual's sense of meaning and stability that are working together in reinforcing efficacy beliefs. The synthesis further indicates that these processes are influenced by not only individual factors, such as reflective practise and mastery experience, but also contextual determinants: mentoring, organisational culture and authentic practice environments - overwriting to some extent the original gap of individual vs. context influences. The literature, however, is piecemeal, lacking in longitudinal evidence and theory integration. Expanding on these findings, future research could give precedence to longitudinal and mixed-methods designs aimed at shedding light on the causal mechanisms and developmental paths across career phases. In addition, investigators should continue to study underrepresented professional groups and cultural settings; assess interventions that deliberately infuse identity- and efficacy-based strategies into professional education and policy; and integrate implicit reflection experiences in targeted learning environments as another form of self-awareness. Furthering this agenda will add to theoretical coherence and guide evidence-based practices that lead to sustainable professional development in the face of growingly complex practice conditions.

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