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The Agile School Counselor Training Model: Fostering a Nonbinary Professional Identity

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Abstract

The authors offer the Agile School Counselor Training Model as a multidimensional framework that provides counselor educators and school counselors-in-training (SCITs) a visual schema for fostering a nonbinary professional school counselor identity. The model covers the full spectrum of work school counselors engage in, ranging from mental health professional to educational professional, as well as a continuum of practice that ranges from a focus on the personal to a focus on the systemic. This article reviews the pendulum swings of school counselor professional identity, introduces the Agile Model, and offers implications for practice for counselor educators and SCITs.

Significance to the Public

The authors of this article offer the Agile School Counselor Training Model as a multidimensional training framework to help school counselors who are in training understand the intersection of mental health professional and educational professional roles as well as the integration of personal and systemic foci.

Keywords: school counselor training, professional identity, agile model

The shifting nature of the school counselor's professional identity has been well-documented (Culbreth et al., 2005; Dimmitt et al., 2023; DeKruyf et al., 2013a; Gysbers, 2001; Lambie et al., 2019). Throughout the approximately 130-year history of the profession, school counselors' career focus has evolved in response to waves of education reform, economic pressure, wars and conflicts, and societal upheaval and progress (DeKruyf et al., 2013a; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Paisley & McMahon, 2001; Reiner & Hernandez, 2013). In the field of education, where budgets are dependent upon governmental support, there has been a tendency to adopt a new identity to show relevance or worth related to an identified need in a particular era. When the pendulum has swung to a different need, from vocational guidance and personal

counseling to academic achievement or mental health and wellness, it has led to dramatic shifts in school counselor identity to meet the needs of the moment.

In current practice, the changing emphasis in schools may mean that, depending on when they began their careers, one school counselor may view themselves foremost as an educational interventionist while their colleague claims a primary identity as a mental health professional (Reiner & Hernández, 2013; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). This can be explained by the fact that academic success was seen as the primary objective of schools in the school reform years of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002; Sabens & Zyromski, 2009), while, in recent years, the social justice and global health pandemics heralded a call

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to address our youth mental health crisis (Alexander et al., 2022; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). The identity held by a school counselor can thus shape their individual practice as well as set expectations from principals and teachers about the school counselor's professional role (Havlik et al., 2019; Milsom et al., 2020; Reiner et al., 2009).

While the responsiveness to national trends and local needs can be framed as a positive trait of the profession, it has also led to role conflict and ambiguity, which in turn has been linked to job stress and burnout among school counselors (Fye et al., 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). As witnesses and participants to several decades of this history, the authors believe an alternative must be proposed to this often harmful oscillation of professional identity. Understanding the issues that have swung the pendulum of professional identity can be empowering, as the lessons learned can point to a balance point for the future practice of school counseling.

All too often, as Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) have stated, "school counselors are compelled to privilege either the educator or counselor identity or must choose to oscillate between identities based on circumstance, setting, or external pressure" (p. 2). Currently, the call for a nonbinary professional identity has gained volume in recognition that the full spectrum of the work is needed (Brott et al., 2021; DeKruyf et al., 2013a; Lambie et al., 2019; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove 2021). We join these voices in proposing that a multidimensional identity can bring coherence to the profession and better meet the holistic needs of students, including their academic, social-emotional, and career development. Rather than an either/or approach, we recommend training school counselors to learn and combine the multiple roles to ably meet a range of needs.

Agile school counselors draw upon the conjoint skills of both educational professional and mental health professional (DeKruyf et al., 2013a) to meet needs within their schools ranging from the individual to the systemic. For example, professional school counselors might use their

clinical skills to intervene with a student experiencing suicidal ideation (Gallo & Wachter Morris, 2022; Purgason et al., 2022) and use their advocacy skills to change system-wide inequitable policies that lead to student distress (Ratts et al., 2007). They can work nimbly from an individual response to school-wide transformation and back again to ably and equitably serve all students throughout a spectrum that ranges from the individual to the systemic (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022; Gruman et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, a new professional school counselor's identity is particularly susceptible to pressure from external forces that can contribute to a lack of confidence, learned helplessness, and/or burnout (Carlson, 2014; Fye et al., 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018). In these cases, the not-so-agile school counselor who only does one-on-one counseling may be responding to crises all day instead of developing preventative programs that address the underlying systemic problems in the building. Similarly, the not-so-agile school counselor who can only function as a data-informed educational professional may be unable to recognize and respond to mental health needs that prevent students from meeting their full potential. In both cases, the new professional is unable to capitalize on their range of knowledge and skills in a way that will instill positive and lasting change.

In this article, we propose a multidimensional training model that encompasses both identities: mental health professional *and* educational professional. In addition, the model maps out a continuum of practice that ranges from a focus on the personal to a focus on the systemic. This model grew out of the authors' experiences as both practicing school counselors and school counselor educators, before and after the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002). This period was marked by a dramatic shift toward academic achievement as the driver of funding and a de-emphasis on support for noncognitive skills related to student well-being and success. As we reflected on eras when school counselor identity had swung in other directions, the model evolved through a series of discussions, articles, and presentations

(DeKruyf et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2016; Gruman et al., 2012, 2016). The result of this collaboration was a training model that can help prepare new professionals to recognize the pendulum pressure as well as to articulate and embrace the totality of their knowledge and skills.

The Agile School Counselor Training Model

The Agile School Counselor Training Model (Gruman et al., 2016) offers a visual framework for counselor educators to foster within school counselors in training (SCITs) a nonbinary professional identity and an intentional approach to meet needs that range from the personal to the systemic. This is in recognition of the exceptional training in both counseling skills and systemic leadership that school counselors receive. The model offers a strengths-based approach that emphasizes specialized training and capabilities rather than listing taboo areas of practice to help SCITs articulate the range of professional skills they possess.

At its most basic, the Agile Model consists of a horizontal axis anchored by Mental Health Professional (MHP) on one end and Educational Professional on the other. A vertical axis intersects this professional identity continuum at the midpoint and is anchored by Person Focus at the top and System Focus at the bottom. Each axis represents a continuum of the work done by school counselors, recognizing that neither the professional identity nor the breadth of the focus of the work is a binary, but rather, it is an entire spectrum.

The cross-pieces of the basic framework create four general areas or quadrants of the model (see Figure 1) that flesh out the interaction between identity and focus. Note that these areas are not a direct overlay of The ASCA National Model (2019b), but are instead a tool that can be used alongside it. The Agile Model is an at-a-glance visual representation that captures the nonbinary spectrum of the professional identity of school counselors as both mental health and educational professionals, as well as the scope of work done by

school counselors ranging from a focus on the person to a focus on the system.

For example, when a school counselor engages in the Person Focus area as an Educational Professional, their interventions could include consultation, individual planning, and student advocacy related to course planning. If the focus is on a System level, the work might include coordination, data-informed programming, and system support. At the System Focus level in an MHP role, the work could include providing staff development and/or parent education on prevention and wellness topics emerging from school-wide data. In that same MHP role, focused more on the Person than the System, one would engage in responsive services as well as individual and small group counseling. The reality is that school counselors use their MHP skills in their work as educational professionals and their educational professional skills in their work as MHPs. In contrast with other MHPs, such as school-based therapists who work primarily in the MHP/Person Focus area, school counselors are embedded in students' environments with existing connections to teachers and administrators, and are therefore ideally positioned for engaging across all areas. To aid in training school counseling students, Table 1 provides a nonexhaustive list of activities that might live in each area of the model.

Centrally located within the basic framework of the Agile Model are the School Counselor Training Standards. These standards, drawn from the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015, 2023) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, n.d.), prescribe coverage of legal and ethical standards, counseling skills, multicultural responsiveness, social justice advocacy, data-informed practice, trauma-informed practice, collaboration, and teaming. This brief listing is not exhaustive of all that school counselors are trained in, nor is it exclusive to only school counselors; instead, it highlights that school counselors are the only professionals in the building comprehensively trained to work within and across all areas (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). For example, the ASCA (2022)

Ethical Standards for School Counselors calls for them to maintain confidentiality at a higher level than their teacher and administrator colleagues. In addition, school counselors from CACREP-accredited programs (CACREP, 2015, 2023) receive training in individual and group counseling and must amass supervised field experience engaging in the same. Infused into this training are

competencies in both multicultural sensitivity and social justice advocacy (Ratts et al., 2016) that should inform all the work SCs engage in, including data- and trauma-informed practice. All of this further characterizes the collaboration and teamwork that SCs engage in with others in their buildings and districts (ASCA, 2019b).

Figure 1
Agile School Counselor Training Model

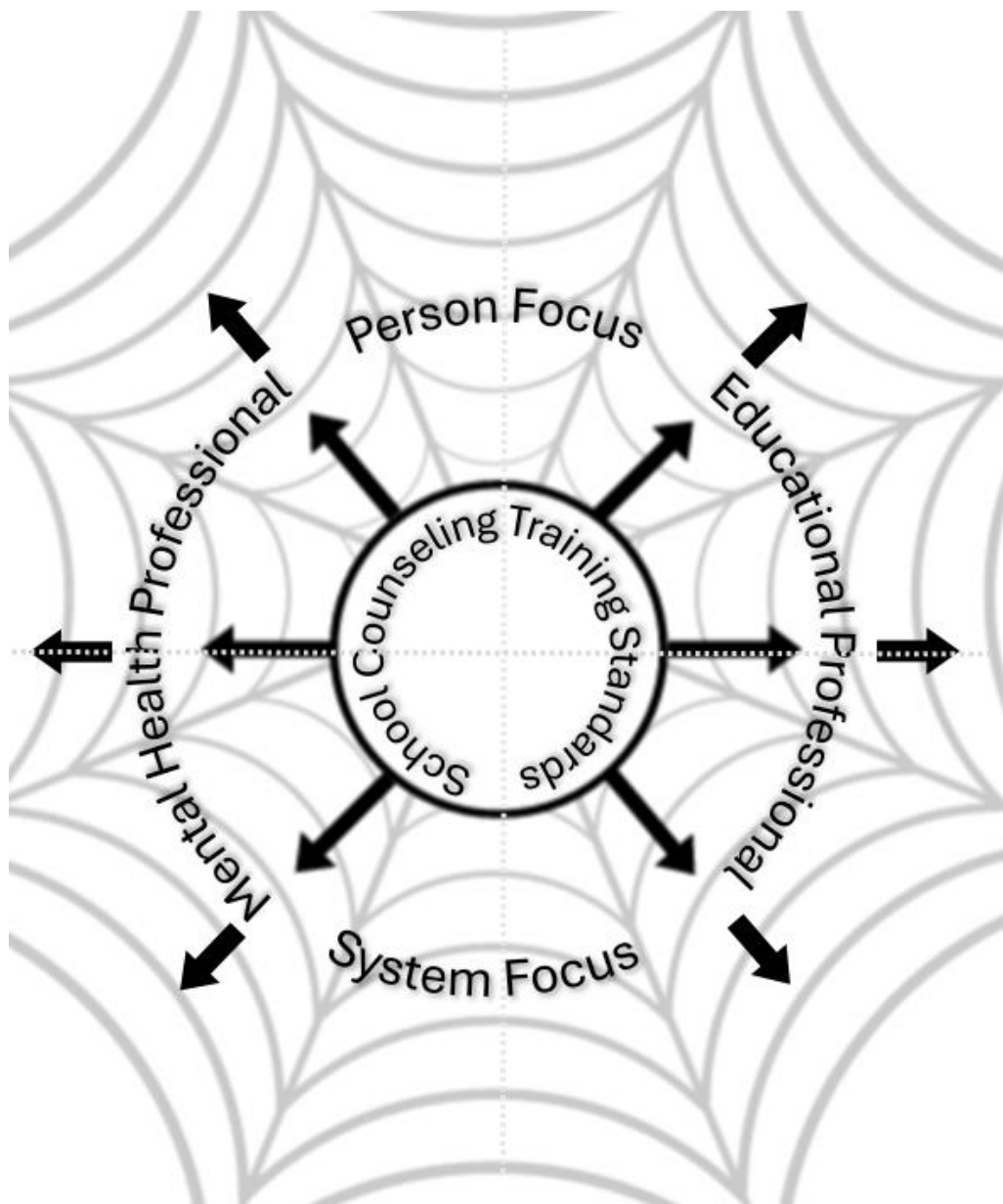


Table 1

Example Activities Within Each Area of the Model

Educational Professional – Person Focus	Educational Professional – System Focus	Mental Health Professional – Person Focus	Mental Health Professional – System Focus
Teacher consultation on strategies to regulate student behavior	Coordination with staff regarding classroom climate initiatives	Parent consultation related to supporting their child’s mental health needs	Staff development related to recognizing student risk factors
Individual academic planning	Planning and delivering data-informed core curriculum on academic success skills	Small group counseling on topics such as coping with grief and loss or developing healthy relationships	School board presentation on student wellness and mental health topics
Advocacy regarding an individual student’s course selection	Advocacy regarding equitable AP course availability	Individual counseling regarding mental health concerns	Advocacy related to concerns with systemic bias and oppression

Note. These sample activities are not all-inclusive and may live in multiple columns.

Teaching the Agile School Counselor Training Model

All three of the authors’ university programs introduce students to the Agile School Counseling Training Model (see Figure 1) in an introductory school counseling course, although each approaches the content differently. One approach begins with student brainstorming, using either a high-tech tool like PollEverywhere or low-tech think-pair-share partnerships, to generate as comprehensive a list as possible of school counseling work activities. Another approach is to begin by briefly reviewing the history of school counseling and examining the shifts in professional identity prompted by educational reforms. Both approaches predictably generate a “pulled in many directions” feeling amongst students regarding what school counselors do and what school counselors are. Large group discussion then centers around the thoughts and feelings that emerge, followed by an introduction to the framework of the Agile Model via a formal presentation. This introductory presentation

describes the mental health and educational role continuum as well as the person-level and system-level continuum of the model. Whether or not already covered, historical and current influences and trends can be threaded throughout this discussion.

In one counselor educator’s approach, school counseling activities that emerge from the discussion are followed by the School Counseling Training Standards, which highlight the comprehensive training SCs receive; in another approach, the sequence is reversed. When introducing the four general areas of the model, work categories reflective of The ASCA National Model (2019b) are identified. These would include consultation, system support, core curriculum, and responsive services, among several others (see Table 1). To confirm understanding, students may be asked to list specific school counselor activities that fall into each area of the model. Representative student answers have included “advocating for transgender bathroom access,” “talking with a parent about the mental health needs of their child,”

and “running small groups.” Inevitably a point that emerges is that the work of school counselors does not always fit neatly into just one area, which is a strength of the Agile Model. When highlighting the School Counseling Training Standards at the center of the model, an important concept to communicate is that school counselors’ training encompasses all areas of the model in contrast to others in their buildings (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021).

The final step when using the model is the use of a case study that puts the proverbial flesh on the bones of the model. The class can be divided into small working groups with each given the same case study for consideration. These small groups utilize the Agile framework to develop a plan of action for the student presented. After sufficient working time, the small groups share with the entire class how they plan to approach the case study. At this point, there is typically a good deal of discussion regarding how each of the groups approached the task in a different manner. This is an opportunity for the counselor educator to reflect upon the fact that this model is sensitive to the environmental and personal nuances of the professional school counselor’s work. In essence, the model does not dictate the nature of a response, but alternately offers a framework that ensures a thoughtful and comprehensive response to complex situations. During this discussion, students are also asked to reflect upon how the school counselor-specific training at the hub of the web influenced the choices they made in determining a response.

A bare-bones case study leaves room for students to imagine different nuances. What inevitably emerges from the case study discussion is that school counselors operate within multiple areas of the web. For example, in *The Case of Rajiv* (see Appendix A), one might start within the Educational Professional–Person-Focus area, because Rajiv’s teacher reached out to you when she overheard potentially derogatory comments made about Rajiv. The two of you may also consult about possible courses of action to support the social or academic needs of a wider group of religious minority students, which means you would then be operating from the MHP–System area or the

Educational Professional–System area. Might classroom lessons as well as staff development be helpful? What do you personally need to learn about Sikh culture? With whom can you coordinate? Direct action you might take with Rajiv and also with his peers could include individual or small group counseling, operating out of the MHP–Person area.

At this point in the training, foregrounding the spider web imagery in the background of the Agile Model introduces a useful metaphor to the case study discussion. The imagery of an intact web — a strong structure — can signify a well-designed comprehensive school counseling program and can help SCITs grasp the interconnectedness of the areas as well as the importance of nimbly working throughout the entire framework.

The web metaphor also provides a readily understood representation of a lopsided or less-than-comprehensive approach to school counseling. A partial web is not as effective as a whole one. If a school counselor neglects an area, it weakens the web as a whole. A lopsided or partial web could be the result of poor training, a lack of experience, or administrative pressures. In a training setting, a large group discussion about the factors that may weaken a web often leads to robust and insightful dialogue amongst students and also offers an opportunity to talk about resilience factors and how those can maintain the integrity of a web.

In the Spring semester of 2023, students at one university were asked to write a reflection after being introduced to the Agile Model. Most of the students’ comments centered on the ease of understanding, the impact of the web visual, and the flexibility of the model. Student 1 wrote:

I really liked the model!! I feel like it was easy to understand, especially because we’re all familiar with the graph and how something can fit into different sections while still being connected to the other sections. I liked seeing this because as a SCIT, I sometimes have a hard time understanding how I can actively perform my different roles like systematic change or educator so it is nice to see it in this kind of layout.

Student 2 articulated similar thoughts:

It validated and gave verbiage to some of the issues I have been having about my own professional identity. In that way, it was comforting to know I am not off track in feeling pulled in so many directions. I appreciated the visual element because it helped me see that these pieces of myself can coexist, intersect and even work together to make me a stronger professional in the field.

Student 3 shared:

I think having the spider web analogy makes this model really concise and clear when understanding the different roles/identities that school counselors must play. It was helpful to have a visual understanding of where all the parts played a role and how school counselors utilize those roles.

Student 4 added:

I liked the idea of a web, it allows “free-flowing” movement from concept to concept, which I believe is more realistic than an axis/graph. I also like the symbolism behind the web when referring to strength and resilience. It really allowed me to visualize the case study in a more succinct manner because there was no “correct” way of processing.

After an introduction to the model, some students articulated how overwhelming the school counseling role felt. For example, Student 5 wrote, “I am curious though how a school counselor can best meet all of the different sectors of this model as it seems to be very comprehensive.” In the same vein, Student 6 shared:

I feel it’s important to be aware of the role that time plays into each part and the model as a whole. School counselors seem to be at the mercy of their time with a student, therefore counselors may need to adjust/pivot their approach more fluidly/rapidly than they are anticipating. If this awareness is in conjunction with the introduction of this model, that may help new school counselors feel less surprised or

overwhelmed when they begin working in a school.



Implications for Practice

Several implications for counselor educators and professionals in the field arise when considering the use of the Agile School Counselor Training Model. These implications include the development of professional identity, the relevance of and empowerment through training standards, equipping for professional advocacy, engaging in student advocacy and equity work, and guiding professional development.

The authors developed the Agile School Counselor Training Model intending to offer a clear and dynamic visual to aid SCITs and professional school counselors in developing a complex school counselor professional identity and focus. The web graphic introduces this complexity through an easily understood visual that helps viewers understand how identity and focus interweave to support professional school counselor practice. Qualitative inquiry with SCITs confirmed our hope that exposure to the Agile Model contributed to their clearer sense of professional identity. This matters because, as noted in the introduction, the school counseling profession has historically faced challenges with role confusion and contested identity. Carrying the burden of identity and role clarification distracts professional school counselors from their core mission of nurturing students’ holistic development (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). A clear sense of professional identity and the full spectrum of practice reflected in the model lifts that distracting burden and thus provides a foundation for engaging in powerful practice.

Secondly, the model is grounded in preparation and practice standards adopted by CACREP (2015, 2023) and ASCA (n.d., 2019a). Through centering training standards in the hub of the web, counselor preparation programs are assured that SCITs are grounded in training standards related to ethics, counseling skills, multicultural responsiveness, social justice advocacy, data-informed practice,

trauma-informed practice, collaboration, and teaming. Through the model, SCITs understand that the standards that ground their preparation are relevant and central to the work they do as professional school counselors (Slaten & Baskin, 2014). As a result of this awareness, novice school counselors are empowered to carry their training forward into their professional lives, leaving them less susceptible to outside influences of administrators and community constituents.

Thirdly, professional school counselors who possess clarity of identity and focus are better equipped to engage in meaningful and successful advocacy for the profession. This professional advocacy has a direct impact on not only the efficacy of services to students but also the work life of professional school counselors (Carlson, 2014). School counseling is often misunderstood by professional colleagues. School counselors who are solidly grounded in the holistic nature of their identity and focus are better positioned to help colleagues understand how school counselors uniquely contribute to student wellness and success. Professional school counselors, whether novice or experienced, can use the Agile Model to educate others on their comprehensive role and focus, as well as when creating administrative agreements (ASCA, 2019b).

School counseling is also often perceived as a challenging profession, yet organizational research has shown that not all stressors in the work environment are necessarily detrimental. Wallace et al. (2009) found that “challenge stressors” such as workload, time pressure, and high responsibility can be beneficial to job performance when perceived to be under the control of the employee *and when organizational support is present*. Professional advocacy can directly impact how school administrators conceptualize the school counselor role and thus the level of organizational support for programming and practice. This is important because a lack of organizational support can lead to learned helplessness (Carlson, 2014) and burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Holman et al., 2019) for the school counselor. To forestall these negative outcomes, advocacy knowledge and skills are

ideally taught in counselor preparation programs before the SCITs become immersed in their work environment (Cigrand et al., 2015; Havlik et al., 2019).

A fourth implication of the Agile School Counselor Training Model is that it offers professional school counselors a framework to remain alert to their own bias or myopic stance. It highlights the reality that Person Focus and System Focus concerns are inextricably interconnected. The model thus provides a consistent reminder to investigate the potential systemic roots of injustice and inequity that may at first glance be identified as an individual concern. Additionally, it provides a prompt to approach complex problems from different angles and consider the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. As a result, the Agile Model aids the school counselor in promoting equity and social justice as a driving force in their work (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Ratts et al., 2007, 2016).

A final implication is that novice school counselors can use the Agile Model when reflecting on their professional practice and planning for their ongoing professional development. Utilizing the framework of the model can shed light on blind spots as well as highlight strengths. For example, a professional school counselor may learn through a time and task analysis (ASCA, 2019b) that they function primarily in the Educational Professional–Person Focus area. Perhaps through self-reflection, this school counselor can recognize their discomfort when moving into the Mental Health Professional–System Focus area because they feel inadequately trained or inexperienced. This understanding can guide school counselors in planning, accessing, and completing relevant professional development opportunities that can best equip them to serve their communities.



Conclusion

The Agile School Counseling Training Model was developed to provide a multidimensional framework that counselor educators can use to teach SCITs to understand and foster a full spectrum

professional identity. The school counseling profession has been plagued by ongoing role confusion and ambiguity practically from its inception (Culbreth et al., 2005; Fye et al., 2020). Recent social, political, and public health developments have underscored the importance of a professional school counselor identity that is diversified, nonbinary, and grounded in the needs of students and communities. The Agile Model addresses the decades-long dilemma of role conflict and ambiguity in the profession by helping new professionals resist severe swings of professional identity and advocates for using all of their knowledge and skills on behalf of students. The Agile Model visually connects professional identity and areas of focus as an interconnected web of practice and empowers school counselors to dive into the full spectrum of their work. Professional school counselors who embody the entire range of their identity as MHPs and educational professionals, and attend to the wide focus of their work from the personal to the systemic, are well-positioned to make a meaningful impact on the students and communities they serve, and the school counseling profession.

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Appendix: The Case of Rajiv

Rajiv is a new 7th grader in your suburban middle school. He moved to this country with his extended family from India 3 years ago. Rajiv identifies as Sikh and his family adheres to traditions from that religion. Your school has about 600 students, 12 of whom identify as Sikh. Rajiv’s core teacher stopped by your office to tell you about comments overheard about Rajiv’s turban.

Decide where you will begin on the web and brainstorm appropriate strategies a school counselor might implement.

Do the same for at least one other area where you would engage.

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