Life-story method utilisation for professional development of high school counselors in Slovenia

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Abstract: This article researches the professional development of trained psychologists (holding a bachelor's degree in Psychology) that work as school counsellors in Slovenia utilising the life-story method. Using the Case Study methodology on four examples, it tries to determine which factors, they deem important for their professional development and how they explain the influence of those factors on their work. The professional development factors were then categorised based on recognising similarities in school counsellors' life-stories, dividing them into areas: (first and second phase) university education, preparation for professional work, work climate, relationships with co-workers, stress & burnout and protective factors & work motivation. Results of our study mostly correspond with previous studies and show that school counsellors work is diverse and often stressful.

Keywords: school counseling, professional development, life-story, stress, school climate

Uporaba metode poklicne biografije za preučevanje profesionalnega razvoja svetovalnih delavcev v srednjih šolah v Sloveniji

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Povzetek: V članku smo želeli raziskati profesionalni razvoj svetovalnih delavcev v Sloveniji, ki izhajajo iz psihološke stroke, z metodo poklicne biografije. Namen je identificirati dejavnike, ki so pomembni za njihov profesionalni razvoj ter njihov pogled na vpliv teh dejavnikov na poklicni razvoj. Kategorije profesionalnega razvoja smo izluščili na podlagi primerjave podobnosti v poklicnih biografijah svetovalnih delavcev in smo jih razvrstili v pet področij – osnovno izobraževanje, pripravo na poklicno delo, delovno klimo in odnose znotraj kolektiva, stres in izgorelost ter varovalne dejavnike in motivacijo za delo. Rezultati so pretežno skladni z rezultati predhodnih raziskav in kažejo, da je delo svetovalnih delavcev pestro in pogosto stresno.

Ključne besede: šolsko svetovalno delo, profesionalni razvoj, poklicna biografija, stres, delovna klima

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In order to keep pace with the constantly changing modern society, it is no longer sufficient for school counsellors to rely on their formal education to successfully, efficiently and responsibly fulfill their broad set of professional responsibilities. Consequently, school counsellors must remain open to change and ready for lifelong learning and continuous professional development throughout their careers (Moss et al., 2014; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012). As this is a voluntary process, school counsellors are individually responsible for pursuing it (Resman, 2000). To be successful, it is vital that they critically evaluate their current knowledge and skillset and substantively evaluate new knowledge, including thoughtfully introducing it into their work (Maretič Požarnik, 2006; Moss et al., 2014).

Role of the school counselling service and the psychologist

The Slovenian educational system consists of primary, secondary and tertiary education, where the primary education is compulsory, starting at age 6 and is 9 years long. The secondary education is 3 – 5 years long depending on the type, and the tertiary education is structured in accordance with the three-cycle system introduced in the "Bologna Declaration" (Taštanoska, 2019).

The school counselling service as an integral part of the educational process is a relative peculiarity of the Slovenian educational system and has more than 50 years of tradition (Bezić & Malešević, 2018; Krek & Metljak, 2011). Around 1100 school counsellors were working in the Slovenian educational system in 2020. Most primary school counsellors are educators, followed by special educators, psychologists and social workers in descending order, while in high schools, most are psychologists, followed by educators and social workers (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

Each profession in the school counselling service has its specific skills and identity, and this research paper focuses on the role of psychologists in the school counselling service. Psychologists' formal education focuses on child development, social and neuro-psychology linked to children, adolescents, school environment families and society, performing psychological evaluations and disorders affecting children and families and successfully approaching those issues using psychological approaches and interventions (Farrell, 2010).

Prior research indicates that primary school psychologists understand their role primarily in caring for relationships and following pupils to ensure optimal development while guaranteeing access to the counselling service is provided equally to all pupils; counsellors also notice that their work occasionally borders on therapeutic. They identify their role in diagnostics as specific to the psychological profession in the school counselling service. Psychologists working in the counselling service feel like an essential part of the team due to the particular skill set they bring to the table and believe one of their roles is good collaboration with teachers, outside institutions and parents as part of different teams in their educational institutions. They strive to provide teachers with a better understanding of pupils and their specific circumstances to help them (Petek, 2020).

On the other hand, psychologists also stress the importance of each profession focusing on their core competencies in order to maintain their professional identities and make sure they are not assuming professional tasks that are unrelated to their profession (Stožir Curk et al., 2018).

Stages of Professional Development

The definition of professional development in this research paper is based on the Slovenian Whitepaper on education, defining it as a lifelong process starting with the beginning of education and continuing until retirement. It focuses on three topical areas: the initial (first and second phase university) education of school counsellors, the introductory period into the profession (traineeship and professional exam) and further education and training of professional workers, including their promotions into higher professional titles (Krek & Metljak, 2011).

University education and preparation for professional work in Slovenia

The Slovenian regulatory framework in 2020 requires all school counsellors to have at least the professional level masters degree and a completed professional exam in education. After completing their degree, most candidates for school counsellors decide on a mentored traineeship, which is recommended – but not required – before entering the professional exam (Vogrinc & Krek, 2012).

Many school counsellors are disappointed with their formal education and believe they did not receive enough practical experience and knowledge during their studies; they believe the educational programmes are too theoretical and practical experience in schools too short of providing meaningful experience with actual work in educational institutions (Pančur, 2009; Vandur, 2018; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012) Additional problems stem from the way the traineeship is implemented: as it is not mandatory, most of the candidates do not perform it (64 %), and a lot of the ones that do, are not satisfied with the way it is implemented (Pančur, 2009; Vandur, 2018).

A problem experienced by many teachers starting in their profession (we assume counsellors working in educational institutions experience similar problems) is that they are psychologically and physically separated from the broader school activities. Due to the lack of organisational culture, the more experienced colleagues often leave them to their own devices instead of mentoring them and usually ask them to perform less exciting or more complex tasks (Resman, 2005).

Additionally, most school counsellors consider the professional exam in education unnecessary and useless (Pančur, 2009).

Further education, training and development

The Slovenian regulatory framework defines objective measures required for reaching defined professional titles, such as years of work experience, performance assessments, participation in official training and extracurricular work (Vogrinc & Krek, 2012).

Prior research indicates school counsellors mainly report satisfaction with systemic measures for work skills training and education (Vogrinc & Krek, 2012). Most school counsellors in kindergartens and schools report they can find interesting topics in the official training offered, while this percentage is smaller among high school counsellors (45 %). More than half (56,2 %) of Slovenian school counsellors partake in 3 to 5 training programs per year. Self-reporting indicates they participate in the training programs to acquire new knowledge and exchange experience and views with other participants. They believe the knowledge learned in training is helpful for their work. (Vandur, 2018)

Most school counsellors reported that professional literature is readily available and current (Vogrinc & Krek, 2012). They believe that tracking and studying professional literature is very important for their work (Vandur, 2018). Some counsellors in Slovenia participate in training programmes concerning therapeutic techniques that offer professional and personal development (Pančur, 2009).

Based on self-reporting, the Slovenian school counsellors value further education, learning and knowledge; they believe that continuous learning and personal development are prerequisites to perform their professional duties successfully (Pančur, 2009). However, participating in training activities does not improve the sense of competence in school counsellors (Skarlovnik Casar, 2016). Additionally, school counsellors report a lack of time for further training, research, and professional development (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

Stress and burnout

Current societal changes, higher autonomy of educational institutions in preventive activities and inclusion of school counsellors in planning and evaluations, and the inclusion of school counsellors into structured career counselling have significantly increased the number and scope of work performed by them (Bezić, 2008). School counsellors report that the main problems they encounter are the imprecise definition of their duties, a large number of administrative tasks, overly large scope of duties to enable efficient implementation with additional feelings of isolation and too little supervision also being reported (Andrenšek-Lep, 2020; Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Bezić, 2008; Johnson et al., 2010; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012; Vršnik Perše et al., 2008; Wilkerson, 2009). High school counsellors additionally report norms being set too high based on the number of duties and scope required (Bezić, 2008; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012).

Because of the diversity and complexity of their work, school counsellors are often subject to stress, which could lead to burnout (Butler & Constantine, 2005; King et al., 2018; Kovač & Krečič, 2014; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). Long-term exposure to stress in combination with insufficient or invalid coping mechanisms can lead to burnout, which may manifest as a reduced feeling of fulfilment, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Kovač & Krečič, 2014). The broader impact of burnout can then be felt by students, families and the broad school environment (Lambie, 2007; Senekovič, 2013).

Around 90 % of school counsellors report increased work-related stress (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Research also indicated burnout symptoms often occurring among school psychologists: more than 2/3 report emotional exhaustion, 5 % report a high level of depersonalisation, and 12 % report low personal fulfilment, while 35 % report thinking about changing their career path (Boccio et al., 2016).

Studies performed in Slovenia show a similar pattern, showing that younger school counsellors at the beginning of their careers fell more stressed than their more experienced colleagues (Kovač, 2012). Coping mechanisms include supervision, sports, strict work/personal life separation and refusing tasks unrelated to their work and duties (Javrh, 2014). However, 12 % still report being unable to shield themselves from burnout, which is especially worrisome as burnout in school counsellors seems to occur sooner than in other profiles working in education (Javrh, 2014).

Protective factors and work motivation

Work satisfaction among school counsellors is positively related to an adequate scope of duties, feelings of high personal efficiency and regional and peer-to-peer supervision (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006).

School counsellors often start their careers with unrealistic and idealistic expectations about their work, which slowly become more realistic with experience and learning of efficient problem-solving techniques related to their work. Managers promoting good work culture and interpersonal relationships also play an essential role in the professional development of counsellors. School counsellors receive most of their professional support through teamwork, study groups and colleagues, primarily being motivated by working with students and their achievements (Andrenšek-Lep, 2020; Pančur, 2009). They report that teamwork is one of the most critical elements of their work (Vandur, 2018).

Study purpose

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the factors affecting the professional development of school counsellors and the views of school counsellors on the main factors affecting their work.

Methods

This research is a pilot exploratory study, utilising the case study method and the descriptive method of life story. The life story method is also known as the life history, biographical method and similar, which is a retrospective narrative of an individual about his life or parts of life in either written or oral form triggered by another person (Bornat, 2008; Tierney, 2000; Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). This study utilised the written form of the life story method through an open-ended questionnaire.

Participants

An opportunity sample was utilised due to the time complexity of the life story method utilised. Of the Slovenian Psychologists' Association members, ten (10) prospective participants selected based on personal acquaintance were contacted via e-mail. Of the ten prospective participants, four (4) responded and provided complete responses to the questionnaire that were included in the study, two (2) responded by explaining they are unable to participate, and four (4) did not respond to the invitation.

Of the four (4) responses received, one (1) participant had between 0 and 5 years of experience, and three (3) participants had between 6 and 10 years of experience. Of the four (4) responses received, three (3) participants finished the Bachelor's degree in Psychology of 4 years (before the so-called Bologna process), and one (1) participant finished the 3 + 2 years Masters degree in Psychology (after Bologna process programs). All the participants were women.

Instruments

The data gathering was performed with a semi-structured questionnaire prepared in the 1ka platform (https://www.1ka.si/), and detailed instructions for preparing their life story were prepared. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, filled out in the provided order and based on the professional winding river approach (Krečič et al., 2008; Kremer-Hayon & Zuzovsky, 1995):

– In section one, the school counsellors drew their professional winding river, pointing out essential changes in their career paths.
– In section two, they described everything that shaped them as a counsellor; they were asked to describe both: the external milestones (such as graduation, professional exam, professional titles, and similar) and internal changes (such as their modified views on the profession, on themselves as counsellors, their mission, how they see a good teacher, and similar).
– Finally, in section three, they described the kind of counsellor they would like to be in the future (in a few years) and what constitutes a good counsellor in their opinion. They also described their plans and vision for the future and how they plan to realise them, also elucidating the opportunities and threats they see on their way.

Procedure

The utilised life story method was adapted based on previous education research (Krečič et al., 2008). First, the participants were provided with detailed written instructions and a link to the questionnaire, which they filled-in in three steps:

– In the first part, the participants drew a river representing their professional development, marking only the crucial milestones and career changes;
– In the second part, the participants described all developments that affected their professional development, taking care to describe the external events (such as completing formal education, exams and similar) and internal changes (views on the profession and similar);
– In the final part, the participants described their goals for the future and their vision of a good counsellor, including specific plans on achieving their goal and any perceived obstacles.

The questionnaires were pseudo-anonymised by changing the names of participants and the names of institutions named in the life stories.

The data was then analysed using the method described in the Data Analysis section.

Data analysis

Firstly, descriptive statistics were performed to determine the total number of participants, the number of participants responding, and the responders' overall structure and basic demographics.

Afterwards, the principal researcher utilised the thematic analysis, which is a widely used qualitative analytic method within psychology, searching for patterns and identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More specifically, the principal researcher carefully read the anonymised stories to identify the relevant parts based on the study purpose. The identified themes were then summarised based on five areas of professional development recurring in all texts that were already briefly described in the Introduction:

– Formal education
– Preparation for professional work
– Workplace climate and interpersonal relationships at work
– Stress and burnout
– Protective factors and work motivation

Results and analysis

Formal education

The school counsellors believe that the formal education received during their University degree studies provided the theoretical foundations required for their jobs. At the same time, they needed to get practical experience through extracurricular activities, such as volunteer and student work, which provided a better understanding of what they wanted to do in the future. One of the participants even believed that school counsellors' profession is unnecessary and was confident that it is one of the professions she will not enter. Some paraphrased from the life story questionnaire quotes are provided below.

Participant 1: *"The study programme is well organised and provides fundamental (theoretical) knowledge required. However, one can only recognise the actual pros and cons of the profession after one start practising it."*

Participant 2: *"During my university years, I performed volunteer work – I managed youth workshops at different primary schools and mentored several*

volunteers. I was also a teacher in summer camps. In my second and third years, I participated in the University educational process at the department of educational psychology, which confirmed my belief that I wanted to go into a profession in that area. The study itself, living in Ljubljana and volunteer work broadened my views. ... The study itself is relatively broad and provides a good basis for the future career, but it would be good if the more practical experience were provided during the formal education process."

Participant 3: *"I studied Psychology at the Faculty of Arts. The study programme was a disappointment as I expected a lot more. ... I therefore often considered my formal education as a sort of struggle to receive sufficiently high grades to keep my stipend, while I fulfilled my ambitions through extracurricular activities as a volunteer in different organisations."*

Participant 4: *"Before starting my university studies in Psychology, I wanted to work with really gifted children and adolescents – if I am honest, I abandoned that idea already while studying. I later enrolled to study andragogy sciences in parallel ... I had a negative view of school counselling services and even joked in my first year that – if I don't get another idea – my final thesis will be on the topic of why counselling services are terrible."*

Preparation for professional work

School counsellors that participated in the study see the practical experience as part of the study and traineeship (if they participated in it) as an essential part of their professional development. It provided them with an insight into what to expect, and their experience with mentors was positive; they received the necessary guidance to start on their career paths. Some of the participants did not have formal mentors as they got employment immediately after completing their university degree but still received mentoring from their colleagues when starting. Interestingly, the three participants who already completed their professional exam do not see it as an essential milestone in their career, whereas the participant still training because it believes it will be an essential milestone for her career development.

Participant 1: *"My personal experience with mentors was very positive – they helped me across the board. They were always ready to explain things further and were open to questions. At the same time, they were experienced enough to describe the profession as clearly as possible.*

I found myself in this profession precisely with the help of two great mentors that provided me with their work experience and knowledge, which is essential in our profession.

Starting without mentors can be very challenging – your formal education provides you with several theories that may not be directly applicable in practice or might need to be further advanced to use them. I consider the professional exam as the cherry on the cake – the knowledge required to pass it is valuable and even essential to successfully dispatch the school counsellor's duties (especially the regulatory framework) – as, unfortunately, our work is also filled with bureaucracy."

Participant 2: *"I trained at one of the grammar schools with a mentor who was a school counsellor and a psychology teacher. During the traineeship, I got an insight into what the school counsellors' work entails and recognised it is a comprehensive profession, with me lacking the knowledge and experience in most of the areas required to perform it successfully. During the university studies, we primarily learned the aspects concerning our field of study, but very little was presented in terms of our administrative duties and the regulatory requirements of the profession. My mentor was highly experienced, kind and accessible.*

During my first year, I had quite a few challenges; I was in my office a lot, studied the regulations and laws at home, and discovered new areas of my profession and similar. I also completed my professional exam during this time. "

Participant 3: *"I found work as a school counsellor in a special needs school immediately after completing my studies. Entering the workforce was complicated for me, as I did not clearly understand what the work entailed. I got most of my support during that time from a colleague working as an educator and the psychologist previously working at my position. ... In the beginning, I mostly took part in training suggested by my colleagues and did not search for any training opportunities by myself.*

I completed my professional exam a year and a half after my first employment, and even though it is a legal requirement to work, I do not consider it as an essential part of my professional development when looking back now."

Participant 4: *"As I had extensive experience with children and adolescents from my voluntary work, I felt very self-confident when starting even without traineeship. I started working in the middle of a school year, and my position was a combination of three different positions. As I was training to become a coach simultaneously and an experienced colleague was present in the office while I lead my counselling sessions, I managed to find my approach to counselling and was honestly excited with the results. The image of a school counsellor job and its usefulness during my university studies were much more pessimistic, and the practical work in the profession was a very positive surprise. I was also tremendously lucky to*

have had a very supporting unofficial mentor who divided our duties in a way that suited me... Looking back, I would say almost idyllic. Looking back, the professional exam, therefore, did not represent a significant milestone for me."

Workplace climate and interpersonal relationships

The responses indicate that interpersonal relationships and workplace climate are vital to all participants in the study; they also emphasise the importance of adequate communication. Three (3) of the participants also report terrible interpersonal relationships at work at some time, two (2) of the participants also report mobbing.

Participant 1: *"Especially in education, collaboration among different stakeholders is critical on all levels: among the whole collective, between teachers, management, students and parents. ... This may be particularly difficult for school counsellors as we are always somewhere in-between: in-between the educational institution and the parents, teachers and students, teachers and management – we work as mediators that try to ensure everyone is satisfied, which is not always possible. At those times, we must focus on our primary and common goal, which is the wellbeing of the child/adolescent."*

Participant 2: *"I immediately felt very good at my new workplace, as I am an artistic soul ... the products of our students surrounded me, and I liked the collective even though I found it relatively big. The management understood the regulation very well, and I felt accepted by the students, colleagues and parents.*
I was occupied with myself and did not notice the organisational climate or the relationships among colleagues. Later, when I understood things better, I realised the interpersonal relationships are strained and, when the management changed, the combination troubled me. Relationships are significant to me personally, as well as professionally."

Participant 3: *"Work at my school is often very turbulent, interpersonal relationships are bad, and some of the teachers believe they can interfere with anything; they also feel they can scream at colleagues. Everything mentioned causes frail relationships and complicates work. Strained relationships, frequent changes in management and one of the previous administrators performing mobbing resulted in me considering changing my employment."*
Participant 4: *"All aspects of this job, except for working with students and developing friendships with some of the co-workers that I still nourish, were problematic to me. Overwork, violent communication between colleagues and students, inferior management... It escalated to where I had to file an official complaint of mobbing that was also formally confirmed. A*

colleague that has been victimised for a long time was unable to help me... During this time, my professional development stalled, my communication skills even backtracked."

Stress and burnout

As seen from the professional biographies of the participants, most of them believe their work is too broad and covers too many disparate areas. The exception to this is Participant 1, who has the least work experience; Participant 4 describes a stress level that could already border on the first signs of burnout.

Participant 2: *"I believe there are too many areas that school counsellors need to cover – there is too much administrative work and too little concrete psychological work."*

Participant 3: *"The work at this school was and commonly still is very draining. The amount of work is huge and covers many areas. In the beginning, I was alone and performed work of up to 180 % of a school counsellor (based on norms and standards). Luckily, a new colleague joined me that took over the coordination of special needs students. Working in a team is much easier as there is always someone you can consult with."*

Participant 4: *"After two years at my new job, I already feel better, and I again enjoy work as a school counsellor; but I still feel the effects of my previous traumatising job. Not long after switching jobs, the effects of overworking spilt over into my personal life.*
While trying to use this experience to help others, I wonder how much longer I should keep on. I am tired. Moreover, when listening to my colleagues from other schools, I hear similar stories. Even though we enjoy our work, it is still draining, especially with bad management that is more the rule than the exception. We do not discuss our work with students during supervisions and discuss our relationships with colleagues and management. Who can enjoy this?"

Protective factors and work motivation

As we can see, the primary driver for school counsellors is their work with students and helping them. Participant 4 also emphasises that the work performance metrics often encourage work unrelated to activities focused on the main work of school counsellors. If a school counsellor wants to get promoted, they need to take on additional work, increasing stress levels.

Participant 1: *"The biggest motivator is the happy faces of students and tracking their progress and improvement. I understand it is impossible to help everyone fully, but even mitigating the current crisis of some of the students can help make their and our world a better place."*

Participant 2: *"On the other hand, work with special needs students represents a special challenge and offering additional professional help in one-on-one settings represents a professional, as well as personal satisfaction for me."*

Participant 3: *"The biggest motivator for me is the students that come to me – sometimes regularly, sometimes occasionally, and whom I can help with my work. I am extremely proud of them and love working with them. I also notice that more and more students are motivated to visit consultations (from an organisational point of view, there are sometimes, unfortunately even too many), and this is the part of my work that I find most important."*

Participant 4: *"I used to find the fact that I could help someone with my knowledge very fulfilling – and it brought me happiness if this was a child that would otherwise not be able to get help, or would only get it after several years. Lately, I found myself mostly focusing on trying to get enough points for promotions, which scares me."*

School counsellors in the future

While thinking about their plans for the future, three of the participants are wondering whether they should change jobs. They all see the challenge for the future in implementing new approaches to counselling; two (2) of the participant also stressed the importance of prevention-related activities. Participant 1 emphasised the importance of the role of teachers and management when implementing changes and setting boundaries when the requirements are unrealistic. Two (2) participants mentioned the stagnation of their professional development in psychology and the disparate requirements of their pedagogical and psychological work.

Participant 1: *"In the future, I hope to further my knowledge to work as a school counsellor effectively. I believe that you never have enough knowledge in this field. To that effect, I will continue to educate myself and try to learn from my mentors as much as possible. I believe it is imperative for a school counsellor to always search for new ways and methods to help students, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of routine and numbness. The positive attitude of the educational institution to change and introduce new ways of working is very important in this respect. If the environment does not support the changes, it is almost impossible for the school counsellor alone to implement them."*

Participant 2: *"Honestly speaking, I do not see myself (only) as a school counsellor in the future. I believe the work entails too much bureaucratic and administrative work that could be completed equally well by other professional profiles. I believe that psychologists as school counsellors lose on our primary professions and*

feel like I am stagnating at my job. I, therefore, always liked the combination of being a school counsellor and a teacher. ... I have been thinking for a long time that I could organise a group at my school, where students could improve their social skills or organise a camp, where the participants would focus on improving their social skills."

Participant 3: *"In the future, I intend to focus more on preventive actions. I see an increase in emotional problems in students, which makes it more challenging to work with them individually. I see an opportunity in group work. ... I also believe that lifelong learning can lead to furthering my career. I would want to learn more on the topics of counselling and therapeutic techniques.*

  I am not sure if I wish to remain at my position long-term. While influencing parts of my job, much of my time is dedicated to activities unrelated to my primary education. I will therefore try to find new and different career options in the future."

Participant 4: *"This is a hard question, especially as I am seriously considering changing my career path. I am still torn between the pedagogical and psychological role of the counselling service. ... On the one hand, I would want to be more actively involved in the organisational development of the school and working with teachers, while on the other hand, I would like to focus on improving the counselling approaches when working with students and families and maybe upgrade them with therapeutical methods. I also see challenges in systematically tracking entire classes, not only individual students ... it would be excellent if I would get to know all classes and somehow manage to introduce a systematic approach to preventive actions."*

Discussion

This research focused on the professional development of a small subgroup of school counsellors who have completed their university degrees in the field of Psychology. We tried to elucidate the factors that are important for the professional development of school counsellors and further determine how those factors affected their work. However, due to the small sample and the descriptive nature of the research, it is important to note that all conclusions should be treated as good starting points for further, more detailed research utilising larger samples.

We focused on five categories of factors: formal education, preparation for professional work, workplace climate and interpersonal relationships at work, stress and burnout and protective factors and work motivation. Finally, we researched the school counsellors' views on their work and their plans for their future professional development.

Formal education

Participants believe that, while the formal education provided a sound theoretical framework, they needed to work as volunteers or student work to gain practical knowledge, experience and a sense of what they want to do in the future. The finding is in harmony with previous research that indicated most school counsellors are disappointed with their formal education because of insufficient practical knowledge gained (Pančur, 2009; Vandur, 2018).

Preparation for professional work

The participants see either practical work, traineeship or both as an essential part of their professional development, as it gave them insight into what the work of school counsellors entails in practice. They mostly describe their mentors as very supportive and a big help when starting their careers. Some of the participants have official mentors as part of a traineeship, while others started working directly with the support of unofficial mentors and colleagues. The finding only partially agrees with prior research that concluded that most school counsellors start their work with insufficient support (Pančur, 2009; Vandur, 2018). While this may be due to the nature of the study (case study, small sample size), it warrants further research in the future. It also emphasises the importance of school counselling teams and the role that more experienced colleagues play in career development. It also opens up new avenues of investigation, such as researching the possibilities of connecting multiple school counselling services to support each other and offer backing in cases where there is only one school counsellor at school. We also confirmed prior findings that most school counsellors do not see the professional exam as an important milestone in their careers (Pančur, 2009).

Workplace climate and interpersonal relationships at work

Interpersonal relationships are deemed critical by all participants, and they also emphasise the importance of (in)adequate communication. Three of the participants mentioned that at least at one point in their careers, the work climate and relationships at the workplace were strained, two of the participants reported mobbing. It coincides with previous findings that managerial support, friendly interpersonal relationships and a good work climate are crucial (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Pančur, 2009).

The work climate at schools is closely related to management, as the management has the responsibility to create collaborative and safe conditions for work; the management also needs to support employees in implementing changes (Erčulj, 2011). Previous research indicates that good collaboration is essential for good career development (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Krečič et al., 2008; Resman, 2005) – a finding also supported by our research.

Stress and burnout

All participants believe that the school counsellor's work is defined too broadly with too many disparate duties. One of the participants described extremely high levels of stress, bordering on burnout. These results are again compliant with prior findings that indicated elevated stress levels in school counsellors due to the complexity and diversity of their work (Huebner, 1993; King et al., 2018; Kovač & Krečič, 2014; Moyer, 2011). They also confirm the early onset of burnout, as indicated by previous research (Javrh, 2014).

Due to vaguely defined areas of work for the school counsellors, they are often given administrative duties, and the overall workload is too big to be efficient. The school counsellors also often feel isolated and without proper supervision (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2010; Wilkerson, 2009). Previous research also indicates that 90 % of school counsellors feel stressed out by their work (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Our findings confirm that: while our participants indicated they like their work with students, they are stressed out by their administrative and other duties, unrelated to their primary mission. The issues stem from a broad set of duties set out by professional guidance, which is especially evident in primary and high school counsellors (Andrenšek-Lep, 2020; Bezić, 2008).

Work motivation and plans for the future

Our participants indicated that their primary motivation is working with and helping students, which coincides with previous findings (Moss et al., 2014; Pančur, 2009).

When considering professional development, most of our participants (three out of four) questioned whether they wanted to remain in the profession. Two of the participants emphasised their fear of professional stagnation. While psychologists possess specific and unique knowledge relevant to the school environment and the school counsellor's role, they are usually alone. They, therefore, have to take on all of the responsibilities, making it harder to take care of their professional identity (Stožir Curk et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Our research mostly confirmed prior findings, showing that school counsellors' work is extensive and often stressful. The work duties are vaguely defined and too broad, which does not leave sufficient time (if any) for preventive activities and professional development. Similar to previous findings, our research confirms that current norms and standards need to be revisited to optimise the service.

Our pilot study also indicated areas of interest for further research by utilising larger samples and quantitative research methods. Based on our findings, it would be interesting to analyse stress and burnout levels in school counsellors and a broader review of the position and duties of a school counsellor in the educational process and collective and the effect of the workplace climate in the educational system.

The pilot study also showed an interesting discrepancy between the novice and more experienced school counsellors regarding their views on the possibilities for career development and work duties. While arguably researched on a small sample, it would be prudent to analyse further why workplace satisfaction rapidly decreased in all 3 more experienced respondents in our study and is low after only a few years - especially since our findings suggest that the perception of stress also increases rapidly and does not significantly decrease with additional experience. Previous studies already hint at this trend and show that school counsellors are prone to burnout sooner than other profiles working in education (Javrh, 2014), which would indicate further study in these areas is warranted.

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