KWARTALNIK PEDAGOGICZNY 2026
NUMER 1 (279)
ISSN 0023-5938; e-ISSN 2657-6007
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https://doi.org/10.31338/2657-6007.kp.2026-1.7

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Challenges, collaboration, and career sustainability: Experiences of school counsellors in Eastern Croatia

Summary

School counsellors play a pivotal role in supporting students' academic, emotional, and social development, yet their position within schools is often marked by ambiguities and competing expectations. This study investigates the experiences and perceptions of school counsellors in eastern Croatia with a focus on their professional roles, collaboration with teachers, and interactions with parents. The study examined how school counsellors perceive their roles and contributions to school culture, the key challenges and opportunities they encounter in their professional practice, and whether these perceptions differ across demographic factors such as gender, experience, and workplace setting. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from a structured survey with qualitative insights derived from open-ended questionnaire responses. Quantitative data provided an overview of counsellors' roles, challenges, and job satisfaction, while qualitative thematic analysis offered deeper explanations and contextual interpretations of these patterns. The thematic findings were derived through systematic coding, categorization, and refinement of open-ended responses, allowing emergent themes to complement and expand upon the statistical results. The research highlights the complexities of counselling work, including role ambiguity, high parental expectations, and structural constraints within schools. Findings indicate that while collaboration with teachers is frequent, its effectiveness depends on structured support, shared norms, and leadership engagement. Counsellors' job satisfaction is shaped by personal resources such as emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, as well as by external factors including workload, time constraints, and institutional recognition. Career-sustaining behaviors, peer support, constructive feedback, and participation in professional learning communities, are vital in maintaining motivation and

preventing professional isolation. The study underscores the necessity of systemic support, clear role definitions, and active engagement of both school leadership and parents to enhance counsellor effectiveness and professional well-being.

Keywords: parental collaboration, role ambiguity, school counsellors, school culture, teacher-counsellor collaboration

Introduction

School counsellors, or pedagogues as they are formally referred to in Croatia, occupy a central position in the educational system. Their role extends beyond the provision of individual support for students to include cooperation with teachers, engagement with parents, and participation in broader school development initiatives. As such, counsellors are essential actors in shaping a school environment that is not only academically successful but also inclusive, supportive, and responsive to the needs of all stakeholders.

Despite the significance of their work, the role of counsellors is often perceived as insufficiently defined. They are expected to serve simultaneously as advisors, mediators, administrators, and advocates, which can result in overlapping responsibilities and role ambiguity. This situation is not unique to Croatia, but it has particular weight in the Croatian context where pedagogues are frequently tasked with implementing diverse educational policies, leading projects, and addressing challenges that extend beyond their professional mandate.

The Croatian National Curriculum Framework (*Nacionalni okvirni kurikulum*, NOK, 2019) and related policy documents emphasize the importance of counselling services in promoting student well-being, encouraging collaboration with families, and supporting teachers in professional development. However, these same policies do not always provide clear guidelines on how such responsibilities should be distributed or supported institutionally. As a result, counsellors may find themselves in situations where expectations are high but authority and resources are limited. This discrepancy creates tensions, particularly in relationships with parents and school leadership, and may affect both job satisfaction and the sustainability of their professional engagement.

At the same time, broader discussions in education increasingly highlight that counsellors' effectiveness depends not only on formal responsibilities but also on the recognition, support, and professional trust they receive within their institutions. In Croatia, as elsewhere, questions of how pedagogues experience their work, how they evaluate collaboration with teachers and parents, and how they perceive their level of recognition by school administration are key for understanding both the strengths and the challenges of the counselling profession.

The present study seeks to address these issues by examining the perspectives of counsellors working in eastern Croatia. It investigates their levels of job satisfaction, their experiences with collaboration, and the obstacles they encounter in daily practice. By situating these findings within the context of national educational policies and the realities of school life, the study aims to shed light on the evolving role of counsellors in Croatian schools and to provide practical insights for strengthening their professional position.

To do so, the following research questions were defined as follows:

RQ 1: What are the roles and responsibilities of school counsellors in eastern Croatia, and how do they perceive their contribution to fostering a positive school culture?

RQ 2: What challenges and opportunities do school counsellors encounter in their professional practice and development?

RQ 3: How do school counsellors' perceptions of their roles, challenges, and contributions vary according to demographic factors such as gender, years of professional experience, and workplace setting (primary vs. secondary schools)?

Theoretical background

School counsellors have long been positioned at the intersection of academic, emotional, and social support systems within schools. Their effectiveness depends not only on their professional training and personal dispositions but also on how their role is defined within educational policy and institutional practice, how collaboration with colleagues and families is structured, how satisfied they are professionally, and how parents understand and engage with their work. Research consistently shows that counsellors' ability to contribute to student well-being and school culture is determined by both individual resources and systemic conditions (Carey & Dimmitt, 2019; Mullen et al., 2023).

An important issue in the literature is role ambiguity. For example, Blake (2020) shows how high school counsellors suffer from role ambiguity due to unclear job descriptions, overlapping duties, and supervision by administrators without counselling backgrounds. These ambiguities lead to role conflict and reduce time available for core counselling functions. Similarly, in *An investigation into the experiences of school counsellors working with adolescents* (2022) published in *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, counsellors describe variation between schools in what is expected of them; in many cases, expectations from administrators or teachers exceed what is formally outlined or realistically manageable. Such findings align with earlier research by Wilkerson (2019), who showed that ambiguity in role expectations directly contributes to emotional exhaustion and burnout among counsellors.

Another central theme in the literature is collaboration with teachers and school staff. Strong partnerships with educators are often identified as prerequisites for effective counselling. In Serbia, Slijepčević and Zuković (2021) found that while teachers express openness toward collaboration, the actual degree to which they accept counsellor input depends on individual factors such as personality, administrative responsibilities, and teaching style. In Slovenia, Šteh, Kalin, and Mažgon (2021) reported more systematically positive evaluations of cooperation, particularly when schools implemented structured opportunities for joint reflection and professional learning. Internationally, Geiger and Oehrtman (2020) has argued that collaboration is not just about frequency of contact but about creating a shared professional culture that values diverse expertise in supporting students.

Job satisfaction among counsellors is another critical area of inquiry. It is widely recognized that both internal and external factors contribute to how counsellors evaluate their work. Monet and Shuib (2024) found that school counsellors with higher levels of emotional intelligence and self-efficacy reported greater job satisfaction, but these personal resources were often moderated by external constraints such as workload, time limitations, and resource availability. Niles et al. (2024) further confirmed that psychological resources like hope and perceived self-efficacy can buffer the negative effects of stress, but high job demands ultimately erode satisfaction unless institutions provide adequate support. This complements findings from Johari and Amat (2019), who emphasized that material conditions are necessary but insufficient; professional recognition, collegial support, and opportunities for continuous professional development are equally vital for sustained satisfaction.

The relationship between counsellors and parents also emerges as a recurring theme in the literature. Parents' expectations often diverge from the counsellors' professional mandate, creating tensions that limit effective partnership. Collins et al. (2024) show that parents frequently expect counsellors to serve as "all-purpose" providers of behavioral, academic, and mental health support, but at the same time regard their role as hidden or ill-defined. This mismatch not only leads to misunderstandings but also undermines parental trust and collaboration. In the Croatian context, Štefulj and Kušević (2021) underline that pedagogues are often placed in a "double bind": they are expected to strengthen parental involvement but lack the authority or systemic support to ensure meaningful participation.

These strands of research converge to suggest that sustainable school counselling requires clear role definitions, institutional support, strong collaboration with teachers and leaders, and greater parental awareness of the counsellors' scope of work. Without these systemic foundations, counsellors risk professional dissatisfaction and burnout, while schools miss opportunities to fully benefit from their expertise in fostering a positive and supportive educational environment.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the roles, challenges, opportunities, and contributions of school counsellors to school culture in eastern Croatia. A convergent mixed-methods design was used, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation. A mixed-methods approach was chosen because the combination of numerical trends and narrative insights was essential to fully capture the complexity of counsellors' professional experiences, which could not have been adequately explored using a single method alone.

A total of 85 school counsellors participated in the study, all employed in primary or secondary schools. Among them, 88.2% identified as female and 11.2% as male. Respondents reported a wide range of professional experience, from less than one year to more than 20 years, with the distribution relatively even across categories (see Figure 1). Regarding workplace settings, 71.8% were employed in primary schools, 27.1% in secondary schools, and 1.2% worked across combined contexts, which ensured representation of different educational environments.

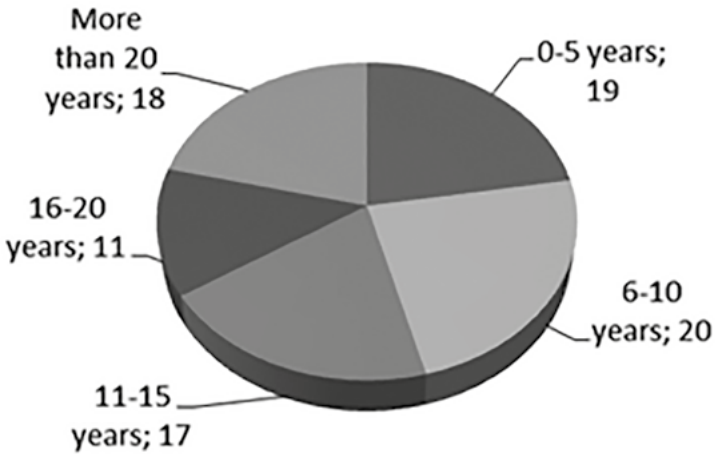


Figure 1. Respondents' work experience.

Source. Author's own work.

The data collection instrument was an online questionnaire, distributed electronically via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first collected demographic data (gender, years of professional experience, and workplace type). The second contained both closed-ended items (Likert-scale and

multiple-choice questions) and open-ended items. The closed-ended items focused on counsellors' roles, challenges, and opportunities, while the open-ended items invited respondents to describe in their own words how they perceive their contribution to school culture. Participation was voluntary, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Formal approval for conducting the research was secured from the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth in Croatia. Data collection remained open for two weeks.

Data analysis followed a two-stage process consistent with a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data from closed-ended items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations). In addition, cross-tabulations were examined to explore relationships between demographic variables and key constructs, and measures of internal consistency (e.g. Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for multi-item scales to strengthen the robustness of the quantitative strand.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process included (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial open coding, (3) grouping codes into preliminary categories, (4) reviewing and refining categories into broader themes, and (5) validating themes against the dataset to ensure coherence and representativeness. To enhance credibility, coding was iterative and analytic memos were kept to document decisions throughout the process.

Integration of the quantitative and qualitative strands occurred during the interpretation phase. Quantitative results were first used to identify general patterns in counsellors' experiences, which were then compared and contrasted with qualitative themes to provide explanatory depth. Points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity between the datasets were systematically examined to form a comprehensive understanding of school counsellors' contributions and challenges.

Results

Role perception and recognition

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles, challenges, opportunities, and contributions of school counsellors to school culture in eastern Croatia. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of school counsellors perceive ambiguity in their professional role. Specifically, 21.2% of respondents reported that their role is not clearly defined, while 48.2% stated that it is only partially defined. Furthermore, 70.6% of respondents felt that their work is only partially recognized and appreciated within the school context. These findings suggest that the professional role of school counsellors remains insufficiently established within the

educational system. The fact that over two-thirds of respondents view their role as unclear or only partially defined highlights the lack of standardized expectations and role clarity.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether perceptions of role clarity differed across five groups of counsellors categorized by years of professional experience. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups, $F(4, 80) = .487$, $p < .05$, indicating that levels of perceived role clarity varied depending on counsellors' length of professional experience. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test showed that less experienced counsellors (0-5 years) reported significantly higher levels of role ambiguity compared to more experienced counsellors (20+ years). This limited recognition may not only affect counsellors' professional identity and motivation but also reduce the potential impact of their work on fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment. These results align with the previous research showing that school counsellors often experience role ambiguity and limited professional recognition. For example, the studies conducted in Hong Kong (Harrison, 2022) and East and Southeast Asia (Harrison, Wai & Cheung, 2022) reported that counsellors are frequently marginalized and disempowered within their schools. In international school contexts, counsellors also reported role confusion and work overload due to ill-defined responsibilities (Langston & Van Gordon, 2023).

Professional development and growth

The findings indicate that while 63.5% of respondents have access to professional networks or communities for sharing challenges, knowledge, and experiences, and 78.8% report opportunities to participate in professional education or training, only 60% perceive that their school provides adequate opportunities for professional development. This suggests a discrepancy between the availability of professional development activities and counsellors' perception of the sufficiency of these opportunities, highlighting a potential area for institutional improvement.

In an open-ended question, the respondents were surveyed on their professional goals in the next five-year period. The analysis of counsellors' responses reveals a clear pattern of professional aspirations that can be grouped into six interconnected domains: career advancement, professional development, project participation, student support, work organization and collaboration, and long-term/personal goals.

Firstly, many respondents emphasized career advancement and promotion as a primary goal. Counsellors frequently mentioned ambitions to progress in rank, such as moving to the position of a mentor or senior counsellor. This reflects the

importance of formal recognition within the profession, indicating that hierarchical progression is not only a marker of personal achievement but also contributes to the counsellors' sense of professional identity and legitimacy within the school. Such aspirations suggest that achieving higher status and recognition is a significant motivating factor for many practitioners.

Closely linked to career advancement is the emphasis on professional development and competence building. Counsellors expressed a strong desire to continuously expand their knowledge and skills, engage in additional training, and improve their counselling competencies. Examples included developing expertise in special education, mental health support, and effective communication with parents and colleagues. This focus indicates that counsellors are committed to lifelong learning and understand the importance of staying current with educational and counselling practices to provide high-quality support to students and the school community.

Another prominent theme is participation in projects and external opportunities, including involvement in Erasmus+, eTwinning, and other school-based initiatives. Counsellors also highlighted the potential of exploring work opportunities outside the traditional school setting. This illustrates an openness to innovation, collaboration, and networking beyond the confines of their immediate work environment. Engagement in such projects not only offers professional growth but also allows counsellors to expand their impact on students, colleagues, and the wider educational community.

A substantial portion of the responses was oriented toward student support and counselling quality. Counsellors aspire to enhance their effectiveness in working directly with students, particularly those with special needs or mental health challenges. They emphasized implementing workshops, preventive programs, and targeted interventions for students and families. This reflects a strong intrinsic motivation to provide meaningful, individualized support and highlights the centrality of student well-being in their professional identity.

Counsellors also focused on work organization, collaboration, and school climate, highlighting the importance of improving communication, teamwork, and the overall effectiveness of school operations. Goals in this domain included better structuring of responsibilities, promoting collaboration with teachers and parents, and fostering a positive school culture. These aspirations suggest that counsellors perceive their role as integral to the broader functioning of the school, beyond individual student support, and they recognize that effective collaboration is essential for systemic improvements.

Finally, some responses reflected long-term or personal goals, including preparing for retirement, maintaining professional status, completing advanced degrees, and achieving work-life balance. These goals highlight the influence of personal

and career-stage considerations on counsellors' professional aspirations. Even as they aim for personal milestones, these counsellors maintain a focus on contributing positively to their professional environment.

These findings show that school counsellors require a holistic form of support that combines financial, educational, logistical, social, and emotional elements. The combination of these factors contributes not only to counsellors' professional growth but also to the overall effectiveness of the school's educational and counselling programs. Direct quotes from respondents highlight the authenticity of these needs and underscore the multifaceted nature of support that counsellors consider essential for their role.

In another open-ended question, the counsellors were asked how their employer (school) can help in meeting their professional goals. The responses indicate that school counsellors perceive support as a multifaceted concept encompassing financial, professional, administrative, material, emotional, and systemic dimensions. One of the most frequently mentioned needs relates to financial support, particularly for participation in professional development activities, training, workshops, and conferences, as well as for acquiring teaching and counselling materials. This reflects a recognition that access to such resources is often constrained by personal funding limitations, and that institutional financial backing is critical to enabling meaningful professional growth.

Closely tied to financial considerations is the emphasis on opportunities for training and continuing education. Counsellors expressed a strong need for structured, high-quality professional learning experiences that enhance their skills, expand their knowledge, and strengthen their effectiveness in working with students, colleagues, and parents. Professional development is seen not only as a pathway to individual growth but also as a mechanism to improve the overall quality of the educational environment.

Administrative relief and effective workload management emerged as another significant dimension of support. Many counsellors highlighted the challenges associated with balancing administrative tasks with direct work with students, suggesting that excessive bureaucratic demands can limit their capacity to perform their professional role effectively. Reducing unnecessary workload and clarifying role expectations are, therefore, perceived as important forms of structural support that directly impact counsellors' efficiency, job satisfaction, and ability to focus on student-centered activities.

Material and logistical support was also identified as essential. Counsellors highlighted the importance of access to teaching aids, educational literature, project opportunities, and well-structured working spaces. Such support ensures that counsellors are able to implement programs effectively and adapt to emerging

educational needs, illustrating that practical resources are fundamental to professional practice.

Recognition, autonomy, and professional respect were repeatedly highlighted as critical components of support. Counsellors emphasized the importance of having their professional role understood, valued, and respected within the school, and of having the autonomy to make decisions and implement initiatives within their scope of practice. These elements of support are closely linked to motivation, professional identity, and overall job satisfaction.

Finally, emotional and collaborative support emerged as a key element. Counsellors emphasized the significance of collegiality, teamwork, encouragement, and a positive school climate. Support in this form enables professional growth, fosters resilience, and contributes to a constructive and collaborative work environment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that school counsellors require a comprehensive form of support that integrates financial, educational, administrative, material, emotional, and systemic elements. Each of these dimensions contributes to the counsellors' ability to develop professionally, perform their role effectively, and positively influence both student outcomes and the broader school environment. The multidimensional nature of these needs highlights the complex interplay between individual competence, institutional backing, and systemic factors in shaping effective professional practice in school counselling.

Work conditions and resources

A large majority of respondents reported satisfaction with their working conditions, with 83.5% indicating that they are satisfied. Additionally, 76.5% of respondents believe that they have access to all the necessary resources to perform their professional duties effectively. These findings suggest that most school counsellors perceive their work environment as supportive and adequately equipped to meet the demands of their role.

The counsellors were surveyed on potential resources, which would make them work more effectively. The responses suggest that a substantial proportion of school counsellors perceive their existing tools and resources as adequate for carrying out their professional duties. They report having access to essential materials, digital resources, and technological infrastructure necessary for their daily responsibilities. This perception indicates a generally favorable view of their current work environment in terms of operational capacity.

At the same time, many counsellors highlighted the need for additional human resources, including other specialized professionals such as psychologists or educational assistants. This need reflects the complexity of their work and the

recognition that certain responsibilities cannot be fully addressed by a single professional. Access to a broader team enables more focused attention on individual areas of counselling, enhances professional effectiveness, and supports holistic student development.

Material and technological resources emerged as another key aspect. Counsellors recognize that access to specialized educational tools, digital applications, and teaching aids is essential for implementing innovative and diverse professional practices. Ensuring these resources are available supports both the quality and scope of counselling and educational activities.

The availability of appropriate physical spaces and environmental conditions was also identified as important. Adequate facilities allow counsellors to conduct workshops, individual sessions, and other professional activities in a conducive and organized manner. Physical resources, including dedicated rooms and appropriate infrastructure, are perceived as necessary to support optimal working conditions.

Effective administrative and time-management support is another critical dimension. Counsellors emphasized the importance of having sufficient time and reduced administrative burden to focus on direct student interaction and professional responsibilities. This reflects the understanding that workload management is essential for both efficiency and professional satisfaction.

Finally, counsellors highlighted the value of professional and systemic support, including standardized procedures, access to continuing education, and institutional backing for professional initiatives. Such support ensures that counsellors can maintain professional standards, pursue ongoing development, and adapt their practices to meet evolving student and school needs.

The findings indicate that school counsellors generally perceive their current resources and working conditions as adequate, yet they also identify areas for improvement that would enhance their effectiveness. Key factors include access to additional human resources, specialized materials and tools, supportive physical environments, efficient workload management, and systemic guidance. Collectively, these dimensions underscore the importance of a well-supported, resource-rich, and collaborative environment in enabling school counsellors to fulfill their multifaceted professional role effectively.

The next open-ended question was on challenges counsellors face at their workplace. The responses suggest that school counsellors operate in a professional environment characterized by a combination of manageable and significant challenges. One of the most prominent issues is the insufficient availability of specialized human resources, such as psychologists, social pedagogues, and rehabilitation specialists. The lack of a full professional team constrains the counsellors' capacity to address the full spectrum of student needs and limits opportunities for collaborative problem-solving.

Closely related is the challenge posed by complex student needs, particularly among students with behavioral, emotional, or learning difficulties. Counsellors are often required to address multiple, overlapping issues with limited support, which increases the demands of their role and necessitates high levels of professional skill, resilience, and flexibility.

Collaboration and communication difficulties also emerge as significant challenges. Counsellors encounter obstacles in working effectively with parents, colleagues, and external agencies. Conflicting expectations, lack of engagement, and varying levels of cooperation create a dynamic in which professional judgment must often be balanced with negotiation and conflict management skills.

Physical and logistical constraints further impact professional practice. Limited office space, shared work environments, lack of privacy, commuting demands, and multi-shift schedules hinder the counsellors' ability to conduct confidential sessions, focus on students, and manage time effectively. These structural challenges highlight the importance of work environment design in supporting professional practice.

Administrative and workload pressures were also emphasized. Counsellors face extensive responsibilities, including administrative tasks, overtime, and duties outside their formal job descriptions. These pressures can reduce time available for direct work with students and increase stress levels, underscoring the need for workload management and role clarity.

Finally, systemic and structural issues were identified as influential factors. Legislative, policy, and institutional limitations affect professional autonomy, access to resources, and the capacity to implement effective interventions. Counsellors perceive that broader systemic barriers sometimes impede the application of their professional expertise and the delivery of optimal support to students.

The results indicate that school counsellors navigate a challenging professional environment where effective practice depends on the interplay of human resources, student complexity, collaboration, physical infrastructure, workload management, and systemic support. While counsellors demonstrate resilience and adaptability, addressing these multifaceted challenges is essential to ensure high-quality educational and counselling outcomes.

Job satisfaction, recognition, and motivation

Regarding overall job satisfaction, 45.9% of school counsellors reported being satisfied with their current position, while an additional 24.7% indicated that they were very satisfied. This suggests that the majority of counsellors hold a positive perception of their work. A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine

potential differences in job satisfaction between male and female counsellors. The results indicated a statistically significant difference, with male counsellors reporting higher levels of job satisfaction compared to female counsellors ($U = 205.00$, $p = .013$). This finding indicates that gender may play a role in shaping perceptions of professional fulfillment, which could be influenced by factors such as differences in work experiences, role expectations, or professional opportunities.

School counsellors were asked to list aspects of their work they find the most fulfilling. The responses suggest that school counsellors find the greatest fulfillment in direct engagement with students, particularly when they can influence positive outcomes in learning, personal development, or emotional well-being. Counsellors value the opportunity to work individually or in small groups, deliver workshops, and participate in activities that allow them to observe students' growth firsthand.

In addition to student interactions, collaboration with colleagues and involvement in school projects enhances professional satisfaction. Counsellors appreciate contributing to the professional development of teachers and engaging in collective efforts that improve the overall functioning and culture of the school.

A further source of fulfillment is the perception of meaningful impact. Counsellors derive satisfaction from seeing the concrete results of their work, whether in student achievements, improved student behavior, or the successful implementation of school initiatives. This sense of contribution reinforces their professional identity and motivation.

Finally, although intrinsic rewards dominate, some counsellors indicated that financial and material factors play a role in their sense of job fulfillment. Adequate remuneration, recognition, and the provision of resources can enhance the overall experience of work, supporting motivation and well-being.

Overall, these findings highlight that school counsellors' professional satisfaction is closely linked to the quality of relationships with students and colleagues, the ability to make a tangible impact, and the presence of supportive work conditions, rather than solely to extrinsic or material rewards.

Similarly, the respondents were asked to list challenges in their workplace. The responses indicate that school counsellors encounter multi-layered challenges in their professional environment. Systemic issues, including unclear or frequently changing regulations and lack of institutional support, create a structural burden that complicates day-to-day work. These challenges are compounded by an administrative overload, which reduces the time available for direct engagement with students and increases stress.

Interpersonal and collaborative difficulties within the school also emerged as significant obstacles. Counsellors reported conflicts, poor communication, and inconsistent support from colleagues and management, all of which hinder the effective execution of their responsibilities.

Challenges in working with parents and students represent a second major dimension. Counsellors face high demands from parents with unrealistic expectations and interact with students who have complex needs, often without sufficient support from specialist colleagues or external institutions.

Finally, limitations in resources and professional support, including the absence of key staff, lack of training opportunities, and inadequate physical facilities, were repeatedly highlighted. These constraints restrict counsellors' ability to perform their roles effectively and contribute to professional stress and burnout.

This suggests that while counsellors are motivated by their work with students, their effectiveness and job satisfaction are significantly impacted by systemic inefficiencies, administrative demands, interpersonal challenges, and insufficient professional resources.

When asked about the level of recognition and support they receive, the majority of counsellors expressed moderate satisfaction, with 63.5% indicating that their current level of recognition is neither high nor low. While 47.1% feel that their work is recognized by the school administration, a substantial proportion, 43.5%, believe that their contributions are only partially acknowledged. These findings suggest that although counsellors perceive some acknowledgment of their efforts, there is a perceived gap between the work they perform and the recognition they receive. This partial recognition may contribute to a sense of under appreciation and highlights the need for enhanced administrative support, clear acknowledgment of professional contributions, and structured feedback mechanisms.

Counsellors identify several forms of recognition as important for their motivation and professional satisfaction. The most frequently emphasized type is verbal praise and acknowledgment, including explicit commendation from supervisors, colleagues, and students. Closely related is the recognition gained from observing positive outcomes in students, which reinforces the value of their work and provides tangible evidence of impact.

Professional respect and trust are also central, as counsellors value being consulted, included in decision-making, and recognized for their expertise. Some respondents highlighted material or financial recognition, such as salary increases or bonuses, as significant motivators, though these were less frequently cited than relational forms of acknowledgment.

Finally, recognition is perceived not only in external forms but also through a supportive work environment: collaboration, encouragement, and flexibility from colleagues and administration enhance the sense of being valued. For some counsellors, personal satisfaction and intrinsic motivation derived from meaningful engagement with students constitute a primary form of recognition, independent of formal or material acknowledgment.

The responses indicate that social, professional, and relational forms of recognition outweigh purely financial or procedural recognition, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal acknowledgment and visible impact on students' learning and development.

Since 69.4% of counsellors believe there is room for improvement in the school recognition system, they were asked to suggest potential changes. Respondents highlighted multiple facets of recognition and evaluation that they find important for motivation and professional satisfaction. Verbal acknowledgment and constructive feedback are frequently cited as essential, including both informal praise and formal acknowledgment of achievements. Similarly, material or financial recognition, such as salary increases, paid overtime, or bonuses, is considered a key motivator, though less frequently emphasized than relational forms of recognition.

Professional respect and inclusion are valued, particularly when administrators consider and trust the professional judgment of counsellors and pedagogical staff. Respondents also emphasized the need for colleagues and administration to understand the full scope of their responsibilities, suggesting that visibility of their work increases recognition and appreciation.

Some responses point to the need for systemic or organizational improvements, such as formal evaluation frameworks, clearer reward systems, or structured recognition policies. Supportive collegial relationships and effective communication are seen as important facilitators of recognition, reinforcing motivation and job satisfaction.

Finally, for many, intrinsic motivation and personal satisfaction, such as witnessing the positive impact of their work on students or receiving informal appreciation, serve as significant forms of recognition, sometimes outweighing formal or financial rewards.

Collaboration and communication

The vast majority of counsellors (98.8%) reported that they collaborate with teachers on a frequent basis. When evaluating the outcomes of this collaboration, 44.7% of respondents considered it only partially effective, whereas 52.9% perceived it as effective. Although collaboration between counsellors and teachers is well established, perceptions of its overall effectiveness remain somewhat divided, with nearly half of the respondents identifying room for improvement. The analysis of an open-ended question indicates that a substantial number of counsellors perceive collaboration in their schools as smooth and effective, reporting no major barriers. This finding reflects generally positive interpersonal dynamics and collegial support. However, several recurring challenges were also identified. The most

frequent involve communication barriers, including insufficient dialogue, lack of active listening, and delayed reporting of student issues, all of which can reduce the effectiveness of joint problem-solving.

Another significant theme is the lack of motivation or cooperation among certain teachers, some of whom are described as resistant to change or disengaged from collaborative practices. Interpersonal difficulties, such as strained relationships, lack of trust, or the presence of colleagues perceived as unwilling to contribute, also emerge as barriers. In addition, structural and organizational factors, such as time constraints, administrative restrictions, or the unequal distribution of responsibilities, can further complicate collaboration. While collaboration is described as highly functional in many schools, these findings underscore that interpersonal, communicational, and systemic challenges still exist and may limit the consistency and quality of counsellor-teacher cooperation.

The respondents suggested some measures to improve the collaboration. The responses reveal that counsellors and staff see collaboration improvement as multifaceted, with strong emphasis on team building and communication as the cornerstones of effective professional relationships. Many respondents believe that structured activities outside the immediate work context, such as social gatherings or excursions, could help foster trust and break down formal barriers that sometimes characterize school culture.

Equally prominent are calls for improving communication practices through regular meetings, open dialogue, and assertive communication training. These suggestions reflect a recognition that miscommunication or lack of dialogue often underlies conflicts or inefficiencies in teamwork.

Another recurring theme is professional development and external support. Respondents highlight the need for targeted training, supervision, and shared learning opportunities to strengthen both professional expertise and interpersonal collaboration. This is tied closely with demands for better leadership, as many respondents believe that principals play a key role in setting the tone for cooperation and ensuring equal treatment of staff.

At the same time, responses emphasize accountability and responsibility, with calls for every member of the school community to fulfill their tasks and avoid unprofessional behaviors such as gossip, disengagement, or lack of respect. Finally, collegial support and mutual respect are identified as essential elements of a positive working environment, with suggestions to foster understanding, value differences, and provide constructive feedback.

Since counsellors frequently communicate with parents, they were surveyed on usual challenges in this collaboration. The responses highlight that school counsellors face substantial challenges in collaborating with parents, which appear

to cluster around behavioral, attitudinal, and structural issues. The most prominent concerns are aggressiveness and conflictual attitudes, with many counsellors reporting frequent verbal confrontations, threats, and dismissive behaviors. Such interactions not only strain counsellor-parent relations but also create a hostile environment that undermines trust. T-test was conducted to examine the association between school level (primary vs. secondary) and reported difficulties in cooperating with parents. The results showed a statistically significant association, $t(82)=2.603$, $p = 0.011$, with a higher proportion of secondary school counsellors reporting difficulties compared to primary school counsellors. This difference suggests that parental engagement is generally more accessible and sustained at the primary level, whereas counsellors in secondary schools face heightened challenges linked to adolescent developmental issues and reduced parental involvement.

A second major theme is overprotectiveness and unrealistic parental expectations, whereby parents often defend their children uncritically, refuse to acknowledge behavioral or academic difficulties, and shift responsibility onto the school. This aligns with the broader perception of schools carrying an increasing educational and parental role, while parents withdraw from active responsibility.

Counsellors also frequently reported a lack of cooperation and poor communication, including failure to attend meetings, ignoring official invitations, or denying the existence of problems. This is compounded by distrust and disrespect, where parents view the school as biased or incompetent and devalue the expertise of counsellors and teachers.

In addition, low parental engagement and inconsistency were identified as barriers, particularly when parents neglect their responsibilities, provide little support at home, or send conflicting messages about the importance of education. Socioeconomic challenges further exacerbate these problems, as families facing financial hardship or instability often struggle to prioritize school collaboration.

The respondents suggested measures to improve cooperation with parents. The responses from counsellors reveal two main perspectives on improving cooperation with parents. On one hand, there is a strong emphasis on creating opportunities for collaboration through joint activities, structured communication, and parent education. On the other hand, there is noticeable skepticism about how much schools themselves can influence parental engagement, with several respondents stressing that deeper, systemic interventions are required.

The most frequently proposed solution is the organization of joint activities and projects that include parents in school life. These initiatives are seen as a way to strengthen trust, foster a sense of partnership, and normalize parent participation. This aligns with recent research highlighting family-school partnerships as a cornerstone of student success. For instance, Norheim et al. (2024) show that

in multicultural early childhood settings, joint parent workshops and continuous inclusive communication are vital for trust and engagement. In Slovenia, schools that held three-way parent-teacher-student conferences reported higher student motivation (Grafenauer Ekart & Vršnik Perše, 2023). Similarly, Tye (2023) documents how COVID-era joint events have helped sustain parent involvement even after restrictions eased. The approach of "co-construction" and inquiry-based engagement (Kroeger & Sisson, 2024) further supports the view that parent-school partnerships work best when parents are active partners, not passive participants.

Another important thread in the answers concerns the educational role of schools toward parents, particularly through training, workshops, and structured communication. Respondents argue that building awareness and trust is key to developing more meaningful cooperation.

At the same time, a portion of staff voice concerns and frustrations - they observe that schools already offer a variety of opportunities for cooperation, but parental response remains limited. This points to the need for broader cultural and systemic changes, where higher-level institutions (e.g., ministries or inspectorates) provide stronger structural support for schools in dealing with increasingly complex parent-school relationships.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex picture of school counsellors' perceptions of their roles, challenges, and collaboration within Croatian schools. In addressing the question of counsellors' roles and responsibilities and their contribution to fostering a positive school culture, the results show that counsellors see themselves as central to cooperation and student well-being. Almost all reported frequent collaboration with teachers, yet nearly half perceived this cooperation as only partially effective. This suggests that their role in shaping school culture is not fully realized, as interaction alone does not guarantee meaningful outcomes. International studies confirm this interpretation: Striepe and Kafa (2025), Árnason Sürmeli et al. (2024), and Kruczek et al. (2022) note that while collaboration between teachers and counsellors often intensifies during crises, sustaining it requires structured support, leadership engagement, and shared professional norms. Similarly, Hemi and Maor (2023) and Blake (2020) demonstrate that when responsibilities are not clearly defined, the impact of collaboration is diminished.

Turning to the challenges and opportunities that counsellors encounter in their professional practice and development, the findings highlight recurring themes of role ambiguity, partial recognition, and uneven institutional support. Nearly

half of respondents described their role as only partially defined, and more than two-thirds reported that their work is only partially recognized by colleagues and administrators. These findings point to persistent structural barriers that undermine motivation. They echo the conclusions of Niles et al. (2024) and Mullen et al. (2023), who stress that recognition and professional self-efficacy are vital for counsellor satisfaction, while insufficient institutional support increases the risk of dissatisfaction and burnout.

The analysis also reveals that while counsellors generally view working conditions as adequate, many point to specific deficiencies such as lack of time, insufficient communication, or limited managerial support. This mirrors findings from Monet and Shuib (2024), who argue that emotional intelligence and self-efficacy contribute positively to counsellors' job satisfaction, but external factors such as workload, time constraints, and resources significantly shape how counsellors evaluate their working conditions. Similarly, the study on Malaysian counsellors' job satisfaction (Johari & Amat, 2019) stresses that material conditions are necessary but not sufficient; satisfaction also depends on professional recognition, collegial support, and opportunities for continuous development.

A further recurring theme in the data is the emphasis on communication, collegiality, and team-building as mechanisms to improve collaboration and reduce interpersonal tensions. Many counsellors explicitly called for more structured team meetings, joint projects, open dialogue, and informal gatherings. This resonates with research showing that collaboration is not only a matter of frequency but also of quality. For example, McCarthy and McCarthy (2023) highlight that career-sustaining behaviors such as peer support, constructive feedback, and professional learning communities are vital in strengthening relationships and preventing professional isolation. The fact that counsellors in this study repeatedly emphasized the need for improved communication indicates that interpersonal and organizational culture remains central to effective teamwork.

The analysis also sheds light on how perceptions vary by gender, professional experience, and workplace setting. Gender differences were most pronounced in relation to job satisfaction, with men reporting significantly higher satisfaction than women. This finding contributes to the third research question and demographic dimension of this study, where men reported significantly higher job satisfaction than women mirroring findings from international research. For example, Yıldırım-Kurtuluş and Yüksel-Şahin (2021) showed that counsellors with more years of experience reported higher levels of professional pride and job satisfaction, with gender differences also present. Similarly, Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė, Pociūtė and Bulotaitė (2019) found that self-efficacy, in conjunction with seniority and

developmental feedback, is crucial in shaping satisfaction among school counsellors. More experienced counsellors in our study expressed greater confidence in handling institutional challenges, while those earlier in their careers emphasized role ambiguity and lack of recognition aligning with what was found in the self-efficacy research (Özteke Kozan, 2022; Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė et al., 2019). Finally, supporting the pattern between school level and parental engagement, Jones and Palikara (2023) report that secondary schools tend to face more difficulties in securing consistent involvement from parents, especially regarding participation in school-based activities and communication, reflecting similar constraints observed in our secondary school counsellors.

Finally, findings regarding collaboration with parents illustrate both opportunities and persistent challenges. While some counsellors describe positive experiences, many stress weak parental engagement, limited attendance at meetings or workshops, and, in some cases, resistance to cooperation. This pattern is consistent with Collins et al. (2024), who demonstrate that parents' expectations of school counsellors are often misaligned with the counsellors' professional mandate, creating tensions and limiting partnership. Moreover, international research underscores that parental involvement is essential for student outcomes, yet difficult to secure without systematic strategies such as open communication, clear role definition, and inclusive activities. The Croatian study by Štefulj and Kušević (2021) further confirms that pedagogues are often placed in double binds: they are expected to build bridges with parents while lacking the authority or institutional backing to enforce parental participation.

Taken together, the study answers the research questions by showing that counsellors in eastern Croatia perceive themselves as essential actors in fostering a positive school culture but constrained by partial role definitions and uneven recognition. They encounter significant challenges, including limited institutional support, unclear responsibilities, and difficulties in parental collaboration, yet they also identify opportunities for professional growth through team-building, open communication, and structured peer support. Their perceptions vary meaningfully by gender, experience, and school level, suggesting that professional development and support strategies need to be tailored to different demographic groups. Ultimately, the effectiveness of counsellors' work depends on a combination of structural, relational, and cultural factors - clearer role definitions, stronger managerial support, trust among colleagues, and systematic strategies for parental engagement are all necessary to maximize their contribution to student well-being and the broader school environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted and often challenging role of school counsellors, emphasizing both the critical contributions they make to school communities and the obstacles that hinder their full potential. Throughout the data, it is evident that counsellors engage in extensive collaboration with teachers, yet the effectiveness of these partnerships is closely tied to the presence of structured support, clear role definitions, and shared professional norms. While interpersonal collaboration within schools is generally constructive, occasional misalignments in expectations, communication gaps, and differing priorities can impede the seamless functioning of teams. Similarly, the relationships between counsellors and parents are frequently marked by tension, often stemming from unrealistic expectations, misperceptions of the counsellor's professional mandate, and inconsistent parental engagement. These dynamics reinforce the concept of "double binds," where counsellors are tasked with fostering collaboration without sufficient authority or institutional backing.

Professional satisfaction among counsellors emerges as a complex interplay between personal resources and external conditions. Emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and commitment to professional growth contribute positively to job satisfaction, yet external factors such as workload, time constraints, and limited resources significantly shape how counsellors perceive their work environment. Moreover, career-sustaining behaviors, including peer support, constructive feedback, and participation in professional learning communities, play a pivotal role in strengthening relationships and preventing professional isolation. Material conditions alone are insufficient; recognition, collegial support, and continuous development opportunities are equally crucial for sustaining motivation and professional well-being.

The practical implications of these findings are clear. Schools should prioritize clear delineation of counsellors' roles, implement structured support systems, and foster a collaborative culture that encourages teamwork among staff. Leadership engagement is essential to provide both authority and advocacy for counsellors. More concrete policy actions include establishing formal role descriptions aligned with national guidelines, implementing workload standards to reduce role overload, ensuring mandatory induction and mentoring programs for new counsellors, allocating protected time for interprofessional collaboration, and integrating counsellors into school-wide decision-making bodies. Additionally, schools and local authorities should develop systematic parent-education initiatives (such as evidence-based workshops and mandatory orientation sessions) to reduce misperceptions and strengthen parent-counsellor cooperation.

Despite these insights, the study has some limitations. The sample size ($n = 85$) limits the statistical power of quantitative findings and may not fully capture regional variation. The reliance on self-report data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias and subjective interpretation. Limited triangulation, due to the absence of complementary data from teachers, students, or parents, constrains the depth of validation. Furthermore, the context-specific nature of the sample restricts the generalizability of the findings beyond similar educational settings in eastern Croatia. Future research could triangulate these perspectives with broader stakeholder feedback, including teachers, students, and parents, and investigate the impact of institutional interventions on counsellor effectiveness and satisfaction.

In conclusion, this study underscores that the effectiveness and well-being of school counsellors depend on both individual competencies and systemic support. By addressing structural constraints, fostering collaboration, and promoting professional recognition, schools can create an environment in which counsellors are empowered to perform their roles effectively, strengthen relationships with all stakeholders, and contribute meaningfully to student development and school success.

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