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School Counseling: A Comparative Study in 12 Countries

Abstract

This paper presents results of a comparative international study on some aspects of school counseling in the following 12 countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Malta, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, UK, and USA. The authors explain the multi-functional character of school counseling, give an idea of establishing a research field that could be called ‘comparative school counseling studies’, show the original terms in individual countries, and compare six aspects of school counseling: 1) legislative framework; 2) position requirements; 3) role of school counselors; 4) functions of school counselors; 5) interaction; and 6) ratio. The paper concludes with a long list of qualities school counselors are expected to possess. This is a document study chiefly based on examining, systematizing and comparing national documents (laws, reports, instructions, advices, position requirements, ministerial orders, recommendations, strategies, and statistics) on school counseling.

Keywords: school counseling, comparative school counseling study, school counselors’ position requirements, role and functions of school counselors

Introduction

Advisor, advocate, agent, believer, collaborator, conductor, consultant, coordinator, diplomat, educator, enthusiast, expert, explorer, guide, initiator, leader, listener, mediator, mentor, navigator, negotiator, observer, pedagogue, professional, psychologist, researcher, specialist, supporter, teacher – these are just a part of most frequently used words in national documents, job requirements, school forums, and professional platforms about what a school counselor is expected to be. It could be said that school counseling is the most multifunctional position in the school system, with too many variable tasks, with a huge number of functions and a large circle of contacts. There is no other position in the school system that is given so many roles.

A school counselor is expected to care about the mental, emotional, social and academic development of students; to prevent them from various risks; to discover, diagnose and understand the essence of problems students face. At the same time, a school counselor should be loyal to the school authority, to be collegial to school teachers, to intermediate between students, parents and teachers in case of conflicts, to propose problem solving decisions, to define strategies for improving the school organization and climate, to organize individual and group consultations for all participants in school life, and to look for support from social and psycho-medical institutions, and to even contact police and court offices when necessary.

This paper is a revised, shortened and updated version of a coauthored study by N. Popov and V. Spasenović that was performed and published in 2018 in two languages – Bulgarian and Serbian (Popov & Spasenović, 2018a, 2018b). These editions serve as teaching manuals to students in Bachelor and Master’s programs and in-service teacher training programs.

The study examines school counseling in the following 12 countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Malta, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Comparative school counseling studies

The mission of the above cited books and the purpose of this paper is to put the beginning of a process of establishing a comparative research field that could be called ‘comparative school counseling studies’.

Firstly, such a research field could contribute to a better understanding of common features, similarities and differences in school counseling worldwide. Secondly, it could support transferring best school counseling practices and innovations between countries. Thirdly, it could help improving school counseling training programs at colleges and universities, especially in countries where such programs are not well developed.

Every comparative international study of school counseling usually faces many difficulties, including:

- the position of school counselor, although being similar across the world, often has different role, functions and tasks;
- in the school systems, in parallel with school counselors, there are many other school or out-of-school based specialists (such as school psychologist or psychotherapist, guidance teacher, speech therapist, social worker, career adviser, professional orientation consultant, etc.) whose functions are often mixed with those of school counselors; and
- in most cases, finding all actual national documentation that regulates school counseling is a very difficult process.

The term

The term ‘school counselor’ has different names in the national school systems: student or education counselor (Austria), pedagogical counselor (Bulgaria), pedagogical-psychological counselor (Denmark), pedagogue-psychologist (Russia), expert associate (Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia), school counselor (Malta, Slovenia, UK, USA), and guidance counselor (Ireland). In this paper, the term ‘school counselor / school counseling’ is used as a common term for all countries.

The original terms in the 12 countries are listed below.

Note: for Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Russia the Cyrillic letters are replaced with their Latin equivalents.

Austria	Schüler- und Bildungsberater
Bulgaria	Pedagogicheski savetnik
Croatia	Stručni suradnik
Denmark	Psykologer / Konsulenter / Uddannelsesvejleder
Ireland	Guidance counsellor
Malta	School counsellor

North Macedonia	Struchen sorabotnik
Russia	Pedagog-psiholog
Serbia	Stručni saradnik
Slovenia	Svetovalni delavec
UK	School counsellor
USA	School counselor

Comparisons of school counseling aspects

The following six aspects of school counseling are compared: 1) legislative framework; 2) position requirements; 3) role of school counselors; 4) functions of school counselors; 5) interaction; and 6) ratio.

Legislative framework

In Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia the governance of the school systems is generally centralized. Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia apply stronger centralization, which means that job requirements, professional activities and duties of school counselors are defined at the national (ministerial) level. The centralization in Bulgaria is soft, which means that school counseling details are decided on both national and school level.

In Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Malta, Russia, UK, and USA the governance of the school systems is decentralized. These countries can be divided into 3 groups:

- Countries with decentralized school system governance and centralized regulation of school counseling. Such countries are Austria, Malta, and Russia. School counseling is regulated by the ministries of education of these countries.
- Countries with decentralized school system governance and decentralized regulation of school counseling. Such countries are Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The ministries/departments of education of these countries regularly publish documents on school counseling that are frameworks and give general recommendations, while the concrete regulation is performed by municipalities and local authorities. In the United Kingdom, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy offers training and accreditation of school counselors. In Ireland, these functions are performed by the National Centre for Guidance in Education.
- A country with decentralized school system governance and national non-governmental regulation of school counseling. Such a country is the United States, where the American School Counselor Association has created its ASCA National Model that should be followed by all American school counselors (ASCA, n. d.).

Position requirements

Regarding the academic degree applicants for school counselors must have, the countries can be grouped as follows:

- Countries where applicants may have both Bachelor and Master's degree. These countries are Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The United States can also be included in this group because 45 states require a Master's degree, while in 5 states a Bachelor degree is enough (ASCA, n. d.).
- Countries where applicants should have a Master's degree. Such countries are Croatia, Ireland, Malta, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Regarding any specialization (additional qualification) applicants must have, the countries can be grouped as follows:

- Countries where applicants for school counselors must have any additional qualification for school counselors in addition to their academic degrees. It happens in Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Malta, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Various models of obtaining additional qualification can be seen – specializations in Bachelor and Master's programs, in-service training programs, etc.
- Countries where no additional qualification for school counselors is required. It happens in Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Regarding licensing (also met as certification or accreditation) of school counselors, the countries can again be divided into 2 groups:

- Countries with no licensing – Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, North Macedonia, Malta, Russia, Serbia, and Slovenia.
- Countries with licensing required – Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Regarding the required type of higher education (specialty) applicants for school counselors must have, the countries can be divided into 3 groups:

- Countries where a degree in Education (or Pedagogy) is required. It is observed in Austria, Ireland, and Malta. The United States can also be included in this group due to the fact that the school counseling programs are often organized at faculties/colleges of education.
- Countries where a degree in Psychology (as a main or additional specialty) is required. Such countries are Russia and the United Kingdom.
- Countries where applicants may have a degree in Education (Pedagogy) or Psychology. It can be seen in Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Role of school counselors

Examining this aspect, it can definitely be said that the role of school counselors has many common characteristics in all countries. The role usually includes:

- supporting students in their psychological, academic and social development;
- consulting students, parents, and teachers;
- resolving conflicts between teachers and students;
- helping students to identify their abilities, capacities and interests;
- preventing dropout;
- supporting the school organization and the teaching/learning process;
- advising students about their career orientation and decisions;

- collaborating with school staff (principals, teachers, other specialists); and
- maintaining school counseling documentation.

Functions of school counselors

The comparative review of a large body of documents (ASCA, n. d.; BACP, n. d.; Bundesministerium für Bildung..., 2017; Danish Agency..., 2014; Jurić et al, 2001; Ministarstvo prosvete i nauke, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2003; Ministry for Education and Employment, n. d.; Ministry of Education and Science, 2019; Ministry of Education and Science, 2016; Mrvar Gregorčič & Mažgon, 2016; National Centre for Guidance..., n. d.) shows that the following functions can be outlined as common for all or most countries:

- identification function – diagnosing psychological, learning and social difficulties students have, and identifying gifted students and students with special needs;
- information function – giving information to all school actors according to their needs;
- support function – supporting personal development of students;
- consultation function – organizing individual and group consultations with students, parents, teachers and other school members;
- orientation function – helping students to get a better orientation about next level of education, vocational qualification or work market;
- prevention function – preventing students from possible risks and dropout;
- correction function – working with students who need additional help in coordination with other teachers and specialists;
- mediation function – solving problems between students, teachers, parents and principals;
- assessment function – monitoring the school process and assessing the quality of school work;
- development function – creating tools for optimizing the school work; and
- research function – getting knowledge of changes, best practices and innovations for improving the school work.

It should be clarified that this list of functions is rather relative. In some countries, these functions are subordinated – some are main, while others are sub-functions or activities/tasks. It was our intention here to outline the big scope of functions of school counseling.

Interaction

It is clear that school counselors need to interact with a large circle of persons and organizations, such as: students, parents, teachers, principals, other school based or out-of-school based specialists (social workers, psychologists, speech therapists, doctors, etc.), municipal and state institutions, non-governmental youth and children organizations, centers for professional information, police and court authorities. In Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States school counselors are expected to contact universities and colleges, representatives of local business, and members of the local church. A specific feature in the United Kingdom is the cooperation between school counselors and the school pastoral system (BACP, n. d.).

Ratio

The number of students at school per one school counselor ratio averagely varies between 250 and 500 students. The best standard (i.e. the lowest ratio) is announced in Croatia – schools with about 180 students must have 2 school counselors, schools with 180 to 500 students must have 3 school counselors, and schools with more than 500 students must have 4 school counselors. In the United States, the average standard is 250 students per one school counselor. In Malta, the standard is 300 students. In Ireland, schools having up to 500 students must appoint at least one school counselor, while schools with more than 500 students must have one school counselor per every 250 students. In Bulgaria, Russia and the other countries the usual standard is 500 students. However, in Bulgaria, the Ministry of Education and Science plans to decrease this number up to 400.

Conclusion

The paper shortly and comparatively presented some aspects of school counseling in 12 countries (11 European countries and the United States). It is clearly declared in national documents (laws, strategies, reports, regulations, instructions, advices, ministerial orders, recommendations, etc.) of all countries that school counseling is a very important position at schools that will play a more and more significant role in the development of education. According to the United States Department of Labor (2018) the number of school counselors in USA will increase with 13% until 2026, which is the highest increase among all professions.

It could be summarized that in the countries included in this study the school counselor is considered the specialist who shall: 1) support the psychological, academic and social development of students; 2) try to resolve conflicts between all actors in school life; 3) help students to face personal problems; 4) consult students, parents, teachers and principals; and 5) act as a coordinator of various school activities. It was mentioned in the Introduction of this paper that school counseling is the most multifunctional position in the school system. The huge diversity of functions listed above shows an abnormal spectrum of problems school counselors should try to solve.

There are also certain differences in school counselors' work. While in some countries the focus is on supporting students in their personal development and learning (Denmark, Ireland, UK), in others the equal attention is paid to the successful realization of teaching and school work and the improvement of the overall functioning of the school as an institution (Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia). In addition, the dominant functions or duties of school counselors vary across the countries – in some cases it is mental health care (United Kingdom), elsewhere academic and career guidance and counseling (Austria, Ireland), prevention (Russia), etc.

It is evident in position requirements, ministerial instructions, school forums, and associations' advices used in the 12 countries that national education policy makers, principals, students, parents, and inspectors expect from school counselors to be: active, balancing, careful, communicative, competent, complex, confident, creative, curious, defending, discreet, educative, experienced, exact, flexible, honest, inspiring, interesting, kind, learning, loyal, moral, motivating, multifunctional,

objective, open, original, patient, positive, reliable, searching, seeing, sensitive, smiling, social, supportive, sympathetic, tolerant, understanding, useful, variable.

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