

A Nine-Country Comparison of School Counselors' Autonomy and Control

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Abstract

This paper is a result of Nikolay Popov and Vera Spasenović's ongoing efforts towards establishing a comparative research field called comparative school counseling studies, where comparative education methodological tools are used in researching school counseling worldwide. The purpose of the paper is to examine the relationship between the regulation of school-based counseling and the level of autonomy and control in the work of school counselors in nine European countries. The study focuses on the school counselor because this is the most multifunctional professional in school, with many variable tasks, a myriad of functions, and a large circle of contacts. 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; and to consult with students, parents, teachers, and other staff members in schools. This is a theoretical comparative school counseling study chiefly based on analysis of normative documents (laws, regulations, ordinances, instructions, and recommendations). The research methods used in the study are document analysis, comparative method, and generalization. Document analysis is used in this study as a qualitative research method for examining, classifying, and interpreting information. The following nine countries are included in the study: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Malta, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. The above-mentioned purpose of the paper is operationalized through: concisely presenting who the school counselor is; grouping the countries by the type of school system governance and the type of regulation of school counselors' work; discussing autonomy and control in the work of school counselors; making brief descriptions of the school counselor's functions in each country with short evaluations of the level of autonomy and control; and classifying school-based counseling functions according to their susceptibility to autonomy or control. As a final result of this study, Popov and Spasenović introduce a classification of school counselor autonomy-control status (SCACS). Presenting results of this first-ever conceptual comparative study of autonomy and control in the work of school-based counselors in some European countries, the paper contributes to the further development of the field of comparative school counseling studies.

Keywords: school counselor, autonomy, control, school system, comparative school counseling, school counselor autonomy-control status (SCACS)

Introduction

This paper is a result of Popov and Spasenović's ongoing efforts towards establishing a comparative research field called comparative school counseling studies. This research field applies comparative education methodological tools to various aspects of school counseling in countries worldwide. Such a research field shall: contribute to a better understanding of common features, similarities, and differences in school counseling worldwide; support transferring best school counseling practices and innovations between countries; and help improving school counseling training programs at colleges and universities, especially in countries where such programs are not well developed (Popov & Spasenović, 2020, p. 35).

Recently, school counseling has proved to be one of the most rapidly developing occupations. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of school and career counselors and advisors is projected to grow 5 percent from 2022 to 2032, faster than the average for all occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Such a trend has been seen not only in the USA but in many countries in Europe as well.

The evidence shows that counselling in schools is increasingly viewed as a profession... There has been a significant move away from school staff, for example, teachers, doing counselling training as an add-on to their role, reflecting what is seen as emerging good practice. (DfE, 2016, p. 8)

The purpose of the paper is to examine the relationship between the regulation of school-based counseling and the level of autonomy and control in the work of school counselors in nine European countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Malta, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom.

This is a theoretical comparative school counseling study chiefly based on analysis of normative documents (laws, regulations, ordinances, instructions, and recommendations). Document analysis is used in this study as a qualitative research method for examining, classifying, and interpreting information.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. (Bowen, 2009, p. 27)

Normative documents that regulate the work of school counselors are official sources of expressing the national policy, priorities, and needs in the field of school counseling. Such documents provide high reliability without any subjective perceptions of authors or respondents because “we may suppose, that there are no spontaneous words in a law, and there are no spontaneous senses as well... the text of a law is a thoroughly considered semantic structure, where all the elements have a contextual and logical substantiation... [and] reflexes the main idea, the content of what the powers have been going to get across to the readers” (Luzan, 2011, p. 344).

Another important advantage of normative document analysis is uncovering and understanding the spirit of documents behind the letters. Autonomy and control in the work of school counselors are often clearly described in normative documents as principles, norms, or mechanisms. However, autonomy and control can also be

understood behind the text in normative documents as unwritten philosophy, values, or doctrines.

Who is the school counselor?

School counselors are highly educated, professionally certified individuals who help students succeed in school and plan their career. An integral part of the total education system, school counselors help students form healthy goals, mindsets and behaviors. (American School Counselor Association, n.d., para 1)

Counselling is an intervention that children or young people can voluntarily enter into if they want to explore, understand and overcome issues in their lives which may be causing them difficulty, distress and/or confusion. A counselling relationship has identified boundaries and an explicit contract agreed between the young person, counsellor and, where appropriate, parent or carer. (DfE, 2016, p. 6)

It could be said that school counseling is the most multifunctional position in the school system, with too many variable tasks, 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 (Popov & Spasenović, 2020, p. 34). "The professional school counselor... possesses unique qualifications and skills to address all students' academic, social/emotional and career development needs." (Bardhoshi, 2016, p. 7). School counselors should possess expertise in pedagogy, psychology, sociology, social work, communication, administration, education and youth legislation, and family relationships.

This paper tries to show how such multifunctional, highly educated, and qualified professionals are positioned between autonomy and control.

Here, two clarifications are needed. Firstly, in school systems around the world, in parallel with school counselors, there are many other school or out-of-school based specialists (such as school psychologist or psychotherapist, health educator, juvenile justice counselor, peer specialist, academic advisor, coach, guidance teacher, speech therapist, social worker, career adviser, professional orientation consultant, employee assistance program counselor, assessment specialist, community service manager, substance abuse counselor, rehabilitation counselor, correctional treatment specialist) whose functions are often mixed with those of school counselors. Here, the authors of this paper focus on the school counselor only.

Secondly, the occupation of school counselor as a school-based professional has different names in the national school systems of the countries, included in this study: student or education counselor (Austria), pedagogical counselor (Bulgaria), expert associate (Croatia, Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia), school counselor (Malta, Slovenia, United Kingdom), and guidance counselor (Ireland).

In this paper, the terms school counselor and school counseling are used as common terms for all countries.

School system governance and school counseling regulation

Despite the huge functional, structural, and organizational diversity in school systems around the world, a national school system is usually governed at the following levels (Popov, 2014, pp. 150-151): national level (central governing authority); regional level (state, province, territory, canton in federal countries; and province or county in non-federal countries); local level (sublevel into county, mostly in federal countries; and district or/and municipality in any country); and institutional level (school). Depending on the administrative map of the country, the regional and local levels may have specific names and subordinations.

Examining the governing power (including: creating education policy; making strategies, priorities, requirements, curricula, syllabi; providing conditions of school system functioning; forming and distributing school funding; establishing and closing schools and other education institutions; exercising control; recruiting; and other governing activities) the national level delivers or does not deliver to the lower levels (regional, local, and institutional), the nine countries included in this study can be divided into:

- Countries with centralized school system governance: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. The centralization in Bulgaria is soft (soft centralization is when the central governing authority, while keeping the power of making all important decisions on the school system, provides a varying degree of autonomy to the regional and local authorities, and to schools).
- Countries with decentralized school system governance: Austria, Ireland, Malta, and the United Kingdom. The school systems in Ireland and Malta combine strong centralized supervision with a high level of autonomy for schools, and that is why they are characterized as decentralized. The United Kingdom has the most decentralized school system in Europe (together with Switzerland, not included in this study).

Here, it should of course be said that both centralization and decentralization of school systems can differ organizationally and operationally in different countries. It should also be added that due to globalization, a middling type of centralized-decentralized school system governance is applied in more and more countries around the world. However, these specifics are not points of discussion here, and the above-presented grouping is reliable enough for this paper.

Exploring the normative documents that regulate the work of school counselors, the nine countries can be grouped as follows:

- Countries with centralized regulation of school counseling: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Malta, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia.
- Countries with decentralized regulation of school counseling: Ireland and the United Kingdom.

In countries with a centralized school system governance, the regulation of school counselors' work depends on overall centralization. This relationship could be called *continuing centralization* – the centralization of the school system continues over the regulation of school counselors' work. It is seen in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia.

In countries with a decentralized school system governance, the regulation of school counselors' work varies. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, it is decentralized. This relationship could be called *continuing decentralization* – the decentralization of the school system continues over the regulation of school counselors' work. In Austria and Malta, the regulation of school counselors' work is centralized. The decentralization of the school systems in these two countries is interrupted. This relationship could be called *interrupted decentralization* – the decentralization of the school system does not continue over the regulation of school counselors' work.

Table 1. Types of relationship between school system governance and regulation of school counselors' work

<i>Types of relationships</i>	<i>Countries</i>	<i>School system governance</i>	<i>School counseling regulation</i>
Continuing centralization	Bulgaria, Croatia, Rep. of North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia	Centralized	Centralized
Continuing decentralization	United Kingdom and Ireland	Decentralized	Decentralized
Interrupted decentralization	Austria and Malta	Decentralized	Centralized

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Autonomy and control

Autonomy and control are features of the regulation of school counseling. School or individual professional autonomy and ministerial or directorial control always exist in normative documents as written rules or ideas behind the text.

Generally, autonomy means “the quality or state of being self-governing” and “self-directing freedom and especially moral independence” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Autonomy is a typical feature of the work of the school counselor. The daily work of the school counselor is much more autonomous than the work of teachers and most other school-based specialists. The school counselor is functionally, organizationally, and administratively more independent than other school staff. The usual functions of a school counselor – identification, information, mediation, support, consultation, orientation, prevention, etc. – furnish this professional with a varying degree of autonomy, flexibility, and variability.

According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), control generally means “power or authority to guide or manage” and “the regulation of an activity especially by government directive”. Being considered a very important figure in school life, who works with students, parents, teachers, school administration, and out-of-school experts and organizations, the school counselor is always a subject of governance that includes a set of values, principles, and aims. Any extent of control over the work of the school counselor helps this professional to comply with education laws and regulations and maintain appropriate professional ethics.

Regarding the work of the school counselor, a high level of autonomy may include the following positives: functionally far from the governing center; freedom in making decisions; greater independence in their responsibilities; sovereignty in advising, consulting, and mediating; objectively advocating for students; better options of being active, careful, creative, flexible, honest, inspiring, open, reliable, sensitive, tolerant, and variable; protecting the independence of those who are supported, assisting them to make their own decisions; respecting individual values and beliefs. At the same time, autonomy requires professional moral responsibility, and is usually a factor for taking risks and making incorrect decisions. The value of autonomy in school counseling should be seen as both a moral constraint and a goal of action.

A high level of control over the work of the school counselor may include the following features: functionally close to the governing center; limited freedom in taking decisions and acting; obligations to follow strictly framed patterns of advising, consulting, and mediating; restricted options of being active, creative, flexible, inspiring, open, and variable; frequent monitoring by governing authorities. At the same time, a high level of control gives confidence in doing professional activities, provides guarantees that the school counselor firmly follows the state requirements, and can be seen as a factor in avoiding risks and wrong decisions in the counselor's daily work. A high level of control often helps school counselors to develop their professional proficiency.

It is a real balancing act to strike the right equilibrium between managing with a high degree of control, whilst still allowing self-expression, autonomy and independence. The human spirit thrives on autonomy and independence but, there will be high risk without oversight, parameters and guidelines. On the other hand, too much control and micro-management will quickly stifle and suffocate valuable talent. (Gilbert, 2015, para 3)

Autonomy and control are often given as two opposing, conflicting, and mutually exclusive phenomena. "Autonomy and controlling support are generally viewed as being on the two extreme ends of a continuum and have been found to be negatively correlated with one another" (Sook Ning et al., 2014, p. 48).

In school systems, and specifically in school counseling, autonomy and control exist simultaneously; they are usually not in conflict, and are mutually inclusive phenomena. In the work of the school counselor, autonomy and control are not "on the two extreme ends of a continuum" but are two parts of an entirety, where they occur positively correlated.

School counselors' functions by country

Austria

Austria is a country with a decentralized school system governance, but centralized regulation of school counseling.

In the Austrian school system, school counseling is part of the overall school activity and involves all school staff. School counselors are professionals who support the process of individual career counseling. The role of the school counselor is to be the person who coordinates the counseling process between students, teachers, and parents.

School counselors have two main functions (BMB, 2017): 1) information function (tasks to this function are: supporting students in the first year of each educational level, informing students in the last school year about further education and additional qualification options, etc.); and 2) individual consultation and mediation (tasks belonging to this function are: advising students about next steps of education according to students' interests, consulting and mediating in case of educational problems, coordinating social activities for student support).

School counselors in Austria have a medium level of autonomy and are highly controlled by both federal (national) and institutional (school) regulations. Regarding regulating school counselors' work, the provincial (regional) level is somehow ignored. This is perhaps because Austrian provinces possess a much smaller degree of autonomy than the main administrative units of other federal countries.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a country with a softly centralized school system governance and centralized regulation of school counseling.

In Bulgaria, the functions of school counselors are (MES, 2019, Art. 17): 1) consulting and supporting students, teachers, parents, and the school management; 2) mediating conflicts; 3) helping students make choices; 4) preventing students from drop-out; 5) motivating students to overcome challenging situations; 6) supporting students to adapt to school environment; 7) career advising and consulting; 8) keeping connections between the school and parents; 9) working with the school team in supporting the student personal development; 10) planning and organizing forms of additional qualification of school staff; 11) contacting out-of-school institutions; 12) doing research in the field of education.

School counselors in Bulgaria have a high level of autonomy in doing most of their functions (for instance, functions 1-7), and a medium level of autonomy in doing the other functions (8-12). The level of control over the work of school counselors can be evaluated as medium, coming from ministerial regulations, and between medium and high, exercised by school directors.

Croatia

The school system governance in Croatia is centralized, with centralized regulation of school counseling.

In Croatia, school counselors provide support in teaching and school activities through direct engagement with students, parents, and school staff, as well as through coordination and professional initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching effectiveness and overall school performance. The functions of school counselors involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating educational activities within the institution; organizing and improving the educational process; collaborating with students, teachers, parents, and the local community; planning, implementing, and monitoring the continuous professional development of the educational staff; creating pedagogical documentation and developmental and strategic documents for the educational institution; providing counseling and career guidance; participating in the development and implementation of adapted programs for students with special needs; conducting research and evaluating the school's work, as well as improving its overall quality (MSE, 2014).

School counselors have a medium level of autonomy in their work, accompanied by a high level of control. Expectations from the role of school counselors are based on various national and school regulations, guiding school counselors' work and partially limiting their autonomy in designing and implementing professional activities.

Ireland

Ireland is a country with a decentralized school system governance, and the regulation of school counseling can be characterized as decentralized.

The functions of the guidance counsellor in Ireland can be taken from the following competencies needed in the process of working with clients (listed in an IGC document, 2016, p. 19): 1) employing a mode of counselling with both individuals and groups; 2) working within their level of skill and knowledge in addressing the concerns of clients; 3) being able to prioritise issues, structure and summarise a session and, review the process of counselling periodically with the client; 4) facilitating clients in identifying and expanding on existing coping strategies; 5) monitoring progress toward goal; 6) assisting clients to develop self-awareness of their personal values, attitudes, beliefs and self-worth; 7) enabling clients to identify and expand on existing coping strategies; 8) helping clients identify strategies for building self-esteem; 9) developing an ability to assist individuals and groups to deal with conflict; 10) taking into consideration culturally relevant resources for use with clients; 11) identifying community resources relevant to client needs; 12) being able to remain grounded in the presence of client distress; 13) assisting clients in understanding the impact of stress on emotional and social health and, facilitate them in developing skills for managing it; 14) evaluating overall outcomes for the client and the practitioner's role in that process.

Ireland is a country where school counselors' work is framed, prescribed, and directed in detail, but despite this punctuality, school counselors possess a high level of autonomy in their work, with a low to medium level of control.

Malta

The school system governance in Malta can be described as predominantly decentralized, with a specific local balance between centralization and decentralization.

In Malta, "counselling means the observation, description, evaluation, interpretation, research, or assistance given in accordance with accepted principals of the counselling profession, methods or procedures for the purpose of preventing or eliminating restrictive behaviour and improvement on interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal reflection, [...], personal development and empowerment in learning, physical wellbeing or mental health" (Parliament of Malta, 2015, Art. 2, para 5).

The school counselor in Malta (Education Division, 2000, p. 46): 1) Is responsible for the running of a guidance and counselling service in one large school, or a number of small schools; 2) Works in continuous collaboration with the Education Officer, Guidance and Counselling; 3) Liaises with the Guidance Teacher/s in the school he/she is posted to, and with the Guidance Teacher/s in the other school he/she is assigned; 4) Advises parents and helps students in making educational and vocational choices; 5) Coordinates the work of Form Teachers and Guidance Teachers in collaboration with the Heads of School concerned; 6) Advises Heads of School and staff on the compilation and use of cumulative record cards, and ensures that these record cards are properly kept;

7) Advises on the profiling of students; 8) Advises on and encourages a healthy all-round development of students; 9) Helps students with problems; 10) Conducts personal counselling sessions with individuals, and/or with groups of students.

In Malta, school counselors have a medium level of autonomy in their work, with a medium to high level of control.

Republic of North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia is a country with a centralized school system governance and centralized regulation of school counseling.

The functions of school counselors in the Republic of North Macedonia include (RNM, 2019, Art. 44): work with students (education support, development support, professional orientation); work with teachers (support in planning and doing education activities and self-assessment, support in their work with students); work with parents (individual and group advising and consulting, pedagogical education of parents, parents inclusion in school life); collaboration with community (collaboration with local community and out-of-school experts and organizations); professional development (personal professional development and support to professional development of school staff); analytical-research work (analysis and evaluation of educational process in school); school structure, organization, and climate (planning educational process, maintaining education documentation, insuring safe school environment).

The Republic of North Macedonia is the country with the lowest level of autonomy school counselors have, and the highest level of control over their work.

Serbia

In Serbia, both the school system governance and school counseling regulation are centralized.

The tasks of school counselors involve (RS, 2017, Art. 138): 1) improving educational work in the institution; 2) monitoring, encouraging, and providing support for the overall development of students in the domains of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social capacities, and proposing measures in the interest of the child's development and well-being; 3) providing professional support to education professionals for creating a stimulating learning environment and strengthening their professional competencies; 4) developing inclusive school culture; 5) protection from violence and creating a safe environment; 6) monitoring and evaluating educational work and proposing measures to increase their quality; 7) establishing cooperation with students, parents, and school staff; 8) establishing cooperation with relevant institutions, professional associations, and other organizations and authorities; 9) coordinating cooperation and ensuring the implementation of decisions made by the school's parent councils and local parent councils; 10) implementing strategic decisions of the Ministry in the institution.

While the duties and responsibilities of school counselors in Serbia are defined by legal regulations, providing a framework that has to be followed, school counselors retain a degree of autonomy in the execution of their tasks. Serbia can be characterized as a country where school counselors operate with a medium level of autonomy, accompanied by a high level of control.

Slovenia

Slovenia is a country with a centralized school system governance and centralized regulation of school counseling.

In Slovenia, school counselors are expected to offer support to all participants in the educational process and work collaboratively with them in various aspects of school life: teaching and learning; school culture and school climate; physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development; career guidance; and socio-economic difficulties. School counselors carry out their role through three interconnected sets of activities: 1) assistance activities (offering direct help to individuals or groups and engaging in various forms of indirect support to create conducive learning environments); 2) developmental and preventive activities (monitoring educational work, planning improvements, and leading or coordinating innovative, and preventive projects); and 3) planning and evaluation activities (participation in planning and assessing the quality and development of both the counseling service itself and the school as a whole). School counselors not only provide individual counseling but also collaborate with teachers, parents, school management, and the local community in creating and maintaining a supportive educational environment that enables students to make optimal progress (NEIS, 2008a, 2008b).

The functioning of the school counseling service in Slovenia is defined by national program guidelines, serving as an orientation/framework for the work of school counselors. School counselors have a medium level of autonomy in their work and a medium to high level of control.

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, both the school system governance and the regulation of school counseling are decentralized.

According to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, “Counsellors offer troubled and/or distressed children and young people an opportunity to talk about their difficulties, within a relationship of agreed confidentiality” (DFE, 2016, p. 17).

In the United Kingdom, the functions of school counselors can be outlined as follows (Ibid., pp. 17-19): preventative intervention (identifying emerging signs of behavioral change); assessment of risks; early intervention (when children or young people themselves, or the adults around them, might identify a problem and refer them to counselling); parallel support alongside another specialist (some children and young people may attend counselling while they are also attending specialist mental health services); tapering or step down of intervention (when a specialist mental health service intervention is completed, a child or young person may attend counselling within school as a further support which consolidates the work of the specialist mental health service).

The UK Department for Education emphasizes on the fact that counselling can be beneficial in several ways, for example it can help (Ibid.): reducing the psychological distress that children and young people may experience as a result of facing a range of life difficulties; supporting young people who are having difficulties within relationships, or who are having difficulty managing their emotions.

The United Kingdom is a country where school counselors have a high level of autonomy in their work, with a low level of control. The advice and recommendations

by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and the Department for Education (DfE) about counselling in schools have a supportive character and do not provide any strict regulations for counselors' work. "There is freedom for each school or college to decide what support to offer to children and young people and staff based on their particular needs and drawing on an evidence base of effective practice" (House of Commons Library, 2021, p. 9).

Autonomy and control in school counselors' functions

Examining in depth what the specific school counseling functions in each country include, and synthesizing the functions that are commonly met in all or most of the nine countries, the following assumption is possible to be made – the functions can be divided into three groups according to their susceptibility to autonomy or control.

Some functions are more likely to be a matter of autonomous activities. Such functions are: information function, support function, consultation function, and prevention function. The nature of these functions – respectively, giving information to school personnel according to their needs; supporting personal development of students; organizing individual and group consultations with students, parents, teachers, and administrative staff; preventing students from risks and dropout – provides more space for autonomous thinking and actions. In countries where the school counselor possesses a high level of autonomy, these functions may give the school counselor the role of a real creator, believer, enthusiast, explorer, innovator, and supporter.

Other functions are somehow more independent of autonomy or control. It can be said that such functions are: orientation function, mediation function, collaboration function, and research function. The core of these functions – correspondingly, orienting students about education, qualification, or work; solving problems between students, teachers, parents, and principals; collaboration with local community; and getting knowledge of best practices and innovations – make school counselors to a certain extent independent from the level of autonomy or control.

And there are some functions that need precise actions strictly according to normative requirements. Such functions are usually: identification function, correction function, development function, and assessment function. The essence of these functions – namely, diagnosing psychological, learning, and social difficulties; working with students who need additional help in coordination with other specialists; making plans for optimizing the schoolwork, and assessing the quality of schoolwork – obliges the school counselor to always follow strict standards. In countries with a high level of control over the school counselor's work, performing these functions requires strictly regulated steps. However, the lower level of autonomy combined with a high level of control can make the school counselor a prestigious professional with highly recognized expertise.

School counselor autonomy-control status (SCACS)

As a final result of this study, synthesizing all data, a classification of school counselor autonomy-control status (SCACS) can be done. The SCACS term is introduced by the authors of this paper. It is based on summarizing data on school system governance, school counseling regulation, level of autonomy, and level of control in the nine countries.

Table 2. Levels of autonomy and control in the work of school counselors

<i>Country</i>	<i>School system governance</i>	<i>School counseling regulation</i>	<i>Level of autonomy</i>	<i>Level of control</i>
Austria	Decentralization	Centralization	Medium	High
Bulgaria	Centralization	Centralization	High	Medium
Croatia	Centralization	Centralization	Medium	High
Ireland	Decentralization	Decentralization	High	Low to Medium
Malta	Decentralization	Centralization	Medium	Medium to High
Rep. of North Macedonia	Centralization	Centralization	Low	High
Serbia	Centralization	Centralization	Medium	High
Slovenia	Centralization	Centralization	Medium	Medium to High
United Kingdom	Decentralization	Decentralization	High	Low

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In exploratory studies focused on other positions, for instance the study by Gilbert and Sutherland (2013) on managers, the permutations between autonomy and control are: 1) high autonomy and low control; 2) low autonomy and high control; 3) high autonomy and high control; and 4) low autonomy and low control. This study on school counselors' autonomy and control shows that a medium level (between low and high) is often met, and the permutations of high autonomy and high control, and low autonomy and low control are not typical for the work of school counselors. Examining the school counselor status in the nine countries included in this study, the following classification can be made.

Table 3. School counselor autonomy-control status (SCACS)

<i>SCACS</i>	<i>Autonomy – Control</i>
Empowered school counselor	High autonomy – Low control
Moderately empowered school counselor	Medium or high autonomy – Medium or low control
Moderately restrained school counselor	Medium or low autonomy – Medium or high control
Restrained school counselor	Low autonomy – High control

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It could be said that:

1. The empowered school counselor is typical of the United Kingdom.
2. The moderately empowered school counselor is usual in Bulgaria and Ireland.
3. The moderately restrained school counselor is usual in Austria, Croatia, Malta, Serbia, and Slovenia.
4. The restrained school counselor is typical for the Republic of North Macedonia.

Here, two clarifications are needed. Firstly, the above-listed statuses should not be assessed positively or negatively, they show the permutations between autonomy and control in school counseling in nine countries, i.e., the empowered school counselor cannot obligatorily be viewed positively, or the restrained school counselor, respectively, negatively. Secondly, this classification is based on an analysis of national school counseling normative documents where autonomy and control are thoroughly considered principles, without subjective perceptions of respondents obtained from empirical studies.

Conclusion

This is the first-ever conceptual comparative study of autonomy and control in the work of school-based counselors in some European countries. Comparatively mapping autonomy and control in the work of the most functional professionals in school, this paper gives another contribution to the development of the field of comparative school counseling studies.

The study suggests that school counselors exhibit varying degrees of professional autonomy, with noticeable differences in the level of control over their work across nine countries. These variations are not solely determined by whether the governance of the school system and school counseling regulations are centralized. This is particularly evident in the context of autonomy. For example, in certain countries where both the governance of the school system and the regulation of school counseling are centralized, the level of autonomy among school counselors can either be high (as seen in Bulgaria) or, conversely, low (as observed in the Republic of North Macedonia). Concerning the control over the work of school counselors, it is evident that it is higher in countries with centralized school counseling regulation compared to those with decentralized regulation.

Autonomy and control in the work of school counselors are also influenced by the predominant functions they perform. In countries where there is a balanced emphasis on supporting students in their learning and development, as well as on the successful implementation of teaching and school work, and the improvement of overall school functioning (such as Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia), there tends to be a heightened level of control over the work of school counselors.

Within the comparative school counseling studies, further research on this topic would be beneficial.

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