



Perceived Stress, Basic Psychological Needs, and Quality of Life among Romanian School Counselors: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

School counselors face daily complex situations, such as abuse, trauma, and the emotional and relational difficulties of students, as well as pressures from other educational actors (parents, teachers, and the wider school community). These factors can generate high levels of stress, reduce both professional and personal quality of life, and may even lead to suicidal thoughts. The present study investigates the relationship between perceived stress, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and quality of life among school counselors. A mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative, correlational component included 43 school counselors from several counties, recruited through the Regional Centers for Resources and Educational Assistance. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with three school counselors. Perceived stress was negatively associated with quality of life ($r = -0.36, p < .05$) and positively associated with frustration of psychological needs ($r = 0.39, p < .001$). Satisfaction of psychological needs showed a strong positive association with quality of life ($r = 0.85, p < .001$), explaining 73% of its variance. School counselors exhibit high levels of stress that significantly impact their quality of life. The satisfaction of basic psychological needs is an essential factor for maintaining well-being and professional balance. Study limitations include the small sample size and the subjective nature of self-report measures.



Keywords: school counselor; stress; basic psychological needs; quality of life; mixed-methods design.

1. Introduction

This research originated from the practical experience gained during the first year of activity as a novice school counselor. In 2024, the author of this study was employed as a substitute school counselor within the County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance Braşov, working in the counseling office of a public middle school. Throughout this period, the counselor was confronted with a large number of urgent and complex cases, including situations of abuse, trauma, aggressive behaviors, and family or educational difficulties.

The time allocated to direct interventions often proved insufficient due to the high number of students and the multiple demands coming simultaneously from children, parents, and teachers. These conditions led to a heightened level of perceived stress and raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of interventions, the adequacy of professional competences, and the actual impact of the counselor's role on beneficiaries.

Building on this experience, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between perceived stress, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and the quality of life of school counselors, providing both theoretical and practical insights into a highly relevant educational issue.

2. Literature Review

Building on this practical experience, the present study aims to analyze the relationship between perceived stress, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and the quality of life of school counselors, providing a scientific perspective on an issue with direct impact in the educational field.

School counselors represent an essential professional category within the Romanian educational system, having the role of supporting the personal, emotional, social, and educational



development of students, as well as facilitating their relationship with family, school, and community. Their main responsibilities include psychological and educational counseling, school and career guidance, prevention of risk behaviors and school dropout, as well as constant collaboration with parents and teachers (Centrul Județean de Resurse și Asistență Educațională Brașov, 2024).

Practical experience shows that professionals in school counseling often face complex situations, including cases of abuse, trauma, aggressive behavior, family and educational difficulties, as well as pressures from other educational stakeholders – parents, teachers, and the school community. The high workload, diversity of issues, and limited time allocated to direct interventions frequently generate high levels of stress, exposing counselors to risks of emotional exhaustion and diminished quality of both professional and personal life.

Specialized literature confirms that educational staff involved in psycho-pedagogical support activities are among the most vulnerable professional categories to occupational stress, particularly in the context of inadequate institutional resources and multiple responsibilities (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). For school counselors, perceived stress tends to be persistent and intense, negatively affecting job satisfaction and potentially leading to burnout or even suicidal ideation (Wilkerson, 2009; Fantilli & Folkman, 2009). The pressure is amplified by the need to manage emotional crises within limited time frames and to collaborate efficiently with teachers, parents, and external institutions.

A useful theoretical framework for understanding these mechanisms is Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which highlights the importance of satisfying three basic psychological needs – competence, autonomy, and relatedness – in maintaining mental health and intrinsic motivation. For school counselors, meeting these needs contributes to stress reduction and supports both professional and emotional balance.

Quality of life in the professional domain is influenced by factors such as work-life balance, perceived stress at work, professional recognition, autonomy in decision-making, and organizational support (Sirgy et al., 2006). Recent studies confirm that psycho-pedagogical support professions are exposed to high levels of stress, while the satisfaction of basic



psychological needs plays a central role in maintaining well-being and professional quality of life (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

In Romania, during the 2023–2024 academic year, one school counselor was responsible for approximately 800 students, and starting from 2025 this number was reduced to 500 (Ministerul Educației, 2023). Even with this reduction, the ratio remains high compared to the international standard, where one counselor should work, on average, with 250 students (American School Counselor Association, 2019). This discrepancy highlights the additional pressure faced by Romanian school counselors, who must respond to a large volume of requests with limited resources. In the absence of well-structured organizational support and supervision programs, the risk of chronic stress, burnout, and decreased professional quality of life remains significantly high. Therefore, analyzing the relationship between perceived stress, satisfaction of psychological needs, and quality of life of school counselors is essential both for advancing research in educational psychology and for supporting educational policies aimed at protecting the mental health and efficiency of this professional category.

Moreover, specialized literature shows that the entry into the profession is one of the most demanding stages for school counselors, being associated with high levels of stress and emotional vulnerability. Mentorship and supervision programs can facilitate professional adjustment and reduce the intention to leave the educational system (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, in Romania, the formal support provided to novice counselors often remains limited or focused mainly on bureaucratic aspects, without sufficiently addressing their psychological and emotional needs.

3. Methodology

Objectives

The present study aims to examine the relationship between perceived stress, the satisfaction and frustration of basic psychological needs, and the quality of life among school counselors, using a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative data.



Hypotheses

- H1. Perceived stress is negatively associated with quality of life among school counselors.
- H2. The frustration of basic psychological needs is positively associated with perceived stress.
- H3. The satisfaction of basic psychological needs predicts quality of life among school counselors.
- H4. There are significant differences in the satisfaction of psychological needs depending on counselors' level of professional experience.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The qualitative component consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews, analyzed using an inductive thematic approach. Interviews were transcribed and coded, allowing for the identification of recurring domains and patterns relevant to school counselors' professional experiences.

The quantitative component involved statistical analysis of data collected through standardized questionnaires that assessed perceived stress, the satisfaction and frustration of basic psychological needs, and quality of life. This approach enabled the exploration of associations between variables and comparisons based on counselors' professional qualifications.

Participants

For the quantitative data collection, an online questionnaire was distributed via Facebook, Instagram, and email to several County Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance, which were asked to forward it to their employees. A total of 43 school counselors participated (39 women – 90.7% and 4 men – 9.3%), with ages ranging from 22 to 64 years ($M = 38.58$, $SD = 11.85$).

The qualitative component included semi-structured interviews with three school counselor colleagues, conducted by the researcher. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.



Regarding professional qualifications, 3 participants (11.5%) held the first professional degree, 2 (7.7%) held the second degree, 14 were substitutes (53.8%), and 1 participant was tenured (3.8%).

Instruments and Materials

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, using semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires (Google Forms).

Three online interviews were conducted via Google Meet in April 2024, each with an average duration of 20 minutes. For confidentiality purposes, participants were anonymized. The interview included questions about professional expectations, challenges encountered, perceptions of the school counselor's role, and coping strategies. The data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with codes and major themes being extracted.

To assess the study variables, three standardized psychological instruments were used:

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14; Cohen & Kamarck, 1983), consisting of 14 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived stress. The instrument has demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .84 to .86.

WHOQOL-BREF (World Health Organization, 1996), a 26-item short questionnaire measuring four dimensions of quality of life: physical, psychological, social, and environmental. Scores are transformed to a 0–100 scale, where higher values reflect better quality of life. Reported internal consistency in the literature ranges from $\alpha = .66$ to $\alpha = .84$.

Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (Chen et al., 2015), comprising 24 items grouped into six subscales corresponding to the three basic needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—evaluated both in terms of satisfaction and frustration. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with reported internal consistency ranging from $\alpha = .71$ to $\alpha = .89$.



4. Results

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23.

H1. It was hypothesized that perceived stress is associated with quality of life among school counselors.

To test this hypothesis, Pearson's correlation was conducted. The results are presented in **Table 1**.

	Physical Domain	Psychological Domain	Social Domain	Environmental Domain
Stress	-.16	-.34*	-.42**	-.42**

Note. $N = 43$. * $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$

Table 1. Pearson Correlation between Stress and Quality of Life

The findings indicate that perceived stress is negatively associated with quality of life in the psychological, social, and environmental domains. Qualitative data obtained through interviews support this negative association. Participants reported experiencing intense emotional states such as anxiety, stress, guilt, frustration, and confusion. For example, one participant explained:

"...anxiety because I didn't know how to do it, what to do, if I was doing it right, and I wanted to do as many things as possible; it was taking a lot of time from my personal life." (T)

The feeling of guilt was also present:

"If I did something else, the feeling of guilt appeared." (T)

The main sources of stress identified by participants included insufficient time allocated for counseling, difficulties adapting to the first job, uncertainty regarding job continuity (as many were employed as substitutes), heavy workload, bureaucratic activities (e.g., reports, meetings), and the frustration caused by the lack of immediate visible effects of counseling on students' behavior.

As one participant expressed:

"I feel frustrated because I think the time allocated is not enough and that I am just one person for



too many. Somehow I feel that I have to choose between them... Who needs counseling more? Who am I to decide?" (A, 76–80).

H2. It was hypothesized that the frustration of basic psychological needs is positively associated with perceived stress.

	Autonomy Frustration	Relatedness Frustration	Competence Frustration
Total stress	.39**	.27	.26

*Note. N = 43. * $p < .001$*

Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Need Frustration and Perceived Stress

The results indicate that autonomy frustration was significantly and positively associated with perceived stress, suggesting that counselors who felt less control over their activities reported higher levels of stress. While relatedness and competence frustration did not reach statistical significance, qualitative data provided valuable insights into how these unmet needs may still exacerbate stress. For example, one participant described a lack of control over daily activities due to unexpected demands, highlighting frustration of autonomy and work organization:

"Ad-hoc meetings without prior scheduling." (A)

Another counselor expressed doubts about the effectiveness and impact of their work, reflecting frustration of competence:

"That's when the questions appear: what is my role here? Do I have an impact? Am I really helping anyone?" (T)

Difficulties in collaborating with teachers were also reported as barriers to fulfilling the need for relatedness:

"They send the child as if to detention." (T)

"Lack of support from colleagues." (T)



Although statistical confirmation was lacking, these narratives suggest that unmet psychological needs can heighten professional stress and reduce counselors' sense of efficiency and belonging.

H3. It was hypothesized that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs predicts quality of life among school counselors.

To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression was conducted. The results are presented in **Table 3**.

Variabile	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>R</i> ²	.73				
<i>F</i>	110.85				
Constant	5.65	8.62		.65	
Total satisfaction	1.96	.18	.85	10.52	.000

Note. Dependent variable: Quality of life. *N*=43

Table 3. Simple Linear Regression Predicting Quality of Life from Need Satisfaction

The regression analysis showed that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs predicted 73% of the variance in quality of life, confirming the hypothesis.

Qualitative data supported this relationship. Participants emphasized that fulfilling psychological needs—particularly competence, positive relatedness, and autonomy—was essential for experiencing a high quality of professional life. One counselor explained:

“I see them, I see their reactions on their faces, that they are happy, that they enjoyed it, and that’s where I recharge with energy, that’s where I get my satisfaction.” (T)

Others highlighted the joy of meaningful relationships at work and the fulfillment of working with children:

“At the end of the day, I do what I love, which is working with the children.” (B)

Moments of genuine connection were described with emotion:

“The moment when they come and hug me when they see me in the schoolyard” ... “They hug you and give you so much in return.” (A, 146)



These testimonies clearly illustrate that satisfying fundamental psychological needs in the workplace contributes to a more positive perception of quality of life.

H4. We hypothesized that there are significant differences in basic psychological need frustration between school counselors depending on their employment status (substitute vs. tenured).

Employment status	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
tenured	31.13	23	6.06	-.79	41	.43
substitute	32.50	20	7.32			

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test Results

To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Results showed no statistically significant difference in basic psychological need frustration between tenured counselors ($M = 31.13$, $SD = 6.06$) and substitutes ($M = 32.50$, $SD = 7.32$), $t(41) = -.79$, $p = .43$. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported (**Table 4**).

However, qualitative findings provide valuable nuance. The three interviewed participants were first-year substitutes without tenure, and they consistently described challenges such as excessive bureaucracy, limited autonomy, and lack of genuine institutional support. For example, one counselor noted:

"So much time is spent on paperwork and planning that it takes away from the time I could dedicate to students and preparing activities for them." (R)

Frustration regarding competence was also reflected in how participants perceived mentoring activities, which they considered superficial and insufficient:

"I only remember one useful activity from the mentoring program... the rest I learned on the go." (R).

Support from school leadership was described as formal and bureaucratic, failing to address the real needs of novice counselors:

"Many things are done just to be checked off, not because they actually help me in practice." (R).

These accounts suggest that, even if not statistically significant in the quantitative data, employment status may still shape how counselors experience need frustration in practice.



5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study align with previous research indicating that professionals in school counseling and psycho-pedagogy are frequently exposed to high levels of occupational stress, which negatively affect their quality of life (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Van Horn et al., 2004). Quantitative analyses showed that perceived stress was negatively associated with the social and environmental domains of quality of life, partially confirming Wilkerson's (2009) observations about the relational and organizational consequences of stress.

By contrast, differences between tenured and substitute counselors were not statistically significant. Nonetheless, qualitative accounts revealed that novice substitutes frequently experienced excessive bureaucracy, lack of genuine support, and limited autonomy—echoing Mullen and Gutierrez's (2018) findings about the vulnerabilities of early-career professionals. This discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative results suggests that while employment status may not systematically predict need frustration, it remains an important contextual factor shaping counselors' lived experiences.

In conclusion, satisfaction of basic psychological needs stands out as a critical predictor of quality of life and a buffer against burnout among school counselors. The partial confirmation of hypotheses highlights the complex interplay between stress, needs, and professional context. The lack of adequate institutional support, particularly for novice counselors, increases vulnerability and undermines the effectiveness of psycho-pedagogical interventions. These findings underscore the urgency of developing mentoring and supervision programs that move beyond formality and address the real psychological and professional needs of school counselors.

Practical Implications

Based on the results, several concrete directions for intervention can be outlined. First, the integration of continuous training modules focused on stress management, emotional self-regulation, and resilience-building among school counselors is essential for strengthening professional competence and preventing exhaustion. Second, regular access to psychological supervision and peer consultation should become an institutionalized practice, providing school



counselors with a safe framework for professional reflection, emotional support, and the exchange of best practices.

Furthermore, simplifying bureaucratic tasks and clarifying the counselor's role within schools may enhance professional autonomy and reduce frustration. Special emphasis should be placed on developing authentic mentoring programs for novice counselors, moving beyond formalism and including practical support, concrete examples of individual and group counseling, and applied feedback.

This study can serve as a starting point for the development of national educational policies aimed at preventing burnout and promoting guidelines for best practices, thereby enhancing the professional quality of life of school counselors and, implicitly, the effectiveness of the services offered to students and the school community.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Although both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed, this study presents several important limitations. First, the relatively small sample size and its restriction to certain regions limit the generalizability of the findings at the national level. Second, the cross-sectional design allows for the identification of associations but does not establish causal relationships between variables.

Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce subjectivity, and certain contextual factors—such as organizational climate, administrative support, case load, or material resources—were not systematically analyzed, despite their potential significant influence on stress and quality of life.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs with larger and more diverse samples, integrating these contextual variables. Expanding the qualitative dimension through focus groups or interviews with a broader range of counselors from different regions could provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of professional realities. Moreover, comparative studies with other educational systems could highlight transferable best practices relevant to the Romanian context.



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