
**SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS SCHOOL
SOCIAL WORK IN TURKEY**

***PERCEPCIONES DE LOS ORIENTADORES ESCOLARES SOBRE EL
TRABAJO SOCIAL ESCOLAR EN TURQUÍA***

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Abstract

Social work in the context of schools has been attracting growing interest in the Turkish education field over recent years, as evidenced by discussions and a significant body of literature regarding introducing social work services in schools alongside counselling services. However, while social workers and social work academics debate over the practicalities of social workers working in schools for various reasons including new employment opportunities and better education environments, it appears that none have examined counsellors' perceptions about the possible future collaboration with social workers in schools. From our perspective, it is vital to know what and how counsellors think of social workers with regards to a possible future professional partnership. In this sense, our research investigated what counsellors, who were currently working in state schools, knew about social work, particularly in a school setting. Quantitative descriptive methods were employed to understand school counsellors' perceptions. The study's population consisted of 295 school counsellors that were working in state schools in Altındağ, Çankaya and Yenimahalle; three provinces in Ankara, Turkey. The study showed that although the counsellors' reports suggested that they were self-assured in working with social workers in schools, they were not satisfied with their understanding of the social work profession, school social work in particular. The participants emphasized that familial problems and low levels of motivation towards school were prevalent problems for the students. The counsellors were not opposed to working with a social worker in schools; in fact the vast majority of the participants believed that working as part of a psychosocial team in schools could enhance school psychosocial services. Lastly, counsellors' perceptions about social workers were dominantly positive despite their self-reported inadequate information of the social work discipline in general.

Resumen

El trabajo social en el contexto escolar ha generado un creciente interés en el campo de la educación turca en los últimos años, tal como lo demuestra un importante cuerpo de la literatura y los debates sobre la introducción de servicios de trabajo social en las escuelas de Turquía, junto a los servicios de asesoramiento y orientación. Sin embargo, mientras los profesionales y académicos del trabajo social debaten sobre los aspectos prácticos de esta incorporación profesional a las escuelas, argumentando varias razones y, entre ellas, las nuevas oportunidades de empleo y una mejora del entorno educativo, parece que ninguno ha examinado la percepción que los orientadores/asesores escolares tienen sobre esta posible colaboración futura con los trabajadores sociales. Desde nuestra perspectiva es vital conocer qué y cómo piensan los orientadores respecto a los trabajadores sociales como colegas profesionales en el futuro, y sobre estos aspectos indagó nuestra investigación. Se emplearon métodos descriptivos cuantitativos para comprender dichas percepciones. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 295 orientadores escolares que trabajaban en las escuelas estatales de Altındağ, Çankaya y Yenimahalle, tres provincias de Ankara, Turquía. El estudio mostró que, aún manifestando confianza en el trabajo conjunto, los orientadores escolares reconocieron su desconocimiento y escasa comprensión sobre la profesión del trabajo social y, en particular, el trabajo social escolar. Ya que los problemas familiares y bajos niveles de motivación eran problemas prevalentes, la gran mayoría creía que el trabajo en equipo podría mejorar los servicios psicosociales escolares. Así, las percepciones de los orientadores sobre los trabajadores sociales fueron predominantemente positivas, a pesar de reconocer su incompleta o inadecuada información sobre la disciplina del Trabajo Social.

KW : School Social Work; Social workers; Counsellors; School; Education

PC : *Trabajo social escolar; Trabajadores sociales; Orientadores escolares; Escuela; Educación.*

Introduction

Recent figures show that there are 16 million 115 thousand students currently registered in formal education institutions in Turkey. These include 11 million students in elementary and lower secondary school level, and 5 million in upper secondary school level. The number of teachers reached 1 million in 2017 (National Education Statistics, 2017). There are 1 million 204 thousand students who attend private schools in total. Although physical statistics look promising in terms of numbers of class rooms per student, quality of education is a major drawback. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that in the last two examination sessions (2012-2015), science reading and mathematics scores all declined compared to previous results. Turkey ranked 50th out of 70 countries in PISA 2015 (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı –MEB-, 2012, 2015; OECD, 2013, 2016).

There is also psychosocial aspect of student experience in school environment which is raising concerns in terms of student wellbeing in Turkish education. Poverty, bullying, mental health problems, peer pressure, alcohol and drug use, familial problems, violence, low self-esteem are among some of the challenges students may face during their schooling (Openshaw, 2008). These prevalent problems, alongside bio-psycho-social developmental issues of students, require particularly close monitoring and psycho-social assistance/interventions from helping professionals (Huxtable and Blyth, 2002; Kılıçcı, 2006).

Institutional psychosocial services for students in school settings in Turkey are carried out by 'counselling and guidance' departments within schools. At the present there are approximately 25,000 counsellors working in schools (Emiroğlu, 2014), and nearly hundred universities offer counselling and guidance degrees at graduate level (Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Sistemi, 2017). Counselling and guidance programs last 4 years and the last year requires students to undertake a field work course in which students organize group counselling and individual counselling practices in schools and relevant institutions (Anadolu University, 2019). Upon completing the program, graduates can take a nationwide general exam to be appointed as a counsellor in the state schools. Those who wish to work at state or private organizations, do not have to obtain any other formation, certification or a graduate degree other than bachelor's degree in counselling. Individuals having a bachelor's degree in sociology, philosophy and psychology and wish to become a counsellor in the state schools have to obtain a pedagogical formation certificate given by education faculties in

some universities in Turkey, although it sparks controversy (Arslan, Karataş and Dostuoğlu, 2019).

Similarly, social work programs also last 4 years and the last semester in many universities are mostly reserved for field work courses. Social work students undertake field work courses in hospitals, family courts and social work centres mainly. However, during the last few years, social work students have started to choose state and private schools as their field work institutions. As with counselling degree holders, social work graduates also take a general exam in Turkey to be appointed as a social worker in the state institutions. Nevertheless, as of 2019, not one social worker has been appointed as a school social worker in the state schools although there are pilot projects in various cities where school social workers are working along with counsellors in schools (Yeşilkayalı and Meydan, 2017).

Although social work and counselling services share some characteristics in terms of human services (YÖK, 2011), there has not been any systematic effort to bring them together as a psychosocial team in relevant settings. Many countries around the world provides examples of psychosocial services where psychologists, social workers and other helping professions work together (Agresta, 2004; Huxtable and Blyth, 2002).

Historically speaking, social work has been mainly identified as a discipline concerned with poverty, child protection, disability, elderly care and medical care. It was not particularly meant to address school problems. However, social workers are now working in various institutions such as hospitals, social service centres, child courts, prisons, rehabilitation centres, kindergartens and more. Developing an understanding and awareness of social work in Turkey has now led to the development of discussions about school social work which is already well practiced around the world (Huxtable and Blyth, 2002).

Many discussed that insufficient number of counsellors (Student to counsellor ratio is ranging from 554:1 to 1225:1) affects the quality of practices in Turkish school settings (Hatunoğlu and Hatunoğlu, 2006; Yeşilyaprak, 2009). Although the exact figures are not known, counsellors from other professions such as primary school teachers or sociology graduates, serve in schools without relevant formation and training. Moreover, the ambiguity of the professional counsellor roles and responsibilities in legal documents negatively affects counsellors' work efficiency and relations with school administrations (Yeşilyaprak, 2009). Furthermore, as far as the guidance and counselling literature and university programs in Turkey considered, the focus has been on academic achievement, individual counselling,

personal development and career planning with a very limited emphasis on family and school environment (Bakırcioğlu, 2005; Deniz and Erözkan, 2012; Korkut-Owen, Owen and Karairmak, 2013; Yeşilyaprak, 2016).

Compared to school counselling's individual centered approach, school social workers work in a more holistic way, considering students' social and family life outside the school as well as school-based circumstances (Constable, 2008).

Whilst the counselling profession deals with issues such as recognition, certification and standardization processes (Akkoyun, 1996; Yeşilyaprak, 2009), overloading problems of students in Turkish schools put forward the idea of school social work as a means of improving the quality of psychosocial services. It is argued that the "person in environment" approach taken by the social work profession could be highly practical for schools, since many problems students deal with stem from their social and physical surroundings (Ozkan and Kılıc, 2014a).

Recent discussions and a significant body of literature regarding introducing social work services in schools in Turkey alongside counselling services demonstrates that there is a growing interest in school social work (Aykara, 2011; Gökgöz and Kesgin, 2015; Özbesler & Duyan, 2010; Ozkan and Kılıc, 2014b). However, while social workers and social work academics debate over the practicalities of social workers working in schools for various reasons including new employment opportunities and better education environments, it appears that none have examined counsellors' perceptions about the possible future collaboration with social workers in schools. From our perspective, it is vital to know what and how counsellors think of social workers with regards to a possible future professional partnership. In this sense, our research investigated what counsellors, who were currently working in state schools, knew about social work, particularly in a school setting. The following research questions were formed:

- Do school counsellors think that they know school social work and to what extent?
- Do school counsellors' self-perceptions indicate that they are knowledgeable about social work and social workers in general?
- How do school counsellors think about cooperation with social workers in schools?

Moreover, we also asked some further questions regarding their opinions on the most challenging and prevalent problems that counsellors faced in schools in order to develop a fuller understanding of the school environment in Turkey.

1. Methodology

This study was based on a descriptive survey method. The population of the study was the school counsellors working in the state schools (primary, secondary and upper secondary schools) in Ankara/Turkey. All school counsellors working within 3 provinces of Ankara, namely Altındağ, Çankaya and Yenimahalle were chosen as the target population. These provinces were chosen for two reasons; they represent different levels of socio-economic status of the population and have more schools than other provinces (Ankara Kalkınma Ajansı –ANKA-, 2017). Permissions were granted from Ankara Provincial Directorate of National Education.

1.1. Tools

The survey form is composed of 4 main sections that contain 18 questions in total. The form was developed by the researchers, evaluated by academics and pre-tested by a sample of counsellors who work in state schools and at universities. After they voluntarily answered and evaluated the form, a few minor changes and edits were made before the survey form was finalized. After the changes, the final form was developed and re-evaluated by the researchers and three academics in the field of social work. It was then the survey was finalized.

1.2. Data collection

To start collecting data in the field, a research team consisting of the researchers and volunteer students of social work department was formed. Under supervision, each province was separated into small areas to facilitate the data gathering phase. Each volunteer student chose an area and 10 schools and went to the field after a brief training provided by the researchers. 141 schools in Yenimahalle, 128 schools in Altındağ and 193 schools in Çankaya provinces were contacted. Before conducting the research, team members and researchers contacted the school counsellors in each school via telephone or in person. Data collection was completed by visiting each counsellor and waiting them while they fill out the forms in their workplace. Although, the team members faced some difficulties such as transport to distant schools, counsellors' reluctance to participate and absence of counsellors when researchers arrived, the data gathering was completed in two months with revisits to schools. Considering that not all schools employed full time counsellors at the time

of the research, and some of the counsellors were absent for long period due to maternal leave and other reasons, 295 school counsellors participated in this study.

1.3. Data analysis

Data gathered were coded and analyzed using the statistics program SPSS 21.0. Descriptive statistics, t-test, Chi-square test, one-way ANOVA were used to analyse the data.

2. Findings

Table 1: Demographics

		n	%
Sex	Male	95	33,6
	Female	188	66,4
Age	30 and younger	42	14,6
	31-40	90	31,2
	40 and older	156	54,2
Job Experience	Less than 5 years	45	15,3
	6-10 years	31	10,6
	10 years or more	217	74,1
Education	Bachelor	209	72,1
	Masters	56	19,3
	PhD	25	8,6
School stage	Primary	114	39,4
	Secondary	87	30,1
	Upper secondary school	88	30,4
Degree	Counselling and Guidance	149	69,0
	Psychology	22	10,2
	Sociology	11	5,1
	Philosophy	17	7,9
	Other	17	7,9
Number of counsellors in school	1	67	23,6
	2	135	47,5
	3	60	21,1
	4 or more	22	7,7

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

The sample included more females (188) than males (95) and more than half of the participants (54.2%) were 40 years old or older. 74.1% of participants had more than 10 years of experience in counselling. Participants' education level were overwhelmingly bachelor's degrees, although not all had graduated in counselling and guidance. 31% of participants had degrees in other disciplines such as psychology, sociology and alike. It was significant to note that 47.5% of schools covered in the research had more than two counsellors.

Table 2: Most Challenging School Problems for Counsellors

		n	%
Poverty	Yes	124	42,0
	No	171	58,0
Neighborhood related problems	Yes	120	40,7
	No	175	59,3
Familial problems	Yes	118	40,0
	No	177	60,0
Bullying and violence	Yes	61	20,7
	No	234	79,3

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

When participants were asked “what are the problems that guiding services cannot address adequately?” the most prevalently chosen option was that of poverty. Almost half of the participants (42%) indicated poverty as their professional concern. Closing following this were ‘neighbourhood related problems’, and familial problems with 40,7% and (40%) of participants respectively selecting them as challenging issues they faced. Other significant problems such as academic failure, low motivation, absenteeism and dropout and drug use were not selected by more than 20% of participants as challenging problems.

Table 3: Problems Require Collaboration with Other Professions

		n	%
Familial problems	Yes	124	42,0
	No	171	58,0
Mental Health Problems	Yes	120	40,7
	No	175	59,3
Bullying and violence	Yes	118	40,0
	No	177	60,0
Neighbourhood related problems	Yes	61	20,7
	No	234	79,3
Poverty	Yes	85	28,8
	No	210	71,2

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

One hundred twenty-four participants indicated that in dealing with familial problems they felt the need to collaborate with other professionals. This was followed by mental health, and bullying and violence as problem areas that needs collaboration.

Table 4: Professions to Collaborate with

		n	%
Psychologist	Yes	188	63,7
	No	107	36,3
Psychiatrist	Yes	184	62,4
	No	111	37,6
Social Worker	Yes	169	57,3
	No	126	42,7
Teacher	Yes	120	40,7
	No	175	59,3
Police	Yes	102	34,6
	No	193	65,4

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

When asked “What professions do you think you need to collaborate with when dealing with students’ needs and problems?” psychologists and psychiatrists were primarily chosen, followed then by social workers. For all three professions, more than half of the participants stated that if they needed to, they could obtain support from these three professions more readily than other professionals such as nurses, doctors and other teachers (Please note that participants were allowed to select more than one option for all questions).

Table 5: The institutions and organizations that counsellors have cooperated with in dealing with student problems

	n	%
Guidance and Research Centre	Yes 207	70,2
	No 88	29,8
Special Education Centre	Yes 146	49,5
	No 149	50,5
Hospitals and Other Health Care Institutions	Yes 120	40,7
	No 175	59,3

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

According to the participants’ answers, the most cooperated with institutions are shown in Table 5. Accordingly, Guidance and Research Centres, which mainly serve disabled school aged children and their families, were the most cooperated with institutions. After Guidance and Research Centres, special education centres were chosen most. This suggests that disability is the main cause for cooperation with other institutions. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that, while social problems, familial issues are common problems that counsellors seek help for, disability emerges as the main cause for institutional cooperation. The reasons behind this might be that there are institutional requirements which oblige counsellors to contact and report to guidance and research centres regarding disabled students in their schools. Nevertheless, further evaluations would be useful to reveal whether counsellors’ choices reflected the limited options available in Turkey in terms of institutional cooperation, or simply a lack of motivation/time. Increasing cooperation with other institutions related to social and mental health care such as social work centres could lead to a decrease in problems related to social environment of students and families.

Table 6: Recognition of Social Work Profession and School Social Work

		n	%
1. Recognition of social work and social workers	Very well	95	32,3
	Partially	189	64,3
	None	10	3,4
2. Thought of sharing common grounds in practice	Yes	257	88,0
	No	13	4,5
	No idea	22	7,5
3. Familiarity of social work practices offered in school settings	Yes	111	38,3
	No	107	36,9
	Not sure	72	24,8
4. Probable support from social workers in dealing with student problems	Yes	227	77,5
	No	15	5,1
	Not sure	51	17,4
5. Willing to work with social workers in the future in schools	Yes	221	75,4
	No	21	7,2
	Not sure	51	17,4

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

As indicated in Table 6, participants were asked about how much they knew about social work and social workers. While 64.3% of participants claimed partial knowledge, only 32,3% of participants stated that they knew social work and social workers very well.

Although 64,3% indicated that they had limited understanding of school social work, the vast majority (88%) of counsellors think that there are great similarities between disciplines. Moreover, three quarters of the counsellors reported that they could seek professional support from social workers.

More importantly, 75.4% of participants stated that they have positive attitudes about future social work cooperation in schools.

It was expected that the participants who have other degrees rather than counselling would have stated that they know social work less than counsellors. However, it did not come as expected. There is no statistical difference between them in their familiarity with social work discipline ($p.876$), practices ($p.538$) and will to work with social workers in the future ($0,05 < p.136 > 0,05$).

Table 7. Recognition of Social Work Profession and School Social Work according to Bachelor Degrees

		Recognition of social work and social workers			Total
		Very well	Partially	None	
Bachelor Degrees	Counselling	52	91	6	149
	Other	22	43	2	67

Source: Own elaboration based on the results of the survey

3. Discussion and conclusions

This study's main aim was to uncover the perceptions of counsellors towards possible partnership with social workers in schools. Additionally, the study investigated which problems counsellors reported as the most challenging in schools, and which of these required support from other professionals in their opinions.

The majority of participants in our study were female, have been working more than 10 years in primary schools, and have a bachelor's degree. Almost one third of the participants did not have any relevant qualifications in counselling services, which coupled with the nonexistence of in-service training opportunities for counsellors makes the quality of service questionable. Counsellors who graduated in other disciplines are a contentious issue in professional circles. Those who are not specifically trained to work in schools may decrease the quality and efficiency of counselling services when dealing with specific student problems that requires qualification, specialized education and training in counselling. The problem of specialization and certification of counsellors continues to divide opinion (Doğan, 1996; Yeşilyaprak, 2009).

Findings revealed that poverty, familial problems and neighbourhood related problems were major challenges for counsellors. This corroborates other research (Şimşek and Palancı, 2014) which suggests, problems that the counsellors face are mostly 'social' in nature. The findings clearly show that problems that counsellors struggle most with are the very same problems that are prevalent in Turkish society. This indicates that perhaps these problems could be better addressed with macro and mezzo level policies and interventions.

Traditional training in Turkish counselling courses has been influenced by a Rogerian understanding of therapy, which is individual centered (Doğan, 2000). Counsellors' person or group-oriented approach to problems may have restrained their perspective when multilevel social problems require broader perspective. One of the most outstanding findings of this research was that familial issues were the leading problem that counsellors sought support for (Table 3). Familial issues, especially those that included abuse and neglect, domestic violence, criminal involvement, divorce etc. may be complex and specific cases for school counsellors to handle by themselves (Dagli, 2014). When considered with other student problems such as mental health issues, bullying and/or poverty, it is reasonable that school counsellors might need to collaborate with other human service professionals to approach such problems competently. At this point, a person in environment emphasis of social work profession could play a key role. Özkan and Kılıç (2014a) points out that social work in schools could be a great contribution to the field since family centered approaches are very well practiced and emphasized by social workers.

Although social issues such as poverty and familial problems were flagged by counsellors in the field, when they were asked to identify the professions they would like to work with, they favored psychiatrist and psychologists before social workers. Even though there was no data from other studies to consolidate our interpretation, findings in Table 5 suggest that there could be confusion amongst counsellors regarding the precise nature of social work. Furthermore, it indicates that just as the Turkish public considers social work to be a profession which operates mainly in the spheres of child protection, social solidarity and elderly care (Yazıcı, 2008), this stance could well be shared by our participant school counsellors.

Limitations

Despite collecting data from a relatively large sample, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other counsellors. The city where the research conducted is the capital of Turkey, thus the participants composed of more experienced counsellors. Other regions in Turkey, have younger counsellors due to the point-based appointment system in the ministry of national education. This might have affected the findings. When collecting data, only social work students were in the field as the research team. This may have impacted the participants' answers related to social workers. However, the findings indicate that there is no explicit bias.

Conclusion

This study indicates that the school social work discipline and social workers' roles in educational settings should be clearly established. The results suggest that a multidisciplinary teamwork approach consisting of various helping professions especially psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, could be implemented in school psychosocial services, providing distinct professional roles and relevant training were given. Further research is needed to attain a clearer understanding of counsellors' perceptions regarding teamwork, psychosocial services and school problems. Negative or indecisive attitudes towards school social work should be addressed and the concept of social work/ers in schools must be widely recognized if it is to be practiced in schools alongside school counselling.

It is important that counsellors should familiarize themselves with other helping professions and collaborate with them when needed. School psycho-social service providers should be consolidated with in-service training addressing challenges and advantages of multidisciplinary team work before a possible implementation of multidisciplinary services in the state schools.

Future research on this interdisciplinary area, should include other human helping professionals and reflect both social workers and counsellors' perceptions.

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