

Article

Examination of school counselors' professional competencies within the framework of national occupational standards

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Abstract

In this study, the professional competency levels of school counselors were evaluated within the framework of the National Occupational Standards (NOS). A total of 204 school counselors working in public and private schools under the Ministry of National Education were included in the study using simple random sampling. The research employed quantitative methods, including a descriptive survey model and qualitative analysis; participants were administered a personal information form and a NOS criteria scale. The data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0. No significant differences were found in the NOS criteria based on gender and type of institution. However, significant differences were identified in terms of the field of study and years of service. It was found that the professional competency levels of those with a master's degree were higher compared to those with a bachelor's degree. The research findings revealed that school counselors had low professional competency levels in areas such as the development and evaluation of guidance and counseling programs, the provision of intervention services, and the implementation of developmental activities. Additionally, it was observed that post-graduate education had a positive effect on enhancing professional competencies.

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Introduction

Individuals working in the field of psychological counseling and guidance in schools are referred to as 'school counselors.' School counselors play roles in supporting students' development, maintaining their psychological health, providing developmental interventions, and assisting in personal/social, academic, and vocational areas. For school counselors to successfully fulfill their professional roles and effectively implement and evaluate the school counseling and guidance programs, they must possess adequate professional competence (Bacıoğlu, 2017). Although there are few studies on the professional competencies of school counselors in Turkey, significant research has been conducted in this area. As a result of these studies, Özyürek (2007) demonstrated that the level of self-perceived competence of school counselors in fulfilling their roles and duties has not been sufficiently investigated. Işık Tokmak (2019) emphasized that school counseling and guidance services are not carried out based on a model, and the practices implemented are not standardized. Taytaş (2021) focused

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on professional competency in his study on school counselors. These studies highlight the importance of professional competencies in school counseling while also identifying the need to address the differences that arise when compared to international standards and models. To ensure the professional success of school counselors, their competencies should be evaluated according to established standards, and necessary steps should be taken to ensure their professional competence. Gysbers (2001) argues that in the 21st century, the roles of psychological counseling and guidance departments should be clearly defined within the framework of a program. Globally, the evaluation of school counselors' professional knowledge and skills is carried out considering models such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) model.

In Turkey, there is a need for standards to evaluate the professional knowledge and skills of school counselors. The standards established in the 'School Psychological Counselor Level 7 National Occupational Standards (NOS)', published in the official gazette in 2017, represent a significant step towards the recognition of the professional definition of school counseling and its establishment in the field. It is believed that these standards will be useful in producing evidence-based answers to the question of the extent to which these competencies are actually present in school counselors. With the publication of the National Occupational Standards, it is expected that a standard will be established in the practices related to school counseling services. Moreover, it is anticipated that these standards will play a significant role in training personnel providing counseling and guidance services in a qualified and professionally competent manner. Therefore, it is believed that developing counseling and guidance training programs in alignment with professional competencies and evaluating and defining professional competence in counseling and guidance based on the 'National Occupational Standards' criteria will be beneficial. This study aims to evaluate the professional competence levels of school counselors according to the criteria outlined in the National Occupational Standards.

Method

In this study, a quantitative research method, specifically the descriptive survey model, was used to determine the professional competency level of school counseling within the framework of National Occupational Standards. Subsequently, a qualitative research method was employed to analyze the items of the National Occupational Standards Criteria. A total of 204 school counselors participated in this study, consisting of 47 males (23%) and 157 females (77%), with ages ranging from 22 to 65. The participants were selected using a simple random sampling method. The participants were administered a personal information form and the National Occupational Standards criteria. The collected data were recorded electronically and analyzed using SPSS 22 software.

School Counseling Professional Competency Standards Criteria

In this study, the "Tasks, Processes, and Achievement Criteria" section from the School Counselor Level 7 National Occupational Standards was used as the basis for developing the "Professional Competency Standards Criteria." The National Occupational Standards (NOS) criteria consist of 53 questions. These items are scored with a binary scale: "no = 0, yes = 1," and the scores range from 0 to 53. A score between 0-18 is considered "low level," between 19-

36 is considered “medium level,” and between 37-53 is considered “high level.” Additionally, each item was evaluated separately on its own.

The competencies demonstrated by the items in the National Occupational Standards (NOS) criteria include:

- Developing a school counseling program
- Implementing a basic school counseling training program
- Assisting students in making individual plans for their development
- Providing intervention services
- Offering indirect services to students
- Evaluating the school counseling program
- Improving the quality of counseling services
- Conducting professional development activities

Limitations

The study’s sample group is limited to 204 school counselors working in public and private schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education. This should be noted as it does not represent all school counselors across Turkey.

Findings

The Professional Competency Standards Criteria for school counselors were administered to a total of 204 school counselors, consisting of 47 males (23%) and 157 females (77%). The scores obtained by school counselors on the NOS criteria were analyzed based on their demographic characteristics. To test whether there were significant differences in the scores on the NOS criteria based on demographic characteristics, t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (One Way ANOVA) were applied, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Examination of professional competency standards criteria based on demographic characteristics

N=204		f	%	X	t	p
Gender	Female	157	77,0	42,9574	0,858	,392
	Male	47	23,0	43,9809		
Institution Worked At	Public School	160	78,4	43,6563	0,337	,736
	Private School	44	21,6			
N=204		f	%	X	F	P
Graduated Program	Psychological Counseling and Guidance (PCG)	151	74,0	43,457	,517	,597
	Psychology	35	17,2	44,343		
	Non-related field	18	8,8	45,000		

Years of Service	1-10 years	103	50,5	43,44	2,428	,067
	11-20 years	58	28,4	42,55		
	21-30 years	35	17,2	46,54		
	31 years and above	8	3,9	44,00		
Professional Experience	1991-2000	46	22,6	45,26	2,164	,094
	2001-2010	35	17,2	41,51		
	2011-2020	110	53,9	43,60		
	2021-2024	13	6,4	43,61		
Academic Career	Master's Degree Graduate	45	22,1	46,33	3,814	0,005
	Doctorate Degree Graduate	2	1,0	39,50		
	Master's Degree Student	8	3,9	43,13		
	Doctorate Student	3	1,5	32,67		
	Bachelor's Degree Graduate	146	71,6	43,26		

According to Table 1, no significant differences were observed between male and female participants in terms of NOS criteria ($t=0.858$; $p>0.05$). Additionally, no significant difference was found between participants working in private and public schools in terms of NOS criteria ($t=0.337$; $p>0.05$).

The analysis conducted to determine whether the NOS criteria scores of school counselors differ according to their undergraduate graduation fields showed no significant differences ($F(2-203) = 0.517$; $p>0.05$). When school counselors were grouped according to years of service, no significant differences were found in terms of NOS criteria ($F(3-203) = 2.428$; $p>0.05$). No differences were observed in terms of NOS criteria based on the year of graduation ($F(3-203) = 2.164$, $p>0.05$).

According to Table 1, school counselors' NOS criteria scores varied based on their academic career ($F(4-203) = 3.814$, $p<0.05$). To identify the source of this difference, a Post Hoc Test (LSD) was conducted. The results indicated that participants who were doctoral students ($X=32.67$) had significantly lower NOS criteria scores compared to doctoral graduates ($X=39.50$), bachelor's degree holders ($X=43.26$), master's students ($X=43.13$), and master's graduates ($X=46.33$). However, due to the very small number of doctoral graduates ($N=2$) and doctoral students ($N=3$), the statistical data was considered potentially misleading. When comparing bachelor's degree holders ($X=43.26$) and master's degree holders ($X=46.33$), it was found that those with a master's degree had higher NOS criteria scores.

To determine which areas school counselors need more support in terms of professional competence, the items of the NOS criteria were analyzed. Items for which less than 70% of school counselors demonstrated competence were considered low in terms of professional competence. The items with low professional competence are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of the items of the professional competency standards criteria

Question	Represented Professional Competency	No%	Yes%
MYS12	Developing a school counseling program	30,9	69,1
MYS14	Developing a school counseling program	32,8	67,2
MYS17	Providing intervention services	36,3	63,7
MYS36	Evaluating the school counseling program	36,8	63,2
MYS40	Evaluating the school counseling program	36,8	63,2
MYS41	Evaluating the school counseling program	35,3	64,7
MYS42	Evaluating the school counseling program	30,9	69,1
MYS43	Evaluating the school counseling program	30,9	69,1
MYS50	Conducting professional development activities	44,1	55,9
MYS51	Conducting professional development activities	31,9	68,1
MYS52	Conducting professional development activities	45,1	54,9
MYS53	Conducting professional development activities	38,7	61,3

According to Table 2, low professional competence was identified in the area of “developing a school counseling program,” as represented by questions 12 and 14 of the NOS criteria. Low professional competence was also identified in the area of “providing intervention services,” as represented by question 17. Additionally, low professional competence was found in the area of “evaluating the school counseling program,” as represented by questions 36, 40, 41, 42, and 43. Furthermore, low professional competence was identified in the area of “conducting professional development activities,” as represented by questions 50, 51, 52, and 53.

Discussion

The professional competence levels of school counselors in relation to the National Occupational Standards were analyzed based on demographic characteristics, specifically how they perceive their professional adequacy. No significant difference was found in the professional competence levels of school counselors based on gender and the type of institution in which they work. In a similar study, Taytaş (2021) indicated that perceptions of competence did not differ according to gender and institution type. This finding suggests that school counselors working in both public and private schools likely receive similar in-service training and undertake similar roles. In previous studies, Özgün (2007) found no significant differences in competency expectations among counselors based on their field of graduation. Similarly, Bıçak (2006) found no significant differences between the departments of graduates regarding the level of task performance.

Our study also showed no significant differences in the professional competence levels based on the educational program graduates, which aligns with these previous studies. As professional seniority increases, it is generally assumed that experience and professional competence would also increase. However, in the present study, it was found that the highest level of professional competence was among those with 21-30 years of seniority, while the lowest level of competence was observed among those with 11-20 years of seniority. No significant differences in professional competence were found based on seniority. Taytaş (2021) demonstrated that competence perception did not vary according to seniority. Similarly, Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk (2007) found that years of experience did not influence competence. These findings suggest that both newly inexperienced school counselors may feel professionally inadequate, as well as those with considerable professional experience who still perceive themselves as lacking in competence.

The professional competence levels of school counselors were also examined in terms of academic career. However, the number of school counselors with a doctorate (N=2) or those enrolled in a doctoral program (N=3) was too small to be considered for analysis, as it might lead to misleading conclusions. The study found that those with a master's degree had higher professional competence levels compared to those with a bachelor's degree. Similarly, Larson, Suzuki, Gillespie, Potenza, Bechtel, and Toulouse (1992) found that as the education level of counselors increased, their expectations of competence also significantly increased. In their studies, Yılmaz and Atay (2023) found that although school counselors valued professional skills, they perceived themselves as having lower professional competence based on the national occupational standards checklist. They emphasized the need for competence-based undergraduate and in-service training. Bengisoy and Özdemir (2019) also highlighted that undergraduate and in-service training in psychological counseling were insufficient. Other studies conducted in Turkey (Çetinkaya-Yıldız, 2019; Çokamay et al., 2017; Gürkan, 2020; Tuzgöl-Dost and Keklik, 2012) indicated that one of the problems faced by school counselors was the lack of effective undergraduate education.

In our study, it was found that more than 70% of participants scored low in terms of professional competence according to UMS standards in questions 12 and 14, which represent "developing school counseling programs." This indicates that the professional competence in this area is low. In the guidance and psychological counseling undergraduate program published by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) in 2018, the "PDR Program Development" course is included as a 2-credit elective course in the 7th semester of undergraduate education. According to UMS standards, school counselors need more training in "Psychological Counseling and Guidance Program Development." It is suggested that this area should receive more emphasis in undergraduate education, the credit for the course should be increased, and in-service training should continue after graduation to support professional development.

The study also found low professional competence in the area of "providing intervention services," represented by question 17 in the UMS standards. Similarly, Tuzgöl-Dost and Keklik (2012) found that school counselors were inadequate in trauma and crisis intervention. In the guidance and psychological counseling undergraduate program published by CoHE, this topic is covered as an elective under the "Crisis Intervention" heading, meaning that not all students can take the course. It is suggested that this course should be made mandatory for all students and supported by in-service training programs after graduation. In line with this, Paisley and Borders (1995) argue that school counselors need supervision services to support them in dealing with diverse student issues and special cases. In our study, low professional competence was also found in the area of "evaluating school counseling programs," represented by questions 36, 40, 41, 42, and 43 in the UMS standards. Bengisoy and Özdemir (2019) found that psychological counselors reported inadequate in-service training programs on psychological tests and measurement tools, indicating a lack of skills and knowledge in these areas. Furthermore, low professional competence was found in the area of "conducting professional development activities," represented by questions 50, 51, 52, and 53 in the UMS standards. Tuzgöl-Dost and Keklik (2012) found that school counselors felt inadequate in the areas of scientific research/statistics. It is suggested that efforts should be made to enhance the professional development perception of school counselors and find ways to help them follow current scientific research and improve their professional development.

When considering the areas with low professional competence, it is apparent that there is a need for standardizing PDR programs, adjusting undergraduate programs to address gaps and needs in the field, increasing internships, supervision, and practice in counseling and psychological services, and ensuring that academics focus on improving these areas in their professional development. Bengisoy and Özdemir (2019) noted that a gap between education and practice in PDR undergraduate programs contributes to low professional competence in these areas, and they emphasized the need for adjustments to undergraduate education based on the needs and shortcomings. Burkard et al. (2012) also highlighted the skill gap in the professional tasks of school counselors and emphasized the need for further training.

Conclusion and Implications

When analyzing the items of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) criteria, it was found that school counselors had low professional competence levels in areas such as developing psychological counseling and guidance programs, providing intervention services, conducting development activities, and evaluating school counseling programs. It was also observed that professional competence could be enhanced through post-graduate education. It is suggested that more emphasis should be placed on these areas in undergraduate education and in-service training programs, with the necessary importance given to improving professional competence in these areas. Similar to professional standardization programs used in some countries, such as the ASCA National Model and CACREP, it is important to integrate the National Occupational Standards into the school counseling profession in Turkey, and to develop the necessary training programs to elevate the professional competence to the highest level. There is a need for further research on National Occupational Standards. This study can be compared with studies such as the ASCA National Model and CACREP, and applying it with a larger sample size could yield more definitive results.

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