



Research Article

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Exploring International School Counsellors' Experiences During the Pandemic.

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Abstract

The unprecedented presence of Covid – 19 generated critical changes internationally in many areas. Education was impacted with growing concerns. While international school counselling is a field that is under researched, Covid – 19 acted as a critical incident, and created the need to understand better the international school counsellors’ practice. This Institution – focused study (IFS) investigated the international school counsellors’ experiences and views during their practice in the Covid-19 pandemic; it also explored their responses, their interventions to support the community, and their own personal coping mechanisms. The study found that international school counsellors activated and modified existing protocols, created new interventions, and produced coping mechanisms to support the community and balance themselves personally and professionally. The study also presented the criticality of Covid – 19 and how it brought professional and personal disturbances for the participants while it signified the need for focused reflection upon the changes in practice, roles, and the need to rethink their professional identity. Findings suggested that new implications in the international school counsellors’ practice surfaced requiring a more focused future research.

Keywords: COVID – 19, international school counselling, crisis, protocols, critical incidents, identity, role

Introduction

The fact that Covid-19 was declared as a Crisis of International concern literally set off the terminology of crisis to be reviewed, which is the experience of a situation that entails challenges that cannot easily be tolerated and is beyond some people’s mechanisms (James & Gilliland, 2001). All stakeholders have been called to respond to this event, but the duration and implications of the pandemic have brought fear and uncertainty globally. In education, school closures had many forms, as they have been using hybrid, online or blended mode throughout the world with many consequences.

WHO (2020) reports that this new phenomenon has both short and long-term impacts on people’s psychosocial and mental health. Thus, crisis protocols were activated by schools, and mental health professionals were called to respond for support in the face of this pandemic. School counsellors are the specialized members of the schools that recognize solutions and strategies for academic and psychological success (NASP, 2014) while providing services (Nickerson & Zhe, 2004).

International school communities had similar responses as they employ school counsellors for the above reasons as well but due to multicultural transitions, unique characteristics of the host country, natural disasters, and political or safety concerns, these schools' communities face more discomfort, or frustration as they are of multiple ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. During the lockdowns many of these people were far from families and dear ones or have even lost loved ones and did not have access to cultural rituals (Greenlees, 2006).

Therefore, in such a context, the understanding of the school counsellor's role in international schools is very important.

Background

School counsellors' role has been subject of discussion in the literature of school psychology and crisis management, with little reference to international school counsellors (Dudley, 1995; Wittmer, 2000). Savva (2015) mentions that defining international schools is not easily done since there are many types in many countries. Historically, the initial aim of the international schools was to provide with generalized education to expatriate children (diplomats, military families, UN), to local students that have the financial resources to pay for those services and to scholarship students to a smaller extent (Savva, 2015). When critical incidents take place, discomfort could look different into those contexts due to the unique conditions.

International school counsellors are certified or licensed as school counsellors or psychologists and work internationally while implementing a counselling programme with the goal to support the students (ISCA, 2011) through a range of responsibilities: individual and group counselling, family support, social and emotional curriculums, referrals to external providers always bound to specific context of course (Lewis et al., 2020).

Schools play a crucial role in students' cognitive, social, and emotional development and school counsellors and school psychologists are the ones according to many professional bodies (ASCA, 2009; ISCA 2011; NASP, 2010) that provide and apply interventions within crises such as debriefing, psychological first aid, provision of a safe emotionally environment and make use of the crisis theory in terms of providing the intervention services. When a crisis takes, the whole school community is challenged and therefore frameworks have been built towards crisis management and intervention (Brock, 2011) with the aim to reduce the disequilibrium and the stress experienced.

During Covid - 19, difficulties have been observed as the changes were of great magnitude in various domains and has upended the lives of students, staff, and families. It has significantly raised the mental health concerns (Sheasley, 2021) and created rapid disturbances in global, institutional, and individual levels.

This study seeks to explore international school counsellors' experiences during Covid – 19 and how this multi-layered critical incident has brought changes or turning points.

Theoretical Framework

To answer questions about the experiences of the international school counsellors during the current pandemic and to see their responses or the changes in their professional roles, two theories were utilized: professional identity theories, and the role theory.

Professional identity is being discussed due to the uniqueness of the role of a school counsellor and the fact that is a conjoint role that of practicing counselling in the educational context.

Role theory has been used extensively by researchers to provide frameworks about action within a context, since roles are social positions that are aligned to professional identities. In the effort to align changes in professional roles and identities within a crisis, critical professional incidents are also examined.

Professional Identity

According to Biddle (1986) social positions are positions held by individuals that share an identity. Erikson (1968) used the term identity to discuss self-awareness and self- identification while others have approached identity simple as the tool to approach self in social situations (Gross & Stone, 1964; Klapp, 1969). Biddle differentiates identity into 4 ways: identities based on clarity, identities within a social context, identities that apply to a single person and identities that refer to social positions within a social structure.

Upton (2012) refers to professional identity as a belief that is related to a chosen profession and provides clarity to the framework of practice, a construct that is dynamic. Amott suggests (2018) professional identity is unstable and constructed within the social structure and is interpreted personally as well, as multiple identities can be formed at the same time (Davey, 2013). More specifically, the professional identity of a school counsellor is a construct that entails personal attributes combined with professional training (Moss et al., 2014).

Previous studies have highlighted this relationship but only one by Maor & Hemi (2021) discusses the relationship of professional identity and burnout in the practice of school counselling. 205 counsellors participated in the study through an online questionnaire. The results showed that stress factors were linked positively to burnout while professional identity was correlated in a negative way with all burnout factors.

Non counselling roles were perceived as more stressful whereas deterioration of personal life was pointed out as a finding but in counsellors with highly developed professional identity, there was high correlation between role stress and burnout. An explanation could be that school counsellors who have a strong professional identity, perceive their job as a mission and are particularly effective. So, role stress is correlated with professional identity positively while burnout is not, and role stress occurs when a particular misalignment takes place and creates disturbance (Coll and Freeman, 1997). There is an ongoing debate about focusing on the 'school' part of the profession or the 'counselling' part.

The school counsellor's job involves a variety of responsibilities in the context of education. DeKruyf, Auger & Black (2017) argue and support a multifaceted identity of the one of the educational leaders and the mental health professional giving emphasis to the facet of the mental health professional but embracing the one of the educational leaders. The need to solidify a professional identity is crucial because of the developmental and unmet needs of the students that research shows. Only in the US a 20% of children struggle with their mental health (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013) and currently in the pandemic the percentages are constantly increasing (Panchal et al., 2021).

The school counsellors besides working with students in terms of being responsive to daily problems that are of complex nature, also work with developmental and situational crises in a facilitative and non – judgemental approach. The development of job descriptions, clarifications of professional roles, development of programmes and protocols, affiliating with professional bodies have been recognized as reinforcers of professional identity (Webber & Mascari, 2006). Nastasi (2000) underlines the need of change and redefining the scope and practice of professional identity. Two areas have been characterized as salient: the identity of counselling as a profession as it interacts with education and the development of individuals' professional counsellor identities (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Hunt & Nichols, 2011, Gale & Austin, 2003).

This study situated in the international context approaching international school counsellors amid the pandemic that surfaces specific facets of the counselling practice, uses their experience in the current situation to investigate through self – report their identity, and roles.

Role Theory

Biddle (1986) suggests that roles are integrated into identities through the social positions and are distributed within role expectations and standards. Role theory is widely used to describe professional behaviours within a specific context (Bidwell, 2001). According to this theory, role stress is the stress that employees experience during their practice (Khetarpal & Kochar, 2006) and it occurs when conflict takes place between expectations and responsibilities. It is also observed among health care and mental health providers (Acker & Lawrence, 2009; Sun et al., 2016; Holman et al., 2019).

Three traits have been identified as being significant contributions to stress: role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001) and are all influenced by role stress. Role conflict takes place whenever the individual faces multiple but opposing responsibilities. Role ambiguity is when responsibilities are vague, and role overload is when resources and time are limited to complete the role. School counsellors face varied responsibilities (Baker et al., 2021) as they promote students' academic, social – emotional and career development and are key players in crises intervention (Chandler et al., 2018) but numerous of times they face role ambiguity.

Zyromski et al., (2018) say that roles are context bound and the understanding of the specific responsibilities are influenced by the environment. This is particularly true in the international context since it is a different culturally context within a different country in a small multicultural community. Therefore, school counsellors are affected by stress especially during crises since they are required to support the students, the families, and staff (McCarthy et al., 2010; Mullen & Crowe, 2018). This is elevated in the international context since the families and the staff cannot always be supported by external providers due to for example language or culture barriers.

A significant study that was published in 2021 during the current pandemic by Romer et al. explored the experiences of school counsellors in the US working in public schools. The findings concluded that: school counsellors struggled to enact roles during the pandemic; they reported a lack of support from administration but had the skills to adapt to the needs and realized different roles they had to take upon (create digital platforms to support students, families, and staff, seek resources from professional bodies). They also reported that they adapted effectively to all organizational constraints to fulfil their roles, while shifts took place in terms of timings since the hours working were increased. The types of services they had to provide altered while they found ways to embrace autonomy.

Covid-19 has created rapid shifts in education with great concerns about students' general well-being which suggests that school counsellors' presence is needed more than ever. Research that emerged in 2020 (Kraft & Simon) capturing educators' experiences, demonstrated significant changes and shifts in education, such as large drop in teachers' sense of success, shift to online learning, lack of confidence in managing their responsibilities while online teaching, and elevation of stress levels. There is currently limited research about school counsellors' experiences and their ability to support students during the pandemic (ASCA, 2020; Strear et al., 2020) and therefore, this study will contribute to more research for the post pandemic world in terms of school counselling and their role to support.

Critical Professional Incidents

During the pandemic, crisis appeared in many domains and evidently brought beleaguered events in professional lives too. Cunningham (2008) talks about events in our professional life that can create a disturbance in the professional equilibrium.

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Tripp illustrates this by saying: “Critical incidents are produced by the way we look at situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of the event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of that judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident”. (Tripp, 1993:8)

Situational critical events are sudden therefore require a form of unpreparedness. Cunningham (2008) argues that the same conditions stand for critical professional events and defines that a critical incident in professional life brings disturbance in: understanding principles, effective practice and the following period will entail focused reflection (p. 166).

Series of events can take place without warning in the professional context in many ways and themes that are multileveled: emotional effects, drastic redirection of professional practice, downshifting or elevation to a position, career change, shifts, new professional learning (Cunningham, 2008).

In summary, there is extensive literature on the role of counsellors and psychologists in general but there is a paucity of literature addressing the experiences of international school counsellors (Holcomb – McCoy et al., 2004).

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the international school counsellors’ experiences during the COVID – 19 pandemic and add to the discourse about international school counsellors. More specifically, the research questions were the following:

Research Question **1**: What were the experiences of international school counsellors during the Covid – 19 pandemic?

Research Question **2**: How did the international school counsellors respond to support the community and adapt to the pandemic and how do they feel they have coped?

Research Question **3**: How did ISCs (international school counsellors) roles change during the pandemic?

Research Question **4**: What were the effects of the pandemic on ISCs professional identities?

The current is a small, flexible study, employing both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods but using qualitative analysis approaches due to its descriptive and explorative nature. The questions are exploratory and clearly reflect the constructivist focus on the process and the counsellors’ interpretations.

The study focuses on the participants' views and experiences, that attribute to it flexibility. Besides the constructivist approach, a critical qualitative research design can be built as Ravitch & Carl would suggest (2016). This constructivist lens entails the critical practices the researchers employ and can distinguish and interpret through the participants' sayings. From a psychological perspective, the current study builds on the participants' garnered insights from previous experiences involving other types of crisis research but also what kind of changes have taken place in terms of their roles and professional identities.

Initially, quantitative data were collected using a web-based questionnaire. The participants' emails were evident on the schools' website and were invited with an extensive explanation to participate in the study by email. Out of 18 international schools, 14 school counsellors' emails were evident on the websites. Out of these 14 school counsellors, ten were chosen based on their school location since an aim was to cover all continents besides Oceania and based on which schools were residential.

The web-based questionnaire involved closed ended questions designed based on exogenous and endogenous variables demographics identified through the literature in order to reduce the time in the semi-structured interview and provide a quantitative description of the population (Creswell, 2014).

Some questions had an "other" category and there were no compulsory questions but all participants answered all questions. All the ten participants that had agreed to participate completed the web-based questionnaire.

More in-depth exploration took place through qualitative data collection after a pilot interview prior to the interviews that provided significant information towards improvement. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted online over a period of five months. The questions were divided into sections based on the reconstruction method (Seidman, 2013), as it can be helpful during interviews to reckon past experiences and thus reinforce the social constructivist stance. The specific fieldwork was conducted within a multicultural context and the entire process took place during the pandemic with different circumstances for each participant. Based on the research questions, the method should mirror a picture of the phenomenon that was to be explored and therefore a criticality to the lens was intended. For reliability and validity mitigation a critical and non-generalized view was adopted without a hypothesis, but by deducing and inducing. As Peat et al. note (2017) extra care was given to sensitivity and transparency in the noting.

Analysis

The data were analysed through the approach of thematic analysis (Robson, 2011) and can provide a flexible approach in the qualitative data analysis which can be complex and nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003).The hybrid approach to thematic analysis (Swain, 2018) was used since it provided a systematic yet flexible process.

PHASES	DESCRIPTION
1. Transcribing	Stage 1 Preparation of codes Stage 2 Creation of A Priori Codes Stage 3 Familiarization with data
2. Initial Coding	Stage 4 A Priori and A Posteriori Coding Stage 5 Add information from interview
3. Collapsing of codes	Stage 6 Cut and Paste Interview Text Stage 7 Collapse codes

Table 1

Findings

Based on the qualitative analysis data, the findings below are organized based on the themes. Three main themes were surfaced: preparation, experiences, changes.

Preparation refers to the knowledge of crisis protocols and systems, preparedness, prior experience, or training and generally their response.

More specifically, eight out of the 10 international school counsellors in the study remarked that they had dedicated response teams and the administration was taking the lead in creating the emergency protocols while all of them also mentioned prior training in crisis management. Three out of the 10 counsellors talked more specifically about their emergency protocols, the safeguard systems they created in terms of online services and a whole pastoral system that was there to support the students holistically. Four of the interviewees discussed that the in-place protocols all had to be modified for online support to function effectively. It was evident from all the participants that counselling structures were in place in terms of providing support during crisis.

They were familiar with existing protocols and activated them but as they reflected, new ways of focusing and evaluating were needed in terms of the move to hybrid and online learning, online counselling, and in terms of the level of disruption in everyone’s life.

Experiences refer to interventions and coping skills. All 10 participants discussed Covid – 19 in terms of being a significant situational crisis and mostly as an uncontrollable occurrence that affected many layers of everyday life (James & Gilliland, 2001). The participants talked about their perception of the pandemic, its arrival, its outcomes, and their level of preparedness.

More specifically, the participants discussed the professional interventions they used to support each community, but also the coping skills they activated to endure and cope personally with the situation.

After describing the situation and how their work was affected, all 10 counsellors described the specific interventions that they used to support the students, the parents, and the staff. All of them used several intervention strategies (as shown in table 2). It seems that the most frequent used, by all 10, were the online sessions with students through different platforms that were either individual or group.

Interventions	Number of participants	Delivery mode	Audience	Frequency
Conversion of safeguarding protocols	5	Online	students	Twice during the 1 st year of lockdown
Sessions	10	Online	Students Parents Staff	Daily with students Weekly and biweekly with parents and staff
Review meetings with team and task distribution	5	F2f and online	counsellors	daily
Workshops for parents	5	online	parents	weekly
Workshops for staff	6	online	staff	weekly
Newsletters	3	online	parents	weekly
Messages	3	online	Students and parent	weekly
Websites	2	online	Students, staff, and parents	daily
Check ins (coffees)	4	online	Staff and students	Weekly for staff, daily for students
Peer programmes	3	online and f2f	students	daily
Social and emotional curriculum	2	online	students	daily
Signal account	1	online	students	daily
Video distribution or presentations	4	online	Students, parents	weekly
Data analysis	7	online	Students, staff, parents	monthly

Table 2

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In terms of coping mechanisms, all 10 counsellors recognised their coping skills that helped them keep themselves balanced and be able to continue to support the community.

The main coping strategies these counsellors drew on were self - reflection, interconnectedness, sense of control and managing disappointment and uncertainty, hobbies, family support, practice of empathy and gratitude, and sense of self-care which again aligns with APA's suggestions on self- care (2010). All except managing disappointment and uncertainty, showing empathy and gratitude, aligned with Rutter's strategies. Of course, managing disappointment and uncertainty could be considered part of psychological hardiness while empathy and gratitude were not specifically mentioned by Rutter (2012).

Interestingly, all 10 referred to interconnectedness (family and peer relationships) as a coping mechanism during adversities.

As shown on the table below (Table 3), personal, social, and professional coping strategies were activated. All participants talked about a fundamental coping strategy that lays in the social and professional domain, that of interconnectedness and relationships with team while 7 of them mentioned the professional networking and its effectiveness. Practicing of self-care and self-reflection were two personal coping strategies that were also mentioned by 7 and 5 counsellors, respectively. Hobbies and creative pursuits were used by 4 participants as a coping strategy. They all discussed about the reinforcement of their counselling skills to be practised inside out, such as managing disappointment, sense of control, practising gratitude or mindfulness, analysing the situation or the interpretation, but interconnectedness with professional networks, their team, and their family (if that was a possibility) along with their reflexivity seem to be as the most effective strategies they used. The practice of a Cosmos perspective and the careful look at the community seem new but it also seems reasonable for a counsellor to activate strategies like these. Counsellors are trained to reflect and provide with strategies, and I expected especially from international school counsellors to activate strategies as the above, but it is still incredibly positive to see how these participants found the capacity to do it in terms of their individual challenges and be able to support the community. The pandemic has seemingly created individual crises not crisis in counselling.

All the participants in this study talked about at least one regulatory strategy, while 6 of them discussed about interpreting the current pandemic and its outcomes.

It is strikingly evident from the participants' answers that they activated the trait of flexibility to respond to their professional and personal needs. They all mentioned re - evaluating the situation and choosing the right strategies for the community, but also for themselves. Altogether, the counsellors in this study drew different coping strategies during the pandemic, the majority of which were used personally and socially. The three most frequent used were practicing interconnectedness socially and professionally, developing a self - care plan and in general the focused reflection that entailed analysis of situation, managing self - control and personal reflexivity.

Coping strategies	Number of participants	Type of coping strategy
Interconnectedness and relationships with team	10	Social and professional
Professional networking	7	Social and professional
Hobbies and creative pursuits	4	Personal
Self - care	7	Personal
Sense of control over life	5	Personal and social
Sense – reflection and personal reflexivity	5	Personal
Interpretation of situation and circumstances	5	Personal, social, and professional
Sense of community	4	Social
Ways to manage uncertainty and disappointment	1	Personal
Practice of gratitude	2	Personal
Practice of mindfulness	3	Personal
Practice of empathy and cosmos perspective	2	Personal

Table 3

Changes

The third theme refers to the changes in roles and professional identities.

The International school counsellors reflected on the obstacles they faced and the experiences they had as they had to carry out their responsibilities. All 10 participants referred to role shifts, changes to their focus, extra responsibilities they had to take on, new organizational needs or skills they had to acquire, initiatives they had to take on, and all reflected on the different and new facets of their roles. More specifically, all 10 referred to the quality of counselling services, the ways to access counselling services and what it meant to be a counsellor.

Romer et al. (2021) found evidence about changes in counsellors' roles, the struggles they were going through during the pandemic to enact their previous role, and that some policies prohibited their work, However, they also found that counsellors adapted and were able to exercise their newly found autonomy. These align with the findings of this study except the findings about policies, which, in contrast, were redefined in the international schools to meet the safety and support standards. This seems reasonable since international schools are autonomous entities that build their own emergency structures and do not follow only governmental policies.

The participants of study clearly stated that the shift in role was a decision stemming from the circumstances after evaluation. The role overload was mentioned as not being particularly unusual for counsellors in their position but because of the total change of focus they had to adapt organizational and educational procedures and enact new skills to be able to fulfill their roles.

Table 4 summarizes the main changes in their professional roles. Most counsellors seem to have had to make many changes to their roles. The counsellors perceived that they experienced changes in the following areas: the means of counselling services, referring not only to the online component but also to the fact that the services did not involve only individual sessions anymore as they had to find resourceful ways to access students.

They also reported adaptability in educational practices, which means that they had to access ways through timetables, curriculums, peer programs, and presentations. They mentioned the change in the focus as they did not focus only on students and did not spend the same time with students, but they tried to support the community, engaging with families and staff, whereas parents and staff were also supported in daily basis to provide with those tools to be able to support their children at home and the staff to endure the difficulties. Participants faced more administrative and organizational responsibilities to adapt to newly found struggles into their time (e.g., creation or conversion of documents or policies, finding ways to support residential children that were not able to leave and liaise with officials and parents). The autonomy and initiative were embraced by the counsellors as this situation was completely new, they took initiative, collaborated with their networks, and tried to find ways to carry out their roles. Finally, they emphasized the challenges to enact new skills as they had never used those skills before, and their own personal circumstances only added to the challenges.

More specifically, and as illustrated in Table 4, all 10 participants had to change their way of providing counselling services in terms of the means for students to access them and the means to provide counselling. All 10 had to take on more administrative responsibilities and 7 discussed a shift in their focus as well (e.g., the most common clientele would be the parents, the staff, and the class, rather than individual students). Five counsellors perceived the enactment of these new skills as a challenge, and they faced barriers. Adaptability to educational procedures was a common change as well for all 10 participants, as counselling in its prior form was limited. When everything was online students had limited access to personal counselling services due to multiple reasons: younger students do not easily engage with online counselling, adolescents would not easily communicate with counsellor or disclose so freely online, the online form of counselling needed to be under safeguarding protection, therefore counsellors adapted to more educational procedures (social and emotional curriculum, mental health

topics online, presentations, group calls and other).counsellors adapted to more educational procedures (social and emotional curriculum, mental health topics online, presentations, group calls and other).

Changes in Roles	Number of participants
More administrative and organizational responsibilities	10
Adaptability to educational procedures	9
Challenges in enacting new skills	5
Autonomy and initiative	10
Change in focus	7
Change in the means of counselling	10

Table 4

The participants referred to changes in their professional counselling roles and they also referred to changes in their professional identities. They talked about their counselling practice being in place and acting as mental health professionals, but they also had to shift roles and include more educational practices to have more accessible strategies for the students, families, and staff. This finding aligns with the international school counsellors’ response about the nature of the current crisis, as not one in counselling but in its ways of practicing counselling. They all discussed a crisis in education that entailed many levels in terms of a crisis at an individual, community, and global level. Three aspects of a school counsellor’s identity surfaced: (1) the foundation of a mental health professional that also required an expansion to their practice (collaborative and interdisciplinary practice, the application of methodologies and tools as in the use of social science methods qualitatively and quantitatively within the context of education as an action researcher and an ethnographer (Nastasi, 2000), the creation and provision of educational material for students to access well-being); (2) a conjoint identity that includes the roles of both educational leader and mental health professional; and (3) a multi – faceted identity (through the adaptation of integrated roles like specialist, diagnostician, advocate, evaluator, and program developer) that entails innovative practices to promote the well- being of the students and families. All 10 participants discussed the crisis in education and changes of a personal, social, and professional nature.

Table 5 summarizes the changes in counsellors’ professional identities as perceived by them. All the participants referred to a conjoint professional identity, that of a mental health professional and of the educational leader.

DeKruff et al. (ASCA, 2013) talk about the professional identity of school counsellors and how it has evolved over time. They specifically trace this identity historically and suggest that it is time to conjoint this identity through the roles of the school counsellor as an educational leader and the roles of the mental health professional. They also mention that the periodic shifts that have occurred in this profession have often had a lack of consensus and have been affected by geographical context as in the US the school counsellor is recognized more as an educator and, in the UK, or Europe, more as a mental health professional (ISCA, 2011; DeKruyf et al., 2013).

In this study, all the participants recognized that they needed to adapt and use more educational practices to access students and offer services, while they discussed a variety of facets that their professional identity included, e.g., collaborating with interdisciplinarity, practicing psychology, researching and collecting data, being knowledgeable about educational practices, and being an expert in mental health while integrating roles (e.g. change agent, specialist in mental health, creating systems and structures, developing programs, evaluating). 9 counsellors experienced adaptability to educational practices and 10 experienced taking on more administrative and organizational responsibilities.

These roles construct a conjoint professional identity of a mental health professional and an educational leader. Similarly, all 10 participants discussed changes in the means of counselling, which shows a foundation of their professional identity as a mental health professional and how they tried to act upon this identity (through autonomy, initiative and enacting new skills). A multi-faceted professional identity was constructed, which is shown by the change in focus (7 participants), the adaptability to educational practices (9 participants), a change to more administrative responsibilities (10 participants), the enactment of new skills (5 participants) and having and showing greater autonomy and initiative (10 participants). They integrated roles and they applied an interdisciplinary perspective in multiple contexts (family context, educational context, community context, taking account all circumstances).

This aligns with the suggestion by Nastasi (2019) that the 21st century school counsellor and psychologist has a multi-faceted professional identity.

There is growing literature about professional identity, identity transformation and identity dissonance, but little about how this applied to international school counsellors. Amott (2018) conceptualizes a professional identity as being dynamically changing and unstable and shaped within a social context. International school counsellors practice in diverse social contexts and they also interpret their perception of self diversely and purpose. This is an alignment with Davey's (2013) definition of professional identity being not singular but unstable, dynamic, and overlapping. These counsellors were practicing in diverse social contexts, in the middle of the pandemic, trying to enact their role as efficiently as possible. That involved the activation of different facets and continually reconstructing the self.

Professional Identities

1. Foundation of mentalhealth professional role
1. Conjoint of professional identity (mental health professional and educationalleader)
1. Multi-faceted professional identity

Table 5

The changes in roles and professional identities were an outcome of a sudden event that had many facets bringing Cunnigham's (2008) critical incident in professional life appl in this situation. Covid - 19 was a critical professional incident for the international school counsellors. It brought disturbance and focused reflection. It entailed changes, new responsibilities, and shifts that led to constructing a more conjoint, multi-faceted professional identity.

Limitations

This study had limitations that have to be noted down:

It was a small-scale study that took place online amid the pandemic, therefore although the sample was of cultural, gender and age diversity was small. It also took place online and during difficult times for all the counsellors. Although there were studies about school counsellors, there are not many about international school counsellors that are dedicated to exploring their experiences. Furthermore,

Discussion

Romer et al. (2021) reveal that school counsellors in the US have been, and continue to be, essential in creating a holistic support to the school community before, during, and after the pandemic. A main contribution of this study has been to highlight the profound impact of the pandemic on school counsellors' practice in the specific setting of international schools where the social and cultural context is characterized by a wide diversity of learners, personnel, and clientele, including the complex circumstances of each country they practice in with each individual interacting, and making sense of their self professionally and personally and how is this portrayed in their role and professional identity.

In this study, international school counsellors eloquently reflected on their struggles and verbalized that they stood back and reflected on what they had been doing. However, although there is no known study about international school counsellors, they appear to have been particularly overloaded with personal and social struggles which are an outcome of living internationally away from family or familiar context.

This study offers a greater understanding of international school counsellors' practice, how they responded to the pandemic, and what its effect has been on their professional identities. Amott (2018) argues that the incorporation of focused reflection can be particularly helpful and as Vasquez (2008) also maintain, the exploration of "self" can clarify situations, roles, and maybe trigger processes of identification. This study contributes evidence to the above, as the participants explored "self" through the focused observation of the situation, its re- evaluation, the clarification of the changes in their practice. Finally, through overviewing the situation holistically, they provided the community with arrangements and interventions.

The findings are based on the participants' own words. Covid – 19 was a life changing event throughout the globe for many individuals. For the participants of this study, it was a critical incident of professional and personal disturbance that required focused reflection and interpretation.

Coping with relocations, losses, and overwhelming educational content seemed a reality for international school counsellors before, and currently dealing with the challenges the pandemic has brought has meant that the struggles are continuing.

A key topic highlighted in the current study was the international school counsellors' encounters with a series of unique circumstances and professional challenges, and to find out their ways of coping with the changes they experienced in their professional identities. These findings call for more research and a better understanding of international school counsellors' practice. More importantly, this study has highlighted that the concept of a critical incident (in this case Covid – 19) has shown the potential for the participants to explore and introduce new methods, tools, ways, solutions, and determine the positive changes, despite the disequilibrium and unsettling feeling personally and professionally.

It has also brought a sense of reviewing and decontextualizing those difficult events and what they mean professionally and personally. Furthermore, they can also bring significant advancements to the quality of their practice and this critical professional incident can, as Cunningham (2008) argues, be a turning point professionally after the period of focused reflection.

This study can stand as an argument for urgently reviewing international school counsellors' practices, what resources are given to them, what support needs to be professionally and personally provided to them. There is also a need for more research to critically evaluate and provide counsellors with more equipment and resources for the future.

Counsellors used reflection and immediately modified protocols, strategies, found new ways to support and went directly into support enactment. Now using reflexivity will help see the bigger picture of professional identity, what it actually means to be a mental health provider within education, look more closely to how collaboration and interdisciplinary practices can lead improved practice, proactivity in social and educational context, and deeper self – understanding.

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