The Professional Experience of School Counseling Graduates in Lebanon: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Graduate counseling programs in Lebanon struggle to attract enough students, raising concerns about the sustainability of this field of education and the availability of professional school counselors in the future. Despite this fact, few studies have addressed the challenges faced by graduates of this program.

This qualitative, descriptive, phenomenological study explores the perceptions and professional experience of graduates of the school counseling program from the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University. Through semi-structured and focus group interviews, the study investigates graduates' motivations for entering the program in the first place, examines the causes behind the shortage of school counselors in Lebanese schools, and identifies strategies for improving recruitment and retention in the field.

The findings of this study are meant to improve school counseling programs and guide their educational policy and practice. The study aims to promote positive social change by raising awareness of the importance of school counseling and supporting efforts to strengthen the profession in Lebanon.

Résumé

Les programmes de formation en conseil scolaire au Liban peinent à attirer suffisamment d'étudiants, soulevant des inquiétudes quant à la pérennité de ce domaine d'éducation et à la disponibilité future de conseillers scolaires professionnels. Malgré ce constat, peu d'études se sont penchées sur les défis rencontrés par les diplômés de ces programmes.

Cette étude qualitative, descriptive et phénoménologique explore les perceptions et l'expérience professionnelle des diplômés du programme de conseil scolaire de la Faculté de Pédagogie de l'Université Libanaise. À travers des entretiens semi-structurés et des groupes de discussion, l'étude examine les motivations des diplômés à intégrer le programme initialement, analyse les causes du manque de conseillers scolaires dans les écoles libanaises et identifie des stratégies pour optimiser le recrutement et la rétention dans ce domaine.

Les résultats de cette étude sont destinés à renforcer les programmes de formation en conseil scolaire et à guider leur politique et leur pratique éducatives. L'étude vise à promouvoir un changement social positif en sensibilisant à l'importance du conseil scolaire et en soutenant les efforts pour rehausser la profession au Liban.

مستخلص

تواجه برامج إعداد المرشدين المدرسيين في لبنان صعوبة في استقطاب أعداد كافية من الطلاب، مما يثير مخاوف بشأن استدامة هذا المجال التعليمي وتوافر المرشدين المدرسيين المهنيين في المستقبل. وعلى الرغم من هذه الحقيقة، فقد تناولت قلة من الدراسات التحديات التي يواجهها خريجو هذه البرامج.

أوراق لمؤتمر السنوي لمركز الدَراسات والأبحاث التَربويَّة

"البحث العلميّ كدعامةٍ لصياغة السّياسات التَربويَّة: نحو نظامٍ تعلّميٍّ تعليميٍّ مُستدام"
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تستكشف هذه الدراسة النوعية الوصفية الظاهراتيّة تصورات وخبرات خريجي برنامج الإرشاد المدرسي من كلية التربية في الجامعة اللبنانية. ومن خلال المقابلات شبه المنظمة والمجموعات الحوارية المركزة، تبحث الدراسة في دوافع الخريجين للالتحاق بالبرنامج في المقام الأول، وتحلّل الأسباب الكامنة وراء نقص المرشدين المدرسيين في المدارس اللّبنانية، وتحدد استراتيجيات لتحسين التوظيف والاستبقاء في هذا المجال.

تهدف نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى تحسين برامج إعداد المرشدين المدرسيين وتوجيه سياستها وممارساتها التربوية. وتسعى الدراسة إلى تعزيز تغيير اجتماعي إيجابي من خلال التوعية بأهمية الإرشاد المدرسي ودعم الجهود الرامية إلى تعزيز المهنة في لبنان.

Keywords

School counseling, Graduate programs, School Counselor recruitment and retention, Positive social change, Phenomenological study

Mots-clés

Conseil scolaire, Programmes de formation supérieure, Recrutement et rétention des conseillers scolaires, Changement social positif, Étude phénoménologique

كلمات المفتاحية

الإرشاد المدرسي، برامج الدراسات العليا، توظيف المرشدين المدرسيين والاحتفاظ بهم، تغيير اجتماعي إيجابي، دراسة ظاهراتيّة

1.Introduction

School counseling is globally recognized as crucial for enhancing students' academic performance, emotional resilience, and social development. In developed countries, its structured implementation has been shown to foster student success and improve school climate (Erford, 2019). School counseling in Lebanon has undergone significant evolution since the 1990s. Prior to that, counseling services were largely absent in schools, partly due to the disruptions caused by the Lebanese Civil War (1975--1990), which resulted in a fragmented educational infrastructure and neglected students' psychosocial needs (Ayyash-Abdo et al., 2010).

The Faculty of Pedagogy at LU offers a master's degree in School Counseling, which includes coursework in areas such as learning psychology, human development theories, counseling program organization, and practical counseling skills, preparing graduates to address students' academic, personal, and social needs (Lebanese University, n.d.). However, in Lebanon, the profession remains underutilized, misunderstood, and structurally unsupported.

This study examines the lived experiences of Lebanese University school counseling graduates to identify gaps and propose actionable reforms. To understand the essence of the participants' experiences, three main objectives were targeted: (a) to determine the motives behind joining the school counseling program; (b) to identify the reasons for the absence of school counselors in Lebanese schools; and (c) to highlight strategies and solutions for the recruitment and retention of school counselors in Lebanese schools.

2. Conceptual Framework and Research Significance

School counselors in Lebanon encounter numerous challenges that impede their ability to effectively support students' academic, emotional, and social development. A pressing issue is the lack of a clear role definition, which leads to inconsistent practices across educational institutions and often results in counselors being assigned administrative duties unrelated to counseling (Ayyash-Abdo et al., 2010).

Insufficient training and professional development opportunities limit counselors' capacity to respond to students' needs, while overwhelming workloads and inadequate resources lead to burnout (IRCEP, 2016). Cultural stigma surrounding mental health also poses a barrier, as societal attitudes often stigmatize mental health issues, leading to reluctance among students and parents to seek counseling services (Ayyash-Abdo et al., 2010). Political and economic instability has significantly impacted the education sector, leading to disruptions and decreased funding (Atallah & El Hajj, 2023).

Students are increasingly drawn to school counseling due to Lebanon's socio-political challenges and the amplified need for mental health support. Many choose this specialization to assist children dealing with trauma, family issues, or academic struggles (Ayyash-Abdo et al., 2010). The Lebanese government's modest efforts since the 1990s to integrate counseling services have created some demand for qualified professionals.

This study contributes to educational reform discourse by addressing cultural, institutional, and systemic challenges unique to Lebanon. It provides insights for policy development, counselor training enhancement, and the establishment of emotional support mechanisms within schools. Despite the increasing importance of school counseling, limited research exists on graduates lived experiences, making phenomenological studies essential for understanding how various factors shape professional identities and practices.

3. Research Design

This research is a phenomenological study that describes the "lived experience" of graduate school counselors, focusing on what all participants have in common after graduating from the school counseling program in the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University. As introduced by Husserl (1931), phenomenology understands people's experiences and their attributed meanings. This qualitative approach provides deep description using participants' exact words (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

3.1. Study Participants

A total of five school counseling program graduates (four women, one man) from the Faculty of Pedagogy were purposefully selected. All five participated in semi-structured interviews, and three participated in the focus group discussion. All participants earned their master's degree in school counseling from the Lebanese University, with graduation years ranging between 2015 and 2025.

TABLE 1 Semi-structured interview participants' demographic information.

Participant	Age	Gender	Year of Enrollment	Year of Completion	Educational Background	Current Employment
Graduate 1	38	M	2019	2023	Physiotherapy	NGO
Graduate 2	31	F	2015	2018	Education – Math and Science	Unemployed
Graduate 3	34	F	2017	2021	Arabic Literature	Arabic Teacher
Graduate 4	43	F	2019	2025	Psychology	Bookstore Employee
Graduate 5	52	F	2011	2015	Education – English	English Teacher

3.2. Data Collection Methods

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion, providing rich, diverse perspectives. Participants consented to recording and transcription, with opportunities to review for accuracy.

3.2.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview consisted of demographic questions and an interview guide focusing on post-graduation challenges and recruitment strategies. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately one hour each.

3.2.2. Focus Group Discussion

The FGD involved three graduates (Graduates 1, 4, and 5) and lasted 160 minutes through Zoom, with in-depth discussion of experiences, challenges, and solutions.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data was examined through interpretational analysis using open coding to uncover recurring themes. The comparative method identified patterns, and codes were grouped into broader categories aligned with principal themes.

4. Results

Three main themes emerged: (a) motives of school counseling graduates, (b) absence of counselors in Lebanese schools, and (c) strategies and solutions for school counseling graduates' recruitment and retention.

4.1. Motives of School Counseling Graduates

4.1.1. Altruistic and Helping Motivations

A predominant theme is the desire to help others, driven by empathy, compassion, and commitment to positive impact on children and adolescents (Cohen & Dekel, 2020). The ASCA (2019a) National Model identifies main duties including service delivery, collaboration, test interpretation, and academic program design, with the primary goal to "ensure every student has an equal opportunity to learn and thrive" (ASCA, 2022).

Three graduates shared similar motives for joining the program. Graduate 3, with a bachelor's in Arabic literature, emphasized that "in schools, students need to be understood, cared for, and loved in order to achieve good results." Her "passion in teaching and dealing with children," were the main intentions behind enrolling in the program. Although she initially applied

for Teaching Arabic at Secondary Level, when that wasn't available, she "chose school counseling, and I never regret it."

Graduate 2, holding a bachelor's in math and science education, was interested in special education but was told that "school counseling as a field of study is broader than special education, and needed in schools." As a schoolteacher, she decided to join because she felt "she would learn more methods and techniques when handling children's problems."

Graduate 5, who had a daycare, enrolled due to her "desire to promote emotional support for the parents." After observing "behavioral, social and cognitive problems in children at the daycare," she thought "in order to eradicate children's developmental problems, we should teach parents how to raise up their kids." She "felt" that school counseling was most suitable to reach her goal.

4.1.2. Career Stability and Professional Opportunities

Practical considerations such as job stability, predictable work hours, and career advancement also influence decisions (Culbreth et al., 2005). Students view school counseling as a stable career path with meaningful work within the educational system.

Graduate 1, a psycho-social, educational, and vocational guidance consultant in an NGO, identified professional motives, emphasizing the urge to "develop a holistic approach in helping special needs students adapt to an inclusive educational setting." School counseling could teach him "how to support all stakeholders responsible for children's upbringing, mainly teachers, parents, and school administration," adding that "it was crucial to understand the science behind each practice."

Graduate 4, with a bachelor's in psychology, holds a core motivation: "to support children and families through holistic, informed, and empathetic way." Despite interests in psychology and human development, her "main goal is to have practical and stable experience in a school setting."

4.2. Absence of Counselors in Lebanese Schools

4.2.1. Lack of Institutional Recognition and Role Clarity

In Lebanese society, mental health issues carry stigma, with counseling viewed as service for severe problems rather than preventive support. Schools emphasize academic success and may not see the need for counseling services (Shaaban, 2018).

Graduate 2 highlighted lack of job opportunities due to the "absence of a clear understanding of what a school counselor does; and hence, no formal position built in the school's structure." Graduate 1 added, "schools often misunderstand and misclassify the counselor's role, confusing it with a psychologist or a social worker, which leads to inconsistent employment practices and limited integration." Graduate 2 affirmed the main problem is "lack of a formal job description issued by the Ministry of Education in Lebanon or even set by the school."

Graduate 5 drew attention to "lack of proper training to teachers and school staff in addressing mental health issues or providing counseling." Sometimes "teachers are expected to take on roles beyond their professional scope, leading to burnout and insufficient attention to students' psychological needs."

4.2.2. Challenges in Internship and Field Practice

All five graduates considered the internship "inadequate" in preparing school counselors. Graduate 1 stated "there is a wide gap between academic preparation and field requirements." In the FGD, he remarked "the program offers a number of counseling courses, mainly career counseling, family counseling, counseling children and adolescents, and counseling in special needs; however, the student cannot authentically experience this wide scope of counseling practices simply because it does not exist all in school setting."

Graduate 5 advocated for more practical internship experiences where students are "equipped with specialized educational tools guiding them to explore what is relevant to school counseling." Graduate 2 highlighted the "strong theoretical emphasis in the university program with limited hands-on or experiential training," rendering the program "weak" in reaching academic and professional expectations.

Graduates expressed frustration with assigned supervisors. Graduates 3, 4, and 5 had school psychologists supervising with limited permission to conduct "individual counseling, parental meetings, and teachers' consultations." Graduate 2 had a regular teacher promoted to counselor as supervisor, where she was "teaching her supervisor the 'role expectations of a school counselor'." Participants commented on difficulties finding schools with counselors and getting approval for meaningful experience.

4.2.3. Barriers to Employment and Job Security

Policymakers don't prioritize school counseling despite growing recognition of mental health importance. Barriers include limited awareness, lack of funding, and multiple faculties for one track. The Ministry of Education (MEHE) and Syndicate of Psychologists are involved in recruitment decisions.

Graduate 2 emphasized schools' "resistance to hire counselors because they lack official licensing or work permits from the Ministry of Education." Graduate 5 added "the ministry does not oblige schools to have counselors in the first place; schools prefer to appoint psychologists or special needs teachers." Graduate 3 noticed "Lebanese schools focus on students' academic achievement, especially in subjects like mathematics and sciences," where "the emphasis is on exams and competition that overshadow the importance of non-academic services such as counseling."

Graduate 2, offered a position for one year then asked to leave, interpreted the decision: "they had limited budget, and they agreed to prioritize core academic staff and essential services, leaving little room for renewing my contract." Graduate 5 left her counselor position because "they gave me additional administrative duties, such as coordinating exams and handling disciplinary matters, which detracted me from my primary role of supporting students; I became responsible for more additional tasks without any financial compensation."

School counselors lack protection from syndicates or official associations. During FGD, Graduates 4 and 5 recounted experiences with the Psychologists' Syndicate being denied affiliation

despite the Educational Psychology department existing. Graduate 3 expressed frustration: "if we were affiliated with a formal organization, such as a syndicate, supported by our university professors, we would have better employment opportunities in schools."

The challenge culminates in questioning Lebanese University's recognition of school counseling as distinct specialization when offered by multiple faculties. Graduate 4 conveyed dissatisfaction: "being graduates from the same university but different faculties may lead to uncertainty among employers about the program's rigor and relevance," affecting "graduates' recruitment and competitiveness in the job market." Graduate 5 focused on accreditation issues where "graduates from the Faculty of Letters and Human Science, major clinical psychology is only accredited and recognized by official bodies, whereas graduates from other faculties face challenges in obtaining licensure, limiting their employment opportunities."

4.3. Strategies and Solutions for Recruitment and Retention

4.3.1. Need for Policy and Structural Reform

Establishing and retaining school counselors requires a multifaceted approach due to Lebanon's complex challenges (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2021). Policymakers should establish clear guidelines distinguishing counselors from other professionals (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

Participants requested "specific, clear, and mandatory" job descriptions. Graduate 2 demanded "recognition by the MEHE where the officials there start recruiting school counseling program graduates in schools." Graduates 1 and 3 emphasized collaborative roles. Graduate 1 remarked, "counselors should take on leadership roles, collaborating with teachers, administrators, and community members to create a supportive educational environment." Graduate 3 urged MEHE to "mandatory establish a counseling office in both public and private schools, where the counselor's work is based on collaboration and teamwork with decision-makers in the school, for the welfare of the school as a whole."

Graduate 4 pleaded the ministry to "expand and accredit graduate programs in school counseling within Lebanese universities as well as offer specialized training and certification in the field, distinct from general psychology." Graduate 5 added "the ministry must ensure that schools adopt a comprehensive model approved by all stakeholders."

Graduate 1 recommended "more practicum courses which allow the students to come across all related tracks in counseling, such as family, career, special needs, and group counseling in an educational setting" and enrolled "counseling students in tracks that are of their interest, rather than studying bits and pieces of all." Graduates 4 and 5 demanded extended training hours. Graduate 5 emphasized internship content: "internship courses must help students conduct individual and group counseling sessions, use standardized and informal tools to assess students' needs, design and evaluate a school-wide counseling program, and collaborate with school's stakeholders."

All participants demanded "equity" with other educational professions and recommended having "a professional syndicate or union which guards their rights." Graduate 2 focused on "counselors should receive competitive salaries aligned with teachers and educational professionals." Graduates 4 and 5 called "for the need to create a supportive work environment for the school counselor, consisting of a dedicated office, supportive administration, and the establishment of a culture of respect for those working in the field of mental health."

4.3.2. Continuous Professional Development

Ongoing training, workshops, and certifications are essential for effectiveness and job satisfaction (Studer, 2015). Participants unanimously emphasized "continuous learning and professional development." Graduates 1 and 5 associated this need with "keeping up with new trends in counseling and bridging the gap between university preparation and job market demands."

Graduates 2 and 3 urged new graduates to "reflect on their practices and create their own profile." Graduate 2 identified "evidence-based practices which demonstrate the success of the

counselor in school setting." Graduate 3 focused on "promoting counselor's skills through collecting data regularly on their impact on school well-being." Graduate 1 reminded fresh graduates: "counselors play a key role in helping students and staff navigate conflict, trauma, and learning challenges in a development-focused way; staying informed of societal changes and resilient in adapting to them through reflective practices are the key to success and progress in this profession."

4.4. Summary of Findings

Motives for pursuing school counseling are diverse, shaped by personal, academic, and societal factors. Primary drivers include altruistic desires to help children and practical considerations like job stability. However, significant systemic barriers exist, including lack of role clarity, inadequate internships, and employment challenges. Graduates emphasized the need for policy reform, enhanced training, professional recognition, and continuous development to address these challenges effectively.

5. Discussion

The findings provide valuable insights consistent with literature on helping professions (Hackett et al., 2019). Graduates expressed strong altruistic drives, particularly salient in Lebanon's context of political instability and economic hardship affecting youth mental health (UNICEF, 2022). Practical considerations also influenced decisions, aligning with international trends (Lambie & Sias, 2009).

However, graduates face substantial systemic challenges, particularly role ambiguity that undermines professional identity (Brott & Myers, 1999). The disconnect between theoretical preparation and practical application during internships reflects concerns about supervised training

quality (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Policy-level barriers include fragmented governance and absence of professional advocacy.

All graduates emphasized continuous professional development, supporting global best practices advocating ongoing training and evidence-based interventions (Lambie & Sias, 2009). While motivations align with international trends, systemic barriers require comprehensive reforms including policy changes, quality internships, professional syndicate establishment, and continuous development promotion.

5.1. Limitations and Implications

This study presents limitations including exclusive focus on Lebanese University graduates, self-reported data potential biases, and lack of stakeholder perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite limitations, it offers valuable policy and practice implications.

Policy needs include clear role definitions and standardized job descriptions from MEHE. Educational institutions should strengthen school partnerships for quality internships and prioritize continuous professional development. Establishing professional syndicates could advocate for rights and enhance recognition. Future research should incorporate broader stakeholders, use quantitative methods to assess barrier prevalence, and conduct longitudinal studies tracking career trajectories.

6. Conclusion

This study explored motivations and challenges of Lebanese school counseling graduates. While altruistic motives and commitment to supporting children were prominent, graduates encountered significant barriers impeding effective skill application. Role ambiguity, inadequate training, and lack of formal recognition emerged as key challenges. Addressing these through comprehensive policy reforms, enhanced training, and continuous professional development is

essential for empowering school counselors to support student development in Lebanon's challenging socio-political context.

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