

The school psychologist in Lombardy: Exploring differences in relation to seniority and order of school

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to provide a picture of the school psychologist in Lombardy, by investigating related roles, functions and experiences. The aims were twofold: to describe school psychologists' work areas, perceived professional knowledge, skills, perceived obstacles, and potential resources for their job; to investigate the extent to which the seniority and the school grade in which the participants mainly worked affected these aspects. Participants were 285 Lombardy school psychologists (89,4% females, 56,5% aged between 36-50 years old, 58,2% with more than 5 years of seniority), working in primary, middle and high school, who were administered an online survey. Results provided an overview of school psychologists' perceptions regarding their work areas, knowledge, skills, and aspects to enhance and address. Findings also highlighted the existence of significant differences when considering seniority and order of school. Finally, evidence suggested the importance of specific trainings aimed to address gaps or critical issues related to school psychologist's professional practice.

Keywords: school psychologists, school psychology, seniority, order of educational levels

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Introduction

School psychologists can play a crucial role in promoting students' health and learning outcomes, and they can also have an impact on the wellbeing of the whole school community (Kolbe, 2019). They are key to provide effective school health services and should be enabled to work and interact directly not only with the students' population but also with the staff and other internal and external professionals and stakeholders. Due to this, their role and the services they provide should be well-structured and defined. This has become even more apparent in light of the consequences of the pandemic and its social and health effects (Portela, 2023).

Nowadays, psychologists are present in the majority of schools, but they still encounter a number of practical and organizational obstacles that can make their work less impacting (Matteucci & Farrell, 2019). These barriers often have to do with lack of resources, funding or excessively low psychologists-to-students ratios. However, difficulties are also linked to the need to improve the definition of the school psychologist role, in order to foster the professional identity and guarantee a more homogeneous implementation of the activities (Polou, 2002).

Internationally, there's growing recognition of this role and of the importance of examining the current situation of the field. As the school psychology profession and demographics continue to evolve, some organizations and researchers have started to pay attention to it through dedicated studies and surveys, especially at national (Goforth et al., 2021) or local level (Matteucci & Farrell, 2019) In some countries, authors also published resources to support school psychologists in their profession, addressing topics such as certification and licensure, legal underpinnings of school-based practice and ethical issues or other barriers that professionals may encounter (Jacob, Decker, Lugg, & Diamond, 2022). Similarly, the International School Psychology Association (ISPA), provides valuable information on school psychologists activities, knowledge, competences and potential resources (<https://ispaweb.org>).

Further efforts in this direction can help enrich the role definition and better detail the complexity of the school psychologist position. Literature has already identified a range of activities that should fall into the domain of school psychology. These activities pertain to different areas, such as organizational support to the school, support to the school staff and support to students (Stanley, Juhnke, & Purkey, 2004; Farrell, 2010; EFPA, 2010; Bombi, Bucciarelli, Cornoldi & Menesini, 2014; Matteucci & Farrell, 2019; CNOP, 2020; Meroni et al., 2021). However, to build a comprehensive framework, specific activities should be analyzed more in detail, and then linked to the competences, information and resources needed in order to implement them.

This is particularly true in contexts such as the Italian one, where school psychology is widespread but not homogeneously coordinated, organized and structured (Braden, DiMarino-Linnen, & Good, 2001; Farrell, 2009; Roe, 2011; Albritton, Mathews, & Boyle, 2019). Some studies have taken into consideration the Italian context and depicted the practice of Italian professionals in schools (Jimerson et al., 2006; Trombetta, Alessandri, & Coyne, 2008; Matteucci & Farrell, 2019; Meroni et al., 2021). In recent years, researchers have also begun to explore Italian school psychology practices more in depth, contributing to a theoretical framework of the professional role, defining the areas of intervention and providing tools to plan and carry out interventions in line with deontological requirements (Cacciamani et al., 2022; Matteucci, 2023).

The need to better define the school psychologist role has been repeatedly noted by these researchers, as it is pivotal in order to be recognized and to be able to work homogeneously in different territories. Studies aimed at exploring methodologies, objectives and recipients of interventions in Italian school settings show that psychologists carry out a wide range of activities targeted both at the individual and at the organization, going beyond the stereotype of a professional dedicated to counselling sessions only (Matteucci, Soncini, Floris, & Truscott, 2022). Moreover, relationships with school members appear to be positive and characterized by cooperation and empathy; even if they still tend to focus more on building one-on-one relationships, rather than with the school community as a whole (Meroni et al., 2021).

A recent qualitative study (Meroni et al., 2021) context are able to adopt a consultative and organizational approach. More precisely, through focus groups, it examined psychologists' perceptions of the schools they work in and of the relationships between school community members. It explored the activities psychologists carry out in the school setting, the competences and tools they use, as well as the needs and barriers they have to face in their work. The results show that schools are perceived as a demanding and multifaceted work environment, that presents psychologists with a range of organizational and professional difficulties. Findings once again confirm the need to support psychologists in further enhancing the development of a consultative and organizational approach, and of an improved definition of their role. This can be achieved through training on available guidelines for school psychologists, deontological support, guidance on possible tools and strategies to address the school community needs and opportunities for discussion and to share best practices. Organizational change needs to be supported throughout the entire process, and it's important to help school organizations understanding the strong relationship between learning and

health (Kolbe, 2019; WHO, UNESCO 2021). Encompassing the needs of all the school community members, taking care also of the school staff well-being is key, and effective interventions modalities to promote health and learning can be identified once the importance of a thorough needs analysis is recognized by the school.

In light of the previous considerations, the need to clarify the previously mentioned aspects emerges. Indeed, quantitative data on the figure of the school psychologist in Lombardy could further detail these preliminary qualitative results and allow for an even more informative definition of professional activities, needs, resources and potential solutions. Moreover, even if a wide range of activities and work areas has been identified, quantitative analysis can provide additional information on how common specific activities are, and under which conditions they are currently implemented. Finally, quantitative data may provide a clearer framework that may be useful for outlining training and counseling activities to be addressed to psychologists and to the school.

Aim

To start filling a gap in the literature on the figure of the school psychologist (e.g., Matteucci & Farrell, 2019), the present study aimed at exploring and investigating roles, functions and experiences of school psychologists in Lombardy, in continuity and upon completion of a qualitative study previously conducted investigating practices and representations of Italian school psychologists, advance knowledge of the status and development of school psychology (Meroni et al., 2021).

In particular the main purposes were to: a) explore and describe school psychologists' work areas, their perceived professional knowledge and skills, and the aspects to enhance their professional practice in terms of perceived obstacles and possible improvements for their job; b) investigate the extent to which the seniority and the school grade (i.e., primary, middle and high school) in which the participants mainly worked affected these aspects (i.e., work areas, perceived professional knowledge and skills, perceived obstacles and potential resources). These last two aspects were not considered in previous qualitative research (Meroni et al., 2021) that did not distinguish between seniority and school grade, thus aggregating results from ever order of school to obtain a global picture of the condition of the school psychologist.

Materials and Methods

Participants

A total of 394 school psychologists accessed and completed the online survey. To be eligible, participants had to be registered with Lombardy's Psychologists Professional Order, to practice the profession in the Lombardy territory, and to currently be in the role of school psychologist. They worked at all levels of schooling, but their main employment was in primary, middle and high school education. For this reason, in the present study analyses were conducted on 285 participants working in primary, middle and high school. This choice was linked to the insufficient sample size of the subgroups of psychologists working at other school levels (e.g. nursery and pre-school).

Most of the psychologists who participated in the study were female (89.4% female; 10.6% male), and most of the sample (56.5%) was between the ages of 36 and 50. They were characterized by different formation and professional experiences, and the length of service ranged from 1 year or less up to 5+ years of professional experience, as shown in Table 1.

Tab. 1 - *Participant characteristics*

Variable	Category	Frequency
Age	20-35	27.4%
	36-50	56.5%
	51-65	13.3%
	>65	2.8%
Formation	Psychotherapist/ psychotherapist in training	72.6%
	Post graduate master	15.4%
	Doctor of Philosophy	4.9%
Seniority	≤1	14.4%
	2-5	27.4%
	>5	58.2%
Order of school	Primary school	22.1%
	Middle school	38.6%
	High school	39.3%

Procedure

This study was conducted online in Italy between July and October 2021.

In July 2021, the Lombardy Professional Order of Psychologists sent to its members an invitation to participate in the current study, containing a link to the anonymous online questionnaire to be completed. The survey was aimed only at psychologists who self-reported working or having worked in the past as school psychologists in Lombardy. Participation was voluntary and informed consent form was requested from each participant. The online questionnaire, available on Qualtrics platform, remained active until October 2021.

Instruments

The questionnaire was designed ad hoc based on evidence from a previous qualitative study and a literature review (Matteucci, 2016; Matteucci, 2018; Meroni et al., 2021) and it contained 46 ad hoc items (multiple-choice items and completion items) structured in the following areas:

- Socio-demographic, educational and occupational characteristics: age, gender, seniority, formation, theoretical orientation, additional areas of work;
- Characteristics of the educational institution: school grade in which the participants mainly work/worked in the last year, years of work at that educational institution, annual amount of hours;
- Activities carried out: work areas (i.e., *“In which of the following areas do you carry out activities at this educational institute?”*), types of activities carried out in different areas (e.g., *“Which of the following activities do you carry out in the field of risk prevention?”*), ways of presenting one’s activities at the educational institute, types of instruments used). Specifically, work areas and the types of activities carried out in the different areas were assessed using a 5-points Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always).
- Perceived professional knowledge (i.e., *“To what extent do you believe to own the following knowledge?”*) and skills (i.e., *“To what extent do you believe you possess the following professional skills?”*), assessed using a 5-points Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much);
- Aspects to enhance their professional practice (i.e., *“Considering your profession, which of the following aspects do you believe could facilitate your work?”*) and perceived obstacles (i.e., *“Thinking about the school you mainly collaborate with, what do you think are the main obstacles you encounter?”*), assessed using a 5-points Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).

Data analysis

To explore school psychologists’ work areas, their perceived professional

knowledge and skills and the aspects to enhance their professional practice in terms of perceived obstacles and possible improvements for their job descriptive analyses were carried out.

To investigate the extent to which the seniority and the school grade in which the participants mainly worked affect their work areas and their perceptions One-Way Anovas and Bonferroni post hoc analyses were conducted.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the considered variables are reported in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Overall, the main work areas (Table 2) in which school psychologists predominantly carried out their activities were: school counseling (4.31), health promotion (3.84), and risk prevention (3.25). Regarding perceived professional knowledge (Table 3), school psychologists perceived themselves as more informed about: the major developmental stages and developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence (4.05), learning processes (3.62), deontological aspects for school-based intervention (3.54), and Specific Learning Disorders (3.52).

Concerning perceived professional skills (Table 4), school psychologists considered to mainly possess team-working skills (4.21), observational skills (4.06), networking skills (3.98), and need analysis (3.83).

In relation to perceived obstacles (Table 5), school psychologists mainly referred to an inadequate amount of hours (3.06) and to inadequate job spaces (2.50).

Finally, among possible resources (Table 6), school psychologists mainly cited the necessity of supervision (3.69), of networking with territorial services (3.68) and of dialoguing with external colleagues (3.65).

Work areas

One-Way Anovas were conducted to examine school psychologists' seniority and order of school differences on work areas (Table 2). As for school psychologists' seniority, significant differences emerged for knowledges regarding school-territory network. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists with 5 years of seniority reported higher scores (respectively, mean differences = 0.633; $p < .005$; mean differences = 0.500; $p < .005$) than their colleagues with ≤ 1 years of seniority and 2-5 years of seniority.

Tab. 2 - Descriptive analysis on work areas and One-Way Anova results comparing school psychologists' seniority and order of school for work areas

	Overall averages		Seniority				School grade				
	M (SD)	≤1	2-5	>5	F	p	Primary	Middle	High	F	p
Organizational support	2.20 (1.037)	1.94	2.19	2.25	1.259	n.s.	2.53	2.01	2.06	4.474	.012
School orientation	2.54 (1.264)	2.54	2.35	2.63	1.368	n.s.	2.23	2.56	2.52	1.225	n.s.
Learning support	2.64 (1.226)	2.58	2.41	2.76	2.366	n.s.	3.35	2.48	2.15	17.911	.000
School-territory network	2.72 (1.207)	2.27	2.44	2.94	7.511	.001	3.15	2.61	2.39	1.225	n.s.
Teaching support	2.74 (1.142)	2.74	2.67	2.78	.281	n.s.	3.19	2.57	2.38	8.515	.000
Training	2.78 (1.152)	2.59	2.64	2.88	1.724	n.s.	3.06	2.76	2.39	6.067	.003
Risk prevention	3.25 (1.122)	3.06	3.35	3.24	.862	n.s.	3.23	3.29	3.12	.570	n.s.
Health promotion	3.84 (1.020)	3.51	3.87	3.90	2.100	n.s.	3.71	3.84	3.79	.234	n.s.
School counseling	4.31 (1.183)	3.91	4.28	4.40	2.529	n.s.	3.58	4.48	4.50	11.674	.000

As for the order of school in which the school psychologists work, significant differences emerged for organizational support, learning support, teaching support, training, school counseling. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists working in primary schools reported higher scores of organizational support (respectively, mean differences = 0.521; $p < .005$; mean differences = 0.474; $p < .005$), learning support (respectively, mean differences = 0.876; $p < .005$; mean differences = 0.1206; $p < .005$) and teaching support (respectively, mean differences = 0.619; $p < .005$; mean differences = 0.804; $p < .005$) than their colleagues working in middle and high school. Regarding training, Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists working in primary schools reported higher (mean differences = 0.677; $p < .005$) than their colleagues working in high school. As for school counseling, Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists working in primary schools reported lower scores (respectively, mean differences = -0.895; $p < .005$; mean differences = -0.917; $p < .005$) than their colleagues working in middle and high school.

Perceived professional knowledge and skills

One-Way Anovas were conducted to examine school psychologists' seniority and order of school differences on perceived professional knowledge (Table 3). As for school psychologists' seniority, significant differences emerged for perceived professional knowledges regarding work wellbeing and its determinants and territorial services. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists with 2-5 years of seniority reported higher scores of knowledges regarding work wellbeing and its determinants (mean differences = 0.336; $p < .005$) than their colleagues with older seniority. Regarding knowledges on territorial services, Bonferroni post hoc analyses showed that school psychologists with >5 years of seniority reported higher scores (mean differences = 0.424; $p < .005$) than their colleagues with ≤ 1 years of seniority.

As for order of school in which the school psychologists work, significant differences emerged for specific learning disorders. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists working in primary schools reported higher scores of knowledges about specific learning disorders (mean differences = 0.483; $p < .005$) than their colleagues working in middle school.

Tab. 3 - *Descriptive analysis on perceived professional knowledge and One-Way Anova results comparing school psychologists' seniority and order of school for perceived professional knowledge*

	Overall averages		Seniority				School grade				
	M (SD)	≤1	2-5	>5	F	p	Primary	Middle	High	F	p
Work well-being and its determinants	2.96 (.950)	3.03	3.19	2.85	3.601	.029	2.64	2.91	3.06	2.862	n.s.
School legislation	3.09 (.825)	2.87	3.01	3.16	2.128	n.s.	3.00	3.03	3.13	.443	n.s.
Assessment test	3.12 (1.072)	3.10	3.23	3.06	.704	n.s.	3.14	2.98	3.06	.349	n.s.
School organizational reality	3.22 (.872)	3.20	3.26	3.20	.138	n.s.	3.12	3.25	3.11	.672	n.s.
Territorial services	3.33 (.891)	3.03	3.19	3.46	4.666	0.10	3.31	3.27	3.31	.046	n.s.
Specific Learning Disorders	3.52 (1.030)	3.65	3.54	3.49	.314	n.s.	3.81	3.33	3.36	3.680	.027
Deontological aspects for school-based intervention	3.54 (.771)	3.26	3.54	3.60	2.545	n.s.	3.45	3.51	3.57	.327	n.s.
Learning processes	3.62 (.841)	3.65	3.64	3.61	.062	n.s.	3.81	3.50	3.49	2.448	n.s.
Major developmental stages and developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence	4.05 (.673)	3.94	4.05	4.08	.569	n.s.	4.12	4.00	4.05	.462	n.s.

Tab. 4 - *Descriptive analysis on perceived professional skills and One-Way Anova results comparing school psychologists' seniority and order of school for perceived professional skills*

	Overall averages	Seniority					School grade				
		M (SD)	≤1	2-5	>5	F	p	Primary	Middle	High	F
Organizational consulting skills	2.92 (.954)	2.94	3.00	2.88	.407	n.s.	2.69	2.86	2.98	1.311	n.s.
Efficacy evaluation	3.35 (.812)	3.16	3.42	3.36	1.143	n.s.	3.26	3.27	3.39	.647	n.s.
Promoting the development of cognitive and academic skills	3.36 (.892)	3.37	3.37	3.35	.012	n.s.	3.50	3.22	3.23	1.691	n.s.
Training skills	3.53 (.894)	3.57	3.59	3.49	.361	n.s.	3.57	3.47	3.49	.185	n.s.
Need analysis	3.68 (.764)	3.39	3.79	3.68	3.115	.046	3.62	3.64	3.59	.118	n.s.
Planning	3.71 (.778)	3.40	3.69	3.77	2.947	n.s.	3.61	3.71	3.59	.701	n.s.
Group management	3.75 (.832)	3.74	3.76	3.74	.021	n.s.	3.62	3.64	3.80	1.075	n.s.
Promoting well-being, social skills, mental health and life skills	3.81 (.751)	3.63	3.84	3.83	.934	n.s.	3.62	3.71	3.87	2.041	n.s.
Demand analysis	3.83 (.747)	3.63	3.90	3.83	1.411	n.s.	3.69	3.76	3.85	.782	n.s.
Networking	3.98 (.771)	4.06	4.00	3.96	.271	n.s.	4.07	3.89	3.99	.894	n.s.
Observation skills	4.06 (.640)	4.03	4.14	4.03	.797	n.s.	4.00	3.92	4.13	2.331	n.s.
Working as a team	4.21 (.663)	4.26	4.25	4.18	.340	n.s.	4.19	4.11	4.27	1.492	n.s.

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One-Way Anovas were conducted to examine school psychologists' seniority and order of school differences on perceived professional skills (Table 4). As for school psychologists' seniority, significant differences emerged for need analysis skill. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists with 2-5 years of seniority reported higher scores (mean differences = 0.400; $p < .005$) than their colleagues with ≤ 1 years of seniority.

As for order of school in which the school psychologists work, no significant differences emerged.

Aspects to enhance the professional practice: perceived obstacles and possible improvements

One-Way Anovas were conducted to examine school psychologists' seniority and order of school differences on perceived obstacles (Table 5). As for school psychologists' seniority, significant differences emerged for inadequate amount of hours, difficulty with the teachers and/or parents relationship, discontinuity in the years of service, difficulty with the dean relationship, lack of recognition of psychologist's role, inadequate job spaces. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists with 2-5 years of seniority reported higher scores of inadequate amount of hours (mean differences = 0.512; $p < .005$), difficulty with the teachers and/or parents relationship (mean differences = 0.559; $p < .005$), discontinuity in the years of service (mean differences = 0.590; $p < .005$), difficulty with the dean relationship (mean differences = 0.344; $p < .005$), lack of recognition of psychologist's role (mean differences = 0.337; $p < .005$), inadequate job spaces (mean differences = 0.505; $p < .005$) than their colleagues with older seniority.

As for order of school in which the school psychologists work, no significant differences emerged.

One-Way Anovas were conducted to examine school psychologists' seniority and order of school differences on perceived possible resources (Table 6). As for school psychologists' seniority, significant differences emerged for clarity about psychologist's role and activities, intervention guidelines and access to testing. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists with 2-5 years of seniority reported higher scores regarding clarity about psychologist's role and activities (mean differences = 0.652; $p < .005$), intervention guidelines (mean differences = 0.587; $p < .005$) and access to testing (mean differences = 0.603; $p < .005$) than their colleagues with older seniority.

As for order of school in which the school psychologists work, significant differences emerged for access to testing. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that school psychologists working in primary schools reported higher scores (respectively, mean differences = 0.597; $p < .005$; mean differences = 0.797; $p < .005$) than their colleagues working in middle and high school.

Tab. 5 - Descriptive analysis on perceived obstacles and One-Way Anova results comparing school psychologists' seniority and order of school for perceived obstacles

	Overall averages	Seniority					School grade				
		M (SD)	≤1	2-5	>5	F	p	Primary	Middle	High	F
Difficulty with the dean relationship	1.88 (1.034)	2.07	2.09	1.75	3.585	.029	1.95	1.88	1.88	.081	n.s.
lack of recognition of psychologist's role	2.00 (.952)	1.97	2.23	1.89	3.419	.034	2.12	1.90	2.08	1.191	n.s.
Difficulty in dealing with regulatory and ethical aspects	2.21 (1.014)	2.00	2.36	2.18	1.578	n.s.	2.21	2.10	2.43	2.399	n.s.
Difficulty with the teachers and/or parents relationship	2.31 (.869)	2.37	2.68	2.12	12.110	.000	2.33	2.21	2.37	.884	n.s.
Discontinuity in the years of service	2.35 (1.359)	2.53	2.73	2.14	5.476	.005	2.32	2.46	2.35	.194	n.s.
Inadequate job spaces	2.50 (1.147)	2.30	2.87	2.37	5.891	.003	2.64	2.31	2.67	2.540	n.s.
Inadequate amount of hours	3.06 (1.165)	3.10	3.41	2.89	5.374	.005	3.07	3.02	3.09	.081	n.s.

Tab. 6 - Descriptive analysis on perceived possible improvements and One-Way Anova results comparing school psychologists' seniority and order of school for perceived possible improvements

	Overall averages	Seniority					School grade				
		M (SD)	≤1	2-5	>5	F	p	Primary	Middle	High	F
Access to testing	2.72 (1.131)	2.97	3.10	2.50	8.976	.000	3.29	2.69	2.49	7.636	.001
Guideline norms to manage difficult cases	3.32 (1.087)	3.45	3.54	3.19	3.040	.049	3.48	3.28	3.38	.564	n.s.
Clarity about psychologist's role and activities	3.40 (1.088)	3.55	3.83	3.17	10.773	.000	3.38	3.24	3.53	1.583	n.s.
Intervention guidelines	3.40 (1.091)	3.48	3.79	3.20	8.413	.000	3.50	3.28	3.44	.781	n.s.
Access to continuing education and training	3.57 (.995)	3.55	3.73	3.50	1.434	n.s.	3.86	3.54	3.49	2.130	n.s.
Dialogue with external colleagues	3.65 (.928)	3.63	3.84	3.56	2.320	n.s.	3.79	3.59	3.57	.839	n.s.
Networking with territorial services	3.68 (.972)	3.59	3.82	3.62	1.295	n.s.	3.66	3.74	3.63	.261	n.s.
Supervision	3.69 (.974)	3.48	3.92	3.61	3.580	.029	3.76	3.67	3.60	.261	.770

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a picture of the school psychologist in Lombardy, by investigating related roles, functions and experiences. More specifically, in continuity with a previous qualitative study (Meroni et al., 2021) the effort of the present research was that to deepen the understanding of this professional figure, also by jointly examining the extent to which school psychologists' seniority and the order of school within which they mainly worked influenced their work areas and their perceptions about one's own knowledge, skills, obstacles and resources.

Work areas, perceived knowledge and skills, and perceived resources and obstacles were examined in order to investigate school psychologists' roles, functions and experiences.

Findings revealed that, within the school, professionals' activities may be primarily attributable to three areas: school counseling, health promotion and risk prevention. This appears to be in line with the main activities proposed by the Guidelines for the promotion of psychological well-being at school promoted by the National Board of Italian Psychologists (2021), which emphasized the importance of implementing programs for counseling, social support and for the promotion of mental health.

Regarding the perceived knowledge results highlighted that school psychologists seemed to perceive themselves as mainly informed about the major developmental stages and tasks in childhood and adolescence, which result to be essential for the understanding and for the evaluation of situations of distress. This is in line with previous qualitative results showing how psychologists are used to manage individual issues and work on one-on-one relationships (Meroni et al., 2021). Conversely, school psychologists considered themselves to be less aware of work well-being and its determinants and school legislation. Specifically concerning the knowledge of legislation, this aspect may be also read in light of the lack of a clear and comprehensive national regulation (or laws) with respect to the role and the functions of the school psychologist (Matteucci & Farrell, 2019). This is something to be taken into account for future improvements, as it is in line with the particular need to better define the school psychologist's role repeatedly stressed by research in the field (Polou, 2002; Meroni et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, a frequent consequence of the meagre legislation on school psychology is the autonomous management of psychological services in schools by the school itself (Matteucci & Coyne, 2017). Concerning perceived professional skills, school psychologists seemed to perceive themselves as mainly skilled in teamwork, observation, networking, and need analysis.

Furthermore, as concerns the perceived obstacles, professionals generally recognized as major hurdles environmental or practical aspects, such as the inadequate amount of hours and the presence of inappropriate job spaces. These findings are consistent with the results from a qualitative study (Meroni et al., 2021), that has shown how contractual aspects, time constraints and the lack continuity in the same school are among the main challenges to work effectively in the school setting and to build a consultative approach impacting both on health and educational aspects that are strongly linked to one another. Finally, as concerns perceived possible resources, school psychologists mainly mentioned the need of supervision, of networking with territorial services and of dialogue with external colleagues.

This study also considered the role played by seniority and the order of school within which school psychologists mainly worked in influencing their work areas and their perceptions about one's own knowledge, skills, obstacles and resources.

As regards work areas, concerning school psychologists' seniority, it emerged that professionals with at least five years of seniority were more prone to recognize the importance of a collaboration between the school and the community-based services present in the territory compared to their colleagues with one year or less of seniority and those with a seniority between two and five years. This could be due to the fact that in maturing, school psychologists seem to achieve a greater understanding of the importance of an integrated work, taking more into account the local services and agencies. As for the order of school, instead, it was found that school psychologists working in primary schools predominantly carried out activities related to organizational support, learning support, and teaching support with respect to their colleagues working in middle and high school. Moreover, it emerged that, in primary schools, professionals dealt more with training activities than their colleagues working in high school. Finally, results also highlighted that school psychologists in primary schools were less involved in school counseling compared to their colleagues working in middle and high school. Findings thus suggest that when children represent the target of the psychological intervention, this does not seem to be directly addressed to them. Moreover, this appears to be in line with the literature evidence (e.g., Albritton & Stein, 2022), suggesting that working with children often requires a collaboration with their caregivers (i.e., teachers and parents). With particular regard to teachers, in this developmental stage, they appear to be more involved in the educational process and to rely more on psychological support than their colleagues in upper orders of school. Furthermore, organizational aspects come to be particularly emphasized, and teachers and school principals appear to be the real users of the school

psychologists' intervention. The ability to focus their professional attention also on the organizational aspects is a key precondition for the adoption of a consultative approach by psychologists. This can be interpreted as a positive element, at least in lower school orders, considered how previous works emphasized the importance of adopting such consultative perspective it (Braden et al., 2001; Farrell, 2009; Roe, 2010; Meroni et al., 2021) but also highlighted that it's difficult for psychologists to actually do so and to make the school organization understand the relevance of (Meroni et al., 2021). This framework appears to be consistent with the needs of the school (Meroni et al., 2021), testifying the ability of the professionals to effectively understand the specific needs related to the order of school and to respond to them in a functional way.

Concerning perceived knowledge, as regards school psychologists' seniority, it emerged that those professionals who had been working within the school context from two to five years perceived themselves as more informed about work well-being and its determinants than their colleagues with more seniority. Thus, these professionals seem to recognize more the importance of working with teachers and school principals in order to ensure and promote a greater work well-being within the school context and community. Moreover, in line with what previously mentioned regarding the importance attributed to a collaboration with local educational agencies from psychologists with greater seniority, it emerged that school psychologists with more than five years of seniority perceived themselves as more informed about territorial services than their colleagues with one year or less of experience as school psychologists. This confirms once again the greater attention and abilities senior psychologists perceive to have about territorial services with respect to professionals who have been working within the school context for less time. Such differences related to seniority suggest the need to support especially psychologists with less seniority in developing a whole-school approach that encompasses the entire school community and its links with the context. As for order of school, instead, it was found that school psychologists working in primary schools seemed to perceive themselves as more prepared about specific learning disorders than their colleagues working in middle school. This appears to be in line with previous studies (e.g., Albritton et al., 2019; Albritton & Stein, 2022) and confirms the importance given to the assessment and/or to the initiation of appropriate interventions in the early years of school with regard to specific learning disorders.

In relation to perceived professional skills, findings revealed that school psychologists between two to five years of seniority perceived themselves as more skilled in need analysis if compared to their colleagues with one year

or less of experience in the field. With this regard, it is possible to hypothesize that, as experience increases, school psychologists develop major awareness regarding the necessity to better analyse the needs expressed within the school context rather than just responding to the manifest demands or urgencies. Needs assessment, indeed, represents a pivotal activity to carry out in order to respond in an effective way to consultative and organizational expectations and explicit demands from the school. Moreover, this confirms the training needs highlighted by Meroni and colleagues (2021) since specific support could facilitate schools in understanding the importance of the needs analysis.

As concerns perceived obstacles, regarding school psychologist's seniority, it emerged that school psychologists between two to five years of experience within the school context mainly reported inadequate amount of hours, difficulty with the teachers and/or parents relationship, discontinuity in the years of service, difficulties in the relationship with the dean, lack of recognition of psychologist's role, and inadequate job spaces than their colleagues with at least five years of seniority. This seems to suggest that professionals who have been working within the school context for a few years (namely, from two to five years) seem to develop a very broad outlook, in which the difficulties may regard different areas (e.g., organizational, relational...). Thus, this result highlights a difficulty in managing some relational and practical aspects of school psychologists' work within the school. Nevertheless, on the other side, perhaps those who have been working in the school for longer have learnt to recognize and deal with the various difficulties linked to the work within the school context in a more functional way. Instead, no significant differences were found between perceived obstacles and order of school, probably suggesting that these critical aspects are perceived as present at every grade of the school.

Finally, as concerns perceived possible resources, concerning seniority, it emerged that school psychologists who had been working within the school from two to five years majorly underlined the need of clarification about psychologist's role and activities, intervention guidelines and to access testing (namely, the possibility to evaluate students by administrating tests) than their colleagues with more seniority. As a matter of fact, specific training and/or supervision, as previously recommended by Meroni and colleagues (2021) could help school psychologists to address the above-mentioned critical issues, which seem to lead professionals to perceive themselves as less effective in their work. As for the order of school, it emerged that school psychologists working in primary schools majorly considered the possibility to access testing as a resource compared to their colleagues working in middle and high school. This could be related to the

fact that psychologists working in primary schools seem to perform more screening and particularly work in the learning area, in line with previously described results and literature evidence (e.g., Albritton et al., 2019; Albritton & Stein, 2022).

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data collection was restricted to a single region in Italy, which limits the generalizability of the findings across the entire Italian school system. Each region in Italy has its own specific regulations regarding school psychologists, and this regional diversity may influence the role, functions and experiences of these professionals. Therefore, future research could benefit from expanding the sample, including psychologists from different regions across the country. By doing so, researchers could explore how variations in regional policies and school cultures shape the perceptions of school psychologists, providing a more comprehensive understanding of this profession at a national level.

Secondly, data collection took place in 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As matter of fact, the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to Italian schools, which may have also impacted on school psychologists' perceptions at the time of the survey. It is possible that remote learning, social distancing, and heightened concerns about students' mental health, could have significantly altered or intensified the perceptions reported by participants. Given the uniqueness of the circumstance in which the study was conducted, it would be valuable to replicate it in a post-pandemic context to compare findings and determine whether these perceptions were shaped primarily by the emergency situation or if they reflect more enduring trends in the profession.

A third limitation involves the exclusion of psychologists working in nursery schools and preschools due to an insufficient sample size. The current study only included professionals from primary, middle, and high schools. Thus, future research should aim to include psychologists working in early childhood educational settings, in order to achieve a greater understanding of role, functions and perceptions of professionals at every single level of school. Additionally, future studies could also investigate whether differences in perceptions, practices and challenges emerge not only across educational settings, but also in relation to the type of academic and professional formation received by school psychologists. Indeed, also educational background may shape different approaches and perceptions regarding interventions and priorities within one's professional practice.

Despite these limitations, the study has notable strengths. First, the sample can be considered representative of school psychologists working in the Lombardy region. Additionally, the study offers a nuanced exploration

of school psychologists' perceptions by taking into account both their level of seniority and the order of school in which they work. This dual focus allows for a more detailed and comprehensive picture of the profession, highlighting how different factors may influence psychologists' experiences and challenges in their roles.

Overall, the current study enriched the literature on the topic, providing noteworthy clues with respect to practical implications. More specifically, findings revealed the importance of providing training programs, particularly addressed to younger school psychologists, who seem to manifest major difficulties within the school context. These trainings should focus both on enhancing their professional knowledge and skills and on fostering collaboration and communication with the school community and the local educational agencies. As a matter of fact, this networking could be beneficial in empowering them to provide a better support to students and to school community.

Furthermore, the awareness of the aspects identified by school psychologists as key resources or challenges in their work may also inform schools about critical issues that may hinder the effective functioning of school psychology services. This understanding could be important in order to identify areas for improvement and enhance the support system for both students and school community.

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