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The rising issue of dropouts from upper secondary vocational schools in the Czech Republic: perspectives of career counsellors

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ABSTRACT

The presented study explores the issue of student dropouts from upper secondary vocational schools from the perspective of school-based career counsellors. In the Czech Republic, student dropout has gained attention relatively recently due to the continuous increase in students who do not complete upper secondary education, a trend particularly relevant in vocational education and training. This qualitative research, based on interviews with counsellors from 10 upper secondary vocational schools, examines how these schools address student dropouts. The findings indicate that a comprehensive approach can be identified, involving the collection of information in collaboration with teachers to identify at-risk students, the implementation of preventive activities to support student engagement and professional identity development, and targeted interventions by counsellors in cooperation with school staff, organisation or parents. Despite the evident lack of systemic measures at the national level of educational policy, some schools have successfully developed mechanisms to mitigate the risk of early school leaving. Career counsellors play a crucial role in this process, acting as support coordinators and providing advisory assistance to at-risk students.

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Introduction

Dropping out of education is associated with several negative impacts on an individual's trajectory. As a result, dropout from education receives considerable attention not only in international educational research (Cederberg and Hartsmar 2013) but also as a long-term focus of national and transnational educational policies (Strategy 2020). The implications of early dropout from education extend to students' academic and social lives (Wilson and Tanner-Smith 2013), mental health (Lee-St John et al. 2018), and problem behaviour (Rumberger 2011). Notably, this phenomenon persists throughout an individual's lifetime, exerting a continuous negative impact and potentially affecting society as a whole (Rumberger 1987; Townsend, Flisher and King 2007).

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The importance of school dropout is also demonstrated by the fact that reducing it is one of the objectives of the European Union, which has set a target of reducing the proportion of young people aged 18–24 who have achieved at lower secondary education to below 9% by 2030 (Education and training monitor 2024). In the Czech Republic, this proportion was 6.4% of young people in 2024, while in 2014 it was 5.5% (Eurostat 2025). Nevertheless, in the long term, there is a clear increase in the number of students leaving their studies early. This trend is particularly noticeable in certain structurally disadvantaged regions, where the share of people with lower secondary education is even 14.1% (Volfová and Svoboda 2023). The issue of school dropout is also related to the type of study programme in upper secondary education as in vocational education and training (VET), dropout rates are higher than in general education (OECD 2010).

In the Czech Republic, upper secondary education follows integrated primary and lower secondary education. Basic schools (for students aged 6 to 15) are part of compulsory education. After completing basic school, students can choose between general upper secondary education and vocational education (Cedefop 2019). Vocational education and training (VET) at the upper secondary level includes 3-year VET programmes leading to a VET certificate (EQF 3) and 4-year VET and lyceum programmes leading to the Maturita examination (EQF 4) (Kaňáková 2024). Therefore, if student leaves school early, they are left with only a certificate of completion of compulsory education, without a qualification that would allow them to pursue a specific profession or continue studying at a university.

The school and its broader environment play a crucial role in addressing the issue of dropout, because various factors in the school environment influence the risk of dropouts. Despite an upward trend in the proportion of students leaving upper secondary school prematurely in the Czech Republic, a systematic approach to addressing this issue remains absent. Consequently, responsibility for tackling student dropout is largely delegated to individual schools, where educational or career counsellors often serve as key coordinators of dropout prevention efforts, closely integrated with career counselling initiatives. Thus, the goal of this research is to describe the strategies that career counsellors employ to address student dropout in the context of their schools. The main research question is: How do career counsellors at upper secondary vocational schools approach student dropout?

Dropout predictors and student groups at risk

Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) point out that dropout cannot be understood as a single moment of leaving school, but rather as the result of a long-term process of disengagement from school, which culminates in withdrawal. For many students, this process is accompanied by problems with attendance, low motivation, lack of effort, and disengagement from academic activities. Withdrawal from school can be explained using two of Finn's (1989) social-psychological models. Firstly, the 'frustration-self-esteem' model is based on reduced student's self-esteem due to unsuccessful school outcomes, which leads to problem behaviour. Secondly, the 'participation-identification' model emphasises students' sense of belonging to the school, which is related to their level of participation and identification with the school and its environment (Rumberger and Rotermund 2012). There is a clear relationship between the level of student engagement

and the risk of dropout (Fall and Roberts 2012; Janosz et al. 2008; Nielsen 2016; Wang and Fredricks 2014). In this regard, it is important how the school addresses disengagement and problem behaviour in order to prevent early school leaving.

Considering the reasons for dropout and students' characteristics, various typologies of homogeneous student groups can be recognised (Fortin et al. 2006; Janosz et al. 2000; McDermott, Anderson, and Zaff 2018; Ogresta et al. 2021). Bowers and Spratt (2012) pointed out that, in general, student dropouts can be divided into four groups. The *disrupting school type* represents students with low grades and behavioural problems. The group identified as *chronically struggling with academics* is associated with very low academic achievement. Students *bored with the learning process* exhibit low levels of engagement and commitment. Lastly, *quiet dropouts* are at risk due to external factors, as they lack a support system to persist in school (Fortin et al. 2006). Moreover, disadvantaged pupils can be identified as another specifically endangered group (Gal 2023).

Pedagogical research focused on dropout has identified four main types of factors predicting student dropout (Bowers 2010). The first predictor relates to poor academic achievement, as represented by teacher-assigned grades. As Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) asserts, academic failure has a dramatic impact on student dropout. Secondly, dropout is associated with absenteeism, which negatively influences a student's current school performance, student achievement, and future school outcomes (Gottfried 2011; Klein, Sosu, and Dare 2020). The third factor is student retention. Research indicates that retention does not contribute to academic achievement and can have a long-term negative impact on students (Jimerson 2001; Walters and Borgers 1995). Finally, the fourth factor is family SES. Parents' attitudes about school and education appear important because children internalise them and develop their own ideas about school and self, also, they shape the home environment and study conditions (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey 1997). Furthermore, students from low-SES backgrounds may be pulled out of school because they need to find a job to support their financial situation (Bradley and Renzulli 2011).

Factors related to school dropout can be divided into individual and contextual factors (Cerdà-Navarro, Quintana-Murci, and Salvà-Mut 2024; Rumberger 2011). Individual factors, also conceptualised as pull factors, are connected with the individual's characteristics or life situation. Internal factors, also conceptualised as pull factors, are connected to an individual's characteristics or situation. Individual factors related to the risk of student dropout include age, gender, and ethnicity (Stearns and Glennie 2006); disability (Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren 2004); as well as low self-esteem, poor academic self-concept, and low ambitions (Rumberger and Rotermund 2012). From the perspective of a student's life situation, students may be pulled from school due to financial worries, or family circumstances such as childbirth or illness. External contextual factors are associated with the family and school environment. For instance, parental support, positive parental expectations, and a high regard for education reduce the risk of dropout (Christenson and Thurlow 2004). Low parental education, low family income, and living in a single-parent household are contextual factors that contribute to the likelihood of dropping out of upper secondary school (Haugan, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2019). The school environment comprises three key elements that influence the risk of student dropout: school structure (e.g. size and sector), academic organisation (e.g. curriculum), and social organisation, which includes the nature of student-teacher relationships (Lee 2007). For instance,

disciplinary policies and conflicts with teachers can increase the likelihood of leaving school (Bradley and Renzulli 2011), while supportive teachers facilitate student motivation to participate (Bruin et al. 2023). Furthermore, dropout risk is closely linked to students' sense of acceptance and their social relationships with classmates (Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015).

School support to students at risk

The school environment and its characteristics form an important context for understanding student dropouts. Based on current knowledge of the factors that contribute to or prevent dropouts, it is possible to identify intervention approaches implemented at the school or system level (Dueggeli 2023; Freeman and Simonsen 2015; White and Kelly 2010). Specific interventions to support students at dropout risk can be divided into several categories such as monitoring, academic support, mentoring, psycho-social skills development, teacher/parent training, change in school or classroom structure, or vocational support (Prevatt and Kelly 2003). Moreover, Böhn and Deutscher (2022) add important context of vocational schools, the role of practices and the workplace addressing student professional identity that can reduce the risk of dropout through positive influence on student's study engagement (Reid et al. 2008).

Monitoring of dropout risk factors (indicators) focuses on observing students' academic performance (grades) in core subjects, absenteeism, problems with progressing to the next grade, or student behaviour in the classroom (Haugan, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2019; Kennelly and Monrad 2007). Monitoring school attendance, as one of the key factors, is crucial as it helps keep students engaged in the educational process (Wilkins and Bost 2016), and this factor can be easily tracked for individual students. Information about individual attendance and grades enables teachers and counsellors to identify at-risk students and provide them with early support to prevent them from dropping out of school.

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting students and reducing the risk of dropout. The risk of dropping out can be lowered by providing social support. For instance, positive teacher-student relationships and praise can positively influence students' school engagement and motivation to study (Fall and Roberts 2012). Furthermore, the risk of potential dropout can be reduced by implementing activities that enhance students' academic and social skills (Marschall, Falk, and Klug 2024). Participation in after-school activities also plays a key role in supporting students' social and academic development. Mentoring is another frequently used strategy for dropout prevention in the context of school, which can be implemented both at an individual and group level. Some mentoring strategies also involve the families and communities of the students (Graeff-Martins et al. 2006). Other strategies focus more on the students themselves, the academic environment, providing support in navigating academic challenges (Fehérvári and Varga 2023), and fostering a relationship with their studies. These two strategies are complementary, and when applied correctly, they can reduce the risk of early school leaving (Wilkins and Bost 2016). Just as the phenomenon of early school leaving itself is complex, its prevention also requires a comprehensive approach.

Career guidance and counselling play a crucial role in improving their future career readiness (Dodd et al. 2022). Fundamentally, guidance offers informing and counselling,

empowering and advocating one's needs, monitoring students' progress and providing precise feedback (Ford 2002). By providing tailored guidance and support, these services can help students make knowledgeable choices, overcome obstacles, and successfully re-engage in education or training (Psifidou et al. 2022). Comprehensive guidance and counselling services allow institutions to empower students to make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. This can help to prevent early school leaving and facilitate return for those who have dropped out. Additionally, such services can mitigate the risks of poor decision-making resulting from insufficient information or unrealistic expectations (Psifidou, Mouratoglou, and Farazouli 2021). Moreover, by extending guidance services beyond traditional school settings, counsellors can create opportunities for meaningful connections and support, empowering young people to make well-considered decisions about their future (Boysen and Poulsen 2014). Career guidance has a potential to reduce the risk of dropouts based on lack of information and irrelevant assumptions about future studies and work.

Methodology

The qualitative approach was chosen for this research due to the nature of the research question, which focuses on how counsellors address early school leaving in secondary vocational schools. This study examines a complex phenomenon that ought to be understood within the broader context of the entire school, the specific role of the counsellor, and their professional experience. The main research question is therefore: How do career counsellors at secondary vocational schools approach solving school dropouts? Additionally, the research explores the following sub-questions: In what ways do career counsellors work to prevent dropouts, particularly in collaboration with school staff? What strategies do career counsellors use to support at-risk students?

Data collection and participants

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews. This method allows for a focus on key topics defined by the research question while also leaving room for additional questions and the individual experiences of each participant. The interviews explored how students at risk are identified, what preventive and intervention measures are implemented to support them, and how career counsellors collaborate with class teachers and families when issues arise.

A total of 11 participants from 10 vocational schools, all working as career counsellors, took part in the research. These individuals are typically teachers or educational advisors authorised by the school principal to address this issue. At one school, interviews were conducted with two counsellors, as the school had separate workplaces where each advisor operated.

Participants were invited to take part in the research through a mass email sent to schools due to their involvement in the South Moravian Region project, which aims to support career guidance in secondary schools ("Implementace DZ JMK" CZ.02.02.XX/00/23_018/0009176). Participation was voluntary. Before the interviews, school staff were informed about the research objectives, the topics to be discussed, and assured of anonymity. The interviews were conducted either in person at the schools

Table 1. Participants.

Vocational school	Counsellor's pseudonym	Study programmes	ISCED broad fields of education (Unesco 2014)
School I	Ema	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Health and welfare
School II	Beatrice	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary; Services
School III	Alice	EQF 3 + EQF 4 + general	Health and welfare; general programmes
School IV	Theresa	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Engineering, manufacturing and construction; Services
School V	Gabriella	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
School VI	Frances	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Services
School VII	Claudia; Cecilia	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Engineering, manufacturing and construction; Services
School VIII	Zoe	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary
School IX	David	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Health and welfare, Services
School X	James	EQF 3 + EQF 4	Engineering, manufacturing and construction; Services

(9) or online (3), with an average duration of 53 minutes per interview. The attached [Table 1](#) provides a summary of participants, identified by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

The table above represents the study programmes division by concrete schools. Every school in the sample provides both 3 years (EQF 3) and 4 years (EQF 4) study programmes. The spectrum of offered study programmes is wide, but it is predominantly connected to the services, health care, agriculture and engineering or manufacturing. Hence, the counsellors coming from different school backgrounds illustrate a multitude of study programmes.

Data analysis

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and anonymised, with both participants and schools assigned pseudonyms. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analysis method, allowing for the identification of key recurring themes across respondents (Bryman 2012). The first step was to get familiar with the gained data. Afterwards, keywords in transcripts were identified in accordance with Naeem et al. (2023). The next step was initial inductive coding, in which meaningful segments of data were assigned codes (Gibbs 2012; Saldaña 2016). During the coding process, keywords were thematically grouped together and named, so codes were generated. Coding was conducted using the Atlas.ti program. Based on created codes, a total of 17 themes were identified, including cooperation with class teachers and vocational training teachers, preventive mechanisms, intervention, organisational cooperation, the role of school management, etc. While interpreting these themes they were conceptualised. A framework approach was used to visualise the topics, providing a clear representation of interview quotes by topic and respondent. Subsequently, each topic was examined in detail (Naeem et al. 2023).

Ethics

Research ethics were ensured by informing each participant in advance about the research objectives, guaranteeing that participation was always voluntary. Participants were assured of anonymity and had the option to request the deletion of their interview until it was anonymised. The empirical data was handled ethically, accessible only to the research team and used solely for research purposes. Emphasis was also placed on the security of stored data.

Results

The absence of a systematic national educational policy towards student dropouts leads to two distinct school approaches. The first approach is characterised by the perception that early dropout is not a significant issue due to its low frequency. Consequently, prevention and support processes are integrated into the broader framework of counselling work rather than being addressed intentionally. However, the opposite approach can be identified, when counsellors acknowledge early dropout as a critical issue and establish specific mechanisms. Based on the data analysis, there is evidence that these schools address student dropout in three dimensions: the collection of information to identify students at risk of dropping out, the implementation of prevention strategies, and the establishment of appropriate procedures for intervening when students exhibit signs of leaving school. Therefore, addressing these three dimensions can be identified as a comprehensive school approach to the dropout issue, as it is based on identification, prevention, and intervention. In line with previous research, these mechanisms can be understood as key to reducing dropout rates and supporting students at risk. The identified dimensions of the comprehensive strategy used by schools to handle student dropout are presented in [Table 2](#).

Data-based warning system for identification students at risk

The first dimension of the comprehensive approach is exemplified by counsellors who prioritise data collection and use the acquired information to identify at-risk students. This dimension is specific for analysing commonly recorded data e.g. attendance and grades. With a significant number of absences serving as an indicator that prompts increased counsellor attention towards the student in question. Given the finite capacity of

Table 2. Comprehensive school approach to reduce school dropout.

School approach dimensions	School's activities to reduce school dropout
Data-based warning system	(1) Attendance monitoring (2) Grades monitoring
Preventive activities	(1) Supportive school climate (2) Support student engagement and vocational identity (3) Financial support
Counsellor's intervention	(1) Individual initial consultation (2) Comprehensive approach to student needs (a) Elimination of potential causes of dropout (b) Providing students and parents with relevant information about additional services (c) Transitions to alternative educational pathways

counselling services, collaboration with teachers – who maintain student attendance records – becomes a key element.

Well, fortunately, we have a table where abnormal absences are recorded, and teachers must note the reason for each absence. So, they have to ask for the reason or inform us so that we can inquire about it. It's a bit of a forcing method – they have to ask about the reasons for absences. (Claudia, School VII)

Teacher motivation to participate appears to play a key role. The statement suggests that teachers at the institution are responsible for mandatory attendance recording. This information is then shared with counsellors, enabling them to analyse absence rates across the student body. When a student is identified as at risk, the teacher is further required to ascertain and document the reason for the absences, ensuring counsellors have access to this data. This established system provides counsellors with crucial information, facilitating timely intervention and support for at-risk students. However, its effectiveness depends on teacher collaboration, which may be reinforced through administrative mechanisms.

In addition to tracking absences, data collection can also focus on student performance, which – especially in cases of decline – can serve as a warning sign of potential student dropout.

And then teachers monitor the development of students' grades – for example, if they are missing grades in certain subjects or if their grade average is declining. Teachers also submit reports once a month to the school prevention coordinator. (Gabriella, School V)

Even in this case, teacher cooperation is crucial. While monitoring student achievement, teachers identify inconsistencies in student performance and inform the school prevention coordinator, whose primary responsibility is to prevent socio-pathological phenomena. This highlights the variable distribution of competencies within the counselling team. It is essential that teachers receive guidance in evaluating student academic performance and that an explicit mechanism for regular collaboration between teachers and counsellors is established.

Another important source of essential information about students at risk is represented by vocational training instructors, who provide a unique perspective on students.

We receive many suggestions from them because, whether they want to or not, they spend much more time with students than regular teachers. Their workday is six or seven hours long, and of course, it's not just about the work itself – it's also about mutual communication. The students are much more open then. (Beatrice, School II)

Input from vocational training instructors is based on a unique student-teacher relationship developed during professional training. Throughout the practical training period, small groups of students spend a significant amount of time with their vocational instructors, fostering greater mutual trust and encouraging student disclosure.

The establishment of a structured system for information collection and evaluation is a crucial prerequisite for the timely identification of at-risk students. However, the system's effectiveness depends on collaboration with teachers, who are responsible for gathering and sharing information with counsellors, thereby enabling targeted intervention for vulnerable students. Consequently, information processing can be regarded as the cornerstone of the early warning system which is based on commonly recorded data

analysis such as attendance or grades of students. Hence, no special counsellors' activities are related to this dimension, it serves as a first step in the process of identification of a potential student at risk.

Dropout prevention activities

The second dimension is dropout prevention. From the counsellors' perspective, an approach that emphasises prevention specifically in relation to school dropout may be observed. This dimension is specific for counsellors' activities to support at-risk students in their educational process. Counsellors' aim is to preclude possible reasons for dropout from various perspectives including support of the classroom climate, fostering the positive relationship with the field of study or providing financial support to students from socio-economically disadvantaged families. Nevertheless, these activities are solely preventive, the activities are non-interventional. The students supported in this dimension are not yet facing an imminent dropout threat. The first approach relates to dropout prevention in the broader school environment. Counsellors aim to cultivate a supportive and confidential school climate in which students feel assured that they can access the school counselling service at any time if they experience personal or academic difficulties.

Students trust all of us from the school counselling centre ... That's something we often see with the students. We know when they come to us on their own, and they actually do it quite often. It's kind of a thing here – they frequently come and confide in us. We've set this up really well, maybe even a bit too well sometimes. I'd say it's going great with everything, really everything. (Cecilia, School VII)

Mutual trust is one of the most important factors in seeking counselling. In this case, identifying at-risk students is simplified for counsellors because students who need help actively seek it and confide in them.

A second line of preventive mechanisms focuses on supporting student engagement in the development of vocational identity. Findings indicate that, according to counsellors, fostering student engagement with their vocational programme has a preventive effect. Emphasis is placed on developing students' professional identities through early practical experience, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of and a stronger connection to their vocational studies.

So, we're actually one of the few schools that started having students do practical training as early as their second year ... So they're already getting the basics in their second year now, and they already kind of see what it's all about. (Beatrice, School II)

Through practical placements – whether in real-world companies or school-based workshops – students have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with various work activities within their chosen field of study. This allows them to determine whether they find the field engaging. As counsellor Alice (School III) adds:

The kids get to figure out what they want to do, and a lot of the time it's a plus because they just really want to do it. They'll stick with it even if they have some setbacks in their theory classes and stuff like that.

In this case, engagement in the field of study serves as a preventive mechanism. By perceiving a tangible purpose in their future career prospects, students are more motivated to complete their studies.

Another preventive mechanism relates to students' financial motivation. Schools also strive to reduce student attrition by securing paid practical placements within external organisations. Thus, students are not only supported in the process of engagement but are also financially compensated for their work.

When we have students from vocational programs, especially in technical and construction fields, we try to make it so they don't go out in the first year. But starting in the second year, they can work for real, so they get pocket money or a kind of allowance for that. (James, School X)

The risk of premature departure from education is closely linked to a student's socio-economic status. This strategy is particularly effective for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who might otherwise leave school to pursue employment for financial reasons. When financial needs are met through paid placements, students are less likely to discontinue their education, thereby improving their long-term employability.

These strategies aim to address the multifaceted nature of student disengagement and create a more supportive educational environment that fosters student success while reducing the risk of early school leaving.

Counsellors' intervention

The third dimension involves explicitly defined procedures that are implemented when a student is at-risk or there is an intention to withdraw. Hence, the aim of this dimension is to resolve the intention or cause of considered dropout. Data analysis indicates that schools implementing structured dropout intervention strategies follow a two-stage process. The first stage involves conducting an individual consultation for at-risk student with a counsellor.

It's just an individual consultation. For me, it is crucial to evaluate the situation and find out what is going on right now and what is behind it. It can be a problem caused by common phenomena like bullying or an unpleasant environment. This is the first thing I ask about because it can influence everything else. Then, we try to find the cause—why the student is no longer interested in their studies and what they are interested in. (Zoe, School VIII)

The primary aim of this intervention is to gather information, allowing counsellors to explore the reasons behind absenteeism, poor academic performance, and other concerns. This initial consultation provides essential insights that help determine the next steps, including further counselling and additional support. Even at this stage, counsellors play a role in identifying and addressing students' challenges.

For more complex cases that cannot be resolved through the initial intervention, a second stage follows – a phase of comprehensive support. At this stage, parents and other school counselling professionals (e.g. school psychologists) become involved.

It has to be planned, so we always try to avoid having parents come in on the spur of the moment. We usually gather some information first and then arrange a meeting for the next day or whenever they are available. When they come in, we debrief the situation because I think they also need to be prepared. It's important to know all the information and find the best solution, as there is never just one right answer. There are many ways to resolve the situation, and we must offer all possibilities. (Beatrice, School II)

As highlighted, preparation is crucial when counsellors engage with parents. Sufficient time for preparation allows counsellors to collect relevant information to support students at risk of dropping out. The more alternative solutions that are considered, the higher the likelihood of retaining students in education. In this stage, collaboration with school psychologists, class teachers, and school management is also essential.

Regarding absenteeism, we usually invite parents if we know that there are medical reasons for the absences. For example, if a student has undergone surgery or a long-term hospitalization, or if there is another prolonged issue, we invite parents, class teachers, and the school headmaster for a discussion. (Ema, School I)

This phase of intervention reflects the school's effort to take a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention through multi-stakeholder collaboration. The goal is to propose solutions and identify supportive measures tailored to the student's situation.

Firstly, support may be aimed at eliminating potential causes of dropout, which can help students persevere through challenges and continue their education. These causes may include academic difficulties or problematic interactions with teachers in certain subjects.

Thanks to grants, we have tablets available in classrooms, so we came up with the idea that students could take them home as well. This way, they can study at home and take notes digitally. (Beatrice, School II)

As these examples illustrate, potential dropout triggers often stem from the school environment. Identifying the root cause enables counsellors, in cooperation with teachers, to address the issue in a way that aligns with the student's needs. This highlights the crucial role of counsellors in dropout prevention.

Secondly, another form of targeted support involves providing students with relevant information about additional services that may help them navigate complex life situations.

Well, it depends on what is happening. If there are issues within the student's family, it's important to offer additional counselling services or connect parents with social workers during the consultation. We also have a good partnership with a local centre where children can receive free psychological support. So, we inform them about this option or refer them to a counselling centre for children and families, especially in cases where parents are unsure about the next steps. (Claudia, School VII)

As exemplified, school counsellors recognise the limits of their professional expertise in providing support. When issues extend beyond their scope – particularly those related to family circumstances – they refer students and their families to specialised services better equipped to offer the necessary assistance.

Thirdly, counsellors provide another form of support by facilitating transitions to alternative educational pathways for students struggling in their current programmes. This ensures that students remain engaged in education, even if they shift to a different field of study.

We look for solutions – for instance, transferring to another school. In our town, there is also a vocational school offering a three-year apprenticeship program that leads to a vocational

certificate. So, if a student is struggling academically, and we see that they are unlikely to pass the maturita exam, we consider such alternatives. (James, School X)

Particularly in cases where students are enrolled in programmes (EQF 4) leading to the maturita (final) exam but are struggling with the academic demands, counsellors may suggest a more suitable educational pathway. This could involve transitioning to an EQF 3 programme within the same school or facilitating a transfer to another institution that offers programmes better suited to the student's skills and interests.

Discussion

The research results show that student dropout is one of the topics that career counsellors focus on. Although numerous practical materials aim to support schools and their staff in addressing dropouts within the context of career guidance (e.g. Trhlíková 2015; Volfová and Svoboda 2023), these efforts are largely fragmented and implemented through isolated projects. Although national educational strategies aim to support schools and reduce dropout rates, systemic measures or intervention programmes at the national level remain absent (Strategy 2020).

The approach of secondary vocational schools to addressing dropout from education and their strategies for reducing the risk appear to be individualised, depending on how frequently counsellors and other staff members encounter this phenomenon. However, we can identify an effort towards a comprehensive Approach consists of three dimensions: data-based warning system; preventive activities; counsellors' intervention. The first dimension is specific for monitoring commonly recorded data – grades and attendance of students. In the second dimension, counsellors prepare preventive activities for students to keep them in the educational process. Through activities, counsellors support positive classroom climate as well as positive relationship to the studied field. In some cases, counsellors strive to mediate financial support for socio-economically disadvantaged students. These two dimensions preclude the reason for potential dropout. The third dimension is specific for counsellors intervening activities to resolve the considered reason for dropout of the student. Therefore, if a school identifies dropout as a challenge, specific processes are established and eventually become routine. We define organisational routines as recurring patterns of recognisable actions implemented by multiple actors in the school environment (Feldman and Pentland 2003). Dropping out can thus be understood as a challenge, the resolution of which requires setting a goal and explicitly defining individual and organisational routine processes (Maag Merki, Wullschleger, and Rechsteiner 2023). However, for these processes to be effectively implemented, it is necessary to cultivate a school environment that fosters collective learning, supported by transformative leadership (Draaisma, Meijers, and Kuijpers 2018).

A data-based system that allows for the identification of students at risk, along with counselling interventions, is an important part of the comprehensive school approach to reducing student dropout rates. Key information on student attendance, grades, and behavioural problems is essential for this process (Mac Iver and Mac Iver 2009; Smink and Schargel 2004). The results show that schools primarily focus on detecting absences and monitoring grades, where cooperation with class teachers and vocational training teachers appears to be crucial. Collaboration

between different roles within the school and teachers who interact with students daily is therefore essential. Cooperation is also key during interventions, where the counsellor may involve a school psychologist, a class teacher, or a specialist focused on preventing pathological behaviours to provide support addressing different students' needs.

School counsellors also focus on implementing preventive activities aimed at fostering a positive climate and supporting professional identity. In promoting a positive school climate, the nature of relationships between school staff including teachers, counsellors, and students, can be considered crucial. Research findings indicate a correlation between positive relationships, social support, and the level of student engagement, which can be seen as a key explanatory factor in relation to dropout rates (Martins et al. 2022; Rumberger and Rotermond 2012; Smink and Schargel 2004). Evidently, positive relationships and teacher support help reduce the risk of frequent absences, encourage participation in school-related activities, and enhance students' sense of belonging to the school (Archambault et al. 2020; Roorda et al. 2017). Another important aspect of dropout prevention in the context of vocational education is supporting the development of vocational identity, which is characterised by readiness for a future occupation and acceptance of its specifics and norms (Skorikov and Vondracek 2011) and often described equivalently as professional identity (Fitzgerald 2020). Through the process of vocational/professional identity creation, which inter alia is the responsibility of career counsellors, the student engagement is fostered (Reid et al. 2008; Wong and Kaur 2017). Hence, career guidance and counselling are essential in fostering student's future career preparedness (Dodd et al. 2021) even in promoting reasoned decisions about their future occupation (Boysen and Poulsen 2014). Schools can promote this favourable outcome while providing support to career counsellors and their initiatives.

Consistent with the theoretical framework based on a social-psychological approach to student dropout, there is evidence that student dropout is a long-term process of disengagement influenced by individual or school-related factors (Lee-St John et al. 2018). Therefore, a comprehensive approach based on identification, prevention, and intervention seems important, as it allows for supporting students at different phases of school withdrawal. On the other hand, student engagement is a complex phenomenon, and in comparison with various intervention programmes, student support in our research is limited to school counsellors' activities. However, effective dropout interventions may include academic skill enrichment, social skills groups, study skills training, or student peer support (Prevatt and Kelly 2003; Wilson et al. 2011). Moreover, the interviewed counsellors did not mention the role of family or school-community collaboration in preventing dropout, even though research emphasises its importance (cf. Smink and Schargel 2004; Wilson et al. 2011). The results of the research show that although some schools address student dropout and consider it an important issue, overall support is primarily focused on solving students' immediate problems related to dropout, without linking it to the broader development of their skills. Therefore, this area may become increasingly challenging if the issue of student dropout continues to worsen.

Limits

Among the limitations of this research, we can include the selection of schools, which was based on the voluntary participation of individual advisers. For this reason, counsellors who face challenges with school dropout but are unable to adequately address them may not have been included in the research sample. Additionally, the advisers' responses may have been influenced by their awareness of the researchers' affiliation with the institution implementing the project. Another limitation we can identify is that attention was given to student dropout in the context of the whole school rather than within individual programmes. Addressing this at the field level could provide better coverage of the specifics of individual study programmes.

Practical implications and future research

To effectively address student dropout, the implementation of systemic measures at the national level is essential, as it would provide schools and counsellors with standardised guidelines. Currently, schools are employing individualised approaches. We can thus observe the impact of educational policy, particularly in supporting the establishment of a data-based early warning system (UNICEF 2016). This system should be based on collecting information on students' attendance, grades, and behavioural issues, as these are important predictors of dropout risk (Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson 2007; Mac Iver and Mac Iver 2009). However, other contributing factors, such as special educational needs and social background, may also be recorded. In addition to defining key indicators, it is essential to establish personnel responsibilities and technical solutions (Frazelle and Nagel 2015). Implementing a standardised system across schools would facilitate regular, long-term data evaluation across the entire region, enabling consistent comparisons between schools and educational programmes.

A promising direction for future research could be exploring the perspectives of classroom teachers and vocational training instructors who interact with students daily. Such research would provide deeper insights into how teachers perceive the issue of dropout, identify at-risk students, and support them within the classroom setting. Additionally, another valuable research focus could be on at-risk students themselves and their perceptions of support from career counsellors. This study could yield insightful findings on perceived social support, counselling methods, and the factors influencing students' participation in the counselling process.

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Declaration on the use of AI in the writing process

The authors of this manuscript confirm that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used to create content or generate ideas during the writing process or to analyse research data. AI was used exclusively to enhance readability and refine language, under strict human oversight and control.

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