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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The wellbeing and work engagement of school counsellors in Southeast Asia: a self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

School counselling is an effective means of providing school-based support for young people's wellbeing. However, the wellbeing of school counsellors themselves and the factors that shape it are relatively underexplored. Such research is particularly sparse in Southeast Asia, where school counselling is an emerging, though quickly developing field. Using Self-Determination Theory as a framework, we investigated the association between need supportive leadership and the wellbeing and engagement of school counsellors in the Philippines. We surveyed 168 in-service school counsellors on need supportive leadership, basic psychological need satisfaction, work engagement, and wellbeing. Structural equation modelling was used to test the proposed model. Results showed that, when counsellors perceived their school leaders as supportive of their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they experienced higher levels of engagement and wellbeing. These associations were mediated by basic psychological needs satisfaction. The findings highlight the importance of providing work environments that support counsellors' basic psychological needs.

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Introduction

The World Health Organisation has recognised school-based support as an effective means of addressing mental health issues (Robles & Bronstein, 2020). School counselling is a wide-ranging profession focused on providing psychosocial support to young people and has been described as having "major potential to contribute to the public good" (Carey et al., 2017, p. v.). Interventions provided by school counsellors are effective for many different mental health problems (Fedewa et al., 2016; Hanley & Noble, 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2013), and research suggests that counselling interventions are as effective with children in Southeast Asia as they are with populations in the Global North, where most research has been conducted (Harrison & Wang, 2020; Kifli et al., 2019; Saw et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018).

The wellbeing of school counsellors themselves is associated with positive outcomes for young people (Nissen-Lie et al., 2013; Pereira et al., 2017), but counsellors face a host of challenges to their own wellbeing. The emotional demands faced by helping professionals, including compassion fatigue and burnout, are well known (Ledoux, 2015; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2014), and many factors can support or thwart the wellbeing of school counsellors. In this study, we adopted Self

Determination Theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework to investigate the association between basic psychological needs and the wellbeing and engagement of school counsellors in the Philippines.

Wellbeing and work engagement of school counsellors

Wellbeing is a multidimensional construct comprising emotional, psychological, and social factors. Emotional wellbeing is defined as experiencing more positive than negative emotions, and appraising life satisfaction positively. Psychological wellbeing refers to the ability to function well, and includes self-acceptance, personal growth, life purpose, positive relationships, autonomy, and environmental mastery. Social wellbeing is made up of social integration, contribution, actualisation, and acceptance, and reflects individuals' evaluations of their social lives (Keyes & Annas, 2009; Lamers et al., 2011).

Aside from wellbeing, another important outcome predictive of overall functioning is work engagement. This is a positive, work-related state involving vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour is a measure of the effort, energy, and persistence an individual invests into their work. Dedication refers to an individual's sense of the significance of their work, and the pride they take in it. Absorption describes concentrating on work and feeling engrossed and interested (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Though narrower and more work-focused than wellbeing, engagement is associated with organisational support and higher wellbeing in schools (Sarath & Manikandan, 2014; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007; Wang, 2024).

Research across different locations suggests that counsellors experience high levels of stress which has been linked to burnout, exhaustion, and poorer job satisfaction (Fye et al., 2020; King et al., 2018; Pennell et al., 2024; Şahin et al., 2022). Studies have also highlighted the interaction between organisational demands and personal factors affecting wellbeing and work engagement. For example, stress and burnout are correlated with high workloads, poor work relationships, large caseloads, a lack of career progression, and a weak professional identity (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Greenham et al., 2019; Hamelin et al., 2023; Hemi & Maor, 2023; Holman et al., 2019; King et al., 2018). The administration associated with delivering and monitoring counselling programmes, such as multi-tiered systems of support, adds burdens such as coordination and documentation (Rila et al., 2025). The assignment of non-counselling tasks to counsellors appears to be particularly significant in predicting burnout (Holman et al., 2018; Kim & Lambie, 2018).

Organisational resources supporting wellbeing include relational support, perceived organisational support, and the provision of professional development and supervision, which strengthen professional identity, reduce burnout, and promote engagement (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Fye et al., 2022; Rila et al., 2025; Um & Bardhoshi, 2025). Supervision appears to be particularly effective in promoting wellbeing and mitigating exhaustion and burnout (Fye et al., 2022; Kim & Lambie, 2018). Job satisfaction and the alignment of practice with counselling frameworks such as the American School Counsellor Association (ASCA) National Model also reduce levels of burnout (Fye et al., 2020; Holman et al., 2019). Research has highlighted the importance of school leadership as an organisational resource, and there is evidence that school leaders play an important role in the wellbeing of their staff (David, 2019; Hascher & Waber, 2021; Haw et al., 2024).

Personal factors contributing to higher wellbeing are self-compassion, counselling self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, spirituality, social support, emotional stability, and physical health (Augustine, 2016; Bali-Mahomed et al., 2022; Greenham et al., 2019). Self-efficacy buffers the impact of poor resources at work (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021), and the experience of meaningful work builds resilience (Um & Seon, 2024). Task-focused coping decreases burnout, while emotion-focused or avoidant strategies increase it (Fye et al., 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018). Traits like grit and ego maturity are also correlated with resilience (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Rila et al., 2025).

School counselling in the Global South: the case of the Philippines

In the Global South, school counselling is less developed than in the Global North, with school counsellors working in particularly difficult environments with chronic under-resourcing. For example, in the Philippines, around 5,000 schools have no electricity, and 10,000 schools have no access to potable water (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2023). Counselling provision for children in the Philippines is also very under-resourced. To become registered as a guidance counsellor or school psychologist, individuals must hold a master's degree in Guidance and Counselling or Psychology, and pass a licencing examination (Republic of the Philippines, 2024). The ratio of counsellors to children is very low, around 1 in 20,000 (Magsambol, 2020; Manila Bulletin, 2023a, 2023b), placing an enormous burden on counsellors. As of October 2024, there were only 5,085 counsellors licensed by the Philippine Guidance and Counselling Association (PGCA; Personal communication, PGCA, Feb. 17, 2025), far fewer than the number of counsellors needed to address the mental health needs of the 39 million children in the Philippines (Manila Bulletin, 2023a, 2023b; Serrano et al., 2023; Tabuga et al., 2014). This ratio stands in stark contrast to statistics in the Global North such as the United States where the ratio is 1:385 (US Department of Education, 2023). Due to the weak development and under-resourcing of school counselling in the Philippines, as in other countries in the Global South, counsellors often experience dual and unclear roles, are disempowered and marginalised, have weak professional identities, receive low remuneration, and face heavy workloads (Hamelin et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Hemi & Maor, 2023).

Self-determination theory

One of the key tenets of SDT is that the satisfaction of three innate basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to increased intrinsic motivation, engagement, and wellbeing (Deci et al., 2017). Empirical studies across a range of settings show that need supportive leadership predicts psychological wellbeing (Desrumaux et al., 2015; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). School leaders can either support or thwart the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs through their leadership practices. It is the perception of basic psychological needs satisfaction that is theorised to lead to optimal outcomes. Hence, SDT's theoretical model can be conceptualised as basic needs support leading to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs which, in turn, leads to better wellbeing and engagement (Deci et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2025). SDT has generally been found to be generalisable across diverse cultural contexts (Haw & King, 2022; King et al., 2024).

The need for autonomy is concerned with the experience of individual agency in decision making (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy support from principals is associated with better life satisfaction (Ebersold et al., 2019) and lower levels of exhaustion and disengagement in teachers (Collie et al., 2016), findings which have been replicated in a Southeast Asian cultural context (Mendoza & Dizon, 2023). School principals and other school leaders can support the need for autonomy through asking staff for their input, respecting their voice, and empowering them to be part of the decision-making process.

The need for competence is satisfied when an individual has a sense of effectiveness and capability in solving problems and carrying out important tasks (Rouse et al., 2020), and predicts higher wellbeing in teachers and other school personnel (Cansoy et al., 2020; Xiyun et al., 2022). School principals and leaders can support the need for competence through giving staff clear roles and responsibilities, and supporting their professional development leading to the attainment of work-related skills.

Relatedness refers to a sense of connection with others and the experience of being recognised and valued (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Satisfaction of the need for relatedness predicts better engagement and more positive emotions in teachers (Haw et al., 2024; Haw & King, 2023). School principals and other leaders can satisfy the need for relatedness through cultivating warm, caring,

and supportive relationships with their staff. In the literature, typical predictors of basic psychological need satisfaction include autonomy supportive leadership, a manageable workload, job security, constructive performance feedback, and task significance (Gagné et al., 2022).

In the field of counselling, the literature is sparse but suggests that organisational support predicts wellbeing and career success (Dose et al., 2018; 2019). The very little research in non-Western settings supports this finding. A study carried out in China found that organisational support and occupational empowerment were associated with higher wellbeing in school counsellors. The study also found that autonomy and competence support mediated the relationship between supportive resources and occupational wellbeing (Feng et al., 2024). The quality of relationships between school counsellors and supervisors may also predict counsellors' wellbeing (Dose et al., 2023), but Feng et al.'s (2024) study of the occupational wellbeing of school counsellors in China found that occupational relatedness support was less significant. These studies broadly support the basic tenets of SDT, but mixed findings, particularly on the importance of relatedness support, warrant further investigation, and researchers have highlighted a need for more research in non-individualistic cultures (Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

The present study

In this study, we sought to test the association between need supportive school leadership and school counsellors' wellbeing. We investigated the association between need support from school leaders, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and school counsellors' wellbeing and engagement in the Philippines. We hypothesised that perceived psychological need support from school leaders would predict wellbeing and work engagement, and that psychological need satisfaction would mediate this relationship.

Methods

Participants and sampling

Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Education University of Hong Kong. A convenience sampling approach was employed to recruit in-service school counsellors in the Philippines. Participants were recruited through the Philippine Guidance and Counselling Association (PGCA) Official Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/PGCAOfficial>), which has more than 81,000 followers. The survey link was posted on the page with an invitation for in-service school counsellors to participate in a study examining the relationship between need-supportive leadership, basic psychological need satisfaction, and wellbeing. The survey remained open for around 10 weeks. A total of 168 in-service school counsellors completed an online survey administered via the Qualtrics application (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>).¹ Given the convenience sampling method and the nature of social media recruitment, a precise response rate cannot be calculated, as it is not possible to determine how many eligible counsellors viewed the recruitment post versus the total number of followers. However, we want to note that Facebook penetration in the Philippines is extremely high. Facebook is among the most popular social media platforms in the Philippines, used by around 95 percent of social media users, far exceeding the global average of 57 percent (Morshed & Mazumder, 2023). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participants accessed the survey items. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 64 years ($M = 41.63$, $SD = 8.65$). More than 80% ($n = 139$) of the participants were female, and the majority ($n = 113$; 67.3%) were married, with 49 (29.2%) reporting being single and 6 (3.6%) identifying as having other marital statuses. Additionally, the distribution of participants who were registered or licensed guidance counsellors was nearly even, with 81 (48.2%) holding a license and 87 (51.8%) not holding one.

Instruments

Need support from school leaders

The Need Support at Work Scale (NSu-WS) measures employees' perception of the psychological need support provided by supervisors (Tafvelin & Stenling, 2018). It was adapted to the current study and counsellors were asked to think about the extent to which their school leaders/work supervisors supported their need for autonomy (e.g. "tries to understand my perspective before stating his/her opinion"), competence (e.g. "provides me with the support I need to develop at work"); and relatedness (e.g. "shows that he/she really listens to what I have to say"). The internal consistencies of the competence-support, autonomy-support, and relatedness-support subscales are .94, .90, and .95, respectively. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted and the construct validity of the NSu-WS is supported by its 3-factor structure: $SB\chi^2(51) = 84.736$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .08 (90% CI [.05, .10]), CFI = .978, TLI = .971, and SRMR = .026.

Basic needs satisfaction

Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction Scale (W-BNS) assesses the degree to which individuals perceive their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as satisfied in their work environment (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). The internal consistencies of the competence, autonomy, and relatedness needs satisfaction are .85, .85, and .89, respectively. Sample items include "I feel competent at my job" (competence), "I feel free to do my job the way I think it could best be done" (autonomy), and "At work, I feel part of a group" (relatedness). CFA found that the construct validity of the W-BNS is supported by its 3-factor structure: $SB\chi^2(24) = 44.433$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .08 (90% CI [.04, .12]), CFI = .972, TLI = .958, and SRMR = .034.

Engagement

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) measures levels of work engagement, which is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The internal consistencies of engagement, dedication, and absorption subscales are .50, .77, and .65, respectively. Sample items include "At my work, I feel bursting with energy" (vigour), "I am enthusiastic about my job" (dedication), and "I am immersed in my work" (absorption). CFA indicated that the construct validity of the UWES is supported by its 3-factor structure: $SB\chi^2(23) = 46.879$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .09 (90% CI [.05, .12]), CFI = .944, TLI = .913, and SRMR = .062.

Wellbeing

The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) assesses emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing (Keyes, 2005). The internal consistencies of the emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing subscales are .86, .87, and .88, respectively. Sample items include "During the past month, how often did you feel happy?" (emotional wellbeing), "During the past month, how often did you feel that you had something important to contribute to society?" (psychological wellbeing), and "During the past month, how often did you feel that you belonged to a community?" (social wellbeing). The construct validity of the MHC-SF is supported by its 3-factor structure as evidenced by the CFA: $SB\chi^2(72) = 148.674$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .09 (90% CI [.08, .11]), CFI = .939, TLI = .923, and SRMR = .057.

Data analysis

Assumption testing

Prior to analysis, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and the assumption of multivariate normality to ensure the appropriateness of the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The dataset included responses from 168 participants on various constructs related to engagement, wellbeing, need satisfaction, and perceived need support. It is generally recognised that

skewness between -2 to $+2$, and kurtosis between -7 to $+7$ are acceptable (Curran et al., 1996; West et al., 1995). In this study, univariate skewness ranged from -1.04 to -0.02 , and kurtosis from -0.90 to 2.11 , indicating that these values were within the acceptable ranges (see also Kline, 2023).

Bivariate correlations among indicators were examined to assess multicollinearity. Within-construct correlations were high (Need Support subscales: $r = .86$ to $.90$; Needs Satisfaction subscales: $r = .82$ to $.89$; Engagement subscales: $r = .60$ to $.63$; Wellbeing subscales: $r = .65$ to $.76$), which were consistent with the theory but no correlations exceeded $.95$, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. We employed robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimation using lavaan (version 0.6-19), which provides Satorra-Bentler corrected statistics appropriate for non-normal data (Savalei, 2014). We additionally conducted bootstrap analyses with 5,000 resamples using bias-corrected confidence intervals, which closely matched MLR estimates, supporting the robustness of our findings.

Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to examine the construct validity of each of the scales used. We created subscale composites by averaging items within theoretically-defined dimensions: Need Support (Autonomy support, Competence support, Relatedness support; 4 items each; $\alpha = .90, .94, .95$), Needs Satisfaction (Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness; $\alpha = .85, .85, .89$), Engagement (Vigour, Dedication, Absorption; 3 items each; $\alpha = .50, .77, .65$), and Wellbeing (Emotional, Psychological, Social wellbeing; 3–6 items each; $\alpha = .86, .87, .88$). These composites served as indicators in our SEM.

This approach differs from arbitrary item parcelling, as it preserves validated multidimensional structures established in the original scale development literature (Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Using subscale-level indicators (12 total) rather than individual items (36+) improved the observation-to-indicator ratio from 4.7:1 to 14:1, while maintaining theoretical interpretability and leveraging the reliability advantages of composite scores (Little et al., 2013; Matsunaga, 2008).

A full measurement model was then tested which included four key latent variables: *need support* (measured by autonomy support, competence support, and relatedness support); *basic psychological needs satisfaction* (measured by the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness); *well-being* (measured by emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing); and *engagement* (measured by vigour, absorption, and dedication). Our measurement model analyses confirmed strong factor loadings for all subscale indicators (.602 to .949).

Structural model

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was conducted to test the linkages among the variables. A mediation model was specified to investigate the direct, indirect, and total effects of perceived need support on engagement and wellbeing, mediated by need satisfaction. The structural model proposed direct paths from Need Support to Need Satisfaction, and from both Need Support and Need Satisfaction to Engagement and Wellbeing. Indirect effects of Need Support on Engagement and Wellbeing through Need Satisfaction were also specified, along with the total effects of Need Support on these outcomes.

The SEM analysis was performed using the Maximum Likelihood Robust (MLR) estimator given the variations in normality identified in assumption testing. MLR estimation provides Satorra-Bentler corrected statistics appropriate for non-normal data (Savalei, 2014). Satorra-Bentler scaled test statistic was used to obtain Satorra-Bentler chi-square tests ($SB\chi^2$). The model's fit was evaluated using several robust fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Additionally, bootstrap (5000) confidence intervals were computed for the indirect and total effects to assess the stability of these estimates. The

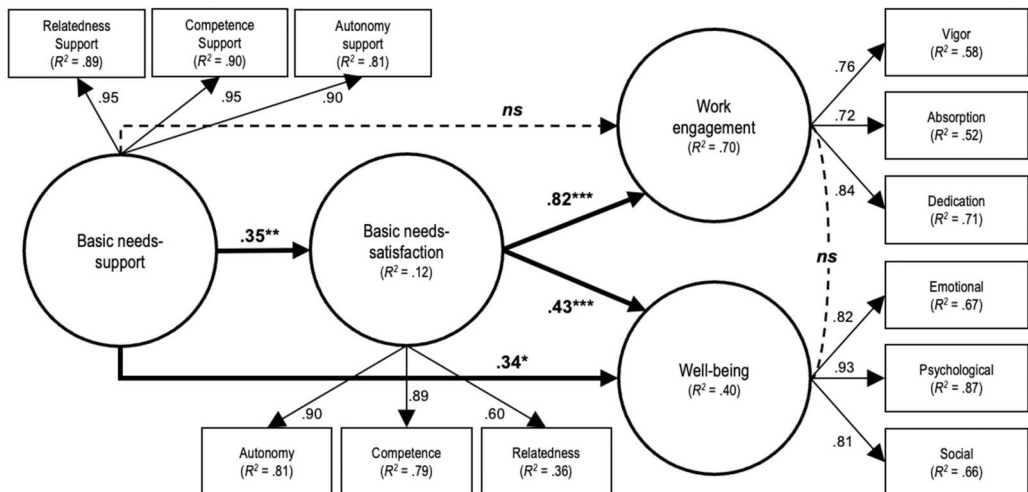
bootstrap results closely matched MLR estimates, supporting the robustness of our findings. The data analysis was conducted using the lavaan package in R (version 0.6-16).

Results

Bivariate and descriptive statistics are given in Table 1. The structural equation model (see Fig. 1) examined the direct, indirect, and total effects of perceived need support on engagement and wellbeing, mediated by need satisfaction. The fit of the model was acceptable, as indicated by the following fit indices: $SB\chi^2(48) = 112.147$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .10 (90% CI [.07, .12]), CFI = .951, TLI = .932, and SRMR = .087, suggesting a reasonably good fit between the model and the data. Direct effects analysis revealed that perceived need support significantly predicted need satisfaction (standardised $\beta = .345$, $SE = .109$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.161, .589]). Subsequently, need satisfaction demonstrated a significant positive influence on both engagement (standardised $\beta = .824$, $SE = .078$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.534, .839]) and wellbeing (standardised $\beta = .432$, $SE = .077$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.162, .461]). Perceived need support was found to be significantly associated with wellbeing (standardised $\beta = .335$, $SE = .090$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.092, .447]) but not with engagement (standardised $\beta = .039$, $SE = .074$, $p = .634$, 95% CI [−.126, .169]).

The indirect effects underscored that need support impacted engagement (standardised $\beta = .284$, $SE = .076$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.127, .428]) and wellbeing (standardised $\beta = .149$, $SE = .039$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.059, .212]) through need satisfaction. These standardised indirect effects indicate that need support influences engagement (standardised indirect effect = .284) and wellbeing (standardised indirect effect = .149) via the mediating pathway of need satisfaction. This suggests that the pathway through which perceived need support affects these outcomes operates both fully and partially via need satisfaction, highlighting the nuanced role of need satisfaction as a mediator. Total effects demonstrated that perceived need support had a notable overall impact on engagement (standardised $\beta = .323$, $SE = .070$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.158, .432]) and on wellbeing (standardised $\beta = .484$, $SE = .090$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.217, .568]). These effects encompass both direct and mediated pathways from perceived need support to the outcome measures, showing that while the direct

Figure 1. Structural equation model testing the mediating role of needs satisfaction between needs support and wellbeing and engagement.



Note. $***p < 0.0001$; $**p < 0.001$; $*p < 0.01$; dashed lines indicate non-significant effects. All factor loadings are significant at $p < .01$.

Table 1. Zero-order correlations, descriptive and normality statistics.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Autonomy Support	–															
2. Competence Support	0.86***	–														
3. Relatedness Support	0.85***	0.90***	–													
4. <i>Basic Needs Support</i>	0.94***	0.96***	0.96***	–												
5. Autonomy	0.28***	0.26***	0.31***	0.30***	–											
6. Competence	0.23**	0.20**	0.23**	0.23**	0.82***	–										
7. Relatedness	0.54***	0.55***	0.59***	0.59***	0.52***	0.51***	–									
8. <i>Basic Needs Satisfaction</i>	0.42***	0.40***	0.44***	0.44***	0.90***	0.89***	0.80***	–								
9. Dedication	0.26***	0.26***	0.25***	0.27***	0.65***	0.65***	0.43***	0.67***	–							
10. Absorption	0.21**	0.19*	0.18*	0.20**	0.51***	0.51***	0.41***	0.55***	0.60***	–						
11. Vigour	0.27***	0.22**	0.28***	0.27***	0.54***	0.58***	0.45***	0.60***	0.63***	0.86***	–					
12. <i>Engagement</i>	0.28***	0.26***	0.28***	0.29***	0.66***	0.68***	0.50***	0.71***	0.87***	0.85***	0.86***	–				
13. Emotional wellbeing	0.30***	0.37***	0.41***	0.38***	0.45***	0.31***	0.51***	0.50***	0.47***	0.34***	0.35***	0.45***	–			
14. Psychological wellbeing	0.39***	0.41***	0.46***	0.44***	0.46***	0.39***	0.50***	0.52***	0.40***	0.37***	0.34***	0.43***	0.76***	–		
15. Social wellbeing	0.33***	0.37***	0.39***	0.38***	0.40***	0.41***	0.43***	0.48***	0.40***	0.35***	0.33***	0.42***	0.65***	0.76***	–	
16. <i>wellbeing</i>	0.37***	0.42***	0.46***	0.44***	0.48***	0.41***	0.53***	0.55***	0.47***	0.39***	0.38***	0.48***	0.89***	0.93***	0.89***	–
Mean	3.96	3.8	3.81	3.86	4.8	4.68	4.62	4.70	4.93	4.43	4.27	4.55	5.01	5.06	4.96	5.01
SD	0.87	0.96	0.97	0.89	0.94	0.92	1.02	0.82	0.83	0.83	0.78	0.70	0.75	0.67	0.76	0.65
Skewness	–0.92	–0.67	–0.63	–0.75	–0.61	–0.34	–0.54	–0.38	–0.64	–0.02	–0.12	–0.21	–1.04	–0.93	–0.84	–0.96
Kurtosis	0.84	0	–0.24	0.29	0.29	–0.67	–0.36	–0.23	0.02	–0.9	0.25	–0.47	1.72	2.09	1.16	2.11

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Italicised text (i.e. basic needs support, basic needs satisfaction, engagement, and wellbeing) are derived from the average of their individual components.

effect of perceived need support on wellbeing is significant, its impact on engagement primarily occurs through the mediation of need satisfaction.

Discussion

Using SDT as a conceptual framework, we investigated the role of perceived psychological needs-support by school leaders in the wellbeing and work engagement of school counsellors in the Philippines. Our findings confirmed our hypothesis that perceived need supportive leadership is associated with greater wellbeing and engagement. Need satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between need support and engagement, but only partially mediated that between need support and wellbeing. This conclusion extends previous research findings that perceived need supportive leadership is associated with wellbeing (Haw et al., 2024) to the field of school counsellors in the Global South. The findings highlight the importance of leadership practices in supporting (or thwarting) counsellors' need satisfaction, and in accounting for their work engagement and overall wellbeing. In the Philippines, school counselling is less well developed than in the Global North and, therefore, less well understood by school leaders, who are more likely to engage in practices that are not supportive of counsellors' engagement and wellbeing (Harrison et al., 2023), potentially undermining counsellors' basic psychological needs.

Autonomy supportive leadership involves empowering counsellors to take an active role in decision making in the domains of policy and practice related to student wellbeing. Research has shown that autonomy supportive leadership is positively associated with wellbeing and positive work behaviours (Slemp et al., 2018; Slemp et al., 2020). The American School Counselors' Association (2019) describes school counsellors as agents of systemic change. In the high power-distance and collectivist society of the Philippines, school hierarchies are strong and associated with social harmony. As such, directive, top-down leadership styles are ubiquitous, and it may not be feasible or culturally appropriate for counsellors to have positional power or formal influence in a school setting. Indeed, Filipino counsellors' need for autonomy may not be as strong as that in more individualistic societies. However, research suggests that when school counsellors in the Philippines are more involved in collaborative decision making, they experience greater satisfaction in their work, and that school leaders' lack of knowledge about counselling thwarts their ability to contribute to the school effectively (David, 2019).

Competence supportive leadership is concerned with addressing issues of identity and purpose. Even in the Global North, where school counselling is well established, counsellors experience role conflict, role ambiguity, and inadequate supervision (Blake, 2020; Hemi & Maor, 2023; Langston & Van Gordon, 2024). These experiences have been shown to impact job satisfaction and intention to leave among mental health employees (Acker, 2004; Yanchus et al., 2017), and are magnified in the Global South, where counsellors commonly work in environments which are not supportive of their competence. For example, they often experience high levels of role conflict and role ambiguity, are assigned inappropriate roles by supervisors, receive poor supervisory support, are provided with limited opportunities for professional development, and have a weak professional identity (Hamelin et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Hemi & Maor, 2023; Larran & Hein, 2024).

The provision of relatedness supportive leadership relies on school leaders' ability to build a collaborative and collegial school climate. The importance of a feeling connected to others – including work supervisors – within their school community has been identified as a predictor of lower turnover intention and lower rates of burnout (Acker, 2004; Dose et al., 2023; Greenham et al., 2019) and higher levels of wellbeing (Langston & Van Gordon, 2024) in school counsellors. Counsellors are usually strongly embedded into the school ecosystem, maintaining relationships with different stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Because of this, relatedness-support may be especially important for counsellors' wellbeing, perhaps even more so within the cultural context of the Philippines, where the self is construed more in relation to other people than is that case in Western cultures, which tend to be more individualistic. Prior studies in the

Philippines have also emphasised that relatedness support is critical in that cultural context, and in some cases were more salient than autonomy and competence support (e.g. King, 2015; King & McInerney, 2019; Haw et al., 2024). Indeed, the importance of counsellors' relationships with school principals in the Philippines has been highlighted as an important contributor of their engagement and effectiveness, and in maximising counsellors' participation in and contribution to the school (David, 2019). This said, research in China found that relatedness support was less central to school counsellors' occupational wellbeing than autonomy and competence support (Feng et al., 2024). The reasons for this difference may be cultural, organisational, or related to the roles of counsellors in different locations. For example, China's Confucian cultural context places a stronger emphasis on competence and mastery compared to the Philippines' Southeast Asian cultural context (Schwartz, 2014).

In summary, adopting SDT as a theoretical perspective highlights the importance of school leaders in providing a school environment which satisfies counsellors' basic psychological needs. When counsellors experience need-supportive leadership, they also experience greater autonomy, competence, and relatedness which, in turn, leads to higher levels of work engagement and wellbeing.

Implications

To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the influence of perceived need supportive leadership on wellbeing and engagement among school counsellors in Southeast Asia from the perspective of SDT. The findings build on research which has applied SDT to the impact of school leadership on teachers' wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Haw et al., 2024), and on research in the area of school counsellors' wellbeing, which has suggested that wellbeing can be supported or thwarted by school level factors (Feng et al., 2024; Hascher & Weber, 2019; Şimşir Gökalp, 2022; Wells & Archibald, 2023). The study suggests that SDT is a useful theoretical perspective linking leadership practices to counsellors' wellbeing and engagement through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, opening up possibilities for future research into the specific need satisfying functions of such workplace experiences as dual and unclear roles, weak professional identities, marginalised positions in schools, a lack of career progression, and low salaries, which have previously been shown to be associated with low motivation, burnout, and turnover intention in school counsellors (Hamelin et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Hemi & Maor, 2023).

The study has practical implications for school counsellors and leaders. In particular, the study highlights the importance of both counsellors and school leaders working together and taking active steps to create alliances and giving counsellors a sense that they are valued and cared about. The influence of principals, directors of guidance and counselling, and other managerial supervisors in supporting counsellors' basic psychological needs lies in how they address school level factors related to counsellors' work. Counsellors should recognise the role of leadership behaviours in satisfying basic needs, leading to higher work engagement and wellbeing. By considering how leadership practices align with the tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), counsellors can advocate for supportive environments.

Counsellors and school leaders can collaborate to support counsellors' need for competence by considering ways to improve role clarity and role appropriateness, providing clear role descriptions, the assigning of appropriate duties matching their training and expertise, and the provision ongoing professional development and clinical supervision. Counsellors' need for autonomy can be better supported by greater empowerment in decision making related to counselling services. In high power-distance contexts, such as that of the Philippine, counsellors may experience limited direct influence. Relatedness support can be enacted by establishing and maintain strong workplace relationships. Relatedness support may be particularly important for school counsellors, given the nature of their role and the collectivist nature of Southeast Asian cultures. As David (2019) highlights, collaboration, cooperation, and genuine partnerships with principals are greatly valued by

counsellors although, in the cultural setting of the Philippines, such relationships can be difficult to establish, given the hierarchical nature of management in schools (Harrison et al., 2023). However, given the inherently relational nature of their work, counsellors are well placed to initiate relationship-building efforts and to cultivate a collegial climate, particularly important in collectivist cultures where relatedness may outweigh autonomy needs. Through the development of good relationships with school leaders, they can become involved in collaborative decision-making on policies pertaining to counselling and student wellbeing.

Limitations and directions for further research

The present study had several limitations. First, all our data were based on self-report measures. Though self-reports have been the most common method of data collection in the domain of wellbeing and engagement, other types of data could be collected to triangulate the information. For example, observations about leadership behaviours or peer-reports could be used.

Second, we investigated the global effects of perceived psychological need support on wellbeing and engagement. We did not differentiate between competence-support, autonomy-support, and relatedness-support, nor between the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the mediating variable. We made this decision both for theoretical and statistical reasons. Theoretically, prior studies have also focused on the global effects and have argued that global perceptions of need-support and need-satisfaction are more important than parsing them into their individual components (Howard et al., 2025). Statistically, our sample size was not very large and had we used the individual scores for each of the variables rather than the aggregate score, we needed a bigger sample size (Jobst et al., 2023). Future studies with larger sample sizes could focus on the more fine-grained distinctions among the individual dimensions.

The partial mediation of basic psychological need satisfaction between perceived need supportive leadership and wellbeing points to the presence of other mediators explaining this association, and these mediators should be identified. As a preliminary study, our findings were limited in scope, and a more comprehensive exploration of the determinants and mediators of wellbeing and work engagement is needed. Relatedly, while our sample size exceeded the minimum required to detect medium effect sizes and our focal indirect effects showed medium effect sizes with statistically significant bootstrap confidence, future research should replicate these findings with larger samples to enhance generalizability and enable detection of smaller effect sizes. The study employed convenience sampling through social media recruitment, which can limit the generalizability of the findings. Our sample may not be representative of all school counsellors in the Philippines, as participation was limited to those who were active on the PGCA Facebook page, had access to the internet, and chose to respond. Nevertheless, Facebook penetration in the Philippines higher than the global average, which made this approach reasonable in the Philippine context. Future research can employ other sampling approaches such as random, stratified, or purposive sampling approaches to enhance representativeness and generalizability of findings.

The influence of cultural characteristics on need satisfaction should be explored in greater depth. Counsellors in the Global South may have a lower need for autonomy, and a higher need for relatedness, given the high-power distance and collectivist nature of Asian societies. However, these assertions are speculative and further studies should investigate the relative importance of different psychological needs within the cultural settings of the Global South. In particular, given the mixed findings on relational support in previous studies (David, 2019; Feng et al., 2024), research into the role of individual psychological needs is warranted. The study's sample was drawn from one country, and future studies should extend this research to a wider range of countries to test the robustness of the findings across different contexts, given the variety of cultural settings within the region. Finally, the methodology was entirely quantitative, and so there was an inevitable

limit to the nuance of the findings. Qualitative research would extend our understanding of counsellors' lived experiences.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the association between perceived psychological need support provided by school leaders and counsellors' wellbeing and work engagement in Southeast Asia. This study demonstrates the critical role of need-supportive leadership in enhancing the wellbeing and work engagement of school counsellors in the Philippines. The study extends the application of SDT to school counsellors in the region, corroborating the theory and highlighting the importance of basic needs satisfaction in promoting work engagement and overall wellbeing. School leaders have the power to create a more supportive school environment for school counsellors. When counsellors' basic needs are met by school leaders through actions such as giving them the freedom to utilise their skills in appropriate roles, enabling them to contribute to school policy, and developing strong relationships, they are more likely to experience increased psychological need satisfaction which could then lead to better wellbeing and engagement, potentially making counselling more effective and better supporting the needs of young people in the region.

Note

1. Post-hoc sample size calculations using Soper's (2023) sample size calculator for SEM indicated that for a model with four latent variables and 12 observed indicators, detecting medium effect sizes ($d = 0.3$) with 80% power at $\alpha = .05$ requires $N = 137$. Our sample of $N = 168$ exceeded this threshold. Given that our observed indirect effects were medium in magnitude (standardized effects of .284 and .149 for the paths from need support to engagement and well-being through need satisfaction, respectively), our sample size was adequate for detecting the effects of theoretical interest.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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