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Teachers' and Counsellors' Views on School Protective Factors for Children With Complex Needs

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Primary school is an important environment that can serve as a protective factor in children's lives, which is especially important for those facing complex and vulnerable circumstances. International and domestic studies highlight the importance of strengthening protective factors in schools, creating a supportive environment, and providing timely and diverse support mechanisms. The objective of the present study was to examine the protective factors identified by teachers and school counsellors to address the complex needs of children in school, as well as the limitations and obstacles to their implementation. A proposal for necessary changes to ensure timely support and reduce risks is also highlighted. Ten semi-structured interviews with teachers and counsellors were conducted, followed by thematic analysis to gather the perspectives of the respondents on supporting children with complex needs. The analysis revealed the important role of establishing trusting relationships with children in complex life situations. At the relational level, the importance of collaborative relationships with parents and external institutions was identified. The necessity of systematically integrated preventive activities within schools to strengthen protective factors was recognised. The question of formal disciplinary warnings and existing support of assistants for children with emotional and behavioural disorders in schools were critically discussed. The analysis revealed recommendations to overcome these obstacles, including appropriate education programmes for teachers and school counsellors, supervision, developing a culture of cooperation with parents, and establishing coordinated and harmonised support networks.

Keywords: children with complex needs, primary school, protective factors, teachers and school counsellors

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Perspektive učiteljev in šolskih svetovalnih delavcev o varovalnih dejavnikih v šoli pri delu z otroki s kompleksnimi potrebami

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~ Osnovna šola predstavlja pomembno okolje, ki lahko deluje kot varovalni dejavnik v življenju otrok, kar je še posebej pomembno za tiste, ki se spoprijemajo s kompleksnimi potrebami in z ranljivimi življenjskimi okoliščinami. Mednarodne in domače raziskave poudarjajo pomen krepitve varovalnih dejavnikov v šolskem okolju, ustvarjanja podpornega in vključujočega okolja ter zagotavljanja pravočasnih in raznolikih oblik podpore. Namen študije je bil preučiti varovalne dejavnike, ki jih učitelji in šolski svetovalni delavci pri svojem delu prepoznavajo kot ključne pri podpori otrokom s kompleksnimi potrebami, ter raziskati omejitve in ovire pri njihovem uresničevanju. Posebna pozornost je bila namenjena tudi predlogom za spremembe, ki bi omogočile pravočasnejšo podporo in učinkovitejše zmanjševanje dejavnikov tveganja. Izvedenih je bilo deset polstrukturiranih intervjujev z učitelji in s šolskimi svetovalnimi delavci, podatki pa so bili analizirani z metodo tematske analize. Rezultati so pokazali, da ima vzpostavljanje zaupanja vrednih odnosov z otroki v kompleksnih življenjskih situacijah osrednjo vlogo pri zagotavljanju učinkovite podpore. Na ravni sodelovanja je bil poudarjen pomen partnerskih odnosov s starši in strokovnjaki iz zunanjih ustanov. Udeleženci so z namenom krepitve varovalnih dejavnikov poudarili tudi potrebo po sistematičnem vključevanju preventivnih dejavnosti v šolsko delo. Kritično so se opredelili do uporabe vzgojnih opominov in do obstoječe oblike podpore spremljevalcev, posebej za učence s čustvenimi in vedenjskimi motnjami. Analiza je oblikovala več priporočil za preseganje ugotovljenih ovir, med katerimi izstopajo: razvoj ustreznih programov strokovnega izpopolnjevanja za učitelje in šolske svetovalne delavce, zagotavljanje supervizije, krepitev kulture sodelovanja s starši ter vzpostavitev bolj usklajenih in povezanih podpornih mrež.

Ključne besede: otroci s kompleksnimi potrebami, osnovna šola, varovalni dejavniki, učitelji, šolski svetovalni delavci

Introduction

Education systems emphasise inclusivity, equity, cooperation and safe learning environments for all students (UNESCO, 2021; Vogrinc et al., 2024). However, schools continue to face challenges related to performance pressure, inequalities and increasing segregation (Razpotnik & Leskošek, 2024). Slovenia is among the European countries developing inclusive education that integrates mainstream and special education, based on additional professional support. However, challenges remain in implementing a comprehensive approach (Vršnik Perše et al., 2016).

Primary schools are environments for diverse groups of children, including children with complex needs who experience difficulties in various areas of life, often combining psychosocial wellbeing and mental health problems, learning difficulties, family problems, issues arising from their socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and other aspects of vulnerability. This group of children requires a holistic, interdisciplinary and integrated approach (Razpotnik et al., 2024; Van den Steene et al., 2019). Slovenian and international studies report an increase in psychosocial distress and mental health problems among young people, as well as long waiting lists for specialised treatments (e.g., Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2023; Valentine et al., 2024). As access to specialised treatments is limited, primary schools, which include all children, play a key role in identifying distress and providing timely support. Appropriate support can prevent the development of mental disorders in adulthood (Mikuš Kos, 2024).

In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of protective factors that strengthen children's resilience when exposed to risk factors and reduce the risk of adverse outcomes (Mikuš Kos, 2017; Ungar, 2016). Ungar (2016) notes that the decisive factor for children with complex needs who are exposed to greater risks is the support system in the young person's environment rather than individual characteristics.

A study by Razpotnik and Rapuš Pavel (2023) found that young people experiencing psychosocial distress frequently emphasised the strong personal involvement of school professionals as a source of support. Similar findings have been reported in international studies (Gallagher et al., 2019; Bussemakers & Denessen, 2024), confirming that supportive relationships between teachers and students help mitigate negative behavioural outcomes. The school counselling service, which in the Slovenian context is an autonomous professional service within schools, plays a crucial role in the timely identification of needs and the rapid provision of assistance to individual children in cooperation with teachers, parents and external institutions. In addition, it provides professional support

at the class level and participates in educational and preventive activities at the school level (Rupar et al., 2024). Social pedagogues, as part of the school counselling service, focus on addressing social distress and preventing social exclusion, which is particularly valuable for students at risk of marginalisation (Anderberg, 2020). Teachers play an important role in this regard, as they are often the first to recognise children's problems through their daily interactions at school (O'Farrell et al., 2023).

When schools fail to recognise distress and respond to children's needs, the school environment can become an additional stressor or even the sole risk factor in the child's life (Mikuš Kos, 2017). Research indicates that less than a quarter of adolescents in Slovenia like school (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2023), and that almost a fifth of Slovenian sixth and eighth graders experience severe stress at, or related to, school (Rupnik Vec & Slivar, 2019).

Review and empirical studies report various limitations of protective strategies for children with complex needs. Regarding internal school factors, the key issues identified include a lack of professional competence among teachers, unclear teacher roles when working with children with complex needs, and the perception that these needs exceed teachers' professional responsibilities (Dekleva et al., 2018; O'Farrell et al., 2023). Schmidt and Čagran (2011) highlight teachers' experiences of stress when working with students with behavioural difficulties, based on findings from a study conducted with teachers. Razpotnik and Rapuš Pavel (2023) present the perspective of young people, who observe the limited interest of some educators in addressing children's distress, a prevailing focus on academic achievement, and a school culture that does not prioritise or allocate time to mental health. In relation to parents, studies (Dekleva et al., 2018; O'Farrell et al., 2023; Poredoš et al., 2024) identify obstacles related to parents' willingness to cooperate and the quality of teachers' collaboration with parents. At the systemic level, issues such as staff shortages in schools, limited access to external institutions, and a lack of connection and coordination between institutions are highlighted (Dekleva et al., 2018; O'Farrell et al., 2023).

Perspective on Future Changes

UNESCO (2021) emphasises the need for changes in school culture towards greater cooperation, solidarity, respect for diversity and the inclusion of all children, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable. As an interdisciplinary science, social pedagogy can strengthen a perspective focused on the individual's world within the school context and create opportunities to implement inclusive principles. The importance of this issue is further demonstrated by a research project of the Slovenian Ministry of Education (Razpotnik, 2024),

which aims to identify the complex needs of children and young people, and to develop guidelines for more modern forms of support. The present article presents some results of this project.

Teachers and school counsellors are often the first, and sometimes the only, professionals able to offer support to children in complex life situations. Therefore, the aim of the present research is to examine the protective factors identified by teachers and school counsellors, as well as the limitations in addressing the complex needs of children in school. We are also interested in recommendations for overcoming the identified limitations and improving support for these children. In line with this objective, the following research questions were posed:

1. Which protective factors and limitations in the school environment are identified when supporting children with complex needs?
 - the perspective of teachers
 - the perspective of school counsellors
2. What measures do teachers and school counsellors suggest for overcoming obstacles and limitations in supporting children with complex needs?

Method

The present study uses a qualitative approach in order to explore the perspectives and understand the experiences, views and behaviours of teachers and counsellors who work with children with complex needs in schools.

Participants

A non-random convenience sample was used. Schools from the central Slovenian region with which we had previously collaborated in educational research were invited to participate. This enabled us to gain access to teachers and counsellors to conduct data collection. Ten teachers and school counsellors from five Slovenian primary schools took part in the study, all of whom were working with children with complex needs. Nine of them were female and one was male. Five of the participants worked for school counselling services (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5) and five were teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5). In the subgroup of teachers, there were three classroom and two subject teachers. In the subgroup of school counsellors there were two psychologists, one social pedagogue, one social worker and one pedagogue. The participants' average work experience was 13.8 years.

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This enabled us to focus on the research questions while remaining sufficiently open to gain

an in-depth understanding of the participants' individual experiences and subjective views. By describing specific practical examples, the participants shared their experiences of working with children they assessed as being in vulnerable life situations. The interviews addressed the following topics: identification of the current situation of children with complex needs in primary school; unaddressed needs and circumstances that hinder adequate support; experiences of cooperation between different professions; presentation of practices; and perceived support and cooperation. The interviews were conducted by the authors between April and June 2025.

Data Analysis

Verbatim transcripts of the ten interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), employing a combined inductive-deductive coding approach. The inductive approach enabled us to identify the themes that emerged from the empirical data, while the deductive approach allowed us to structure the analysis according to the research questions.

Results

Protective Factors and Limitations in Working With Children With Complex Needs From the Perspective of Teachers and School Counsellors

Based on the interviews conducted with the participating teachers and school counsellors, the main themes were identified through thematic analysis. Codes relating to protective factors and limitations were initially identified separately then grouped into overarching themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' and school counsellors' experiences. The findings are illustrated with selected quotations that reflect authentic participant perspectives.

The Perspective of Teachers

Based on the five interviews conducted with primary school teachers, four main themes were identified: (1) teachers' personal commitment and the creation of a safe relationship; (2) a supportive school environment; (3) cooperation with parents; and (4) the role of the school counselling service and external institutions.

Teacher's Personal Commitment and the Creation of a Safe Relationship

One of the main protective strategies in the first thematic category is personal commitment and viewing one's profession as a mission (T1, T2, T3, T4). The teachers link their mission to creating a safe space and secure relationships, which they state are essential for students to develop social and learning skills. Several teachers (T1, T3, T5) repeatedly highlight the importance of their own wellbeing as crucial for managing behavioural and emotional distress. Two teachers (T2, T4) report from experience that children may express distress through disruptive behaviour and by frequently testing boundaries. Most of the teachers (T1, T2, T3, T5) identify emotional warmth and relationships with the teacher as an important protective factor. One teacher (T5) has established a ritual at the end of the day whereby the children can choose how to say goodbye, which has become a symbol of trust in the relationship. All of the teachers highlight the fact that lack of time and overload prevent them from continuously supporting each child. At the same time, some of the teachers (T3, T4, T5) report feelings of exhaustion when working with children with complex needs. Some (T1, T3, T5) also note that creating a safe environment for children in distress is sometimes more challenging due to differing views and uncoordinated approaches among teachers at the school. The following statement illustrates the importance of building a secure relationship between the teacher and the children in the classroom:

"But I think that, as a class teacher, I want all of my students to feel safe here, so that if they have a problem they come to me and we solve it together. I say the same thing to the student [with complex needs]: we always look for solutions, we talk and that's how I build a secure relationship with him." (T4)

Supportive School Environment

All of the surveyed teachers mention adapted teaching plans that take into account the specific needs and life situations of the child. When adapting to the child, they follow the principle of gradual progress; even if the child initially shows low motivation or behavioural problems, they seek ways to help them progress. All of the teachers state that individualised approaches leading to good learning outcomes require the active participation of parents and other school staff. They provide various examples of how they have adapted flexible teaching methods to the children by considering their abilities, potential and current difficult life circumstances. Some teachers (T1, T4, T5) report that flexible and individualised teaching methods conflict with the school's performance-oriented approach, which limits the activities from which the children benefit, such as more conversation and cooperation in everyday school activities. Some (T1, T2, T4)

highlight the importance of good coordination and cooperation among those involved in the child's support network as a protective factor. In this context, several teachers (T2, T4, T5) identify various obstacles to the child's cooperation with assistants for children with emotional and behavioural disorders. In order to strengthen the safe learning environment, two teachers (T2, T4) emphasise the importance of preventive activities. At the same time, some teachers (T1, T2, T5) also note the risk of inconsistency among teachers when implementing these activities in school. Only one teacher (T4) mentions taking part in training on preventive programmes, which helped her in working with the class. The following statement provides an example of a child's interaction with an assistant for children with emotional and behavioural disorders:

"The child doesn't want a personal assistant and doesn't accept him ... he can't stand him ... Other parents ask where the assistant was at that time [when there are problems in class]. However, the school leadership decided that the assistant must be present at all times to withstand pressure from other parents." (T4)

Cooperation With Parents

Most of the surveyed teachers (T1, T2, T4, T5) emphasise the importance of building relationships with parents through sensitivity and a personal approach. Some (T1, T2, T5) note that when parents consistently follow instructions and agreements, positive results are observed, even in children with greater difficulties. All of the teachers acknowledge the challenges posed by vulnerable family circumstances (e.g., absence of parents, domestic violence, replacing personal closeness with material goods), which make cooperation and the protection of the children's interests more difficult. Some teachers report that cooperation is particularly challenging with parents who have a lower level of education (T1, T5) or where there are differences in views between the parents and the school (T4). The following statement illustrates one teacher's personal approach and efforts to partnership with parents:

"If you share your own experience, or if you call them without waiting for them to call you, you tell them what we're going to do together. In this way, I think it's much easier to cooperate." (T2)

The Role of the School Counselling Service and External Institutions

The school counselling service was presented to all of the participating teachers as an important source of support for both students and staff. In complex cases (e.g., domestic violence), all of the teachers underline the importance of effective cooperation with the counselling service and liaising with external

institutions, but note that they encounter greater difficulties with the latter. Some teachers (T1, T3, T5) report that the complex bureaucratic procedures required to activate support consume too much of their time. Bureaucratic procedures can even prevent certain support interventions involving external services from being initiated (T5). Several teachers (T1, T2, T5) state that they receive little or no feedback from external professional services. The support provided to children and families at home by the mobile preventive social-pedagogical service is highlighted as a positive experience (T2, T5). Two teachers (T1, T2) consider involving children in social programmes run by volunteers from various organisations and institutions as a protective strategy. However, limitations to networking arise when children lack transportation to these organisations (T1). Some teachers (T1, T2, T5) recognise limitations in the support available within the school, as the counselling service cannot provide children with more continuous assistance. All of the teachers report a lack of coordination between the school and external institutions, so the effects of support at school can be negated in the long term. The following statement illustrates the inconsistency between the interventions of the school and external institutions:

“Unfortunately, I haven’t had the best experience here ... it took two months for the Centre for Social Work to come and conduct interviews after I reported violence against a child in the family ... A huge amount of bureaucratic work for such a miserable result.” (T5)

The Perspective of School Counsellors

Based on the five interviews conducted with school counsellors in primary schools, five themes were identified through thematic analysis. These reveal protective factors and highlight their limitations when working with children with complex needs: (1) a trusting relationship; (2) professional practice, competence and experience; (3) parental support and cooperation; (4) preventive and support programmes at school; and (5) interdisciplinary work and cooperation with external institutions. Below we present quotes that illustrate the authentic experiences of the counsellors.

A Trusting Relationship

All of the school counsellors emphasise that when providing support, it is essential to establish a trusting relationship with the child. Some (C1, C2, C5) recognise the role of caring class or subject teachers who have built a good relationship and trust with the child, while some (C1, C2, C3) stress the importance of continuity in meetings with the child to maintain a trusting relationship but

report being hindered by a lack of time. The statement below illustrates the importance of regular meetings with the child to maintain a trusting relationship:

"... I met with her once a week ... so she could calm down a bit, so she had someone to talk to, so she could get her worries off her chest ... she can come to me ... we try to change these people [who support her in school] as little as possible, because we already have an established relationship, and she knows us and feels relaxed around us." (C2)

Professional Practice, Competence and Experience

All of the surveyed school counsellors report diverse professional approaches to working with children in difficulty, drawing on each child's strengths and potential. In their counselling work, they use environmental adaptations and various aids. In the most difficult cases, two of them (C1, C4) report choosing to act in the best interests of the child rather than following the rigid bureaucratic framework of formal disciplinary warnings. The same counsellors (C1, C4) note that some teachers lack knowledge of child development and the specific expertise required to address the complex needs of children, which hinders the effective implementation of individualised adaptation. Some counsellors (C3, C4, C5) observe a lack of motivation for further training among some teachers. They (C3, C4, C5) also highlight the problem of inconsistent approaches and expectations among some teachers, which sometimes limits positive outcomes for the child. The statement below illustrates one school counsellor's view on inconsistency in the teacher's approach to the child:

"In my opinion, sometimes the teacher causes disruptive behaviour in the student. Sometimes they also expect children to be 'statues' in the classroom, all sitting quietly and peacefully." (C4)

Cooperation and Support for Parents

All of the participating school counsellors state that good cooperation with parents enables a faster response to behavioural or emotional problems in children. Some (C2, C3, C5) maintain contact with parents by reporting on the child's progress. All of the counsellors support parents by providing them with information and encouraging their participation in preventive activities as well as therapeutic or counselling programmes. One school counsellor (C2) finds the support to be most effective when the child is also involved in the parent-teacher meetings. Problems with cooperation arise in some single-parent families or families with a low socioeconomic status (C1) due to the parents' lack of educational competence (C3, C5) and differing views and values regarding education (C1, C3, C4, C5). The following statement illustrates the discrepancy in how the

child is seen between the parents and the counsellor:

“The parents don’t notice; they claim that everything is fine at home. I’ve experienced that parents are very hostile towards the school, even though their child is violent. For them, the school is to blame for everything.” (C3)

Preventive and Supportive Programmes at School

All of the surveyed school counsellors state that they recognise the potential of school prevention, which can address problems at an early stage. Schools implement a wide range of preventive activities and programmes to develop emotional and social skills. However, limitations may arise regarding children’s motivation, as two school counsellors (C1, C3) note that the responsiveness to such activities varies. Several counsellors (C3, C4, C5) also point out the overload suffered by some teachers and their lack of motivation to carry out preventive activities in class. All of the school counsellors take action themselves by participating in training courses and organising workshops for students and lectures for parents, although some (C3, C4, C5) note low interest and participation among parents. In one case (C1), a school prevention project is highlighted, which encourages volunteering and peer assistance in learning (older students help younger ones). Most of the counsellors (C1, C3, C4, C5) emphasise the importance of school leadership in supporting preventive programmes. The following statement illustrates the recognition of the potential of school prevention:

“Children shouldn’t have to wait two years to see a clinical psychologist when they are already developing panic attacks and anxiety disorders. We could have taken preventive action much earlier. We are fortunate that all of the children are here.” (C1)

Interdisciplinary Work and Cooperation With External Institutions

Some school counsellors (C1, C2, C5) report the importance of coordination between themselves and teachers so that the children’s problems can be identified early and addressed promptly. However, most of them (C1, C2, C3, C5) highlight limitations in support due to a lack of professional staff in various fields. The effective implementation of protective strategies is hampered by the unwillingness of some teachers to cooperate in adapting to the child (C3, C4, C5). Two counsellors (C2, C3) also perceive obstacles in the support provided by assistants for children with emotional and behavioural disorders, as schools assign them responsibilities that they cannot fulfil due to a lack of knowledge. All of the counsellors point to long waiting times and limited access to free external services, which slows the protective effects of school interventions. They all report that cooperation with external institutions (e.g., Centre for Social Work, health

professionals) is often ineffective, stating unresponsiveness (C1, C2, C3, C4) or differences in the views of school staff and external institutions (C2, C5). One counsellor (C1) notes frequent changes of professionals at the Centre for Social Work, which causes cases to stall. The following statement highlights differing opinions on the seriousness of the child's situation:

"The Centre for Social Work said it's not that bad. They won't even call a team meeting. The child psychiatrist says we are to blame for everything, that the child must progress to the next grade because he's very capable, but now it looks like he'll have to repeat the grade because he can't cope and doesn't work. The mobile service [Mobile Preventive Socio-Pedagogical Service] also sent a report to the Centre for Social Work stating that the child isn't being properly cared for at home, but the Centre insists that he's not at risk." (C5)

Recommendations for Overcoming Obstacles and Changes in Working With Children With Complex Needs From the Perspective of Teachers and School Counsellors

In this section, a thematic analysis of the recommendations made by both the teachers and school counsellors is presented together due to the smaller number of recommendations from teachers, while ensuring that both perspectives remain clearly visible. Three main themes were identified: (1) system resources and organisational conditions in school; (2) cooperation with parents; and (3) cooperation with external institutions. The findings are illustrated with selected quotations that reflect authentic participant perspectives.

System Resources and Organisational Conditions in School

The proposals from some school counsellors (C2, C4, C5) include calls for greater autonomy and motivation for teachers in their educational work at school. Most of the school counsellors (C2, C3, C4, C5) emphasise the need for regular supervision for school counsellors, as the workload and expectations placed on counsellors are very high, especially in complex cases. Some teachers (T1, T2, T5) also suggest the introduction of regular professional reflection among teachers. Two school counsellors (C1, C4) submitted a proposal for teacher education, particularly in order to deepen teachers' knowledge of developmental psychology and neuropsychology. Two teachers (T1, T2) also propose selected additional education and training for working with children with complex needs. Several school counsellors (C1, C4, C5) recommend the systematic integration of school prevention, as the availability of these activities would reduce the need for

external treatment. The statement below illustrates one counsellor's suggestion regarding the need for regular supervision:

"We are not familiar with supervision at this level [for counsellors], but it is absolutely necessary for such difficult cases because, as a counsellor, you encounter the most challenging cases in education." (C4)

As part of the organisational changes, two school counsellors (C2, C3) propose reducing the number of students in classes. Some school counsellors (C1, C2, C3) propose hiring additional professionals to strengthen interdisciplinary and comprehensive support for children with complex needs at the school. All of the teachers suggest reducing administrative tasks. The statement below illustrates one counsellor's suggestion regarding hiring an additional school counsellor:

"... we would need at least two counsellors, one alone ... you know that someone is in distress, but you can't [provide support] like that." (C3)

Cooperation With Parents

Two of the surveyed school counsellors (C1, C4) propose the systematic integration of preventive programmes for parents to prevent the development of complex life stresses in children at an early stage. One school counsellor (C4) highlights the need to develop a culture of cooperation with parents to encourage their active participation. Some teachers (T1, T2, T5) also propose more parental involvement that could encourage partnership and cooperation. The statement below illustrates one school counsellor's proposal for the systematic integration of preventive work with parents:

"... Financial arrangements must be made at the national level to ensure that parents whose children are already identified as having problems in kindergarten are included in the support process about parenting ... Prevention would avoid many health problems in children. ... we would have to encourage parents to participate. ... if a child has problems, we should first work with the parents." (C1)

Cooperation With External Institutions

All of the participating teachers and school counsellors propose strengthening networking and establishing quickly accessible, flexible multidisciplinary team interventions. Most emphasise the need for a comprehensive work plan (T1, C1, C4, C5), counselling for parents (T1, T5, C1, C4) and support for teachers (T1, T2, T3, T5, C3), which would prevent the escalation and complexity of children's life situations. The following statement by one teacher highlights the importance

of networked and decentralised support:

“Networking is absolutely important. I even think that social work centres should have their own premises in the field, be mobile, present in schools and nursing homes, etc. They should be where the problem is; you take the child and go there and sit down, call the parents and don’t wait in line.” (T1)

Discussion

The present article examines teachers’ and school counsellors’ perceptions of protective factors and their limitations when working with children with complex needs. The participants were also asked for suggestions on changes that could strengthen the school’s supportive role for this vulnerable group of children. The results show that both teachers and counsellors emphasise building trusting relationships with children with complex needs and forming strong partnerships with parents. Both teachers and counsellors advocate an individualised and continuous approach. Related studies (Almqvist & Lassinantti, 2018; Demol et al., 2020) confirm that supportive relationships are crucial for positive outcomes in children with complex needs. Supportive relationships at school are often the only stable protective relationships for these children. With regard to protective factors, both groups of research participants emphasise the importance of using diverse teaching and educational approaches, highlighting the need for coordination within the school support network and with external institutions. They identify preventive work as an important protective factor when working with children with complex needs. Teachers highlight collaboration with the counselling service as an important source of support for both the children and themselves, as noted in research by Šteh et al. (2023).

Among the challenges of working with children with complex needs, teachers cite a lack of coordination among staff. School counsellors also highlight inconsistent approaches, which can limit positive outcomes for the child. When collaborating with parents, teachers often encounter communication barriers related to socioeconomic status, while counsellors identify discrepancies in parenting approaches as a significant challenge.

Teachers and school counsellors note the limitations of the support provided by assistants for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, particularly when addressing complex needs. The participants report that, in addition to the physical support defined in the Regulation on Supplementary Professional and Physical Support for Children with Special Needs (*Pravilnik o dodatni strokovni in fizični pomoči za otroke s posebnimi potrebami*, 2023), assistants often provide emotional, social and behavioural support, for which they

lack appropriate professional training. This expansion of their role can result in inappropriate forms of support and further exacerbate the distress of this group of children. This area is underexplored and requires further study.

At the interinstitutional level, teachers and school counsellors identify numerous obstacles, including long waiting times, insufficient information sharing and a lack of consistent, coordinated collaboration among institutions. As a result, interdisciplinary support measures are less effective. These limitations are particularly problematic when supporting children with complex needs, as they can exacerbate difficulties and contribute to long-term distress. These results are consistent with other studies (Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2018; Dekleva et al., 2021).

Both teachers and counsellors focus their recommendations for overcoming these obstacles on strengthening their own professional development through supervision and additional training in order to acquire the necessary competencies for working with children with complex needs. Counsellors propose changes to teacher training, suggesting it should include raising teachers' awareness of their beliefs and approaches towards children with complex needs, and equipping them with interpersonal skills, communication skills and professional knowledge so that they can better understand children's development and respond appropriately to their distress (e.g., Bogdan Zupančič & Krajncan, 2018; Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Poredoš, 2024; Schmidt & Čagran, 2011).

Proposals to enhance school support from both teachers and counsellors also emphasise the need for rapid multidisciplinary assessment of children, including both an evaluation of the situation and a support plan for the child, parents and school. Flexible and responsive support in schools is required, based on identifying children's needs without lengthy categorisation procedures by external institutions. In order to ensure effective support, the responsibilities of individual services must be clearly defined and a case coordinator appointed (e.g., Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2018). This would lead to more coordinated support for the child at various levels and prevent depending solely on individual, highly committed professionals (Razpotnik et al., 2024).

In line with a more comprehensive and flexible approach, some school counsellors in our study emphasise the need for caution when issuing formal disciplinary warnings to children with complex needs, in order to ensure that these measures take into account the child's overall situation and best interests. Official disciplinary warnings can lead to transfer to another school, thus disrupting the child's established support network, increasing their distress and jeopardising their future life path. This issue is particularly relevant in light of the amendment to the Primary School Act (*Zakon o osnovni šoli*, 2025), which extends the validity of formal disciplinary warnings in Slovenia to twelve months (previously, they

were valid only for the current school year). We agree with Jeznik et al. (2020) and argue that a restorative approach must be developed in schools, gradually moving beyond retributive measures. This can be achieved through adequate support and training for teaching staff and by transforming the entire school culture.

The participants in the present study, especially the school counsellors, emphasised the need for the systematic and continuous implementation of preventive activities and programmes in the school environment. Dekleva et al. (2021) also highlight the importance of a comprehensive preventive approach in their recommendations for further developing a support network for young people in psychosocial distress. However, our participants placed less emphasis on peer relationships and peer support, which both national and international studies identify as important protective factors for children with complex needs and as forms of prevention (e.g., Dekleva et al., 2021; Demol et al., 2020; Korkiämäki, 2016).

Conclusion

This article presents protective factors within schools, barriers to their implementation and recommendations for changes in working with children with complex needs from the perspectives of teachers and school counsellors. The findings highlight that supportive and trusting relationships with children, strong partnerships with parents, and individualised, continuous support through coordinated collaboration between schools and external institutions are key protective factors in school settings.

The analysis identifies several barriers to effective support for children with complex needs, including insufficient coordination among school staff, inconsistent professional approaches, and challenges in relationships and communication, particularly in cooperation with parents. Additional obstacles were found at the interinstitutional level, such as long waiting times, lack of information exchange and inadequate coordinated collaboration, which may reduce the effectiveness of support. Importantly, the findings also highlight the participants' critical perspectives on school disciplinary measures when addressing the difficulties of children with complex needs in the school context, an issue not identified in previous Slovenian research. Such measures may, in some cases, further worsen the situations of children with complex needs.

The findings underscore the importance of rapid multidisciplinary assessment, as well as coordinated and continuous support for children with complex needs in school practice. Effective collaboration with parents and flexible,

empathetic approaches are essential. Targeted professional development for teachers is recommended in order to strengthen understanding of complex needs.

The limitations of the study include the small sample size and the inclusion of only teachers' and school counsellors' perspectives. Further research should adopt a multi-perspective approach, incorporating the views of parents, children and professionals from external institutions. It should also focus on developing effective systemic support for school staff and establishing protocols for coordinated cooperation between schools and external institutions to ensure timely support for children with complex needs.

Ethical Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for scientific research. We obtained informed consent from all of the participants in advance and ensured their anonymity and confidentiality. The research was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets analysed in the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions related to the protection of the research participants, but they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the authors used OpenAI 20 on 29 September 2025 with the following prompt: "Improve the academic writing style without changing the meaning of the content", for the purpose of improving the language and readability. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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