

# Identifying Factors Influencing the Efficiency of School Counselors: A Thematic Analysis Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** School counselors are expected to induce changes in schools and to help improve and promote students' academic, personal/social, and professional development. Accordingly, this study aimed to identify the factors underlying the efficiency of school counselors.

**Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted using a descriptive and exploratory design. Data were collected through semi-structured exploratory interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The participants in the study were 13 school counseling professors and experts with research and academic experiences in school counseling. The participants were selected using purposive non-probability (judgmental) sampling and sampling continued until data saturation.

**Results:** The findings showed that factors underlying the efficiency of school counselors included psychological skills (communication and interaction skills, trust-building and persuasion skills, motivational skills, and cognitive skills), technical skills (learning and teaching skills, problem-finding and problem-solving skills, knowledge skills, and research skills), personality traits (responsibility, adherence to human and moral values, initiative, ideation and creativity, effort and patience, risk-taking spirit, and adaptability), and management skills (planning and time management, monitoring the surrounding environment, and decision-making).

**Conclusion:** Addressing the factors contributing to school counselors' efficiency helps improve their professional competencies and leads to the effectiveness of counseling services offered in schools. Moreover, taking into account these factors can contribute to recruiting more qualified counselors in the educational system.

**Keywords:** School, Counseling, Counselor, Thematic analysis

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## Introduction

Counseling services are currently provided in a wide range of fields, including marriage, family, addiction, education, career, psychological well-being, and health. One of the most important and widely used areas of counseling is within schools and educational settings, which are responsible for guiding students (1). School counselors provide an opportunity for students to talk about their problems by building a friendly relationship with students (2). School counselors are responsible for addressing the academic, personal/social, and career development needs of students through the design, implementation, evaluation, and strengthening of a comprehensive school counseling program (3). Currently, every job and specialty requires a range of skills and competencies necessary for the effective performance of job duties. School counseling as one of the specialized fields also requires a wide range of competencies. However, helping different clients and guiding and empowering them requires having a set of intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills, which are referred to as efficiency (4). The efficiency of

school counselors involves a set of theoretical and practical skills including attitudinal, personality, emotional, scientific, and moral skills that facilitate the establishment of counseling relationships and increase the effectiveness of the counseling process (5). Therefore, it is very important to know the components of efficiency because the employment of inefficient counselors in schools can lead to irreparable damage to the academic and career future of students. Moreover, instead of helping to solve the problems of clients, such counselors may cause more complicated issues. In contrast, efficient counselors can contribute to improving the effectiveness and success of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs in schools and help improve the academic development and mental health of students (6). Accordingly, school counselors play a vital role in the development of students and there is a consensus among scholars on the irreplaceable influence of school counselors. Several studies have highlighted the significant preventive role of counselors in the school, particularly concerning unsuitable school climate (1) and bullying (3,7). Human



resources, especially school counselors, are considered one of the fundamental factors in the education process, and achieving the goals of the education system is not possible without the presence of counselors with a high level of efficiency and professional competency (6). The school counseling profession may be known as one of the normal elements in the school and educational system, but given its significant impact on the education-career path as well as the mental health of students, it is recognized as one of the most important and effective professions. If the general belief is that the best guide the best, efforts should be made to employ talented counselors with a high level of efficiency in schools (8). Highly efficient school counselors can contribute to promoting the mental health of students as fathers, mothers, spouses, and future employees. Various studies have demonstrated that the efficiency of counselors has a significant negative relationship with job burnout (9) and a significant positive relationship with job attachment (10). Ahmadi et al (11) also reported a significant positive relationship between the performance of efficient counselors and psychologists and their psychological characteristics such as hopefulness, creativity, innovation, and analytical power. In their study, Akbari et al (12) introduced job efficiency as part of the professional qualifications of counselors. Moreover, in their study on counseling and psychotherapy, Baştemur and Uçar (13) reported that mastery of technical skills (e.g. active listening, empathy, and acceptance), therapeutic skills (assessment and diagnosis), and ethical skills (confidentiality, honesty, and non-harming) is necessary for an efficient counselor.

The Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in Iran (Strategy 13) has highlighted the development of religious, educational, scientific, and professional capabilities and competencies of school employees (including school counselors) to achieve goals such as establishing an efficient human resources management system. Various people are currently employed as school counselors without their competencies being assessed or any serious efforts made to improve their efficiency and capabilities. Hence, valid and standard factors accredited by subject-matter experts should be taken into account when recruiting school counselors or developing any model to improve the efficiency of school counselors. Although efficient school counselors may have some common characteristics, they have also unique characteristics due to cultural and educational differences in different communities. Thus, further research can identify these specific characteristics as we cannot consider a set of general and absolute characteristics for school counselors in all communities. Indeed, factors empowering school counselors vary to a significant degree across different communities depending on their cultural norms. To this end, given the important position of school counselors, researchers in many countries

design and conduct qualitative and quantitative studies that fit the cultural norms governing their communities. However, the efficiency of school counselors in Iran has received less attention both theoretically and practically. Hence, conducting qualitative studies can reveal the characteristics of efficient school counselors and serve as a guide for school professionals and counselors. The insights from such studies can encourage researchers to conduct more research to validate the identified factors. Accordingly, more practical steps should be taken to identify, review, and improve factors underlying the efficiency of school counselors. The findings from research in this field can be used by authorities to develop a guiding charter, formulate guidelines, revise the criteria for recruiting, training, and employing school counselors, and establish requirements for providing high-quality school counseling services in the national education system. A review of the literature shows that most of the studies conducted in this field have focused on teachers and administrators. Thus, less attention has been paid to identifying factors affecting the efficiency of school counselors. Therefore, the present study seeks to pave the way for employing talented and capable school counselors in schools by identifying the factors underlying the efficiency of school counselors. Thus, the question addressed in this study is: What are the components of the efficiency of school counselors?

## Methods

### Design

This qualitative study was conducted using a descriptive and exploratory design. Data were collected using semi-structured exploratory interviews with school counseling professors and experts and analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to analyze qualitative data that require searching the entire dataset to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns. This method organizes the data and describes them in detail, but it can go beyond this and interpret different aspects of the phenomenon in question (14). Following Braun and Clarke's model (15), thematic analysis involves several steps; (a) collecting data (b), creating primary codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) examining themes, (e) defining and labeling themes, and (f) reporting the findings. The interview questions were developed following the research objectives and instructions from subject-matter experts. Using an inductive model, the researcher first developed the interview questions based on a review of the literature. The content validity of the questions was assessed by subject-matter experts and some questions were revised or removed. Finally, following the findings from a pilot study, the questions were re-evaluated and confirmed by the subject-matter experts. The questions focused on identifying the characteristics of efficient school counselors. Semi-structured interviews are

flexible data collection techniques that do not focus only on predetermined instructions, and the researcher can ask additional questions during the interview to obtain more information or make further clarification (16). Accordingly, additional questions were asked in this study if necessary to explore the depth of the participants' responses and the points highlighted by them. Each interview started with a general question about the (direct or indirect) use or non-use of school counseling services, and the interview process was guided based on the answers provided by the respondents. The first question asked of all participants was: "Have you ever used school counseling services (directly or indirectly)?" Then, more specific questions were asked to identify the factors underlying the efficiency of school counselors: What skills should school counselors have to improve their performance? What training should school counselors receive to be able to develop the skills you mentioned? What qualifications and skills should the country's education system focus on and take into consideration to improve the selection of school counselors?

### **Participants**

The research population consisted of all professors and specialists with research and academic experiences in school counseling. The participants in the study were 13 school counseling professors and experts who were selected using purposive non-probability (judgmental) sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method and occurs when "elements selected for the sample are selected by the judgment of the researcher. This method is basically used when the number of people with the necessary characteristics or conditions in the field of study is limited. Therefore, to achieve his goal (i.e. deep understanding of the desired phenomenon), the researcher chose people whose knowledge and understanding in the field under investigation was deep and extensive according to his previous familiarity with the society in a judgmental way. Patton (17) used the term purposive sampling to describe a sampling procedure in which cases that are information-rich in terms of qualitative research objectives are selected. Thus, as this study aimed to evaluate the characteristics of school counseling from the perspective of experts in the field, the participants should have the required inclusion criteria such as research background and experience in the field of school counseling.

### **Data collection**

Data saturation in qualitative research is closely related to sample size and the number of participants (16). Accordingly, in this study data saturation was achieved after conducting semi-structured interviews with 13 school counseling professors and experts. Before data collection, the researcher approached the participants and

explained the objectives of the study to them, and based on their willingness to participate, the interviews were scheduled. According to the inductive model of qualitative research, the researcher prepared the interview questions by reviewing the relevant literature. To ensure the content validity of the interview questions, a general framework for the semi-structured interviews was developed by summarizing feedback from supervisors, advisors, and subject-matter experts. Based on the preliminary findings of the study and insights gained from the literature review, five interview questions were formulated. The researcher subsequently sent the interview forms to the professors for approval. The main focus of the interview questions was to identify the characteristics of efficient school counselors. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Given the outbreak of COVID-19 and the unavailability of participants, the interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and key points were noted in real time. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times, and the significant statements related to the research objectives were underlined to identify and extract the underlying themes. The first author (D.A.) was responsible for arranging and conducting all interviews. The criteria for enrollment in the study were having academic and research experiences in school counseling, having an academic degree related to school counseling (counseling, psychology, and educational sciences), and willingness to participate in the study. Example interview questions included the following:

- In your opinion, what are the expectations of a school counselor at the lower secondary level?
- What skills should school counselors at the lower secondary level be equipped with to improve their performance?
- What training should school counselors at the lower secondary level receive to achieve or enhance the skills you mentioned?
- What platforms and resources should schools provide to help school counselors at the lower secondary level achieve or enhance the skills you mentioned?

In addition, probing questions (Could you give an example? What do you mean?) were asked for further clarification. To check the content validity of the interview questions, the initial version of the interview was reviewed, revised, and confirmed by subject-matter experts and professors. Table 1 presents the demographic information of 13 participants in the study.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected through exploratory and in-depth interviews with experts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method to identify, analyze, and express the patterns (themes) in the data. At least this method organizes the data and describes them in detail, but

**Table 1.** The participants' demographic characteristics

Code	Organizational position	Gender	Age	Academic rank	Education
1	Faculty member	Female	53	Associate Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
2	Faculty member	Female	45	Assistant Professor	Ph.D. in Educational Science
3	Faculty member	Female	51	Associate Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
4	Faculty member	Female	43	Assistant Professor	Ph.D. in Psychology
5	Faculty member	Female	55	Associate Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
6	Faculty member	Male	45	Associate Professor	Ph.D. in Educational Science
7	Faculty member	Male	39	Assistant Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
8	Faculty member	Male	40	Assistant Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
9	Faculty member	Male	58	Professor	Ph.D. in Educational Psychology
10	Faculty member	Male	53	Assistant Professor	Ph.D. in Psychology
11	Faculty member	Male	59	Associate Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
12	Faculty member	Male	42	Assistant Professor	Ph.D. in Counseling
13	Faculty member	Male	51	Associate Professor	Ph.D. in Educational Psychology

it can go beyond this and interpret different aspects of the research topic. The thematic analysis process begins when the analyst identifies patterns of meaning and subjects of potential interest. This analysis involves a continuous back-and-forth movement between datasets and coded summaries and analysis of the emerging data (18).

### Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln's criteria including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were used to measure the validity of qualitative data (19). To this end, the participants were selected with maximum variation in terms of experience. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved and the most suitable semantic units were selected (transferability). The internal validity of thematic analysis was evaluated by the research experts through face validity. For this purpose, after conducting the interviews and performing the coding procedure, the interview text and the extracted codes were reviewed by the participants to confirm their accuracy and detect any inconsistency in the data. The credibility of the data was confirmed after revising them based on the feedback received from the participants. To ensure that the interpretation of the data reflected the phenomenon in question (trustworthiness), the data were reviewed through member checking (by the participants) and external checking (by non-participants). Moreover, the confirmability of the data was checked through constant comparisons of the extracted codes based on the feedback received from the experts. The reliability of the data was confirmed by re-codifying four interviews within a specific time interval. Afterward, the extracted codes were compared within two time intervals. The test-retest reliability of the data from the interviews was calculated as 0.81, confirming the reliability of the coding scheme.

### Ethical Considerations

To comply with the ethical principles, the researcher provided some instructions about the objectives of the study and the research procedure. Besides, informed written consent was obtained from the participants. They were also assured that their information and identity would be kept anonymous and confidential and the data would be recorded without specifying the participants' identity. The participants were also free to withdraw from the study whenever they wished.

### Results

The main themes extracted from the interviews and examples of the participants' statements are presented in this section. The data from the interviews indicated that the efficiency of school counselors is affected by four factors including psychological skills, technical skills, personality traits, and management skills (Table 2).

#### Psychological skills

Psychological skills consist of five skills including communication and interaction skills, trust-building and persuasion skills, motivational skills, cognitive skills, and awareness-raising skills. Cox (20) defined psychological skills as the inherent or learned characteristics of people in various fields that make their success possible or probable. Psychological skills in the supportive professions are a set of abilities and personality traits that help therapists be successful in the workplace. With the help of psychological skills, school counselors can acquire knowledge, insights, and cognitive skills that enable them to recognize and analyze the client's issues and problems. One of the participants stated:

*"The school counselor is expected to understand the significance of counseling with parents, try to interact continuously with parents to inform them about the less-seen characteristics and talents of their children, and help the parents learn the skills necessary for the*



**Table 2.** The codes, themes, and categories extracted from the study

Main themes	Subthemes	Primary codes
Psychological skills	Communication and interaction skills	1-2, 1-4, 2-3, 2-10, 3-3, 3-6, 3-10, 4-4, 4-6, 5-9, 6-2, 7-7, 7-8, 7-9, 8-1, 8-2, 9-5, 10-4, 10-6, 10-9, 10-10, 11-1, 11-6, 11-13, 12-3, 12-5, 12-9, 13-11
	Trust-building and persuasion skills	3-2, 7-2, 11-11, 12-1, 12-2, 13-2
	Motivational skills	4-1, 6-1, 8-3, 10-5, 11-10
	Cognitive skills (knowledge of oneself, the profession, and the environment)	2-8, 5-1, 6-5, 6-6, 9-1, 12-10, 13-1, 13-12
	Awareness-raising skills	3-1, 4-3, 7-4, 13-9
Technical (educational and research) skills	Learning and teaching skills	1-1, 8-5, 11-3
	Problem-solving skills	2-5, 4-12, 6-3, 8-4, 9-11, 11-8, 12-4, 13-6
	Knowledge skills	1-3, 1-5, 1-7, 2-7, 3-4, 4-2, 4-5, 4-7, 4-9, 4-11, 5-3, 5-4, 5-5, 5-7, 5-8, 5-10, 6-7, 7-1, 7-3, 7-5, 7-6, 8-7, 8-9, 9-2, 9-3, 9-4, 9-6, 9-7, 9-8, 10-2, 10-3, 10-7, 11-2, 11-5, 11-9, 11-12, 12-6, 12-12, 12-17, 13-8
	Research skills	1-6, 2-9, 5-11, 6-8, 8-8, 9-10, 11-4, 13-10
Personality traits	Responsibility	4-13, 10-11, 12-13, 12-14
	Adherence to human and moral values	1-8, 2-6, 3-12, 4-10, 6-9, 9-9, 10-8
	Initiative, ideation, and creativity	2-4, 3-7, 3-11, 6-4, 9-12, 12-11, 13-5
	Effort and patience	12-8, 13-3, 13-4
	Risk-taking spirit	3-9, 10-12, 12-15
Management skills	Adjustment and adaptability	5-6, 12-7, 13-7
	Planning and time management	2-1, 2-2, 3-8, 4-8, 5-2, 11-7, 8-6, 10-1
	Monitoring the surrounding environment	3-5, 10-7
	Decision-making	4-14, 10-13, 12-16, 13-9

*success of students”* (Participant 4).

**Technical skills**

Technical skills account for teaching and learning skills, problem-finding and problem-solving skills, knowledge skills, and research skills. Technical skills, as a set of management skills, are the specialized capabilities used by people to perform their duties (21). The technical skills required for each profession and job are different from each other. Technical skills are considered the most important tools of counselors in their work and the key to success. Moreover, school counselors should pay attention to the effect of technical skills that contribute to the effectiveness of the counseling process, regardless of stereotyped thoughts and conventional gratifications. According to one of the participants:

*“School counselors receive some instructions during their academic studies at university. Thus, those counselors who have completed higher education or postgraduate programs or have more competencies than those who have lower education are expected to provide more efficient services”* (Participant 7).

**Personality traits**

Personality traits account for responsibility, adherence to human and moral values, initiative, ideation and creativity, effort and patience, risk-taking spirit, and adaptability. Personality can be referred to as certain patterns of thinking, emotion, and behavior that define a

person’s style in interaction with their social and material environment. In other words, personality involves relatively stable characteristics that affect people’s communication, performance, conversations, thinking style, lifestyle, etc (22). A school counselor, in addition to specialized skills and knowledge, must also have special personal qualities to be effective in the counseling process. One of the participants stated:

*“I believe a school counselor must be able to see and understand the multifaceted potential of students. Counseling students is like working with an array of different gems and stones. Each is different, each is beautiful in its own right and, most importantly, each has value”* (Participant 10).

**Management skills**

Management skills involve planning and time management, monitoring the surrounding environment, and making decisions. Management skills include a set of abilities and skills that a person can use to ensure success in achieving their goals and those of the organization. Indeed, management skills represent the developable abilities of people that show themselves in the individual’s performance (23). These management skills help the school counselor to evaluate the majority of options as much as possible when faced with various professional issues in the school as well as counseling sessions, and to choose the one that has the highest probability of success or effectiveness on the one hand and best fits with the

counseling goals and procedures on the other. According to one of the participants:

*“Given the limitations governing school counseling (such as the low number of counselors in schools or the absence of counselors at all educational levels), school counselors should design a calendar at the beginning of the academic year to advance their programs and activities. They also should adopt innovative strategies to perform their duties, prioritize activities based on their importance and necessity, and refrain from engaging in non-consultative duties (Participant 4).*

## Discussion

The present study sought to identify the factors contributing to the efficiency of school counselors. The data analysis showed that psychological skills, technical skills, personality traits, and management skills together with 18 related components can contribute to the efficiency of school counselors in providing guidance and school counseling services. Psychological skills account for 5 components including communication and interaction skills, trust-building and persuasion skills, motivational skills, cognitive skills, and awareness-raising skills. This finding is in line with the results from previous studies (4,13,18,22,24-26). It is important to pay attention to the psychological skills of the school counselor in the sense that such skills can make the school counselor efficient in establishing interactions and communication with clients, playing a significant role in their functions. Good communication skills are the basis of all support services and without them, people will not be able to form relationships, influence, support, advocate each other, and solve problems (18). Concerning individual interactions, counselors develop or improve communication and interaction skills by learning or strengthening individual communication skills such as verbal and non-verbal skills. Moreover, they can develop and improve communication and interaction competencies to facilitate group interactions by focusing on characteristics such as teamwork skills or strengthening public relations. The effectiveness of the school counselor in establishing communication and interactions can induce gaining trust and persuasion in contact with students and their parents and motivate them to actively listen to the instructions and advice provided by the counselor, hence they can know themselves, their field of study, and the surrounding environment. Benefiting from cognitive skills, the school counselor has awareness, insights, and mental skills that enable them to recognize and analyze problems and issues related to counseling (27). Considering the developmental characteristics of middle school students who are in their teenage years and their high resistance to any kind of external help, especially students who have been referred to the school counselor by the teacher or principal, the school counselor should be familiar with motivational

techniques and use motivational interviews when necessary. As an example, the use of the miracle question in solution-oriented therapy by the school counselor is effective in improving the atmosphere of counseling sessions and creating motivation. One of the reasons why the counseling process fails is that students are unwilling or unable to use their full potential in the counseling session. Thus, by using different techniques and approaches, while highlighting the abilities and positive characteristics of students, the school counselor informs them about their unknown capacities and the positive consequences of using these capacities. Psychological characteristics create a certain inner attitude for efficient school counselors, which affects the way they deal with various job issues. Hard-working counselors are committed to what they do and dedicate themselves to the goal, they feel in control of the situation, and they see career issues and problems as challenges and opportunities for further growth and development, rather than restrictions and threats. As a result, the effective psychological skills of the school counselor can leave a deep impact on the personal, social, psychological, and academic development of students. Such a counselor in the school does not spend all their energy and time on the academic counseling of the students but tries to help improve the mental health of students by understanding the students' moods and providing the necessary guidance and counseling to contribute to their psychological development.

Technical skills of school counselors involve learning and teaching skills, problem-finding and problem-solving skills, knowledge skills, and research skills, as reported in previous studies (28-32). Technical skills are considered the most important tools of counselors in their work and the key to success, and for this reason, most of the approaches and models for empowering counselors emphasize the importance of familiarity and mastery of technical skills along with specialized knowledge (3,33). The technical skills of the school counselor are important in the sense that the counselor should be able to observe the problems and their importance for each student and provide a solution for them. However, providing a solution by the counselor, in addition to their previous experience, requires having up-to-date knowledge and research skills so that they can learn about the best and most efficient problem-solving approaches and techniques and obtain the most optimal results from them. Attention and prioritization of knowledge and research skills as the most important criterion for school counseling services have always been emphasized by counseling experts (34). These skills have been somewhat neglected in the theoretical and practical fields, and more attention has been paid to academic certifications than experience, discipline, and specialized knowledge. Thus, the efficiency of counselors depends primarily on their knowledge and research skills. To provide high-quality services to students, the school

counselor needs to know the latest theories of school counseling and psychology. In addition, the integration of professional knowledge is also recognized as an important factor contributing to the effectiveness of the counseling process (35). Moreover, the school counselor, while having teaching competencies, should be able to understand the research activities and their association with the counseling relationship and the school environment so that they can learn from their surrounding environment, including experienced counselors across the country, as well as the latest achievements and research results gained through successful experiences of international counselors. Therefore, an efficient school counselor should pay attention to the effect of technical skills that contribute to the effectiveness of the counseling process, regardless of stereotyped thoughts and conventional gratifications, and always strive to improve these skills. It should be noted that the efficiency and consequently the technical characteristics of school counselors are not fixed and static, but rather a dynamic process that continues for a long period after the person completes the graduate program in school counseling. Hence, it is essential to constantly assess and monitor the efficiency and technical skills of school counselors.

Personality traits required for efficient school counselors include responsibility, adherence to human and moral values, initiative, ideation, creativity, effort and patience, risk-taking spirit, and adaptability, as confirmed in previous studies (22,27,36-38). It is important to take into account the personality traits of the school counselor because counseling and communicating with students and their parents about their academic and non-academic problems require qualities such as perseverance, patience, tolerance, adaptability, commitment, and conscience at work. Currently, schools need creative and innovative counselors who base their actions and behaviors on reasoning and wisdom and encourage students to use reason and wisdom to solve their problems. A creative counselor emphasizes the process and development of cognitive and metacognitive skills more than mere guidance. Such a counselor puts into practice learner-centered (indirect) counseling methods and implements counseling innovations such as book therapy, play therapy, art therapy, ability-based counseling, etc., and does not limit themselves to traditional practices. The root of many behavioral and psychological patterns of counselors should be sought in individual beliefs and values and in general in their personality structure. The more conscientious the counselors are, the more responsible they feel for their job performance and consider themselves committed to their job duties and roles. Corey (39) stated that an effective counselor should have special personality skills along with specialized knowledge. This implies that even if the counselor is scientifically capable of counseling but does not pay attention to moral and human principles and

values and does not apply them in the counseling process, their instructions and guidelines will have no significant influence on clients, leading to fundamental challenges in the counseling process. The personality characteristics of a counselor are so important that people who do not have such characteristics, even with sufficient education and experience, should not be allowed to do professional work (36). It seems that personality traits cannot be achieved through education and training, and if the applicants for the counseling profession do not have these characteristics at the beginning of specialized training, they will not be able to be useful and effective counselors for clients because education only strengthens the personality traits of people who are interested in their job (12). According to Holland's career theory, the career success of people has a direct and significant relationship with their personality traits. This means that people are attracted to a specific job that meets their personal needs and provides them with job satisfaction (40). Thus, a person's personality and their choice of profession are related to the choice of job, and to the extent that there is harmony between the personality characteristics of people and their chosen job, the probability of efficiency and job satisfaction in that profession is higher.

Finally, management skills in school counselors involve planning and time management, monitoring the surrounding environment, and decision-making, as reported in previous studies (41-45). Management skills are among the important requirements for school counselors as they can prepare the school counselors to make more efficient decisions about the academic status of students according to the monitoring of the environment, taking into account the available facilities (45). Any kind of decision about providing counseling services to students is doomed to failure without considering environmental facilities. Decision-making skills help the school counselor to evaluate the majority of options as much as possible when faced with various professional issues in the school as well as counseling sessions, and to choose the one that has the highest probability of success or effectiveness on the one hand and best fits with the counseling goals and procedures on the other. In addition, such skills help the school counselor to encourage students to learn decision-making skills instead of choosing or making decisions for the students and allow them to use individual initiatives when facing various personal and academic issues. Counseling treatment has a process format and its management requires a lot of planning and functional discipline. The low ratio of school counselors to students in schools (in Iran) on the one hand, and time constraints on the other hand, require school counselors to act systematically and plan-based to provide diverse services to a larger number of students. Counseling sessions will be efficient enough when they are organized and held through detailed and step-by-step

planning. Thus, counselors who have high self-discipline and are organized in their personal activities and daily life, are likely to have sufficient discipline in their counseling activities and can help clients solve their problems and achieve better treatment recovery. A counselor who is equipped with management skills is reliable, law-abiding, and disciplined, who can follow the rules, policies, and standards set for the quality of services and stand the pressure from colleagues or even the counselor himself/herself to provide low-quality services or work for rule and improve his/her performance to an excellent and praiseworthy level (38). Accordingly, the school counselor, while avoiding mental and functional confusion, makes it possible to achieve successful counseling outcomes in the counseling session (32). Making rational decisions is an important component of professional competencies, and experts try to present their knowledge in areas where decisions are structured. Instead of making decisions for clients, efficient school counselors help them to make correct decisions in special situations by teaching them the correct principles of decision-making, including gathering information, analyzing alternatives, receiving advice from others, analyzing decisions, and accepting responsibility. Indeed, if students are adequately prepared based on their specific time and place requirements in the decision-making stage, they are more likely to engage in carrying out the decisions made.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study indicated that knowing and improving the factors contributing to the efficiency of school counselors can lead to enhancing their professional productivity. The findings from this study can be used to assess the factors contributing to the efficiency of counselors who are currently working in schools. The insights from this study can also be used to improve the efficiency of counselors by holding in-service training courses. Moreover, the factors identified in this study can be used to modify employment procedures and hire more efficient school counselors. Furthermore, the findings of the present study need to be compared to other models of the efficiency of school counselors in the educational systems of other countries. This study was conducted with some limitations that may reduce the applicability of its findings. One of the limitations of the present study was that the interviews with counseling experts were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions caused by it, and this may have affected the results of the study. According to the objective of the present study, its findings may have less generalizability for measuring the efficiency of other counselors (such as family counselors). Furthermore, as the study was conducted using a qualitative approach, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings.

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## Authors' Contribution

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## Competing Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the ethical committee of Mohaghegh Ardabili university under the code of ethics IR.KMU. REC.1395.525

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