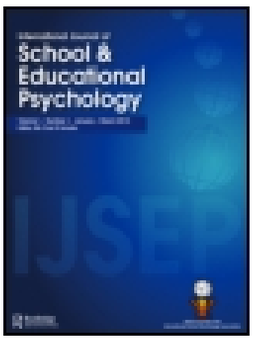

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Perceptions of work and work engagement among school psychologists in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we respond to recent calls to investigate work-related circumstances of school psychologists. As very limited research is done on work engagement among school psychologists, we also tested for the effect of well-established work-related factors on work engagement. A subsample of data from a survey distributed to all members of the Swedish Psychological Association was used to assess school psychologists' (N = 440) perceptions of work-related factors and work engagement. Our results indicate that a considerable part of the participating school psychologists experience high work demands and have trouble finding work–life balance. In general, however, school psychologists in Sweden experience high work engagement. The results also indicate that school psychologists in Sweden experience a lack of role clarity in their professional role. Our findings validate a model that underlines the importance of role clarity for school psychologists work engagement.

KEYWORDS

Role clarity; school psychologists; Sweden; work engagement; work–life balance

Introduction

Sweden has, due to a law from 1946 enforcing school readiness assessments for all six-year old's, a long history of employing School psychologists in elementary schools. Working with assessments aimed at sorting children into differentiated learning groups, School psychologists thus early carved a niche for themselves in the Swedish school system. Although the practice with mandatory school readiness tests ceased in the mid-1970s, the role of the school psychologist as a sorter of children has until recently remained much the same with a strong focus on individual assessments and school placement. Therefore, and due to the change in policy, the job expectation for school psychologists have been changed. As such, this study aims to understand the working conditions of school psychologists in Sweden and how role ambiguity affects school psychologists' engagement.

In 2010, a new Education Act made it mandatory for elementary, junior- and senior high schools to implement interdisciplinary Student Health Teams (SHTs), meeting regularly. The Education Act also stipulated for these teams to work with health promotion, disease prevention, and remedial interventions (Schad, 2014) while utilizing the competence and expertise of school psychologists, social workers, school nurses and doctors as well as special education teachers. With the exception of special education teachers, all four professions mentioned are obligatory to be included in the SHT. Although many schools already had a tradition of working in such teams, the new Education Act led to the implementation of SHT at all levels and across the nation.

Albeit having a structural base for SHTs in place, many schools initially struggled to establish the role and function of the teams within the regular framework of schools. Likewise, SHTs also struggled with identifying and implementing evidence-based methods for multi-tiered support. As identified in international research, it is common for schools to have difficulties establishing needs-based working models for professional practice and collaboration (for a recent discussion see Eklund et al., 2020). School psychologists and SHTs might also find it difficult to overcome barriers such as non-existent or insufficient job descriptions, meager resources, or old ways of working. As pointed out by Eklund et al. (2020), efficient implementation of mental and behavioral health models depends on collaboration and effective coordination. Previous research has indeed shown that having well-functioning school teams supported by an administration is a crucial prerequisite for successful "school-wide positive behavior support" (McIntosh et al., 2014).

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Theoretical framework

In order to understand the working conditions of school psychologists in Sweden the Job-Demand Resources model (JD-R), as proposed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), was used as a theoretical framework in this study. According to this theory, job demands are those physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of work that require sustained effort and therefore are associated with certain physical or emotional costs. Job demands (e.g., quantitative demands and role conflict) are not necessarily negative but can turn into stressors when the personal costs are too high. On the other hand, job resources are aspects of work that could balance job demands. However, job resources (e.g., social support and feedback) are not only necessary to deal with job demands but are also important in their own right. Job resources are also aspects of work that stimulate personal growth and development and that are functional for achieving work goals (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

The JD-R theory proposes that demands and resources trigger two processes: the demand and the resource process. The demand process is a health impairment process predicting e.g., burnout and exhaustion while the resource process predict e.g., motivation and work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Further, the JD-R model proposes an interactive effect between job demands and job resources. Job demands can thwart the positive effect of resources and resources can buffer against negative effects of demands (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

The JD-R model was built from a heuristic framework, which makes it applicable to different occupations and a wide variety of demands and resources can be included in such a model (Schad, 2019). From a school psychology perspective, a JDR-model building on previous school psychological research preferably hoans in on factors such as experienced: work- or caseload (Castillo et al., 2016; Proctor & Steadman, 2003), support from supervisors (Worrell et al., 2006) and collaborative environment (Brown et al., 2006; Hosp & Reschly, 2002). In light of the unclear role of school psychologist in Sweden, we find it especially important to clarify and build on school psychologists' perceptions of role clarity as a supportive factor.

Work engagement

It is well known that engaged employees have physical as well as cognitive and emotional involvement in their work and thus have an effective connection with their work (Kahn, 1990). Work engagement is often defined as a pervasive positive state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to high levels of energy, mental resilience, and willingness to invest high levels of effort in one's work and persist despite difficulties. Dedication, on the other hand, refers to feelings such as work being significant, a sense of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and a readiness to meet challenges. Finally, absorption is described as being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work and a sense that time passes quickly. This is very close to what has been discussed as "flow" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Work engagement is necessary and beneficial for both employees and organizations. Employees that have a high level of work engagement are more willing to put extra effort in their work, and they are also found to be more creative and productive (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Studies suggest that work engagement is associated with better mental and physical health e.g., better sleep quality and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Barber et al., 2013; Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012; Innstrand et al., 2012). Work engagement is not only predictive of job performance and low risk of sickness absences but also of client satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2008; Rongen et al., 2014).

The antecedents and consequences of work engagement have been explored using the JD-R model in many studies worldwide. Research has shown that specific job and personal resources can promote work engagement through a motivational process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources are those psychological, social, and organizational dimensions that are functional in achieving work goals e.g. job control, learning opportunities, and a supporting environment. Personal resources are aspects of the self that are functional in achieving work-goals and promote individual growth e.g. self-efficacy, optimism, and locus of control (Bakker, 2011; Crawford et al., 2010; Nahrgang et al., 2011). Drawing on results based on previous research it is fair to state that school psychologists expressing high levels of work engagement also likely benefit the promotion of student health and learning.

Role clarity

A role can be defined as a set of expectations about a position in a social structure. In a work context, role clarity can be thought of as the degree to which a person understands performance expectations in their position (Rizzo et al., 1970). Internationally, there is a trend that school psychologists increasingly shift their work from individual-level based assessments and therapeutic contacts to more indirect work (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Gutkin and Conoley (1990) proposed the "Paradox of School Psychology" meaning school psychologists must first and foremost focus their professional expertise on the adults surrounding the child or student. The

environment in which children are functioning is, indeed, controlled and led by adults, in turn making such interventions more cost effective.

Also, in Sweden, there has been a shift in perspectives from the narrower diagnostic view to a clear aim of school psychological services to promote psychosocial and physical well-being of children and youth. Unfortunately, however, there seems to be a substantial gap between rhetoric and practice (Guvå & Hylander, 2011). International research also shows that other professionals indeed expect the school psychologists to work directly with children. To make matters worse, school psychologists themselves are not in agreement of their function and role (Ahtola & Kiiski-Mäki, 2014; Ashton & Roberts, 2006). In Sweden, there seems to be an uncertainty about what to expect from the school psychologist from other professionals in the SHT (Hylander, 2011). Large gaps between actual and ideal roles have been associated with lower levels of job satisfaction for school psychologists (Brown & Sobel, 2019). In light of that, role clarity can be considered an important aspect of the working conditions of school psychologists and may have an impact on work engagement.

Present study

In the present study, we respond to the recent call by Brown and Sobel (2019) to further investigate the work-related circumstances of school psychologists. Based on the very limited research done on work engagement among school psychologists we explore their perception of work engagement utilizing the 9-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). As discussed, role clarity is an especially salient work-related aspect of school psychological work, making this an interesting factor to explore in connection with work engagement.

Other work-related constructs pertinent in work and organizational psychology are work demands, and collegial and supervisory support as well as incivility (Schad, 2019). We believe that exploring school psychologists' perceptions of these work-related factors will be beneficial for understanding work engagement as perceived by school psychologists. Specifically, the research aims were:

(1) To assess school psychologists' physical working conditions, quantitative work demands, collegial support, support from supervisor, workplace incivility, work confidence, work–life balance, and role clarity.
(2) To assess school psychologists' work engagement.
(3) To examine to what extent role clarity relates to work engagement above and beyond, work demands, collegial support, support from supervisor, workplace incivility, work confidence, and work–life balance as experienced by school psychologists.

Methods

Study context

In Sweden, the program leading to a master's degree in psychology consists of five years of studies including first and second cycle. Students who receive a Master of Science in psychology also need to complete a one-year residency under supervision. Once this practical training is completed, the psychologist can apply to the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare to be certified as a licensed psychologist (Schad, 2014). A licensed psychologist has the right to independently work in different contexts e.g., schools, health care, and work/organizational settings.

Procedures and ethical considerations

Data were collected in the fall of 2014 and is a subsample of a larger study initiated by the Swedish Psychological Association. To assess the working conditions of Swedish psychologists the members of the Swedish Psychological Association were sent an online survey. The participants were informed of the purpose of the survey, that participation was voluntary and that individual responses would be kept confidential.

In order to answer the research question of this study 80 out of 99 questions in the original survey was considered to be relevant. The questions were both well-established and assessed scales as well as questions constructed for the purpose of the study.

There were at the time 7619 members of the Swedish Psychological Association who had a registered e-mail. The original survey only reached 7567 people due to the fact that 52 people had an inaccurate e-mail registered. Data from people over the age of 70 and people who stated a different sex than male or female have been excluded from the study due to the fact that they were too few to assess from a statistical point of view. A total of 3240 members of Swedish Psychological Association were included in the original study, which corresponds to a 48% response rate. For the purpose of this study, only data from school psychologists were considered.

Background information

Personal demographic information was collected including age, gender, whether the participants were

licensed psychologists or not, years of experience as a licensed psychologist, and if the participant was employed as a school psychologist.

Participants

In the sample, there were 440 participating school psychologists of which 11 participants did not complete 60% of the survey and were therefore excluded from the analysis (N = 429). Of the participants, 78.2% were females and 21.8% were males. Most of the participants had several years of experience working as a licensed psychologist and more than 50% of the participants had worked for more than ten years. Age was relatively evenly distributed among the participants, except for ages 66–69 years, which was a smaller group (see Table 1 for details).

Measures

Physical environment

The participants' physical environment was assessed with questions concerning what kind of workplace they have (office of their own or shared office) (Table 2), how much time they spend at work (<25%, 26–50%, 51–75%, 76–100%) and how pleased they are with computer solutions at work. The indoor climate at work was assessed with 12 questions from the MM-survey (see Table 2) (Andersson, 1998) (e.g., In the last three months have you been affected by draft?). The participants rated indoor climate on a 4-point scale: 1 = *no, never*, 2 = *yes, sometimes*, 3 = *yes, often* and 4 = *not relevant*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .81.

Quantitative work demands

Quantitative work demands were assessed using a 4-item subscale from COPSOQ (Kristensen et al., 2005) (e.g., Is your workload unevenly distributed so it piles up?). The participants rated work demands on a 7-point scale modified to fit the purpose of the study: 1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times a year or less*, 3 = *once a month or less*, 4 = *a few times a month*, 5 = *once a week*, 6 = *a few times a week*, and 7 = *every day*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .88.

Table 1. Demographic data.

Age	N = 440	%
23–35 years	105	23.9
36–45 years	116	26.3
46–55 years	90	20.5
56–65 years	120	27.3
66–69 years	9	2.0
Years as a licensed psychologist		
Less than 2 years	51	11.6
2–5 years	84	19.1
6–10 years	97	22.0
11–20 years	103	23.4
More than 21 years	102	23.2
Not licensed	3	0.7
Gender		
Male	96	21.8
Female	344	78.2

Table 2. Crude means and standard deviations for the individual questions concerning physical environment for school psychologists.

Dimension	Scale	M	SD	% favorable responses
Computers	1–3[a]			Yes often
How pleased are you with the computer solutions at work?		2.0	0.6	78.9%
Indoor climate	1–4[b]			Yes often
In the last three months have you been affected by the following:				
(1) draft		1.4	0.7	6.0%
(1) too high temperature		1.5	0.7	8.3%
(1) varying temperature		1.8	0.7	15.7%
(1) too low temperature		1.9	0.8	22.5%
(1) poor air quality		2.0	0.8	31.0%
(1) dry air		1.7	0.8	18.3%
(1) uncomfortable odor		1.5	0.7	7.6%
(1) static electricity		1.1	0.5	1.2%
(1) tobacco smoke		1.2	0.5	1.6%
(1) loud noise		1.7	0.8	13.9%
(1) poor light and light causing reflexes		1.5	0.7	8.8%
(1) dust or dirt		1.4	0.6	4.6%

[a]Higher scores indicate a more favorable response.
[b]Lower scores indicate a more favorable response.

Support from colleagues

We assessed support from colleagues using a 3-item subscale from COPSOQ (Kristensen et al., 2005) (e.g., How often do you get help and support from your colleagues, if needed?). Answers were given on an 8-point scale modified to fit the purpose of the study: 1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times a year or less*, 3 = *once a month or less*, 4 = *a few times a month*, 5 = *once a week*, 6 = *a few times a week*, 7 = *every day, and* 8 = *not relevant*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .83.

Support from supervisors

Support from supervisor were assessed using a 3-item subscale from COPSOQ (Kristensen et al., 2005) (e.g. How often do you get help and support from your immediate superior, if needed?). The participants rated perceived support from supervisor on an 8-point scale modified to fit the purpose of the study: 1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times a year or less*, 3 = *once a month or less*, 4 = *a few times a month*, 5 = *once a week*, 6 = *a few times a week*, 7 = *every day, and 8 = not relevant*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .84.

Workplace incivility

We assessed workplace incivility using six items from the Swedish translation of workplace incivility scale (Cortina et al., 2001; Schad et al., 2014) (e.g. Have you been in a situation where any of your supervisors or coworkers made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you?). Answers were given on an 8-point scale modified to fit the purpose of the study: 1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times a year or less*, 3 = *once a month or less*, 4 = *A few times a month*, 5 = *once a week* and 6 = *a few times a week* 7 = *every day*, and 8 = *not relevant*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .85.

Work confidence

Confidence at work was assessed with a 3-item scale constructed for this study (Schad et al., 2015), (e.g., It is easy for me to express my opinion at work even if others disagree with me). Answers were given on a 4-point scale: 1 = *does not fit at all*, 2 = *fits poorly*, 3 = *fits fairly well*, and 4 = *fits perfectly*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .78.

Separation between work and spare time

Work–life balance was assessed using 4 items from the (LUCIE) Lund University Checklist for Incipient Exhaustion (Karlson et al., 2010), (e.g., Problems at work make me irritable at home). Answers were given on a 4-point scale: 1 = *does not fit at all*, 2 = *fits poorly*, 3 = *fits fairly well*, and 4 = *fits perfectly*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .85.

Role clarity

Role clarity was assessed partly by using a seven item Swedish version (Schad et al., 2015) of a scale originally developed by Rizzo et al. (1970), (e.g., I know what is expected of me). Answers were given on a 4-point scale: 1 = *does not fit at all*, 2 = *fits poorly*, 3 = *fits fairly well*, 4 = *fits perfectly*, and 5 = *not relevant*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .86.

Work engagement

Work engagement was assessed using a short version of (UWES) Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (e.g., At my work, I feel bursting with energy) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The participants rated perceived work engagement on a 7-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times a year or less*, 3 = *Once a month or less*, 4 = *A few times a month*, 5 = *once a week* and 6 = *a few times a week, and* 7 = *every day*. The internal consistency for the scale was α = .92.

Statistical analysis

The statistical computations were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (IBM Corp. released 2017). Cronbach alpha coefficients were used to assess the internal consistency of respective variables. The individual scales were inspected for normality, skewness and kurtosis. Results regarding research question one was presented with mean and standard deviations for each study variable. As for research question two, *M* and *SD* was presented as well as group comparisons done with Mann Whitney U tests (gender difference) and Kruskal Wallis H non-parametric test (difference between age groups and difference between years of experience).

Pearson zero order correlations were used to explore associations between continuous study variables. Point Bi-serial correlations were used to estimate the association between binary variables and continuous variables. Multivariate analysis was performed rendering a removal of 28 outliers (Hoaglin & Iglewicz, 1987). A hierarchical linear regression was performed to assess how much the five work-related variables contribute to the variance in work engagement. This was considered important when exploring to what extent role clarity relates to work engagement above and beyond other work-related variables (research question three).

Results

School psychologists' physical work environment and quantitative work demands

Of the participants in this survey, 72% had their workplace in an office of their own and 22.7% shared their office with a colleague. On a weekly basis, 39.3% spent 26–50% of their working hours in the office. Another 27.3% spent 51–75% of their working hours in the office. Seventeen percent spent less than 25% of their working hours in the office, and 15.5% spent 76–100% in their office.

Table 2 outlines details regarding school psychologists' ratings on computer solutions and indoor climate at work. Roughly 20% responded that they were *not pleased* with the computer solutions at work. Regarding the indoor climate, almost one third of the respondents rated that they often were affected by poor air quality. Roughly 20% rated that they often were affected by too low temperature and dry air. Varying temperature was often a problem for 16% of the responding school psychologists and loud noise was a problem for 14% of the respondents.

Table 3 outlines details concerning work demands for school psychologists. Roughly one third of school psychologists report that they have high quantitative

Table 3. Crude means and standard deviations for individual items.

Dimensions	Scale	*M*	*SD*	% responses
Work demands	1–7[b]			*Always/several times a week*
Questions about your work demands during the last year:				
Is your work unevenly distributed so it piles up?		4.2	1.8	28.2%
How often do you not have time to complete all your work tasks?		4.1	2.1	37.1%
Do you get behind with your work?		4.1	1.9	30.3%
				Never/a few times a year
Do you have enough time with your work tasks?	1–7[a]	3.8	2.1	27.5%
Support from colleagues and supervisor	1–7[a]			*Never/a few times a year or less*
How often do you get help and support from your colleagues?		4.9	1.7	9.8%
How often is your colleagues willing to listen to your problems?		5.3	1.7	6.5%
How often do your colleagues talk to you about how well you carry out your work?		3.6	1.5	25.9%
How often do you get help and support from your nearest superior?		3.3	1.5	33.0%
How often is your nearest superior willing to listen to your problems?		4.1	1.9	23.8%
How often does your nearest superior talk to you about how well you carry out your work?		2.7	1.2	54.3%
Workplace incivility	1–7[a]			*Every day/a few times a week/once a week*
How often do you experience the following:				
Someone put you down or was condescending to you.		1.7	1	2.4%
Someone paid little attention to your statement or showed little interest in your opinion.		2	1.1	2.9%
Someone made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you.		1.3	0.6	1.4%
Someone addressed you in unprofessional terms. either publicly or privately.		1.5	0.8	0.6%
Someone ignored or excluded you from professional camaraderie.		1.3	0.8	1.2%
Someone doubted your judgment on a matter over which you have responsibility.		1.3	0.7	0.7%
Work confidence	1–4[a]			*I agree/I pretty much agree*
It is easy for me to talk to my colleagues.		3.7	0.5	88.7%
It is easy for me to express my opinion at work even when others disagree with me.		3.5	0.6	87.4%
It is easy for me to socialize with my colleagues in a relaxed way.		3.6	0.6	88.8%
Work-life balance	1–4[a]			*I agree/I pretty much agree*
Work takes so much energy that I can´t deal with things I have to do at home.		2.5	0.9	51.2%
Problems at work makes me irritable at home.		2.1	0.9	28.0%
I have difficulty relaxing at home because of persistent thoughts of work.		2.0	0.9	25.7%
I have difficulty sleeping because of persistent thoughts of work.		1.8	0.9	17.7%
Role clarity	1–4			*I disagree/I disagree somewhat*
I have clear. planned goals and objectives for my work.		2.6	0.8	40.1%
I know I have divided my time properly.		3.0	0.7	22.0%
I know what my responsibilities are.		3.2	0.7	11.9%
I know exactly what is expected of me.		3.1	0.7	19.1%
I feel certain about how much authority I have.		3.1	0.8	19.0%
I have a clear explanation of what has to be done.		2.9	0.8	29.8%
Other professionals at my work are clear about my role as a school psychologist.		2.8	0.8	30.5%
It is clear who my superior in the organization is.		3.6	0.8	10.6%
Work engagement	1–7[a]			*Every day/several times a week*
At my work. I feel busting with energy.		4.4	1.6	30.7%
At my job. I feel strong and vigorous.		4.9	1.4	49.8%
I am enthusiastic about my job.		5.3	1.4	49.1%
My job inspires me.		5.4	1.4	54.8%
When I go up in the morning. I feel like going to work.		5.0	1.7	50.2%
I feel happy when I´m working intensely.		4.8	1.6	41.8%
I am proud on the work that I do.		5.7	1.3	63.3%
When I am working, I forget everything around me.		5.6	1.4	64.2%
I am immersed in my work.		4.7	1.7	38.8%

[a]Lower scores indicate a more favorable response.
[b]Higher scores indicate a more favorable response.

work demands resulting in work piling up, getting behind and not having enough time for work tasks *always* or *several times a week*. Almost 40% of school psychologists feel that they do not have enough time to complete all work tasks (*always* or *several times a week)*.

Support from colleagues and supervisors

Regarding support from colleagues, 10% or less of the respondents experience that they *never* or *a few times a year* get help/support from colleagues and have colleagues that are willing to listen. Regarding help/support from nearest superior more than one-third of the respondents experience that they *never* or *a few times a year* get help/support from their nearest superior and roughly 24% have a superior that *never* or *a few times a year* is willing to listen. Roughly 25% experience that they *never* or *a few times a year* get work-related feedback from their colleagues and 54% rate that they *never* or *a few times a year* get feedback concerning work performance from their nearest superior.

Workplace incivility and work confidence

Less than 3% of school psychologists in Sweden respond that they have experienced workplace incivility on a regular basis (*every day, a few times a week* or *once a week*). In detail, fewer than 1% of the respondents reported that someone had addressed them in unprofessional terms or doubted their judgment in a matter over which they were responsible. In addition, a majority of school psychologists in this study *agree* or *pretty much agree* report that they have confidence at work in relation to their colleagues.

Separation between work and spare time

Roughly 50% of the respondents in this study *agree* or *pretty much agree* that work takes so much energy that they cannot deal with things they have to do at home. Almost a third *agree* or *pretty much agree* that problems at work make them irritable at home and more than one fourth of school psychologists have difficulty relaxing at home because of thoughts of work.

Role clarity among school psychologists

About 40% of school psychologists *disagree* or *disagree somewhat* that they have clear, planned goals and objectives for their work. Roughly one third of the respondents also experience a lack of clear explanations of what work that has to be done and that other professionals at work were not clear about the role of the school psychologist. Table 3 outlines the details of role clarity among school psychologists in Sweden.

Work engagement among school psychologists

A majority of the participating school psychologists state that they like going to work in the morning, feel that the job is inspiring, feel proud of the work that they do, and forget everything around them when working (*several times a week* or *every day*). A considerable part, roughly 40%, also state that they are immersed in the work and feel happy when working intensely. Almost 50% of school psychologists felt strong and vigorous at work and also experienced feelings of enthusiasm (Table 3).

A Mann-Whitney U Test was conducted to compare the mean of work engagement for females and males. There was a small but significant difference in scores for males ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.12$) and females ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.21$, $p = .015$) indicating that females experience higher work engagement.

To assess if work engagement was different among school psychologists with different years of experience as a licensed psychologist, a Kruskal Wallis H non-parametric test was conducted. There was a small significant difference in work engagement depending on years of experience ($p < .001$, $df = 4$). Table 4 presents a summary of work engagement in school psychologists with different years of experience.

To assess if work engagement differed between school psychologists of different ages a Kruskal Wallis H non-parametric test was conducted. A significant difference was found between different age groups ($p < .001$, $df = 4$). Table 4 presents a summary of work engagement among school psychologists of different ages.

Correlations

Relationships between all measures were analyzed with Pearson´s correlation (Table 5). Significant correlations were observed between all scales except for between work demands and work engagement as well as work demands and work confidence. Work engagement was positively related with support from colleagues, support from supervisor, work confidence and work engagement while negatively correlated with physical environment, work demands, workplace incivility, and work–life balance.

Role clarity and its relation to work engagement among school psychologists

Table 6 presents a summary of a hierarchical linear regression that was conducted to assess how school psychologists' perception of collegial support, support from supervisor, work confidence, work–life balance, and role clarity were related to work engagement (the variables physical environment, work demands, and incivility were not included in the regression analysis due to low correlations with work engagement). The control variable gender was nonsignificant for the

Table 4. Work engagement among school psychologists of different ages and with different years of experience.

Dimension	Scale	*M*	*SD*
Work engagement	1–7[a]		
Years as a licensed psychologist:			
Less than 2 years		4.89	1.16
2–5 years		4.68	1.23
6–10 years		4.89	1.22
11–20 years		4.98	1.22
More than 21 years		5.15	1.24
Years of age:			
23–35		4.78	1.18
36–45		4.86	1.21
46–55		4.97	1.25
56–65		5.08	1.24
66–69		5.82	1.10

[a]Higher scores indicates a more favorable response.

Table 5. Cronbach's alpha, means, standard deviations and correlations for all study variables.

Variables	α	*M*	*SD*	Ske	Kurt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Physical environment (1–3)[a]	.81	1.6	0.4	1.3	3.8	-	.12*	−.17**	−.21**	.30**	−.23**	.29**	−.16**	−.17**
2. Work demands (1–7)	.88	4.1	1.7	0.1	−1.1		-	−.14**	−.15**	.26**	−.09	.44**	−.35**	−.09
3. Support from colleagues (1–7)[a]	.83	4.6	1.4	−0.4	−0.5			-	.55**	−.28**	.35**	−.29**	.22**	.25**
4. Support from supervisor (1–7)[a]	.84	3.4	1.4	0.4	−0.5				-	−.22**	.20**	−.29**	.29**	.24**
5. Work place incivility (1–7)	.85	1.5	0.7	2.2	6.1					-	−.44**	.39**	−.45**	−.18**
6. Work confidence (1–4)[a]	.78	3.5	0.5	−1.2	1.9						-	−.31**	.44**	.35**
7. Work-life balance (1–4)[a]	.85	2.1	0.7	0.4	−0.4							-	−.45**	−.35**
8. Role clarity (1–4)[a]	.86	3.0	0.6	−0.3	−0.2								-	.40**
9. Work engagement (1–7)[a]	.92	5.1	1.2	−0.6	0.1									-

* = correlations are significant at the 0.01 level, $p < .05$ and ** = correlations are significant at the 0.01 level, $p < .01$.
[a]Higher levels indicate a more favorable response.

variance in work engagement. Next collegial support, support from supervisor, work confidence, and work–life balance was added to the regression equation. This set of variables explained 22.5% ($p < .001$) of the variance. In the third step, the variable role clarity was added to the regression, explaining an additional 3.8% ($p < .001$) resulting in 26.1% ($p < .001$) of the total variance of work engagement accounted for.

Discussion

Our objective was to assess the working conditions and work engagement of school psychologists in Sweden. There has, until now, been a gap of knowledge in this area of research. Our study finds that school psychologists in Sweden overall tend to be satisfied with their physical working conditions and don´t experience a lot of workplace incivility, they have supporting colleagues, and experience high work confidence. However, there are indications that a considerable part of the participating school psychologists experience high work demands, have trouble finding work-life balance, and report a lack of support from their nearest superior.

Working conditions

School psychologists have been found to be at risk for developing burnout due to multiple responsibilities, work overload, engagement in caring for others, and shortages of practitioners (George-Levi et al., 2020; Schilling & Randolph, 2020). It can be considered quite alarming, albeit not very surprising, that many practitioners in the field experience less-than-ideal working conditions like lack of support from their nearest superior and high work demands also affecting behavior after work hours. School psychologists in Sweden tend to experience support from colleagues in general and workplace incivility is not common. However, the access of supportive networks varies across the country. Many psychologists do not have other psychologists at work and may have to find their supportive professional networks elsewhere. The current findings imply that support from nearest superior is an area that could be improved as a third of the participating school psychologists do not get help or support from their nearest superior.

Work engagement and role clarity

Due to recent trends internationally as well as in Sweden, school psychologists aim to increasingly work with preventive and proactive interventions. We therefore took a special interest in exploring work engagement and role clarity among school psychologists in Sweden.

Our study shows that the level of work engagement in our sample is medium-to-high compared to other groups (Hakanen et al., 2019). Most school psychologists in Sweden feel that their job is inspiring, and they are proud of their work. This result is not very surprising, considering that research by Hakanen et al. (2019), shows that employees with higher education are more likely to be engaged at work compared to employees with less education. The same study finds that employees in human service jobs have higher work engagement than other work areas or industries. A reasonable explanation for this is that psychologists, like other professionals in the human services, find it meaningful and engaging to use their expertise to meet and help people. School psychologists also have the opportunity to work with prevention and health-enhancing interventions at different levels (individual, group, and organization), which might be found meaningful and engaging.

Interestingly, the school psychologists in this study are highly engaged in their work and yet roughly one-third of the school psychologists in this study report high work demands, e.g., work piling up and not having enough time to complete work tasks. This is not contradictory considering research using the JD-R model shows that job resources and personal resources are the main drivers of work engagement. Job demands, like workload or emotional demands, play a minor role or might even be positively related to work engagement if considered challenging and not hindering (Crawford et al., 2010).

Table 6. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis on the dependent variable Work Engagement ($N = 347$).

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Predictor	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Gender	−0.275	0.166	−0.089	−0.300	0.147	−0.097*	−0.280	0.144	−0.096
Support Colleagues				0.011	0.052	0.013	0.023	0.051	0.027
Support Supervisor				0.096	0.052	0.108	0.060	0.051	0.067
Confidence at work				0.640	0.124	0.274***	0.465	0.128	0.199***
WLB				−0.409	0.086	−0.250***	−0.290	0.089	−0.177***
Role Clarity							0.520	0.124	0.234***
R^2	0.008			0.225			0.261		
F change for R^2	2.748			25.283***			17.531***		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Hakanen et al. (2019) find that, in general, women are significantly more engaged in work than males are. Our study indicates that this might be true for school psychologists in Sweden as well. There is a small but statistically significant gender difference indicating that women are more engaged. This may be a result of cultural and structural factors, but the difference is to be explored further.

Another finding in our study is that older school psychologists are more engaged in their work. The retirement age in Sweden is 65–67 and this study implies that school psychologists' still working after the age of 65, experience higher levels of work engagement. This finding was expected and is in line with previous research, showing that age is positively related with work engagement (Hakanen et al., 2019). A reasonable explanation for this may be that psychologists who are more engaged chose to continue working after the age of 65, whereas less engaged psychologists chose to retire at an earlier age. The findings are also in line with burnout research proposing that with age professionals develop more effective ways of managing professional demands and stress (Dorociak et al., 2017).

In this study, school psychologists answered questions about different aspects of role clarity. More than 40% of the responding school psychologists experienced that they did not have clear, planned goals and objectives for their work. Roughly, one-third of the respondents also experienced a lack of clear explanations of what work had to be done. Not surprisingly, roughly one-third of the respondents experienced that other professionals at work are not clear about their role as a school psychologist. This is in line with previous national research showing that there is an uncertainty about what to expect from the school psychologist from other professionals in the student health team (Hylander, 2011). To this can be added that teachers often have a different view of the role of the school psychologist and the student health team. Some teachers expect problems related to students to be solved outside the classroom. They want the psychologist to help the child directly and are not especially interested in collaborative work to solve issues (Meyers et al., 1996).

We proposed that role clarity relates to work engagement above and beyond common demands and resources relevant for school psychologists. Indeed, our findings validate a model that underlines the importance of role clarity for work engagement among school psychologists. Of the other predictors work confidence and work-life balance were found to be relevant predictors. We consider this finding key because it highlights the importance of minimizing the difference

between actual and ideal roles among school psychologists. The view of the school psychologist's role has changed through history based on changes in views of the purpose of schooling and theoretical conceptions on how students learn. Psychologists themselves have advocated a view with more emphasis on proactive work with students and teachers for a long time (Braden et al., 2001). There is a trend with more emphasis on implementation science, multidisciplinary collaboration, and evidence-based interventions (McIntosh et al., 2013). In Sweden, the new education Act (SFS 2010:800) that took effect in 2011, states that the student health team is to contribute to creating environments that promote students' learning, development, and health as well as support students' development toward the goals of education. This statement proposes that the objective of the student health work should mainly be health-promoting and preventative. At present, almost ten years later the role of the student health teams varies greatly across Sweden both in terms of how the teams are organized as well as what role they fulfill in the schools.

As our results indicate that psychologists in Sweden experience a lack of role clarity among employers and other professionals, there is a need for school psychologists to develop clear goals and objectives of their work, while framed in a modern school setting. Ahtola and Kiiski-Mäki (2014) found that increased cooperation with the school psychologists demonstrates to school professionals that psychologists can be of use even when not in contact directly with children or families. Psychologists seem to be able to influence expectations from other professionals from a more clinical perspective to expectations more in line with the field of school psychology only by doing their job in tandem with other school professionals. Increasing the availability of school psychology services may also be of importance for decreased role ambiguity and higher work engagement among school psychologists. Psychologists typically serve multiple schools resulting in a lot of time spent in multidisciplinary meetings. Larger student-to-school psychologist ratios have been found to be associated with more special-education-related practices such as evaluations and reevaluations (Curtis et al., 2002). As psychologists want to spend more time on both direct and indirect work, the discrepancy between the desired and actual amount of time spent in multidisciplinary meetings is negatively related to job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2006). Increasing the ratio of psychologists to students can be a good way to go, to ensure high work engagement among school psychologists. It may also help to shift focus from psychological services from reactive to proactive psychological interventions. Hopefully, this would in turn result in the promotion of student learning, development, and health for a larger group of students than currently.

However, there is also another aspect to this, and it relates to the awareness among school psychologists themselves about their role in a school setting. The Swedish universities offering a program leading to a master's degree in psychology typically do not have an emphasis on educational psychology in their curriculum (Schad, 2014). Of course, areas of great importance for the school psychologist are studied e.g., developmental psychology, cognition, and personality psychology. Other important skills including consultation, are also taught. However, few universities offer a specific course in educational psychology and if so, the duration is very brief (Schad, 2014). As a consequence, new psychologists in a school setting are generally not well prepared for working in a school context and this can be very troublesome when there, in addition, exists confusion regarding the role of the school psychologist in the organization as well as among other professions in the student health team. It would likely be beneficial if the universities had more emphasis on school psychology in their curriculum, making psychologists more prepared to take on specific roles in the educational setting.

The Swedish Psychological Association offers a specialist-training program in Educational Psychology. Yet very few of the psychologists specializing in a field chose educational psychology. There might be several reasons for that, but one may be that schools as employers generally do not see the benefits of having psychologists specializing in this area and are consequently not willing to pay for this. In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for specialists in clinical settings, but this has not been the case in educational settings. Another reason might be that there have not been many courses offered relevant for this area, making it difficult to complete the specialist training in educational psychology. Specialist training in educational psychology could, however, be beneficial as specialized school psychologists can serve as role models and mentors to colleagues with less experience. A specialist in educational psychology can also be an active change agent in their work setting, working to clarify the role of the school psychologist. Psychologists cannot enhance role clarity in a vacuum but need supporting colleagues and supervisors that are interested in the role of the school psychologist and in supporting their development.

Practical implications

To our knowledge, this is the first study focusing on the working conditions of school psychologists in Sweden. By highlighting role clarity and work engagement we captured some important aspects of working conditions that may be of value to school psychologists, their employers, researchers, as well as policy makers.

Moreover, psychologists are a group of professionals in Sweden that are at high risk of stress and burnout and have high absences from work (Försäkringskassan, 2014). High levels of work engagement among school psychologists are an important factor as work engagement is associated with greater job performance and lower risk of absences from work (Bakker et al., 2008; Rongen et al., 2014). In a summary of several studies, Brown and Sobel (2019) find that role ambiguity and excessive demands were associated with burnout. We found that many school psychologists in Sweden experience high work demands and difficulty with work–life balance and that role clarity is an important factor promoting work engagement. All and all there are several reasons to focus on the working conditions of school psychologists as to minimize the risk of absences. This can be considered important not only to the individual school psychologist but also to ensuring the delivery of school psychology services.

A systematic review of the relation between school, learning, and psychological health showed that many factors in schools affect student health and that health in turn affect school achievement (Gustafsson et al., 2010). Children with poor school achievement tend to have lower self-esteem and more mental health problems, which may lead to aggressive forms of behavior. Contrary, good relations act as a protective factor for future mental health problems (Gustafsson et al., 2010). There is evidence that poor mental health and poor school achievement follows the child into adolescence and also later in life with a strong association between poor self-rated health in adolescence, high school dropout and reduced work integration (Gustafsson et al., 2010; De Ridder et al., 2012). In light of this, school psychologists have an important role in the student health team working to promote student well-being, psychological health, and school achievement.

Furthermore, there is a shortage of psychologists in Sweden and employers need to ensure good working conditions to be an attractive workplace for school psychologists. Our study shows that a special focus on clarifying the role of the school psychologist is an important factor to consider.

School/educational psychology is presently not an active research field among the universities in Sweden. We believe that it is important to introduce a research agenda for school psychology in Sweden, and one important aspect is framing the role of the school psychologist. Such research could evaluate and increase the understanding of the procedures and methodologies in their area and the outcomes of the services delivered.

Limitations and future directions

There are some limitations concerning self-report measures, which is often criticized for introducing common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). There are many reasons for bias, but social-desirability bias is often discussed. Despite the limitations, self-report measures have shown to adequately assess people's representations of work environment variables (Ashforth, 1985).

Another limitation of this study is that personal traits are not explored in relation to working conditions. Employee personal traits may directly influence, moderate, and mediate the relationship between demands/resources and outcome variables according to the JD-R model (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

A drawback of this study was the modest participation rate, about 48%, in the original survey by the Swedish Psychological Association. The exact response rate among school psychologists is not known as psychologists in all areas were included in the original study.

Another possible limitation of this study is that the data was collected in 2014. This could impact the usability of the results. However, we find no evidence of large changes in work-related circumstances for school psychologists during the past five years. The official regulations are the same as they were in 2014 and the general debate among school psychologists tends to focus on the same themes. Challenges that seem not to have changed very much are the financial limitations, as well as a difficulty in employing psychologists due to the shortage of licensed psychologists. The latter seems to be quite a challenge especially in rural areas. In addition, this is the first study in Sweden focusing on school psychologists working conditions and there is a need for a follow-up. Due to the general debate in Sweden concerning the psychological health in youth and children and the low result in PISA-surveys measuring students learning in different countries, there is an increased pressure on politicians and policy makers to invest in student health and the working conditions of school staff.

The results of this study provide initial data regarding the working conditions of school psychologists in Sweden. Future research could further

separate aspects of the working environment that are relevant specifically for school psychologists. Aspects to be explored further may be student to psychologist ratio, if the psychologists have colleagues, if they are situated at a school or at separate student health care centers, if they serve private schools or municipal schools and how much time they spend on individual assessment compared to health promotion and health prevention. These are aspects not yet explored which would add additional important information about the working conditions of school psychologists in Sweden.

Our study reports that role clarity of school psychologists is an important factor associated with work engagement and that a lot of school psychologists experience a lack of role clarity. Future research should continue addressing the perception among school psychologists of their role in the student health team and, in addition, the conceptualization of school psychologists work with other professionals in the school context. Furthermore, future research could preferably explore what factors are important for shaping and clarifying the role of school psychologists.

Conclusions

This study advances the knowledge of school psychologists working conditions in Sweden. In general, the school psychologists participating in this study experience high work engagement. There are also many who report experiencing high work demands and a difficulty finding work–life balance. Our study confirms previous research that psychologists experience a lack of clarity regarding their professional role.

Taken together, the present study validates a model that underlines the importance of role clarity for school psychologists to experience work engagement. We suggest that interventions to clarify the role of the school psychologist should start already at the university level courses being offered that prepare the students for a role in the school setting. However, interventions at schools are equally important as school leaders have a special responsibility in providing opportunities for communication about the role and the work of the psychologist in a supporting manner and in relation to other professionals in the student health team.

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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 from the corresponding author, (ES), upon reasonable request.

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