

Part 2

School Counseling Practices

School Counsellors' Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Slovenia

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Abstract

Life and work in educational institutions, including the work of school counselling service, changed suddenly due to the Covid-19 pandemics. The classes were conducted online, and the educational processes, along with the work of the school counselling service, had been thwarted and altered in many ways. A number of previous evaluation studies have shown that the long-established school counselling tradition in the educational institutions in Slovenia is welcomed and well received by headteachers, teachers, students and parents already in the normal circumstances. The aim of this paper is to present the results of the exploratory qualitative study on the ways the school counsellors in Slovenia had been coping with the questions and challenges that have arisen in the time of distance learning and counselling. The study was conducted with an on-line questionnaire in April 2020. The non-random sample consisted of 328 Slovenian school counsellors. The results have shown that, in the first pandemic wave, the school counsellors were important actors in solving different situations related to: relationships between adults and children or adolescents; school learning; teachers' educational dilemmas and questions regarding distance schoolwork; and to the management of the educational institution. The findings of the study also show a positive attitude of counsellors in collaboration with school headteachers and teachers. The state of emergency has raised the awareness of all professionals at the school about the importance of mutual support and at the same time represents an opportunity to reflect on even better cooperation and a reciprocal relationship that enables quality educational work.

Keywords: school counsellors, Covid-19 pandemic, counselling work, challenges, cooperation

Introduction

In March 2020 Slovenia declared a Covid-19 epidemic, which quickly grew into a global pandemic. Life and work in educational institutions, including the work of school counselling service, changed suddenly due to the Covid-19 pandemics. The

community of children, students and educators moved to a virtual space, raising a number of questions about the impact of these changes on educational and counselling processes and the role of the school counselling service (see Gregorčič Mrvar, Jeznik & Kroflič, 2020a; Šarić & Gregorčič Mrvar, 2020; School Counseling during COVID-19, 2020). This includes the question to what extent school counsellors adapted their work in order to be as supportive as possible to all those in need and, on the other hand, to what extent they were supported in their efforts by the school management and relevant state institutions (see Savitz-Romer et al., 2020).

As researchers in education, we quickly realised that education was carried out under fundamentally changed circumstances, which could continue for some time and, above all, the situation was unlikely to be the last of its sort. Consequently, we started conducting both theoretical and empirical research from the very beginning of the pandemic in order to provide a sound basis for well-informed solutions (prim. Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). To gain insight into the situation in educational institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted an exploratory study among school counsellors in April 2020. In the study, we explored how the counselling service dealt with the challenges that arose during the implementation of distance education and counselling during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (March to mid-April 2020).

Some characteristics of school counselling in Slovenia

One of the basic characteristics of the school counselling service in Slovenia is that it is part of the individual school and often brings together a team of professionals with different profiles (e.g., pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, etc.). The key conceptual document for school counselling is the Programme Guidelines for the School Counselling Service (Programske smernice, 2008a, 2008b). The Guidelines state that school counsellors participate in resolving pedagogical, psychological and social issues in schools by means of three central activities: activities of assistance, of development and prevention, and of planning and evaluation. Undertaking these three main types of activities, the school counselling service helps students, educators, management, parents and it collaborates with them in the following areas of everyday life and work at the institution: learning and teaching; school culture, school climate and order; physical, personal and social development; schooling and career guidance; socio-economic difficulties (ibid.).

The fundamental orientation of the counselling service, which remains essential at a time when a variety of issues and uncertainties in the educational work and process are coming to the foreground, should become and stay a development- and prevention-oriented service – and as such crucial in achieving a higher quality of the work in educational institutions. The counselling service will become developmental and preventative in its orientation only if it is interdisciplinary and if it is able to integrate its activities into the work of the educational institution at different levels – institutional, classroom, micro-pedagogical (see Gregorčič Mrvar,

2021; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b; Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019) – in collaboration with all participants in education. Collaboration is essential to creating conditions for successful educational activities that require adherence to the principles of safety, acceptance, equality, participation, respect, caring for others, and mutual aid (e.g., Resman, 2007). The counselling service focuses on the activities and processes that focus on the entire educational institution as a community. It addresses issues of group dynamics, communication, culture, and climate in the educational institution.

A number of previous evaluation studies have shown that the long-established school counselling tradition in the educational institutions in Slovenia is welcomed and well received by headteachers, teachers, students and parents in the normal circumstances (e.g., Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b). Research findings also show that the cooperation between the counselling service and various other actors in the educational institution is good. For example, a survey of teaching staff in Slovenian schools (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011) indicated that almost three quarters of teachers (73.1%) and even more headteachers (92.7%) rated their cooperation with the school counselling service as very good or good. A study conducted a few years ago (Mrvar, 2008; Kalin et al., 2009) on the cooperation between counsellors in Slovenian primary schools and parents showed that the majority of the counsellors involved parents in their work and had relatively good personal experience of working with them. Similarly, the findings of a survey on collaboration with external institutions and experts (Gregorčič Mrvar & Mažgon, 2017; Šteh et al., 2018) showed that the responding school counsellors were relatively satisfied with their collaboration with different institutions in the community, with the majority of them rating their collaboration as good or very good. The counsellors evaluated collaboration with other schools, preschools and student dormitories the most favourably. They emphasised that without the help of external institutions and individuals, without teamwork and inter-institutional networks they would not have been able to carry out certain activities and projects (e.g., organising an intergenerational collaboration where older people provide learning assistance; organising various volunteer activities, etc.) or solve students' and families' problems (ibid.).

A recent large-scale study on the work of the school counselling service (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b) also found that the majority of headteachers and teachers rated their cooperation with counsellors as very good or good, while counsellors themselves were a little more critical in their assessments. It is noteworthy that the headteachers saw the counsellor as more of a support than the counsellors saw the headteacher (ibid.). On average, the counsellors saw more obstacles to establishing and developing quality collaboration than the teachers did. They saw obstacles in the lack of knowledge about each other's work and tasks, workload on both sides, different expectations about collaboration and different professional perspectives on classroom work and work with students (ibid.). Parents demonstrated considerable knowledge of the work of the school counselling service

and positive attitudes towards it. Similar responses and assessments were given by students (*ibid.*).

Despite some divergence in the assessments, the findings are encouraging. Satisfaction with existing cooperation undoubtedly provides a good basis for further cooperation with various actors inside and outside the educational institution. However, the situation around the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – when direct contacts between students and educators were disrupted and moved to a virtual space – presented counsellors with new challenges on how to organise education and counselling and how to provide adequate support for teachers, students and parents.

The purpose of the study and its methodology

The aim of this paper is to present the results of the study on the ways the school counsellors in Slovenia had been coping with the questions and challenges that have arisen in the rapid transition to distance learning and counselling (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). The study was conducted using an online questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions in April 2020 – during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the exploratory qualitative study, we focused on several questions of dealing with the Covid-19 situation. In this article we will present the answers to the questions (*ibid.*):

- How did the responding counsellors cope with school closures?
- Did the counsellors notice any positive aspects in the changed working circumstances?
- When working from home, did the counsellors face any difficulties and obstacles in their educational and counselling work?
- What was the counsellors' evaluation of the cooperation with different participants in education during their work from home?

The study was carried out among school counsellors and it also included those working in preschools and student dormitories, via the online questionnaire. The non-random sample consisted of 328 Slovenian school counsellors. A total of 328 respondents accepted the invitation, 316 female counsellors (96.3%) and 12 male counsellors (3.7%). They included 59.6% primary school counsellors, 28.1% secondary school counsellors, 5.9% preschool counsellors and 3.7% student dormitories counsellors. The situation regarding the respondents' employment status as a consequence of the closure of educational institutions was as follows: 88.1% of the counsellors worked from home, 5.9% were on furlough, 5.9% gave another answer (e.g., they were on leave) (*ibid.*).

The questionnaire included assessment scales that were analysed for basic descriptive statistics. The participants were asked to explain their assessments in open-ended format. For open-ended questions, responses were coded using an inductive qualitative analysis approach. First, parts of text were ascribed codes and, subsequently, content-related codes were combined into categories. At the first level

of analysis, one of the researchers coded the responses and another coded 20% of the responses according to the proposed coding scheme. Where there was a discrepancy in the attribution of the codes, the researchers suggested reformulations until a consensus was reached. The codes were then grouped into superordinate categories, which were created incrementally, with new codes added as necessary and the categories repeatedly reviewed and reorganised to keep the meanings of the coded and categorised responses as clear as possible and in line with the participants' original responses.

Results

Coping with the situation

First, we considered how the counsellors coped with the situation of working remotely in general. Most of their answers on the rating scale were positive. Three quarters of the counsellors indicated that they were coping well (61.9%) or very well (13.4%) with the situation, while a fifth chose a neutral answer. 4.4% of the counsellors answered that they were coping poorly with the situation, while no one chose the option very poorly. We asked them to justify their assessment and 266 (83%) did so. The responses show that many of the counsellors adapted quickly and well to the situation ($f = 60$). According to their responses, they tried to ensure that the work continued as smoothly as possible in some adapted form, to support the management and teachers, and to maintain contact with students and parents.

Even among the counsellors who reported that they were coping well with the situation, in their explanations many added that they needed a period of adjustment (up to 14 days) ($f = 23$), which was particularly arduous, as it was necessary to adapt to working remotely, to delineate it from family responsibilities, and above all to establish communication and contact at a distance, to equip and train all the teachers, and especially the students, to work remotely.

The counsellors also reported that the situation made their work more demanding and exhausting, and that for many the working day stretched over the whole day ($f = 45$). It was particularly difficult for those with children of their own who needed care and help with their schooling. Not all the counsellors working remotely were in the same situation, and this should be taken into account when planning their work in such circumstances.

Some of the counsellors reported continuing most of their work in an adapted format, while others pointed out that the quality of counselling was not the same ($f = 74$), that there was a lack of personal contact, and that students did not open up as much as they might have otherwise, as they did not have the privacy they needed, and they were unable to make contact with some students altogether. Some counsellors reported feeling helpless ($f = 17$) because they did not know how to help these students. Working with vulnerable groups was particularly strenuous. The focus of the counsellors was on students with special educational needs, students

with learning difficulties and students who did not have adequate support at home. An example of an explanation:

I don't feel good because I don't have access to vulnerable groups. Even if I'm successful in making contact, it's different from what it is at school. I feel that some students are anxious because other family members (in some cases) are listening in on the conversation. In spite of being asked to report problems, few actually report them even though you know they're in need because you know the family.

Most of the counsellors stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining contact (f = 89) with the management, teachers, students and parents, but they used different modes and forms of communication. Some of the counsellors wrote that this kind of situation was a challenge for them (f = 16) and that they were trying to be proactive and find new ways of working remotely. Some of them used the situation for professional training and education and for writing various articles (f = 8), which they usually do not have time to do.

It is important to take note of the counsellor's warnings that not everything can be done remotely (f = 15). This includes more demanding counselling, individual learning support as well as specific tasks such as enrolment in Year 1.

The positive aspects of the changed working conditions

We inquired if there were any positive aspects that the counsellors had noticed in the changed working circumstances. 67.6% answered in the affirmative, 25.6% did not see any positive aspects to the situation, and 6.8% chose "Other".

The analysis of the counsellors' explanations of their assessments on the rating scales showed that those who did not find any positive aspects in the changed working conditions pointed in particular to the fact (already mentioned by some in the previous question) that there was a lack of personal contact with colleagues, students and parents. They underlined that certain groups of children and adolescents were particularly disadvantaged and that distance education was generally of a lower quality. This confirmed the fear expressed in several places that the existing form of distance education was deepening pre-existing disparities among students. One representative quotation:

I can't imagine what it's like to live in a family where there's violence, alcohol, abuse, poverty ... The children from such families go to school to get away from their environment. Now they have nowhere to go.

On the other hand, there were many counsellors who saw advantages in the changed circumstances, especially in the different way of working, which they supported both by describing their personal circumstances (more influence on work scheduling, no commuting to work) and changes in their work (less administrative work (or more time for it), more time for studying and writing articles, etc.). One of the highlighted benefits was the new skills and knowledge acquired, especially the use of ICT, both by counsellors and teachers and by students. For example:

We've made a good plan with the school management and teachers, and everything is on track. After four weeks, all senior students were computer-trained and all students now have access to ICT. Students with learning difficulties work well with us and are happy to receive help.

The counsellors also mentioned greater cohesion within the team, as well as with students and parents, students' greater independence, and they argued that some students – such as those with special educational needs – benefited from this approach. Interestingly, quite a few of them believed that the situation would make educational work more valued in the future. The positive side of the situation was the realisation of the importance of educational work and the role of the educator.

The negative aspects of the changed working conditions

We went on to ask whether the counsellors faced difficulties and obstacles in their educational and counselling work when working from home. 72.8% of the counsellors answered in the affirmative. 51.5% of the counsellors who agreed cited students' or parents' lack of access to a computer or appropriate ICT as a major problem. The lack of knowledge and training of others (teachers as well as students and their parents) in the use of ICT tools was mentioned by 41.4% of the counsellors, while 22.2% also mentioned their own lack of knowledge and training in the use of ICT. 34.8% also mentioned technical difficulties in using ICT, as well as the fact that such tools were not suitable (or were only partially suitable) for counselling (32.8%). 3.5% cited the unavailability of a computer or appropriate ICT tools as a problem.

The counsellors' cooperation with other participants during distance education

Two questions referred to the frequency of cooperation with colleagues, students, fellow counsellors and the evaluation of this cooperation. Encouragingly, no counsellor indicated that they had not worked with teachers or preschool teachers at all or did so only once during the school closures. The most frequent the counsellors worked together with the school staff – several times a week or every day with the headteacher (50.9% and 23.8% respectively) and several times a week or every day with teachers (46.4% and 44.5% respectively), as well as with parents – several times a week (45.6%) or every day (19.1%) and students – several times a week (38.3%) or every day (47.4%). The counsellors were least likely to work with experts or professional services outside the school, and they interacted with other school counsellors inside and outside the institution once (33%), several times (36.6%) or on a daily basis (19%). This implies the importance of professional support networks, including during a pandemic.

The counsellors' evaluations of their cooperation with the various participants show that they worked well or very well with most of them. The highest ratings were given to cooperation with teachers and preschool teachers and to cooperation with the headteacher (89% of the respondents rated cooperation with teachers or preschool teachers as very good or good, and 87% of the counsellors gave a positive rating to the

headteacher's support). They rated cooperation with students (69%) and their parents/carers (70%) slightly lower, but still as good or very good. The lowest scores for cooperation and support (poor 20.2% and very poor 7.2%) were given to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and other professional institutions such as the National Education Institute, the Association of School Counsellors, faculties, etc.

Most of the counsellors explained reasons behind their assessments of the cooperation. Their answers indicate that the pandemic brought counsellors and other educators (headteachers, teachers) together: they offered each other support and help, they collaborated to find solutions to educational and consulting/counselling issues, and they shared ideas, knowledge and experiences. Some examples of their answers are: "We're in touch all the time, every day of the week, by phone, by email, etc."; or "The headteacher is supportive and helpful, responsive, calm, available and up-to-date, we support each other".

Discussion

The findings of our study demonstrate that the majority of the participating counsellors were able to work remotely, but there was also a significant share of counsellors who were not (they were on furlough, etc.) or whose role in distance education was not entirely clear. Here, we would like to draw attention to two key roles that counsellors play in the regular context of educational work: a link in the formation of the school community and a supporter of all educational participants in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning. This was confirmed during distance education, as can be seen from the results of our study on the way counsellors interacted with students, their parents and other educators. The importance of their role was confirmed both by the counsellors' responses in this study and by the headteachers' responses from the same set of studies (Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021).

The counsellors reported that during the period of distance education they had more work than usually and that work was more tiring, and for many the working day stretched over the whole day. They also emphasised that the quality of communication and counselling was not the same as before, because personal contact was lacking, and interaction with the help of modern technologies could only partially replace this contact. Nevertheless, some of them reported that the work enabled them to acquire new skills, especially in ICT, and that a lot of materials had been produced (e.g. on independent learning, motivation to learn, coping with adversity) that could be used in different areas of education and counselling in the future.

According to the majority of the responding counsellors, the pandemic and the emergency have strengthened cooperation between educators. The situation showed – and we may have forgotten this or taken it for granted – that the school is a community of students and educators and that their daily pedagogical interactions enable learning as well as personal, emotional, social and moral development (Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). It is a community that fosters friendships, learning

to live in a community that cares for the wider well-being of children and the development of their potential (ibid.). The school community, of course, is an integral part of the wider community (Šteh et al., 2018). On the one hand, it needs its support to function; on the other hand, it gives support back and strengthens the community (ibid.). The pandemic revealed how important it is to work together for quality education and quality of life in the wide and narrow communities (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022; Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) find that Covid-19 strengthened collaborative relationships in some educational settings and weakened them in others. Collaboration among educators was further strengthened in the schools where professional collaboration between educators had already been developed before the pandemic (ibid.).

The results of the present study indicate that school counsellors are aware of how great the distress can be for children, adolescents and adults when personal contact and community socialising are interrupted (cf. Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022; Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). Lee (2020) also reports that school closures during the pandemic had a particularly negative impact on children and adolescents with mental health problems and those with special educational needs, because school routines go some way to helping them cope with their problems. They had limited access to appropriate support (peer support groups had been cancelled, as had face-to-face counselling, while telephone or video counselling could be a problem for them), and children with special educational needs missed out on opportunities to develop key skills for their personal development (ibid.). The author further points to the increase in violent behaviour in families as a consequence of isolation, economic insecurity and all the related pressures.

Implications

As the respondents in our study indicated the lack of knowledge in use of ICT in their work, we recognized this as a need that has emerged among the counsellors for more training in distance counselling. In addition, the respondents reiterated the need for teamwork, participation in support (e.g., supervision) groups, and more support from the responsible Ministry and other institutions (e.g., in terms of norms and guidelines, which mostly teachers received). As Slovenia found itself without any systemic model of crisis education at the beginning of the epidemic (Skubic Ermenc & Urbančič, 2021), it is not surprising that a number of the counsellors said that the Ministry's guidance was too vague or insufficient and too late (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021) and some also said that the support provided by external institutions was unhelpful and the recommendations given were merely a varied range of recommendations from which school counsellors had to work out for themselves what was and was not useful for them. Some, however, did recognise the efforts of various institutions (ibid.) and used their activities as a source of support for their work. The data also indicate differences between counsellors in the way they engage in cooperation with external institutions and in the way they perceive this cooperation as a support for their professional activities. We can foresee increased support for

schools provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on various prevention programmes in the future. However, if we shift too much of the responsibility for prevention to external collaborators – in this case NGOs – and if we understand the involvement of external institutions too narrowly in terms of “servicing” (i.e., direct action to address problems once they have occurred), we move away from an understanding of the school counselling service as contributing to the holistic development of individual students and of the school as a whole (Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019).

The counsellors in our study (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022) emphasised that the quality of communication, education and counselling was not the same as before because personal contact was lacking, and interaction with the help of modern technologies could only partially compensate for this lack (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) make a similar point, arguing that collegial meetings via different technologies and platforms are often a poor substitute for face-to-face meetings. However, they also argue that remote interactions can be adapted to educators’ different needs and circumstances and where quality relationships and trust already exist, professional collaborations can be strengthened further. Counsellors should also be given additional training in remote consultation/counselling. It is also important to ensure a clear demarcation between work and private life and to provide adequate support for counsellors to maintain their mental health (see Savitz-Romer et al., 2020).

Recommendations for future research

In the future, it would be useful to explore in more depth how technology can be used to respond more effectively to the diverse needs and potentials of students and educators, and how they can work together. It will also be necessary to study how counsellors deal with the challenges of the reopening of schools in the face of all the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus (e.g., the use of face masks, the implementation of frequently changing quarantine rules, the cancellation of various events, schools in the nature, etc.), as well as with the long-term consequences of school closures and the uncertainty and unpredictability that still surround us when carrying out our work in education and counselling.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and the emergency situation have undoubtedly changed the work and processes in educational institutions tremendously and caused various difficulties, and it was crucial to adapt very quickly to the new situation and to establish new forms of communication and cooperation. School counselling is predominantly oriented towards individual and remedial activities, often at the expense of developmentally oriented tasks (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021). This was already evident before the pandemic (ibid.), our data has shown that this was the case during and after the pandemic as well, if not even more.

In Slovenia, we witnessed a considerable variety and diversity of approaches to, as well as improvisation in, solving problems and implementing educational work (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022; Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). The situation stimulated more ingenuity and courage among educators, at least some of them, to make increasingly more complex use of technology and to introduce more innovative ideas (Kalin, Skubic Ermenc & Mažgon, 2021). Positive attitudes and various opportunities for cooperation and joint work have also emerged in terms of cooperation (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021, 2022). The challenge for educators is how to maintain and nurture this supportive and collaborative climate and the willingness to face challenges together that developed in many schools during the first wave of the pandemic. Many practitioners have come to the important realisation that working together can help them overcome the difficulties of their day-to-day work, and that, with each other's support, they can learn and develop professionally. However, we wonder whether this will be – or has been – maintained in educational work under normal circumstances.

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