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A Lesson on Mutual Collaboration for School Counsellors, Principals, and Teachers Given by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Slovenia

Barbara Šteh* 

University of Ljubljana, SLOVENIA

Petra Gregorčič Mrvar 

University of Ljubljana, SLOVENIA

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Abstract: This paper presents the meaning and characteristics of collaboration between school counsellors, school principals, and teachers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia and the extraordinary situation in which work in educational institutions changed dramatically overnight and the community of students and professionals moved into a virtual space. In the first part of the paper, we highlight that a strong network of professionals in an educational institution is key to achieving the vision, goals and quality of educational work. In the second part of the paper, we present the results of a survey conducted through an online questionnaire among 328 Slovenian counsellors during the first wave of COVID-19 in April 2020. The results of this survey show a positive attitude of counsellors towards collaboration with principals and teachers. The emergency situation has raised awareness among all school professionals about the importance of mutual support, while providing an opportunity to reflect on ways to improve mutual collaboration and build mutual relationships that enable quality pedagogical work. One of the biggest challenges for any school community now is to maintain the sense of alliance and mutual support that was created in many schools during the pandemic.

Keywords: *Collaboration, COVID-19 pandemic, principals, school counsellors, teachers.*

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Introduction

In this paper, we follow the argument, supported by numerous studies (Duslak & Geier, 2016; Edwards et al., 2014; McCarty et al., 2014), that a strong network of school professionals is key to achieving the vision, goals and quality of educational work. This means that collaboration goes beyond the wellbeing of an individual student and focuses not only on solving one specific school problem but also on the learning and development of all students and the school as a whole (Resman, 2004, 2018; Staničič & Resman, 2020; Talbert, 2010).

It is important that schools evolve towards becoming learning communities where working and learning together is valued and encouraged, where mutually supportive relationships develop, where members share a common vision and values, research together, and do their best to find solutions to the daily challenges of their practice (Admiraal et al., 2021; Lieberman, 2012; Stoll & Kools, 2017). However, we should be aware that this is an ideal objective which might be difficult to implement in reality, as it is often at odds with the sometimes still present traditional school culture where school professionals are isolated from each other, not used to teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, and are not willing to learn together (Fullan & Edwards, 2021; Lieberman, 2012; Šteh et al., 2021). Stoll and Kools (2017) write about schools as learning organisations, which is what we must strive for if we are to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world with the development of new technologies (e.g., ChatGPT) and professions, as well as the diverse needs of today's learners. This need has likely only been reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Encouragingly, Stoll and Kools (2017) suggest that it is possible to create such a learning community in a variety of school settings, as evidenced by the application of this concept in a wide range of countries. It should be noted, however, that the formation of a learning community always depends on contextual factors such as the social climate, prevailing values, and the processes, strategies and structures that create the conditions for collaboration and shared learning in a particular school. It also depends on the beliefs, values, competencies and willingness to learn among individual educational professionals (Stoll & Kools, 2017; Welsh et al., 2021). Field (2019, p.1112) cautions that we should by no

* **Corresponding author:**

Barbara Šteh, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. ✉ barbara.steh@ff.uni-lj.si



means “make the unrealistic assumptions that the interests of all school staff are, or should be, aligned”. Networking, collaboration, and overcoming challenges together, as well as setting common goals, must, therefore, be continually rethought and re-evaluated by the participants in the learning community, and this collaboration can only ever be based on good interpersonal relationships and trust (Kelchtermans, 2006). To this we can add Fullan and Edwards' (2021, p.8) suggestion that strong collaborative organisations are better equipped to confront crises – and indeed to thrive in them.

In this paper, we will focus on the collaboration between school counsellors, principals and teachers, who are the central actors of quality educational work. We will first briefly introduce the role of each of them, and then present some of the characteristics and empirical findings on their collaboration gathered so far. We will continue with some conclusions from an empirical study on their collaboration in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia from the perspective of counsellors. This will be the foundation on which we will formulate some starting points for further development in education that aims at establishing schools as learning communities.

Just to clarify, the school system in Slovenia is divided into three sections of education: primary, secondary and tertiary (Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2023). Primary education is provided by public and private preschools, primary schools, primary schools with an adapted education programme, music schools and educational institutions for children with special educational needs. Secondary education is provided by upper secondary schools and secondary schools. It is classified as general or vocational technical and secondary professional or technical education. In this article, our focus is on primary and secondary sections of education.

School Counselling as an Integral Part of Every School in Slovenia

In Slovenia, all educational institutions, from kindergarten to the end of secondary education, have a counselling service as an internal professional service (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022). This service is thus an important stakeholder in achieving the fundamental goals of educational activities and, at the same time, the goals of the school as a learning community. The concepts of school counselling services in Europe and around the world differ with reference to their formal set-up, the experts who work there, school counselling programmes, etc. (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022; Carey et al., 2017; B. Harris, 2013; Popov & Spasenović, 2018). In Slovenia, the counselling service is staffed by a variety of professionals, such as pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, social pedagogues, special pedagogues, etc. Program Guidelines for the Work of the Counselling Service (National Education Institute Slovenia [NEIS], 2008a, 2008b) define that the counselling service is involved in addressing pedagogical, psychological and social issues in schools through three main activities: support activities, developmental and preventive activities, and planning and evaluation activities. Through these three basic types of activities, the counsellor interacts with all of the participants within the educational institution (children/youth, educators, teachers, principals, parents) and cooperates with them in the following areas of life and work in the educational institution: (a) the learning and teaching process, (b) co-shaping the culture, education, climate, and discipline of the school, (c) involvement in the physical, personal and social development, (d) career orientation, and (e) the area of socioeconomic hardships (NEIS, 2008a, 2008b).

The counsellor is, therefore, a professional member of staff who, together with other professionals, shapes the daily life and work of the school (NEIS, 2008a, 2008b). In addition to direct counselling work with students, their work further involves working on the professional tasks of the educational institution as a whole, where they are involved in certain aspects of planning, implementing, and evaluating various action plans, joint initiatives, projects, etc. The work of the counsellors at this level is strongly intertwined with the collaboration with the principals and the school leadership. At another level, the work of the counsellor also relates to direct participation in the educational process, which is why it is particularly important for the counsellor to achieve quality collaboration with teachers to whom they provide professional support.

This demonstrates the importance of actively engaging counsellors in the functioning of the whole educational institution and the importance to their success of developing high-quality collaborations with stakeholders within and outside the educational community (Lieberman, 2012; Šteh et al., 2018). To achieve this, it is also crucial to develop a culture of collaboration within the educational institution as a whole (Fullan & Edwards, 2021; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022). The latter is primarily the responsibility of school principals, but teachers and school counsellors also play an essential role in shaping this culture. Their work is briefly outlined below.

The Role of the Principal and School Leadership

In schools in Slovenia, similarly to the international context (Eurydice, 2007), the position of the school principals (including their tasks) has changed with the collapse of centralised school management. Today, as elsewhere in the world, the principals in Slovenia have significantly more well-defined tasks. On the one hand, this means a greater responsibility towards the government, but it also constitutes a significantly greater moral responsibility toward teachers, students, parents and the local community (Greene & Stewart, 2016; McCarty et al., 2014; Resman, 2004, 2018; Staničić & Resman, 2020). According to Slovenian legislation, anyone who has a master's degree, has at least five years of work experience in education (e.g., as a teacher or school counsellor), a suitable title in promotion in education and has passed the principal's exam can be appointed as a school principal (Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2023). The law

provides that the principal organises, plans and manages the work of the school and the work of professionals, thus he is responsible for the administrative as well as the pedagogical/educational leadership of the school (Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2023). The administrative part of their role includes dealing with funding, recruitment, pay systems and a wide range of regulations and norms, while, in the pedagogical aspect of their leadership function, principals build and strengthen relationships with staff, motivate them, ensure the quality of the educational process, create a supportive school climate, engage with parents and the community, and pursue the vision of the organisation (Dolgan, 2012), which is also one of the core tasks of principals in other parts of the world (Kaminskienè et al., 2021; Stoll & Kools, 2017; Welsh et al., 2021). One part of the pedagogical aspect of their school leadership is to ensure appropriate conditions for educational work and successful planning, which also includes planning and facilitating professional learning and development for their staff (Admiraal et al., 2021; Stoll & Kools, 2017). It is also important to consider that principals are confronted with a variety of expectations from teachers, students, parents, the national and local authorities, and the local community (McCarty et al., 2014; Resman, 2004). Thus, they find themselves in an unenviable position, as they are faced with complex tasks and situations brought about by social changes (e.g., social stratification, increasing numbers of students with special needs and mental health issues, increasing numbers of students from immigrant families, etc.) (Edwards et al., 2014; Fullan & Edwards, 2021; A. Harris, 2008; Schleicher, 2015; Staničić & Resman, 2020). These are trends of social changes, which, according to research, the COVID-19 pandemic only intensified. At the same time, the pandemic situation created conditions in which school systems and individual schools are faced with new challenges (Fullan & Edwards, 2021; Strear et al., 2021). The time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting emergencies required principals to react quickly and decisively and adapt to entirely new conditions.

What has been described above also encourages the modern school management to move towards *collaborative* and *distributed leadership*. Distributed leadership in the international space represents one of the most effective approaches to managing educational institutions in the 21st century (A. Harris, 2003, 2008; Pont et al., 2008). It is a form of leadership where active participation of all professional workers is embraced, and where they take on a part of the leadership responsibilities (A. Harris, 2008; Stoll & Kools, 2017). The influence and decision-making within the institution are the result of the interaction among individuals rather than the direction of an individual leader. This requires the leader, in our case the principal, to delegate some power to other educational professionals (Gronn, 2002, as cited in A. Harris, 2003). In this kind of leadership, the participation of all employees is important in planning goals, realising the vision of the school, and ensuring its development, while also solving any emerging problems. Developing and actively maintaining a collaborative school culture is encouraged (Fullan & Edwards, 2021). Collaborative and distributed leadership is even more in the foreground during remote work when leadership functions are distributed among individuals or individual groups (A. Harris, 2020; Kaminskienè et al., 2021). In this context, an important role in collaborating with the leadership is also given to school counsellors (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2019).

Teachers' Role and Responsibilities

Teachers carry out educational work in accordance with Slovenian legislation and publicly valid programmes in such a way that they ensure objectivity, criticism and plurality, and are professionally autonomous (Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2023). Anyone who has completed a university degree or a master's degree programme and has acquired appropriate pedagogical training during or after their studies can become a teacher in Slovenia. The main task of teachers is to ensure quality learning and create learning environments that enable students to have holistic learning experiences and achieve personally meaningful learning (Marentič Požarnik et al., 2019). Or, as De Corte (2010) would put it, create an environment that enables students to learn in a constructive, self-directed, contextually relevant, and collaborative way. For quality educational work (manifested in facilitating students' optimal development, high levels of student achievement, and the quality of interpersonal relationships), creating and maintaining a positive classroom climate is, among other things, essential, as evidenced by a large body of research (Dernowska, 2017; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Norton, 2008; Thapa et al., 2013), which in turn is correlated with the school's climate and culture.

Teachers are constantly confronted with many challenges related to their teaching: co-creating the above-mentioned positive classroom climate, keeping up with the development of their subject area, introducing new didactic approaches and the use of ICT, adapting their teaching to the needs of their diverse students, etc. Quality implementation of lessons, activation of students, and the introduction of modern approaches presuppose that teachers are appropriately educated and qualified and that they have a positive attitude towards change and a willingness to learn collectively (Makovec, 2018; Stoll & Kools, 2017; Welsh et al., 2021). Teachers are constantly confronted with new demands and play a central role in introducing changes and innovations, and they need to be involved in the whole process of planning, implementing, evaluating and realising the school's goals and visions (Valenčič Zuljan & Kalin, 2007). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were confronted with the challenge of switching to remote teaching overnight, for which they were, of course, not all prepared equally. This was partly due to inadequate technical equipment and support but also due to a lack of appropriate distance teaching competencies and personal characteristics (resilience, willingness to learn and adapt to new work circumstances, existing beliefs about the effectiveness of remote teaching and learning, etc.) (Kochan, 2021).

Collaboration Between School Counsellors, Principals and Teachers

What school counsellors, principals, and teachers have in common is that they share the responsibility and concern for the optimal development and learning of all students in the school, for their best possible academic performance, and for the quality of the functioning of the school as a whole, which are also the fundamental reasons for their collaboration (Duslak & Geier, 2016; Edwards et al., 2014; McCarty et al., 2014; Resman, 2004; Staničič & Resman, 2020). Collaboration, discussions and agreements between counsellors, principals and teachers go beyond the partial view of one or the other (Resman, 2004, 2018; Staničič & Resman, 2020). Researchers have found that a strong, quality connection between school counsellors, principals, and teachers helps them to better understand the role of each other, which can lead to greater alignment of work plans and the vision of the school, and a higher quality of the educational work of everyone involved; resulting in higher student achievements (Edwards et al., 2014; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022; Resman, 2004, 2018; Staničič & Resman, 2020).

In addition to the advantages and the benefits that their joint reflection and work can have on the development of the students and the school, quality relationships and collaboration are also rewarding and useful for the teachers themselves, e.g., good interpersonal relationships are a starting point for understanding each other's roles, they serve as a preventive measure against burnout, and are an important factor for professional development (Duslak & Geier, 2016; Edwards et al., 2014; Molina et al., 2022; Sink, 2008; Wingfield et al., 2010).

The results of some of the existing studies on the functioning of the school counselling services in Slovenia show that they are cooperating well with the various stakeholders in educational institutions. For example, according to a survey conducted among teaching staff in Slovenian schools (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011), almost three-quarters of teachers (73.1%) and an even higher number of principals (92.7%) rated the cooperation with the school counselling service as very good or good. A comprehensive survey on the work of the school counselling service in Slovenia (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022) also found that the majority of principals and teachers rated their cooperation with school counsellors as very good or good, while the counsellors themselves were slightly more critical in their assessments. Interestingly, principals perceive counsellors as more supportive than the counsellors perceive the principals to be (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022). This may be because principals are in the role of delegating various tasks to the school's professional staff. In doing so, they may also delegate tasks to counsellors that do not fall within their job description. The burden of inadequately assigned tasks on school counsellors has also been reported in several other research reports (e.g., Blake, 2020; Villares et al., 2022).

As mentioned above, the responses of Slovenian teachers in the aforementioned study (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022) show that they are satisfied with the work of school counsellors and that they do not consider cooperation with them as a sign of their failure and/or incompetence. Other studies from different parts of the world also show that teachers are generally open to working with school counsellors, or rather that the collaboration is perceived as successful (e.g., Atici, 2014; Slijepčević & Zuković, 2021). However, the extent to which the cooperation is a partnership remains a question. Similarly to the way in which counsellors were more critical of their collaboration with principals, they also perceive that there are more obstacles to establishing and developing quality collaboration with teachers, especially in the areas of lack of knowledge about each other's work and tasks, the workload on both sides, different expectations of collaboration, and different professional perspectives on working in the classroom and with students, compared to how teachers evaluate that same collaboration (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022).

In a national study conducted in the United States, Reiner et al. (2009) similarly found that teachers do not have insight into the overall work of school counsellors and that divergent views on certain tasks of school counsellors are very much present. The results indicate that teachers see the role of school counsellors more in providing individual counselling to students than in working with teachers themselves to present proactive, prevention-oriented counselling curricula, and even less in providing teachers with suggestions for better teaching. The challenge is certainly to shift the focus of counselling work from being purely curative to being proactive and preventive in individual schools and to move from working individually with members of the school community to working collaboratively and problem-solving. It is crucial to create a safe environment and a relationship of mutual trust so that school professionals can share concerns and dilemmas they encounter in their work in the school, in the classroom, or with individual students and parents without feeling threatened (Korthagen, 2017; Rodgers, 2002).

The level of satisfaction with the current state of cooperation by the majority of professionals in Slovenian schools undoubtedly provides a good foundation for further collaboration with different stakeholders within the educational institution. However, the results of the above-mentioned survey show that it should be further developed in the direction of partnership collaboration as described by Sheridan et al. (2002), where those involved co-design and share common goals, plan and implement activities together, learn from each other, participate to the best of their abilities and share responsibility. Here, we stem from the premise that emergencies and unforeseen situations, such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, challenge all members of the educational community and, at the same time, bring forth opportunities for reflection and growth (Kaminskienè et al., 2021). The time of pandemic drew attention to the pedagogical importance of the connection between different participants in the school and the importance of the school community because, at a time when the possibility of active community connection was threatened, the awareness of the

importance of the community was consequently strengthened (Kroflič, 2022). The importance of the educational institution as a community of students and all educational professionals was highlighted, among which daily pedagogical contacts enable learning and personal, emotional, social and moral development as well as facilitate the establishment of friendships, learning to live in a community that cares for the wider good of students and the development of their potential (Kalin et al., 2021). We have learnt that the disappearance of the community triggers a variety of existential hardships for children, adolescents and adults, while at the same time bringing major difficulties in maintaining knowledge levels (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022; Kroflič, 2022). Therefore, it is important to find out how well school counsellors, principals and teachers collaborated together in this emergency situation, because, as school professionals, they are the most responsible for building a quality school community and ensuring a good learning environment for all, and a good classroom and school climate depends on their collaboration. The experience of mutual collaboration in an emergency situation can be a good basis for finding ways to strengthen and improve it.

Methodology

Research Design

The study followed the principles of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to gain insight into what the closure of schools and the shift of the school community of students and professionals to the virtual space has meant for collaboration among all members of the Slovenian school community. In this paper, we present only part of the results of an empirical study we conducted among counsellors of primary schools, secondary schools, kindergartens and student dormitories about one month after the complete closure of these educational institutions in Slovenia in April 2020 (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021). We will answer the following three research questions:

- 1) How often did counsellors collaborate with principals and teachers during school closures?
- 2) How did they assess the quality of their collaboration with principals and teachers?
- 3) How did they justify their assessments?

Sample

A non-random sample consisted of 316 female counsellors (96.3%) and 12 male counsellors (3.7%), for a total of 328 respondents. According to the latest available data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia [SURS], 966 school counsellors were employed in Slovenian primary and secondary schools in 2016. We assume that, based on the available data, we have drawn a sample of about one third of all school counsellors. These included 59.6% primary school counsellors, 28.1% secondary school counsellors, 5.9% preschool counsellors, and 3.7% secondary school student dormitory counsellors. As many as 64.6% of the respondents indicated that the educational institution where they worked was in an urban area, and 35.4% in a non-urban area. As for their professional profiles, the highest number of them were pedagogues (48%), followed by psychologists (28.3%), social pedagogues (10%), social workers (7.2%), special pedagogues (2.8%) and three inclusive pedagogues (0.9%). The majority of the counsellors did counselling work (89.8%), but some also provided additional professional support to students (49.2%), taught a subject (13.9%), and carried out other work (24.1%). The situation regarding the employment status of the respondents 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, and 5.9% gave another answer (e.g., they were on leave).

Data Collection

The study was conducted using an anonymous online questionnaire completed from April 13-23, 2020, more than a month after the educational institutions closed. The counsellors were invited to participate in the study via e-mail and social media, as well as societies and associations that included various profiles of counsellors. Their participation in the survey was voluntary, and answering the questions posed no threat to their wellbeing.

In connection with the research questions, as we did not find a measuring instrument by which we could fully answer the posed questions, we, therefore, compiled an original questionnaire according to a preparatory scheme that corresponded to the sub-problems for which we wanted to obtain relevant data. First, we prepared a preliminary form of the survey questionnaire and gave it to two experts in education and school counselling for evaluation. We then gave it to two school counsellors to complete and evaluate. Based on the feedback, we checked the relevance of the individual questions and improved the questionnaire accordingly – shortened it and reformulated some questions.

The final questionnaire included 16 closed-ended questions, six rating scales with five possible answers (5=very good, 4=good, 3=neither good nor bad, 2=bad and 1=very bad), and 11 open-ended questions. In addition to demographic and school data, the counsellor's professional profile, and years of experience as a counsellor (a total of 10 questions on basic data), counsellors were asked to provide information about how they responded to the change in work conditions, what difficulties they experienced working from home, whether they saw any positive aspects of the change in work

conditions, and, most importantly, how often they interacted with various stakeholders inside and outside the school and how they rated those interactions.

Analysis of Data

In this paper, we focus only on the data related to collaboration counsellors with principals and teachers – for our three research questions outlined, as other findings have already been published elsewhere (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021). We specifically asked them to explain their assessment of the collaboration. We processed their explanations according to the inductive approach of qualitative analysis. The first-level analysis was conducted by one researcher and then another one separately coded 20% of the answers according to the suggested coding scheme. When discrepancies were high, the researchers sought agreement through a revision of the codes. Subsequently, related codes were combined into higher-level categories. The second researcher reviewed the emerging categories and the ascribed codes, making suggestions as to the meaning of each category until the final agreement among the researchers was reached. The quantitative data were analysed at the level of descriptive statistics.

Results

The Frequency and Evaluation of Collaboration With Principals and Teachers

First, we were interested in how often the counsellors managed to collaborate with principals and teachers during the closure of educational institutions. Table 1 shows that the counsellors managed to collaborate with both very often. As many as 44.5% of the counsellors indicated that they worked with teachers *daily*, while the other half (46.4%) worked with teachers *several times a week*. Encouragingly, no counsellors reported that they *never* or *only once* worked with teachers or educators at the time of the school closures. Slightly less frequently, but still, very frequently, they also worked with principals – half of them (50.9%) interacted with them *several times a week*, and just under a quarter of them (23.8%) were in contact with principals *daily*.

Table 1. The Frequency of Collaboration Between Counsellors and Principals and Teachers During the Closure of Educational Institutions, as Assessed by Counsellors

How often counsellors collaborate with principals and teachers?	Principals		Teachers	
	f	%	f	%
Never	1	0.4	0	0
Once since the start of the pandemic (within a month)	7	2.6	0	0
Once a week	61	22.3	25	9.1
Several times a week	139	50.9	127	46.4
Daily	65	23.8	122	44.5
Total	273	100.0	274	100.1

We were further interested in how counsellors rated this mutual collaboration (Table 2). In line with previous research on collaboration between school counsellors and principals, and teachers in Slovenian schools (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2022; Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011), these evaluations are again very positive. In the first period after school closure, 52.8% of school counsellors rated their collaboration with principals as *very good*, 34.9% as *good*, leaving only a small percentage (12.3%) of those who were *not satisfied* with their collaboration with principals. Similarly, 89.7% rated their collaboration with teachers as *good* or *very good*.

Table 2. The Evaluation of Collaboration Between Counsellors, Principals, and Teachers During the Closure of Educational Institutions, Assessed by Counsellors

Counsellors' evaluations of collaboration with:	Principals		Teachers	
	f	%	f	%
Very good	142	52.8	109	40.4
Good	94	34.9	133	49.3
Neither good nor bad	26	9.7	23	8.5
Bad	6	2.2	4	1.5
Very bad	1	0.4	1	0.4
Total	269	100.0	270	100.0

Qualitative Descriptions of the Evaluations of the Collaboration with School Principals

Out of the 269 counsellors who evaluated their collaboration with school principals, 192 (71.4%) also provided an explanation of their evaluation. The analysis so far has shown that the majority of counsellors worked (*very well* and *regularly*) with principals in all educational institutions. 154 (80.2%) of the 192 counsellors, i.e., those who rated their collaboration as *good* or *very good*, highlighted the positive aspects of their collaboration with the principal regardless of

the type of educational institution, 18 (9.4%) of the counsellors pointed out at both, the positive and the negative aspects of their collaboration, and 18 (9.4%) of the counsellors emphasised the negative aspects of their collaboration. We classified two responses as other (new principal, no collaboration).

Most of the answers were short, but at the same time, very telling, and referred mainly to the frequency of collaboration (f = 79 or 51%), the form of communication (f = 20 or 13%) and the (general) expressed praise, support, and help (f = 107 or 69%) that the principals provide to the counsellors or each other. Some examples were: *we are in contact all the time, all days of the week, by phone, email, etc.; the principal is supportive and helpful, responsive, calm, approachable, and up-to-date, we support each other*. Most of the counsellors praised the work, collaboration, attitude and communication of the principals. This is confirmed, for example, by the following two answers: *"He supports and encourages us. He makes wise decisions. He wants to make our work easier"* and *"High levels of understanding, support, finding sensible solutions, trust"*.

A few of the school counsellors provided more extensive answers, addressing the topics of:

- *joint planning, implementation, and monitoring of educational work* (f = 22 or 14%); e.g.:
"He is always available for clarifications and questions, he participates in discussions, he gets involved when there are difficult situations to deal with, he works with us to find solutions to better work with parents, to collaborate with each other ..."
"The principal gives professional and daily directions for the implementation of remote education. She regularly and continuously reviews our performance evaluation and also gives feedback. We also regularly collaborate and consult on other organisational matters that do not concern direct work with the students".
- *the areas of educational work in which the principal is involved and the agents with whom he/she collaborates* (f = 13 or 8%); this aspect is illustrated by the following two statements:
"The principal is quick to respond and supports all forms of work with students and parents, they coordinate the activities of teachers and class teachers, respond to student and parent initiatives, and set healthy boundaries for teachers – in terms of the volume and the scope of the material they deliver, as well as in terms of the ways in which they test and assess knowledge".
"Excellent. He is responsive on a day-to-day basis, he keeps us informed, motivates us, and thanks us for the work we have done. He also has close and regular contact with the students (and class representatives). He gives us clear instructions, but at the same time leaves us a lot of autonomy and trusts us. He is always like that, is a pleasure to work at our school".
- *the quality of team leadership during the pandemic and the dissemination of relevant information and technical support to other school staff* (f = 34 or 22%); statement examples:
"School leadership is working very hard to establish connections amongst school staff, to provide technical assistance and ICT".
"She is always available, always ready to collaborate, to give advice, to offer help. Our relationships are based on trust. She makes sure she is up to date with everything that is going on, but not through an inspection-based approach. She doesn't impose additional (unnecessary) tasks on us - for example: comprehensive daily reporting on our work... (some principals require this)".

At the same time, some counsellors reported on *positive attitudes of the principals towards their work and their tasks* (f = 17 or 11%). Some examples of their reports are: *"he appreciates my work; he does not expect us to tear ourselves in half, but reminds us to take care of our health; he leaves us a lot of autonomy and trusts us"*.

Some counsellors, especially those who rated their collaboration as *neither good nor bad* and *(very) bad* (36% and 19% respectively out of 192 counsellors), drew attention to the negative aspects of the pedagogical leadership and the collaboration with the principal. They mainly pointed out that counsellors and teachers *do not get enough support and approval from the principal* (f = 13), that *there is not enough guidance and clarification on their work* (f = 12), and that there is *no regular contact with principals or other school staff* (f = 10). Two counsellors further highlighted the additional administrative work involved in working from home. Negative experiences are illustrated by the following statements:

"I was not given guidelines for my work. I set them on my own. But I am supported when it comes to most of my ideas and initiatives. I miss the team-based professional planning of support and guidance for colleagues".

"In the initial weeks, there were no clear definitions of what was expected from the school counsellors. Nor was it known whether they would recognise hours spent working from home. At one of the schools, this is still the case (uncertainty is felt), at the other school I work at, we have a narrowed-down weekly meeting with the leadership team and there are clearer expectations about working from home".

"Writing minutes for each assignment, constant Skype meetings even for irrelevant matters".

Some school counsellors would, therefore, appreciate more clarification and guidance about their tasks and more trust from their principal, but at the same time, some also pointed out that principals are also under pressure and in need of support, while others wished for more contact with the principal and other staff, more collaboration and joint planning, working together to find solutions, etc.

A few of the counsellors also reported that some principals do not think that it is possible to conduct (quality) counselling work remotely ($f = 4$), e.g., *"The opinion of the principal is that counselling work cannot be done as 'remote work'"* and *"The role of teachers, and especially class teachers, is more important"*. The counsellors themselves agreed to some extent, as 74 of them (out of 266 who provided an explanation of their assessment of coping with the pandemic situation and the school closures) described that the quality of the counselling work is *not the same*, that *the lack of personal contact is noticeable*, and that *the students do not open up as much as they normally would*, as they do not have the necessary privacy at home. And at the same time, some students could not be contacted at all (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021).

Qualitative Descriptions of the Evaluations of the Collaboration With Teachers

The results show that the vast majority of school counsellors are satisfied with their collaboration with teachers, and most of them (207 or 76.7%) also explained their assessment. The most frequent response was that they were in *constant contact* and kept each other informed, coordinated and negotiated on all current issues ($f = 69$ or 33.3%) or that they were *in contact when needed* ($f = 12$ or 5.8%). This certainly shows how important it is to have a good communication network for quality work and collaboration; only in this way can the flow of information be smooth, and only in this way can they support each other, consult each other, and resolve any problems that emerge. Some counsellors again stressed that, despite all this, communication was limited, and that *personal contact and face-to-face communication were notably missing* ($f = 10$ or 4.8%), e.g., *"I am satisfied with the collaboration in given circumstances, but I do not think that this can replace face-to-face contact"*. Face-to-face communication has certain advantages that cannot be compensated for.

In their explanations, many respondents reiterated that *the collaboration works well and is smooth* ($f = 28$ or 13.5%) but did not specifically describe what type of collaboration they were referring to. However, some of them specifically stated that the collaboration involved *mutual support and joint problem-solving and learning*, which is indicative of the characteristics of partnership collaboration ($f = 34$ or 16.4%). These types of explanations include the following:

"We complement each other, exchange examples of good practice and share our knowledge and experience with each other".

"By sharing our perspectives on the situation and through knowledge, we come up with good solutions".

"I am in regular (daily) contact with teachers. They often contact me to exchange information, to consult, and to develop a plan for an individual student or family together".

In some cases, they became even more connected with one another, developing an *even greater sense of belonging to a community* ($f = 6$ or 2.9%), as the following answer illustrates well:

"We are regularly in touch, for instance in our Viber group, the atmosphere is very relaxed, there is a great deal of encouragement and a feeling of belonging that otherwise often dissipates".

Some of the respondents specifically emphasised the responsiveness of the teachers and their willingness to follow directions and suggestions ($f = 28$ or 13.5%). For example: *"Teachers are responsive, open to suggestions, ideas and advice"*. On the other hand, they stressed that they did not cooperate with all school or kindergarten teachers as well, and that there was room for improvement ($f = 8$ or 3.9%), e.g., *"We are in constant contact, but it's just like at school, we work with some better and smoother than with others"*, and that not everyone is responsive and willing to adapt, to follow guidelines ($f = 16$ or 7.7%). For example:

"Some teachers rarely see the need to coordinate their work, especially when it comes to students with special needs. Some find it difficult to align and coordinate work with others and with the school counselling office".

Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) similarly find that COVID-19 has strengthened collaborative relationships in some educational settings and weakened them in others. The arguments of the counsellors further highlighted that teachers need help in these situations, and that some of them *do seek it and ask for advice* ($f = 24$ or 11.6%). The following are examples of responses:

"I am in contact with teachers daily, and we have regular consultations. They are grateful for the support, for our messages of support to them, to the parents, to the children, and for the advice on how to use different software and applications (some of which I have researched and presented at the remote staff meeting). They have been very grateful for this".

"Many teachers also trusted me with their personal struggles and hardships. I am here to help and support them as well".

Only three indicated that teachers were still not seeking help and did not address their problems with them, and two reported that some teachers still did not seem to understand the difficulties and distress faced by both students and parents.

Discussion

The analysis of frequency and evaluation of collaboration with principals showed that the majority of counsellors collaborate very good or good and regularly with principals. The responses of most counsellors in our survey suggest that the epidemic has brought counsellors and principals closer together. In the explanations of their evaluation of collaboration, they emphasised that they support and help each other, work together to find solutions for educational and counselling work, and share ideas, knowledge and experiences. Such a support network within educational institutions is essential for quality educational work (Fullan & Edwards, 2021). On the other hand, there were very few responses that the collaboration with principals was neither good nor bad or (very) bad, and the justifications for the ratings suggest that this was mainly due to the lack of support and approval from the principals, guidance and clarification of the work and the lack of regular contact. These, then, are the aspects that principals must pay particular attention to when establishing and maintaining good collaboration with other professionals in the pedagogical leadership of the school.

The emergency situation also brought counsellors and teachers/educators closer together. The results regarding collaboration with teachers show that the vast majority of counsellors were satisfied with collaboration with teachers, most of them rated collaboration as very good or good. Most often, they stated that they were in constant contact and were constantly informed, coordinated and agreed on all ongoing matters or that they were in contact when necessary. It is certainly obvious from this how important it is for quality work and collaboration to establish a quality communication network; only in this way is the flow of information uninterrupted, and they can give each other support, consult and solve current problems. Some counsellors emphasised that, despite everything, communication was limited and that personal contact and live communication were especially lacking. From their descriptions of their interactions, it can be inferred that some of them had developed a partnership in the true sense of the word, as defined, for example, by Sheridan et al. (2002). In some cases, however, teachers relied primarily on them for help, specific instructions, and guidance. It is evident that, during this adjustment period after the closure of the schools, teachers needed a lot of support and collaboration in setting up remote learning, which very clearly demonstrated the important role that the school counsellors play on the level of schools, and not just in their counselling work with individual students. However, a small percentage of school counsellors also indicated that some teachers were not responsive and willing to adapt their work to the new circumstances and that, just like in a 'normal' situation, some teachers were difficult to work with.

The communication network must be constantly reinforced, whether we are experiencing a pandemic or not. This needs to be addressed at both the technical level (adequate means of communication) and the organisational level (time management). Above all, it is important to develop a culture of mutual collaboration. Collaboration depends each time on the willingness of individual community members to work, learn and develop together (Stoll & Kools, 2017; Welsh et al., 2021), which was also confirmed in this study.

The lesson we learnt from these difficult circumstances is how important it is for school professionals to develop a sense of alliance and mutual support. In this context, Kelchtermans (2006) writes about collegiality, which refers to the quality of the relationships among staff members in a school – to the supportive, stimulating, rewarding, democratic relationships among equals. It is not only about collaboration, which refers to joint activities, but also about the quality of the relationships. Collaboration and collegiality constitute and reflect one another in an ongoing process, meaning that both their appearance and their meaning can evolve and change over time (Kelchtermans, 2006). Collegiality among school professionals allows for a shift from an individualistic culture to the notion of a collaborative culture (e.g., Fullan & Edwards, 2021; Shah, 2012). Strong and healthy collegial relationships among school teachers are regarded as an essential component of school effectiveness and teacher enhancement (Shah, 2012). Collegiality also plays an important role in promoting growth and development, job satisfaction, organisational and professional commitment, and school quality and student achievement (Shah, 2012; Warren Little, as cited in Lieberman, 2012, p.470). However, we need to be well-aware of the fact that collaboration and collegiality do not occur in a vacuum but always emerge within a specific context at a specific time and can be seen as important working conditions for school professionals. They enable their professional development and need to be continuously cultivated and reflected upon.

The results of the empirical study suggest a positive attitude of school counsellors towards working with principals and teachers during the epidemic and remote education and counselling work, and they mostly considered the collaboration between them as good or very good. Collaboration with principals was even more often rated as very good compared to collaboration with teachers (52.8%; 40.4%). Perhaps the higher scores are the result of more intensive cooperation between the counsellors and the principals with many of the initial questions related to the organisation of distance education. Concurrently, research among principals (Kalin et al., 2021; Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021) showed that, in unpredictable and emergency situations, there was a significant need for a calm, decisive and proactive leader who could effectively manage the situation and provide support to educators. Even in the present research, the counsellors see the principal as a source of support, and, at the same time, they notice a high level of willingness on the part of both principals and teachers to collaborate and to tackle the challenges that have been brought about by remote education together.

Similar findings emerged from a study on how principals faced the COVID-19 pandemic and "running an empty school" in Slovenia (Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021), in which the school principals maintained that solidarity and collaboration among teachers and other staff members had strengthened. Similarly, Lithuanian school principals overwhelmingly indicated that, in quarantine, they received the most overall support from teachers (Kaminskienė et al., 2021). All these findings demonstrate the importance of the role that both counsellors and teachers can play in coordinating the efforts of the school community, especially when unforeseen situations arise that must be addressed collaboratively.

In this regard, we would like to point out that the counsellors were very clear in emphasising how important it is for the school staff to feel supported by their principal and to receive clear guidelines in managing the school, especially in emergencies. But, at the same time, they highlighted that it is equally important for the principal to trust them with responsibility and enable them to be autonomous in their work. According to Resman (2004) and Staničič and Resman (2020), it is important to allow counsellors a high degree of professional autonomy, especially when it comes to working in their specific areas of expertise and responsibility. Professional autonomy naturally entails a high degree of accountability, which is not desired by all.

Because school counsellors, principals and teachers work together with the common goal of ensuring the most optimal development of the school as an institution and of all those who are part of it (the students, the staff, and anyone else who enters the school environment), it is crucial that they co-create the vision of the school, set the goals and identify the opportunities and the challenges for achieving the best quality of their work together. In this context, they share responsibility, and it is, therefore, necessary for them to work together in a coordinated and mutually supportive way, both during the planning process and during the monitoring and evaluation of the various activities. That is something that the emergency situation drew our attention to. Through collaborative work, joint planning and shared responsibility in the implementation of the activities, the obstacles often reported by practitioners (such as lack of time, etc.) could be somewhat overcome. What we have learnt from the emergency situation is that the importance of teamwork at different levels of the school and of bringing practitioners together to find solutions, share responsibilities, and allow (and acknowledge) each other's professional autonomy, is not to be underestimated when it comes to establishing a collaborative school culture and climate.

On one hand, the epidemic and the emergency situation have, according to the opinion of the majority of the counsellors, strengthened the collaboration between school professionals. This period has demonstrated something we may have somewhat forgotten due to taking it for granted: a school is a community of learners and all school professionals who interact with each other on a daily basis, and that interaction is what facilitates learning and personal, emotional, social and moral development (Kroflič, 2022; Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021). It is a community that enables friendships, learning to live in a community that cares for the wellbeing of students and the development of their potential, and the school community itself is an integral part of a wider community (Šteh et al., 2018). The pandemic has shown how important it is to work together for quality education and quality life in both the wider and the more immediate community (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021; Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021). Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) find that COVID-19 has strengthened collaborative relationships in some educational settings while weakening them in others. Teacher collaboration was further strengthened in school settings where professional collaboration between teachers had already been developed prior to the pandemic (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Some authors point out that the maintenance of positive relationships is a priority (Sheridan et al., 2002) as failing to develop good relationships can render us incapable of forming successful partnerships. This is only achievable if we cultivate empathy in our relationships, a quality that is crucial to develop, even during the basic education of professionals in schools, as they have to work with a wide variety of individuals and groups (Scott et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the pandemic and emergency situation has clearly shown how severe the burden can be for everyone, both students and adults, when personal contacts and community interactions are interrupted (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021; Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021). Counsellors warn that the quality of communication, educational and counselling work is not the same as before, mainly due to the lack of personal contact with interlocutors. This contact cannot be fully replaced by modern technologies and the latter are not able to provide a truly safe space for interaction (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021; Strear et al., 2021). Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) similarly observed that meetings between colleagues, carried out using various technologies and platforms, are often only a poor substitute for face-to-face encounters. However, the authors also point out that remote interactions can be appropriately adjusted to the various needs and circumstances of school professionals and, in the case of previously established quality relationships and trust, mutual collaboration can also be further strengthened in this way. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to offer additional training for counsellors in remote counselling.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency conditions have undoubtedly changed the way educational institutions work and communicate, and have caused significant challenges in having to adapt very quickly to the situation and establish new forms of communication and collaboration (e.g., Strear et al., 2021). At the same time, we were able to observe a great variety of different approaches, as well as improvisation in tackling a multitude of emerging challenges and in the implementation of educational work (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021; Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021). The situation has encouraged more ingenuity and courage among educational professionals, or at least among some of them, to transition

to more complex uses of technology and to introduce more innovative ideas on a weekly basis (Skubic Ermenc et al., 2021). A positive attitude towards mutual collaboration also emerged, as well as various opportunities for collaboration and joint work. The keywords that arise from the descriptions of the positive examples of the collaboration between counsellors, principals and teachers in our study are that they are in constant contact and have developed a mutual relationship, that they share experiences and solve problems together, that they consult each other, that they support each other and that they trust each other. The antithesis of this is excessive control, cases of distrust, and unwillingness to collaborate.

The challenge for educational professionals is to maintain and to nurture this supportive and collaborative climate and the willingness to face challenges together, which developed in many school environments during the first wave of the pandemic. Many practitioners have come to the realisation that working together can help them overcome the day-to-day challenges they face and that they can learn and develop professionally more effectively with the support of each other. In light of our research findings, we can reiterate and emphasise the importance of building on the four Ts: trust, time, technology, and thinking together, when creating and sustaining a learning community, as is also outlined by Stoll and Kools (2017). The first step in the emergency situation was to establish a communication network, also using technology, and to take the time to maintain regular communication that allowed for mutual collaboration. The key, according to the counsellors, was mutual support and trust, also in the professional competences of one another. The latter enables us to think together and to meet the ever-changing challenges of educational work, which are also brought about by changing working conditions and the diverse needs and characteristics of students and their parents. Similarly, Strear et al. (2021) note that the pandemic has provided us with an important lesson in the power of collaboration and in raising awareness about the value of school counsellors. We wonder, however, whether this momentum and the willingness to engage in collaborative educational work will be successfully sustained in educational work henceforth.

Recommendations

It would be interesting to investigate whether the feeling of alliance and mutual support between school professionals remained after returning to school. In order to gain more insight into and understanding of the counselling service's collaboration with principals and teachers, it would be worthwhile to design even more in-depth research, both quantitative and qualitative. This would enable further exploration of the complexities of relationships and cooperation between educators and the development of partnership models of collaboration.

In the future, it would be useful to explore how technology can be used to respond more effectively to the diverse needs and potentials of students and the school staff and how this can lead to better collaboration. One of the main challenges for any school community is how to maintain the sense of alliance and mutual support that has developed in many schools in emergencies, as it enables practitioners to work together more effectively with their combined strengths, competencies and knowledge, to face the ever-emerging challenges of daily school work. A system of good information exchange and professional support networks (face-to-face and digitally) should be developed within each school to enable practitioners to stay connected, share their concerns and dilemmas, process their experiences, and, where necessary, work together in further collaboration to solve problems related to educational work and in joint action planning. In doing so, it is necessary to re-conceptualise joint work, clarify common objectives, divide tasks and responsibilities, and develop trusting relationships.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first is that we conducted the research during the first wave of COVID-19, in a state of shock, when the educational situation suddenly changed for everyone. If we had also obtained data on collaboration after a certain amount of time had passed, when everyone involved had already gotten used to the new work conditions, further insights could be drawn. The scope could be expanded to include an analysis of how the experience of collaboration during the pandemic affected the collaboration of counsellors, principals and teachers after returning to school. Second, data were collected only from counsellors who were willing to participate in the survey and complete the questionnaires, limiting the possibility of generalisations. This self-selection can also mean that answers were only obtained from counsellors who were comfortable sharing their thoughts and had time to complete the questionnaire. It would, of course, also be insightful to get the perspective of the principals and teachers on the quality of mutual collaboration – a task for the future.

Ethics Statements

The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

Šteh: Data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, methodology description, article writing, critical revision of manuscript, editing. Gregorčič Mrvar: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, article writing, critical revision of manuscript.

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