

SPECIAL EDUCATORS AND THEIR COOPERATION WITH THE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT IN THEORY AND PRACTICE?

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Abstract A special educator can participate in all the activities of the school counselling service and is most effective in those related to the organisation of the lives of children with special needs. The authors monitored the cooperation between special educators and school management, as part of a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, in the context of which the special educator's tasks are defined in the Programme Guidelines for Primary School Counselling Service (2008), as well as how they cooperate with school management in terms of how many other tasks they perform together. The authors found that special educators enjoy the trust of management. The results revealed the operation areas of the school counselling service wherein cooperation between the special educator and school management was evident. The results of the study suggest the basis for further scientific research on the cooperation between school management and the school counselling service.

Keywords:

school counselling service, school management, special educator, cooperation, Programme Guidelines for Primary School Counselling Service

1 Introduction

Counsellors are undoubtedly an important and inseparable part of the school system (Bezić, 2008; Gregorčič Mrvar & Šarić, 2018; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012), which, owing to the interdisciplinary nature of the work, requires the integration of various professional profiles (Gregorčič Mrvar & Šarić, 2018).

In today's primary school, the work of a counsellor can be performed by psychologists, counsellors, social workers, social educators, and special educators in accordance with Article 67 of the Organisation and Financing of Education Act (1996). Beside the aforementioned law, the profile of counsellors in primary school is also defined by the *Rules on the education of teachers and other professionals in the educational programme of the primary school* (2011). In addition to the already mentioned profiles, also master professors of special and rehabilitation pedagogy, and masters of supervision and inclusion pedagogy profiles are included.

All professional profiles in the counselling service are equal, and cooperation among them is important, as each contributes with their expertise to a successful project of assistance and/or cooperation (Programme Guidelines, 2008).

This paper focuses on the area of cooperation between a special counsellor and school management. The authors were interested in special counsellors' opinions on cooperation with the school management with regard to the tasks defined in the Programme Guidelines (2008). As the number of students with special needs increases in our primary schools, special counsellors not only perform counselling work, but also render additional professional assistance.

As part of the study, the authors directed their attention to the differences between special counsellors who are employed as counsellors, and those who are employed as teachers of additional professional assistance (hereinafter the additional teachers).

2 Defining the Counselling Service and Its Tasks

The formal framework for the work of the school counselling service is the Organisation and Financing of Education Act (1996) and the basic conceptual document, on which school counselling work is based in Slovenia, is the Program

Guidelines for Primary School Counselling Service (Programme Guidelines) (2008), which are separately designed for each subsystem (kindergarten, primary and secondary school, and student dormitory). The general starting points set out in the first part of the Programme Guidelines are the same for all subsystems and define the objectives and purpose of the counselling service, as well as the basic principles and the types and areas of activity. The second part of the guidelines for the counselling service in primary schools (Programme Guidelines, 2008) deals with the areas of work of the counselling service and its basic tasks. Counsellors choose priority areas of work and form an annual work plan based on them.

According to the Programme Guidelines (2008), the basic educational goal of the school, and thus the basic goal of the counselling service, is to provide opportunities for a child's optimal development. Therefore, according to Resman (1999), counsellors are the ones who help students in their growth, school, and personal development, and who create opportunities for a productive lifestyle. They are the key actors who help children and adults (teachers and parents) to resolve various situations related to relationships, learning, and educational issues (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020b).

The basic purpose of the counselling service is to use its expertise to aid all participants in the educational process in order to help them to be successful in achieving their educational goals. Owing to the nature of the work, and the complex connection between pedagogical, psychological, and social issues, the work of the school counselling service is interdisciplinary and requires the participation of counsellors with various professional profiles (Programme Guidelines, 2008).

The basic functions of the school counselling service, set out in the Programme Guidelines (2008), are counselling, consultation, and coordination. Its core activities focus on relief activities, including development and prevention, as well as planning and evaluation activities.

Through these basic tasks, the counselling service cooperates with all participants in the educational process in the fields of learning and teaching, school culture, education, climate and discipline, physical, personal and social development, schooling and vocational guidance, and in the field of socio-economic hardship (Programme Guidelines, 2008).

The same guidelines apply to all profiles of counsellors, but their work differs considerably from one profile to another, as each profile involves problem solving according to specific expertise. Thus, the special counsellor offers help to students mainly from the special-pedagogical point of view.

3 The Special Educator as a Counsellor

Kavkler and Tancing (2000) state that a special educator can participate as a counsellor in all activities of the basic school counselling service and is most effective in activities related to the organisation of the lives of children with special needs.

As part of their support activities, they advise children with special needs on the choice of methods, approaches, and learning aids that could enable the children to learn more successfully. The special educator also advises teachers on forms of work, aids, and professional literature for the more effective teaching of children with special needs and participates in the development of individualised programs. They work with parents to find effective learning organisation and planning strategies, learning techniques, and appropriate learning aids. They prepare classes for parents and teachers, and coordinate work among all those actively involved in the care of children with special needs (Kavkler & Tancing, 2000).

In development and prevention activities, the task of the special educator is to analyse the current situation regarding the integration of children with special needs to help plan changes and improvements in this area (Kavkler & Tancing, 2000).

The special educator also actively participates in the activities of planning and evaluating the education of children with special needs (Kavkler & Tancing, 2000).

Next, the areas of activity for the tasks of a special educator and counsellor, which are intertwined with the tasks of the school management, will be examined.

4 Intertwining of Counselling Service Tasks and School Management

The school consists of four main subsystems, including the counselling service, which, as a distinct minority, has no formal power (Bečaj, 1999). However, despite being professionally autonomous in its work, it is nevertheless subject to the control

of the school management, which is supposed to supervise the fulfilment of the tasks defined in the Guidelines (Chata & Loesch, 2007; as cited in Vršnik Perše, 2008). The position, role, and program of the counselling service largely depend on the expectations of the management, its way of running the school, the vision of the school, and the management's understanding of the role of the counselling service (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020a).

Gregorčič Mrvar et al. (2021) reveal that research conducted so far shows that the cooperation of the school counselling service with various actors in the educational process is good.

The Program Guidelines (2008) identify key areas and the related tasks of the counselling service. The tasks that include cooperation between the counselling service and the school management are presented below¹. Special emphasis is placed on the tasks of a special educator.

In the field of school culture, education, and climate and discipline, the task of the school counselling service is to provide the conditions to shape an appropriate culture and climate at the school, to actively participate in the shaping of school order, and in planning and implementing teacher education with modern educational/disciplinary approaches (Programme Guidelines, 2008).

Regarding physical, personal and social development, the task of the school counselling service is primarily to plan, organise, and carry out teacher training in cooperation with the management (Programme Guidelines, 2008). Kavkler and Tancing (2000) see the special educator's role in this field as being mainly in cooperation with the school management to shape the policy of including children with special needs in everyday life.

In the field of schooling, counsellors mainly work with management to form the school's annual work plan (Programme Guidelines, 2008), which also determines the work of the school counselling service, the school's integration activities, cooperation with parents, teacher education, and cooperation with external research institutions and counselling centres (Basic School Act, 1996). All these areas are

¹ The results of the analysis of the cooperation between the special educator and school management in the field of learning and teaching are not presented in this paper.

crucial for creating a supportive environment for children with special needs, therefore the involvement of special educators in their shaping is essential.

As part of vocational guidance, the school counselling service, together with the management, coordinates vocational guidance activities, plans teacher training in the field of vocational education, and creates a space with information for planning educational and career paths (Programme Guidelines, 2008). In vocational guidance, special educators are those who, in cooperation with the management, ensure that all activities related to this area are also adapted to the special needs of students. Their job is to provide students with tailored instruments, counselling techniques, materials, and training programs, as Zunker (2012, as cited in Medič, 2015) stated that the goal of career counselling for children with special needs is to make the most of their potential.

In the field of socio-economic distress, the school counselling service cooperates with the management in shaping programs to help students with learning difficulties in challenging socio-economic conditions. They are actively involved in projects to find and provide maximum support for continuing education to students from socially disadvantaged and deprived families and to help develop plans to solve financial problems, and so on (Programme Guidelines, 2008).

5 Empirical Study

5.1 Purpose of the Study

The theoretical part of this study presents the areas of operation and the intertwining of school management tasks and the counselling service in general, as the Programme Guidelines define the tasks regardless of the professional profile of the counsellor. The authors have highlighted the areas of cooperation with the management, which, because of their professional qualifications, would be most easily performed by special educators. The aim of the study was to uncover the areas of cooperation, as defined by the Program Guidelines (2008), where special educators work with management, and how they evaluate this cooperation.

5.2 Research Method

The authors used a qualitative approach characterised by focusing on smaller parts of education, and this was tied to smaller groups and individuals (Sagadin, 2001). A descriptive method of pedagogical research was used, more specifically, a case study. Cooperation between the school management and the special educators was monitored using semi-structured interviews.

5.3 Research Sample

The sample was chosen purposively. Four special educators from four primary schools in different regions were chosen. Regions included the Drava Region (Podravska), the Lower Sava Region (Posavska), the Central Slovenia Region (Osrednjeslovenska), and the Carinthia Region (Koroška). The schools that were selected enrol between 298 and 906 students. The authors chose everyday cases that, owing to their averageness, represent the situation studied (Vogrinc, 2008). The respondents were special educators, professors of special and rehabilitation pedagogy, and professors of defectology, who perform counselling work in schools and/or cover the implementation of additional teachers (hereinafter the term “special educator” will be used for all profiles).

In the third and fourth primary schools, the special educators also worked as counsellors besides being additional teachers. The special educators at the first and second primary schools were employed as additional teachers, who, because of the nature of their work and the needs of everyday life, were actively involved in the implementation of counselling services, especially in the areas of working with students with learning difficulties and special needs.

Besides the special educator, the counselling service team at the first primary school also included a psychologist and a social counsellor. At the second primary school, the special educator also had a psychologist and educator in the team. Besides the special educator, the team at the third primary school consisted of another special educator and two social counsellors (one employed part-time). The fourth primary school had a special educator in the team, as well as another special educator (counselling work and additional teacher) and an educator only performing

counselling. Counselling at this school was distributed among all members of the active professional staff.

5.4 Data Collection and Processing Procedures

In the current study, the authors wanted to take a more in-depth look at the subject, therefore, a qualitative approach was used. To conduct the semi-structured interviews, a protocol containing ten sets of content was prepared, which consisted of open-ended questions. The introductory set of questions referred to the basic data of the research sample (number of students at the school, education, composition of the counselling service).

In the second part, the authors were interested in how the special educators assess cooperation with the school management (obstacles and initiatives for cooperation, management support, autonomy of action). In the third part, the authors were interested in how important the special educators find their work or how they assess it. The fourth set of questions referred to the cooperation between special educators and the school management in the field of learning and teaching, while the fifth focused on the field of school culture, education, climate, and order.

The sixth set of questions referred to the cooperation between special educators and the school management in the field of physical, personal, and social development, the seventh referred to the cooperation between special educators and the school management in the field of schooling, while the eighth referred to the cooperation between special educators and management in the field of vocational guidance, and the ninth referred to the cooperation between special educators and management in the field of tackling socio-economic hardships. In the tenth set, the authors were interested in which areas of work special educators feel most competent and in which they feel the greatest deficit, in accordance with the Program Guidelines (2008).

Before starting the study, a research plan had been designed. With the help of the analysis of the Program Guidelines (2008), the authors defined the areas of cooperation between management and special educators and formulated questions based on them.

The study was conducted in December 2019. The survey was followed by the preparation of transcripts. Based on the definition of the problem and areas of cooperation between the special educator and the school management, as well as on the literature review, a list of codes was prepared before starting, and a deductive approach was used with regard to the analysis of the data (Vogrinc, 2008), in which the presence of certain codes was presented.

5.5 Results and Discussion

All surveyed special educators worked in a team consisting of various profiles of counsellors. Special educators at the first and second primary schools performed the work of additional teachers, and special educators at the third and fourth primary schools, besides the additional teaching hours, also performed the work of a counsellor.

Given the answers it was clear that special educators who are not employed as counsellors are also actively involved in the work of the counselling service. Namely, their active involvement has a positive effect on the creation of an inclusive climate, and thus on the optimal development of children with special needs.

5.5.1 Cooperation of the Special Educator with School Management

The surveyed special educators assessed their cooperation with the school management as good and correct. One special educator assessed their cooperation with the management as very good, and they pointed out that their cooperation was regular and effective.

The initiative for cooperation usually comes from special educators – the counselling service. A special educator from the second primary school mentioned that the initiative depends on the contents of the problem or task.

In a survey conducted by Gregorčič Mrvar and Šarić (2018), counsellors assessed their cooperation with management as good.

Three special educators did not perceive obstacles for cooperation, one stated that obstacles occasionally appear as a result of the school management not knowing the professional field. Nevertheless, all involved special educators receive support from the school management, which listens to the proposals of the school counselling service, takes them into account, and supports them in front of other professional associates of the school. Also, most of them were satisfied with the possibility of participating in school activities. The answers of the third special educator implied that she was increasingly approached by teachers with requests for help in adapting materials and assessments of knowledge for students with special needs.

As one of the most important tasks of the school counselling service performed by special educators, the surveyed professionals included care for the optimal development of children with special needs, detection of, and assistance to, students with learning difficulties, diagnosing children with special needs, and cooperation and counselling for parents and teachers.

5.5.2 Cooperation Between the Special Educator and Management in School Culture, Education, Climate, and Order

In terms of educational importance (Blažič et al., 2003) school ranks immediately after the family, so it is understandable that all surveyed special educators are actively involved in education at their schools. They pointed out that in all schools an educational plan group has been formed for preparing this scheme, and everyone, including teachers, participates in its formation by submitting proposals.

All special educators also participate in deciding on educational measures. Special educators, who are not employed as counsellors, participate in deciding on educational measures only with regard to students for whom they provide additional teaching.

At the first and second primary schools, the special educators pointed out that in cooperation with the management they ensure an appropriate culture and climate at the school, mainly through acting preventively by conducting various workshops. Proposals for the education content made by the entire team are submitted to counsellors, who then submit them to the management.

When discussing the planning and implementation of professional education in this field, special educators, who also perform counselling work, cooperate more actively with the management. In cooperation with the school principal, they seek relevant training courses and make suggestions to the management. Like their colleagues, they also prepare internal training courses for teachers to get acquainted with social games and other preventive activities, which can be used to establish a good classroom climate.

At the fourth primary school, the special educator pointed out that in cooperation with teachers and management, they had created new forms of educational activities and consequences for violating the rules from first to fourth grade, thus supplementing or changing the rules of the school. As members of the counselling team, special educators at the second and third primary school also participated in the formation of school rules.

5.5.3 Cooperation Between the Special Educator and School Management in Physical, Personal, and Social Development

The experiences of special educators in this field also vary. The first special educator did not participate in the planning and implementation of professional training in this field. However, another special educator, with the approval of school management, conducts a lecture or workshop at least once a year, which is related to specific learning difficulties and their consequences for students. In cooperation with other members of the counselling service and the management, they discuss students with special needs and their specialties and strengths with the entire teaching staff every August, who make suggestions for adjustments and the effective implementation of the educational process.

The third and fourth special educators in this field actively cooperate with management in the planning and implementation of training courses. These sessions then go ahead both in the context of annual planning, and in the planning of lectures that need to be conducted owing to the problems that are faced during the school year.

The fourth special educator also said that she joined the management in training that year, wherein she became even more familiar with this topic, and now she will be able to bring this field closer to other employees. The counsellors prepare one training session or workshop on this topic At least once a year. In collaboration with other counsellors, they prepared a manual for classroom hours, which is of great help to teachers in planning classroom lessons that serve as prevention, as well as having a curative effect.

5.5.4 Cooperation between the Special Educator and the School Management in the Field of Schooling

Most special educators are actively involved in the preparation of the school's annual work plan; only the special educator at the first primary school does not participate directly (only by submitting proposals within the staff team), as this is the responsibility of a counsellor-psychologist.

At the second primary school, the special educator submits her proposals for the education plan to the management, as part of the formation of the annual work plan, and actively participates in the self-evaluation plan.

At the third and fourth primary schools, the special educators cooperate with the management by preparing contents for the operation of the school counselling service in cooperation with other members of the staff, which is determined by the Basic School Act (1996) as a mandatory part of the school's annual work plan. Subsequently, the annual work plan of the counselling service is coordinated with the management. They are often involved in other areas as well, i.e., teacher training, the school fund, children with special needs and learning difficulties, cooperation with parents, and so on.

The third special educator also indicated cooperation with the management in the retraining of students.

5.5.5 Cooperation Between the Special Educator and School Management in Vocational Guidance

From the given answers the authors learned that the surveyed special educators mostly do not lead vocational guidance in schools, as this task is performed by other professionals.

Another special educator pointed out that she does not carry out vocational guidance directly but is active in vocational counselling for students with special needs and their parents, on which she reports only to management.

Only at the third primary school does a special educator lead the field of vocational guidance independently. She coordinates the work in this area with the principal and reports to him.

5.5.6 Cooperation Between the Special Educator and School Management in Tackling Socio-Economic Hardships

The field of socio-economic hardships at the first primary school is covered by a psychologist. Depending on the situation, and if the student who attends additional teaching classes needs help, the special educator turns to a psychologist, who then looks for solutions in cooperation with the management and others involved.

The special educator at the second primary school pointed out that the nature of her work enables her to gain a detailed insight into the child's possible distress in the school or home environment. She first informs the school counsellor and, if necessary, the school management about these observations, and contributes to the solution with proposals in which she also includes the child's wishes and opinion. She also pointed out that the management regularly encourages all employees to identify potential student problems and to inform the counselling service in a timely manner.

The third special educator said that this area falls entirely within her work obligations. She addresses all problems in cooperation with the school management. She also cooperates with the management in the allocation of subsidies by the school

fund and in a framework of cooperation with the Social Services. In more complex cases or problems, the management is also present at meetings with parents.

At the fourth primary school, the special educator stated that, in agreement with the management, she regulates matters in this field for students from first to fourth grade. She independently conducts interviews with parents, assists in writing applications for subsidies, participates in the organisation and coordination of additional assistance to students, proposes inclusion in various summer camps, and cooperates with the Social Services. She reports only to the management on all matters. In more demanding cases, the management is also involved in problem solving.

Solving socio-economic hardships depends on the nature of the problem, the scope of the school counselling service, and the representation of profiles in it, as well as the division of work within the school counselling service.

5.5.7 The Special Educator's Competence and Autonomy in Defined Tasks

All the special educators involved in the study included working with students with special needs among their main tasks, and therefore evaluated their work as important for the functioning of the educational process, as they play a crucial role in establishing an inclusive environment. All of them also highlighted the connecting role of the special educator, as they represent a bridging link between the student, and the parents and teachers.

The special educator at the second primary school highlighted their role in preventive action and in ensuring equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their needs. She emphasised the need to reorganise the work of special educators, which should be 'shifted to the class', where they would be actively involved in direct work in the class and use their expertise to actively contribute to establishing a stimulating learning environment for all.

The fourth special educator said that she sees the counselling service as a connecting link between all participants in the educational process.

The special educators who work as additional teachers pointed out that they are familiar with the *Programme Guidelines for the counselling service in primary school*, but their main guideline is provided by the nature of the work they primarily carry out, and most of all by the *Instructions for educational programs with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance for a nine-year primary school* (2003). Nevertheless, both of them believed that they had extensive knowledge in the field of learning and teaching and, of course, all areas related to working with children with learning difficulties and special needs. They felt the biggest deficit in working with parents and solving socio-economic hardships, and they would like additional training in this field.

The special educators, who work as counsellors, pointed out that they feel the greatest deficit in solving socio-economic hardships, and the special educator from the fourth primary school also pointed out the field of vocational guidance, which is not one of her duties.

All special educators in the survey were of the opinion that they could be professionally autonomous in their work, and that the school management trusts them and accepts their professional proposals.

5.6 Conclusion

Over the years, all counsellors have become an indispensable part of the educational process (Privošnik & Urbanc, 2009). In order to be successful at their jobs, it is vital to work in an interdisciplinary way, which manifests as cooperation between various professional profiles of counsellors. Their collaboration with other professionals and management is crucial for the successful running of the counselling service as a whole (Programme Guidelines, 2008). The same can be concluded from our study, as all involved special educators are members of a team of counsellors, who successfully solve the problems of everyday educational life and cooperate with the management.

From what was said, one can deduce that the surveyed special educators are actively involved in the complex work of the school counselling service. This connects pedagogical, psychological, and social issues, and is carried out through assistance, and development and prevention activities, as well as planning and evaluation activities (Programme Guidelines, 2008).

The authors noticed differences between the special educators who were employed only as additional teachers, and those who also performed the work of the counselling service. This is a logical consequence of the fact that they perform different tasks in accordance with the workplace, and that the general starting point and basis for counselling work services are the Program Guidelines (2008). However, the basis for the work of additional teachers are the *Instructions for educational programmes with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance for a nine-year primary school* (2003).

In the field of school culture, education, and climate and order, there is also the preparation of an educational plan, and all professionals are included in it, in all schools. The differences between special educators arise in terms of participation in the imposition of educational measures, as additional teachers participate in this procedure only if there is a student involved to whom they offer their assistance within their additional teaching hours. There are also noticeable differences in the planning of professional education with special educator-counsellors actively cooperating with the management.

Also, in the field of physical, personal, and social development, special educators – counsellors and management – actively participate in the planning of education, while special educators – additional teachers – do not participate in it.

Special educators – counsellors have a more visible role in creating the annual work plan of the school, since they have to prepare the operational contents for the school counselling service. Special educators – additional teachers only participate in planning through the team or special assignments (self-evaluation).

Vocational orientation is independently led by only one special educator – counsellor, as another professional associate is in charge of this area at the fourth primary school. At the second primary school, a special educator – additional teacher leads vocational guidance for children with special needs, as she knows them extremely well, due to the nature of her work.

Special educators – additional teachers in the field of socio-economic hardships cooperate with the management regarding students to whom they offer assistance.

The interviews imply that the special educators – counsellors are trained to perform the duties of the counselling service, and they feel autonomous and professional in their work. Special educators who perform additional teaching are also actively involved in the work of the counselling service, but mostly in connection with students with learning difficulties and special needs, thus actively contributing to a positive school climate.

The authors found that special educators can be professionally autonomous in their work and that they enjoy the support of the management. All special educators felt working in a team of counsellors was an advantage, since they could perfectly complement each other in an interdisciplinary way.

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