

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING MODELS AND PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT: THE CASE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract

This study is concerned with a possible organizational consulting model of schools in rural areas with unfavorable social, economic and cultural (SEC) environments. Specifically, the study offers a case study analysis of five rural schools of one Lithuanian municipality. The results yielded a conceptual framework for a model of rural school consultation. The proposed model is in

line with the theoretical approaches of the dynamic and the ecological theories. The obtained research results offer suggestions and insights for organizational development theory and practice.

Keywords: *models of school consulting, school/organizational performance, effectiveness*

1. INTRODUCTION

The body of studies on the organizational effectiveness of the public and nonprofit sector is large and constantly growing. Starting with assessing the effectiveness of public and private organizations (Parhizgari and Gilbert, 2004), nonprofit organizations' effectiveness depend on the external relations with stakeholders (Balsler and McClusky, 2005). Empirically, there

is some evidence that organizational consulting can enhance overall organizational performance (Buono et al., 2011) or lead to organizational development (Burke and Noumair, 2015).

Schools, as (usually) belonging to the public sector, are also concerned about their effectiveness. In course of the last three decades an extensive body of literature has been dedicated to school leadership (e.g.

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Leithwood et al., 2004 and Marzano et al., 2005), principals' leadership (Muijs et al., 2010; Želvyš et al., 2019) and/or teachers' leadership (Harris and Muijs, 2003; York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Hairon, 2017), as well as its effects on schools' organizational performance. Moreover, school development as a learning organization (Senge et al., 2000; Kools et al., 2020) and creation of teachers' learning communities is, also, among highly researched topics in the context of organizational effectiveness of schools (see e.g. Katz et al., 2009).

Currently, the greatest emphasis is placed on school performance in low social, economic and cultural (SEC) status schools. Analysis of 2015 OECD PISA (The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Programme for International Student Assessment) results (OECD, 2016) indicate that the difference in achievement between students studying in high and low SEC status schools is about 80 points. Likewise, significant differences have been found in learning outcomes between children from urban and rural schools (2015). According to the OECD (2016) data, the gap in achievement between students from rural and urban schools in Lithuania amounted to 57 points in natural science, 65 points in reading skills, and 53 points in mathematical literacy. Such findings indicate considerable territorial differences in schools' performance. Therefore, improvement of students' achievements in schools, with a low SEC status, presents a particularly relevant research topic.

The quality of school leadership is seen as one of the main factors, contributing to the achievement of the learning results (Council of the European Union, 2006). However, Branck et al.'s (2012) study provides contradicting evidence, suggesting that school leadership is not a significant

predictor of better student achievements in low SEC status schools. A body of literature suggests that aspects, such as teacher professionalism (Jensen, 2013), development of socio-emotional skills of children (Durlak et al., 2011; Liu, 2016), creation of a positive school micro-climate (Berkowitz et al., 2017), different teaching strategies (Han et al., 2015), aspiration of a school to change the results (Bendikson et al., 2011), and the regional/national level of education policy (OECD, 2017), could improve students' learning achievements as a measure of primary school performance in low SEC status schools. School consultation has been indicated as a highly efficient intervention in solving problems, such as learning or/and behavioral difficulties (Kampwirth and Powers, 2016). Therefore, this study explores the development of a school consulting model, in order to improve schools' performance in disadvantaged SEC environments.

First, we provide an overview of the organizational environment of schools and consultation models. Next, we focus on the current research of consultation models for rural schools with a low SEC status. Finally, we highlight some thoughts and implications for school consultation research and practice.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. School organizational environment

The relationship between organizational effectiveness and environments is a particularly relevant topic in organizational studies (Child, 1972; Boyd and Gove, 2006). From the viewpoint of organizational learning theory, the environment affects overall

performance (Senge et al., 2000). In school settings, the organizational environment affects its performance, measured by students' learning achievements.

The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (2016) state that family, individual and environmental factors have a great impact on a child's achievement. Meanwhile, Jensen (2009) claims that the major factor, affecting the achievement of students, living in unfavorable (poverty) conditions, is not their living environment, but rather the school and the teacher. Jensen (2013) notes that the best strategy to help students from an unfavorable SEC environment achieve success in learning is to provide conditions that involve them in the learning process. Hence, if the basic needs of a child are met, the school community can help, by creating a positive atmosphere in the educational institution, rendering emotional support to children, promoting their effort, developing their cognitive capacity, actualizing their endeavor and energy to learn, as well as teaching them to develop a growth mindset, i.e. a belief that their achievement depends on the effort made.

Studies, conducted by other researchers, show that in striving for student achievement on the level of both school and teacher, one of the possible methods is the development of socio-emotional skills. Liu (2016) maintains that better neo-cognitive (social) skills can weaken the influence of an unfavorable SEC environment and improve academic achievement. It is noteworthy that socio-emotional learning programs are highly important, as they can affect achievement of all children (Durlak et al., 2011). Creating a positive school atmosphere is also significant, as it contributes to higher achievement and reduces the negative impact of an unfavorable SEC status,

as well as other risk factors, associated with academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Pekrun et al. (2017) have found that positive emotions (joy, pride) further lead to the positive academic (mathematical) achievements, which in turn provide pre-conditions for such emotions. Meanwhile, negative emotions (anger, anxiety, shame, boredom, despair) have a reverse impact, i.e. they are followed by the low achievement, and consequently, additional negative emotions.

Other researchers believe that teaching strategies are important in teaching students from an unfavorable SEC environment. For instance, Han et al.'s (2015) study demonstrated that problem-based teaching of STEM helps low achievement students to improve performance and reduces differences in learning outcomes. The researchers note that students with low achievement received a greater positive impact from the cooperation in heterogeneous groups, yet they could not substantiate the reasons for this impact. Furthermore, Bendikson et al. (2011) claim that the achievement of students from an unfavorable SEC environment can depend on the aspiration of a school to change results. The research findings show that schools in low and average SEC communities that autonomously set progress goals demonstrate good or average performance in comparison with others. Meanwhile, schools demonstrating low achievement make fewer attempts to progress. As Borman and Rachuba (2001) note, characteristics such as greater involvement in academic activities, internal locus of control, learning efficiency, positive attitude towards school, and positive self-evaluation are inherent to students in unfavorable SEC environments who have achieved better outcomes.

Creemers and Kyriakides (2010) maintain that interaction of all educational levels is important for school effectiveness. The authors refer to it as the dynamic model of educational effectiveness. This model (1) highlights a dynamic interaction of all the factors at all levels of the educational system (the system, school, teacher, and student) and their impact on the students' achievements at different levels (cognitive, emotional, psycho-motoric, and new learning); and (2) reveals indirect and direct connections between education factors and student outcomes that enable envisioning the reciprocity of these connections.

Consequently, in order to explore what consultation model could be developed for rural schools seeking to improve student achievements, we will make an overview of the consulting models that can be useful in solving problems caused by unfavorable school SEC environment.

2.2. School consultation: International models

Our search for consultation models yielded a substantial corpus. Dougherty (1995) distinguishes and analyses mental health, behavioral, and organizational consulting models. In their classification, West and Idol (1987) not only emphasize models, mentioned by Dougherty, but also classify such models as process, clinical, program, and education/training. Alongside mental health, behavioral consultation and process consultation, Dettmer et al. (2005) identify advocacy consultation. Sheridan et al. (1996) emphasise the traditional consulting models (behavioral, of mental health, and organizational) as the main ones, whereas collaborative, instructional, process, resources, etc. consultations are seen as their variants. Different consultation models and their characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of different school-based consultation models

Model	Behavioral	Mental health	Organizational	Collaborative
Focus	Problem-solving	Preventive	Ways of problems solving	Interaction of professionals
Theories	Behaviorism, Social learning theories	Psychodynamic theories	Theories of system changes	Communicative theories
Stages of consultation process	1. Problem identification 2. Problem analysis 3. Plan implementation 4. Problem evaluation	1. Consultation request 2. Problem definition 3. The consultation report 5. Implementation of recommendations Follow-up	1. Entry 2. Problem definition 3. Needs assessment 4. Intervention 5. Evaluation	1. Entry 2. Goal setting 3. Problem identification 4. Intervention recommendations 5. Implementation of recommendations 6. Evaluation of plan and team process 7. Follow-up

Centredness	Client-centred	Client-centred Consultee-centred Program centred administrative Consultee-centred administrative	On various systemic levels: Client-centred Consultee-centred System/school- centred	Client-centred Consultee-centred
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Based on the information provided in Table 1, it is possible to claim that each model has a different focus, ranging from prevention and problem-solving to the systemic approach. Although every model implies different stages of the consultation process, the following key stages can be observed in all of them: problem identification, intervention, and assessment. However, the main difference is not the focus of a consultation model, but rather its centeredness, i.e. client-centred or/and consultee-centred. The organizational consultation model is the only model that is system/school-centred.

As previously mentioned, other consultation models are discussed differently in the scholarly literature. There is a lack of a unanimous conceptualization of collaborative consultation. For instance, West and Idol (1987) distinguish collaborative consultation as an individual model. However, in later studies, collaboration is defined as a “*process that enables groups of people with diverse expertise to combine their resources to generate solutions to problems over a period of time*” (Idol et al., 1994: 60).

Over the past few decades, scientists have tended to identify collaboration as a key dimension, ensuring effective consultation (Kampwirth and Powers, 2016): consultants and consultees work in cooperation so that, by sharing experience and knowledge, they can solve students’ academic, behavioral, and social/emotional problems (Kolbert et al., 2016). In this study, we assume that collaboration is the key dimension of other models, which is especially

significant in consulting the schools in an unfavorable SEC environment.

Focusing on the systemic functioning and change of schools as organizations, the organizational consultation model becomes even more relevant. The model could be referred to as systemic, due to its focus on systemic changes and reliance on the theories of the systems change (see Table 1). Our insights are reinforced by the ecological approach to organizational consultation. For instance, Meyers et al. (2012) claim that organizational consultation is the goal and a constituent part of an efficient consultation model, where attention is focused on systems and systemic changes. Besides, it is a type of consulting that acknowledges contextual influences. Organizational consultants are not necessarily thoroughly familiarized with the organisation, its culture and its processes (Meyers et al., 2012). Therefore, before starting consultation “interventions”, these are discussed with the community members, i.e. a close cooperation occurs between the consultant and the consultee (e.g. teacher, school community, and /or district). If this process is successful and consistent, teachers (in the case of a school) learn to see the problems of an organization and foresee the necessary interventions in the process of consultation.

A systemic approach towards school-based consultations and the importance of cooperation are made relevant by the insights of the theoreticians of systemic change. For example, Levin (2008) maintains that it is wrong to believe that a single change can ensure improvement over a

short period of time; that a few strong leaders can implement change in schools; that a new curriculum and standards can stimulate favorable changes; that the situation can be improved by the accountability system that includes a lot of different data, etc. In other words, the author underlines the need for systemic changes at different levels. Fullan (2011) advocates a similar approach that emphasizes the necessity of both individual (teachers') and institutional efforts, striving to change, i.e. improve student achievement. This would indicate an increase in an individual's capacity to change oneself and cooperate with others. Consultants act in the context (individual and institutional) of changes and improvement. Considering these theoretical insights, we believe that the model of systemic consultation is the cornerstone of school-based consultation, in the context of unfavorable SEC. Likewise, cooperation between the consultant and the consultee is the key dimension in ensuring efficient consultation.

3. METHODS

3.1. Methodological approaches

The methodological approach selected is that of an explanatory case study (Yin, 2014). As Brown (2006) noted, this type of research is mainly concerned with unexplored areas and problems. The case the study focuses on is the project "Initiative for Municipalities", which was implemented in five schools of one District Municipality in Lithuania, in the period from 2016 to 2018 and was funded by the Education Exchanges Support Foundation . The project aim was to foster performance of small rural schools by employing external consultants.

In accordance with the selected methodology, we have identified one unit of analysis, namely implementation of consultation, from a extensive case study. The rural school consultation model, presented in this article as a research result, is a theory-related analytic generalization. Such generalization of research results complies with the case study methodology, since analytic generalization is possible from one or more cases (Yin, 2014).

3.2. Data collection and data analysis procedures

An exploratory research approach was used, in order to explore how school consulting was implemented. The data were collected from the documents (school activity plans; evaluation and self-evaluation of progress records, quarterly and final reports on the consultation activities and results) and the interviews. The documents enable insights into descriptions of the performed analysis of the overall school situation and individual performance of the schools, before and during the process of consultation.

Interviews were collected from different levels of education management informants (N=18): five informants at national level (IN), three informants at municipal level (IMu), seven at school level (IM), and three external expert consultants (IK). The interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview questions (e.g. *what were the activities of the informants in the project, in relation to the process of consultations; what vertical ties were developed between the levels of education management; what were the attitudes of informants from different levels of education management towards the SEC context; how could the impact of the adverse context be mitigated to improve the achievement of students; what were the*

attitudes of informants towards consultation and probability of its impact sustainability; etc.) were modified for each group of informants depending on the nature of the connections of the informant group to the case.

The deductive thematic analysis was employed for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in order to enrich the theoretical notions of different consultation models with practical examples. Likewise, we sought to explore and develop a consultation model for rural schools from unfavorable SEC environments.

The data were analysed and the obtained findings were structured according to the main theme - *the phenomenon of consulting and its nature*. The data were clustered into five main sub-themes: *how were the data collected?; what specific problems and objectives were identified?; which ways of problem-solving were found?; how was the plan implemented?; how was progress measured?; in what ways were the data analysed and evaluated?*

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Data collection

The consultants collected the primary data from the descriptions of the overall school situation, presentations of schools themselves and municipalities during the first meeting with school representatives. Based on this, the unequally distributed features, yet significant for all project schools, were identified: student learning achievement was much below the average; the learning context was unfavorable; meeting the specific learning needs of students was a challenge for the schools. The conducted analysis presupposed the aim

of the consultation – to improve organizational performance through student learning achievement.

General school problems were identified at the initial stage of data analysis, analysing schools' documents:

1. the teachers' opinion that children living in an unfavorable SEC context are demotivated for learning, unable to achieve success in learning, and that the teachers are hostages of a situation that cannot be changed;
2. the schools provide poor compensation for the students' learning problems, due to the influence of SEC factors on their learning achievement.

In the descriptions of the school situation and discussions, it was maintained that the teachers were highly qualified, but the learning motivation and aptitude of students were low: „<...>during that meeting, you could hear the teachers express their victim syndrome very clearly: here the students are different, we are not guilty of getting such students“ (IN1). Therefore, a higher level of achievement could not be expected from the students. Hence, the second problem was revealed: the schools did not undertake expedient measures to mitigate the impact of the unfavorable SEC context, since they did not believe in success.

4.2. Description of the targets selected at the initial stage of the consultation

Analysing the interview transcripts, it appeared that, when formulating the aim and identifying general problems, the consultants focused on the factors affecting learning achievement that are emphasized by theorists (as discussed in the theoretical overview): overcoming the lack of faith in

the students or the lack of a growth mindset, the empowerment of schools to purposefully develop other learning conditions, namely, compensation mechanisms; setting a specific numerically expressed goal of what should be attained and what is recognized by theorists as an important factor in improving students learning achievement. *“We identified academic achievement as a primary goal, and at the second level, we thought about the progress of schools as such. We then agreed on what that progress was, how we value it <...> we all agreed on that very clearly, and it was clear to us what we would need to measure next. We then agreed on the measures that led to*

this goal. <...> we started with a very clear plan of what we have to do” (IN1).

4.3. What specific problems and objectives were identified?

Alongside with the general problems, consultants of each school (referred to by the names of colours) and its community identified specific problems, depending on the peculiarities of the socio-cultural context (see Figure 1). Specific features of each context were defined on the basis of the analyzed group of documents – descriptions of the situation analysis, provided by the schools.

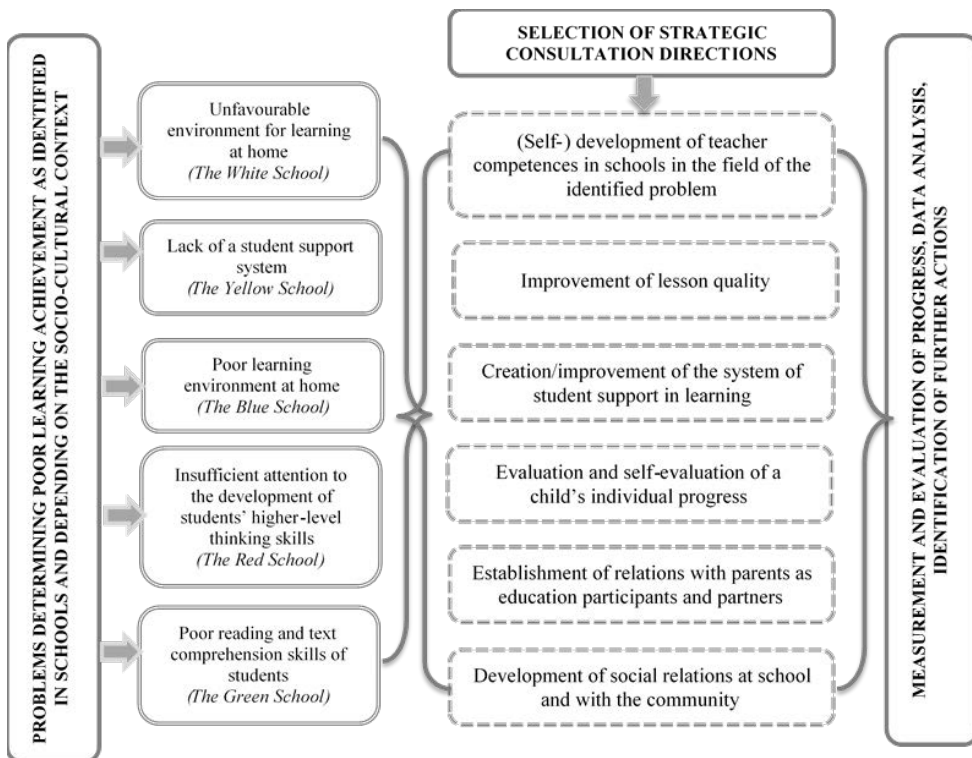


Figure 1. School problems identified by the consultants and school communities, and strategic consultation directions

The White School. The students are characterized by low learning motivation, inadequate self-evaluation, and lack of initiative; parents are poorly knowledgeable on the issues of child cognition and communicating with children; parents hardly participate in the educational process; the number of students at social risk is increasing; gifted students leave for a gymnasium; the school is being reorganized, due to the diminishing number of students: it has become a multifunctional centre, which creates more binding functions to act in the community, extending its work beyond the student body; the changing school status causes lower self-esteem of teachers.

The Yellow School. The students have numerous behavioral problems and the teachers lack competence to address them; the level of students' intrinsic learning culture is low; parents hardly cooperate with the school and give little attention to a child in the family; a part of the student community is passive and unwilling to learn; the number of socially vulnerable families is high; the teachers hardly cooperate with each other in striving for the students' progress.

The Blue School. It is characterized by an unfavorable social environment, lack of student motivation and responsibility, parents' poor cooperation with the school, and diminishing family values.

The Red School. The students' academic achievements do not meet the expectations; their abilities are average and they are indifferent to learning; the students demonstrate little initiative in other activities; they want quick and good results by employing minimal effort; the students' SEC status is uneven; few students seek for a higher level of achievement.

The Green School. Its distinctive feature is that a large amount of students are those, who could not adapt in other schools and lack intrinsic motivation, responsibility and independence. There is an unpleasant learning experience and a negative attitude to learning; some students have not attended school for a long time and live in a problematic environment; 30% of the teachers work have several places of work, or have only a few contact hours; not all teachers identify themselves with the school, are passive, unfamiliar with the students, their parents, school culture, and community expectations; children from foster homes attend the school.

4.4. Which ways of problem-solving were found and how were the plans implemented?

A common dimension united the identified problems of different schools – the identified problems were considered a cause of low achievement. Therefore, directions of the strategic consultation with the schools were focused on the improvement of achievement (see Figure 1) and were relevant for all the schools. As presented by Figure 1, the following strategic directions were identified:

1. (Self-) development of teacher competences (development of theoretical knowledge and its application in education practice);
2. Improvement of lesson quality;
3. Creation/improvement of a system of student support in learning;
4. Evaluation and self-evaluation of students' individual progress;
5. Establishment of relations with parents as education participants and partners;

6. Development of social relations at school and with the community.

Although the strategic action directions are identical, due to the same outcome – poor achievement – different means of action and ways of their implementation were chosen for each school, depending on the identified cause of such outcomes. “*As individual consultants, we act very differently, <...> but we still have to admit that the school was free to choose the pace, and methods*” (IK1).

For example, various forms of on-site training were organized, such as seminars and creative workshops, and four schools (*the White, Yellow, Blue and Red Schools*) opted for methodological trips for teachers to the schools of consultants/professional practitioners, in order to help develop their competences. The aims of these trips were to familiarize the teachers with the experience, offered by the consultants, as well as to ensure that teachers were learning from colleagues. “*The trip to another gymnasium helped us – we noticed that there was something different there, so some changes appeared in our school, as well. We were also consultants at the school. We watched the lessons and communicated*” (IM2). *The Green School* introduced new teaching strategies to the teachers: “*<...> I counted as far as: 24 seminars and 98 individual consultations per year <...>. The consultant arrived at the school and stayed from morning till night. The support was immeasurable*” (IM5).

Seeking to improve lesson quality, the *White School* aspired to create a favorable classroom and school environment, by consistently implementing a programme of socio-emotional education. *The Yellow and Blue Schools* decided to enhance lesson efficiency by involving the students in active learning, exploiting non-traditional learning

spaces, employing cooperative learning, creating evaluation criteria of lesson quality, and using them for the evaluation of lessons. *The Red School* decided to promote the research competencies of students, i.e. they implemented personal student projects outside the classroom: “*the purpose of personal projects was to show the child that he/she can explore what he/she is interested in, not to force <...>. After those projects, the children became more courageous, more willing to do something... A different relationship between teacher and child was established*” (IM2). *The Green School* was directed by the consultant to structure the lesson content of different subjects into information units; to apply kinaesthetic and outcome-oriented methods; to employ the schemes (templates) of logical thinking, when structuring a text; to apply a cumulative score at every stage of teaching; to organize pair work, etc.

All the schools revised and reviewed the old forms of student learning support, or developed the new ones. Hence, the system of student learning support became a systematic one. Employing different methods, all the schools systematized the evaluation and self-evaluation of a student's individual progress as a significant component of the learning process. “*At the initiative of the consultant, teachers have scoreboards in the classrooms so that the children are informed, always know what is going on, and so that they can constantly remember and look at*” (IM1). All the schools learned new ways of working with the community and implemented them in different ways with the support of the consultants. “*<...> strengthening the community is very hard work. What conclusions have we tried to draw for ourselves about why people choose so carefully and so reluctantly? We believe that our society still needs to be nurtured to that communality. <...> In the*

city, people are more open, more active. In the country, they are more individualistic, sitting in their homes: how do I go now anywhere and do something; no, better not” (IM4).

4.5. Description of the targets of consultation and its implementation

While selecting the strategic action directions of consultation with the school communities, the consultants indicated the factors, affecting learning achievement that are outlined by theorists and discussed in the theoretical part of this article. Put of those, the ways of student involvement in the learning process, learning support by fostering cognitive capacities of students, creation of a positive environment for education (classroom atmosphere, community relationships), the significance of social-emotional education for achievement are emphasized: “<...> we pay close attention to the child himself/herself, his/her emotional state, hi/her involvement in the lesson. This is our goal in the lessons: if a child feels good, he/she can learn better” (IM1). In addition, focus was placed on teaching strategies, by improving teacher competences, lesson efficiency, as well as student involvement in the self-evaluation of personal progress: “We made a model: in each lesson, every teacher and every child evaluate themselves, the same criteria in all lessons are applied: we look at understanding, effort and homework. We’re filling out a public document on Google Drive at the end of the week” (IM3). In other words, the consultants encouraged the schools to create *compensation mechanisms* that would mitigate the impact of an unfavorable SEC environment: “All we do is practically learning support – compensating for the home environment. We always emphasize: Children, do not rush, stay, do homework at

school <...> our direction is to compensate for what they lack” (IM3).

4.6. Measurement of progress, data analysis and evaluation

Periodical measurement and evaluation of progress and data collection in the consulted schools were organized as follows. Firstly, on the semi-annual basis, the schools reported the results of their progress to the school founders, project implementers, and representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Secondly, the changes of the school, implementing the socio-emotional education programme (*the White School*), were evaluated by the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning once a year, as a part of a study of socio-emotional competences and the environment, including the students, parents and the whole school staff.

However, according to our opinion, monitoring of the progress on site and reacting to the changes was much more important. For instance, the teachers evaluated and discussed individual students’ progress on a weekly basis. If considered necessary, it was also discussed with the student, and all the necessary support was offered and organized. Depending on the selected ways of the implementation of the strategic action direction, the obtained results were presented in schools after certain stages. For example, the students and the supervision teachers presented individual projects (*the Red School*) on a previously scheduled day, where the whole school community, parents, municipal education specialists, project implementers, etc. were present.

The teachers and school administration discussed progress with the consultant every month. The consultant visited the school once a week and delivered all the necessary

support for the teachers, gave recommendations after the observed lessons or other activities, or organized the necessary interventions for the school. For instance, at the beginning of the project, one school (*the White School*) was reorganized into a multi-education centre. As a consequence, its functions were partly changed. Therefore, the main consultant asked for an additional help to be hired - a specialist in community work, which was not planned at the beginning of the project. Apart from hiring a specialist in this field, a specialist in the field of socio-emotional education was also invited as a consultant for the school – multi-educational centre, implementing the integral programme of socio-emotional education.

Furthermore, the teachers made a personal evaluation of their activities and progress. Apart from discussing the observed lessons, delivered by their colleagues, the teachers recognized the significance of reflection, as a way to contemplate their own activity. They evaluated their lessons, according to the devised lesson quality grids (referred to as the criterion-based matrixes of lesson quality) (*the Yellow and Blue Schools*), filled out the teacher self-evaluation sheets (*the Green School*), notebooks of personal professional development (*the Yellow School*), etc.

Generalizing the consultation activities, it must be noted that their directions both depended on the specific context of the school and the personality of the consultant. They focused on the factors which had been previously recognized, as having effect on students' achievements in unfavorable SEC environments. It is noteworthy that the collaborative school consultation approach prevailed in four schools out of five, where the organizations and consultants acted as equal partners: "*<...> the project enabled the school leaders to gather*

the community, make decisions, <...>. The principals believed they could empower their people. And since that connection was systematic: was it a live contact, or a phone call, or an email <...>, that constant contact with the school enabled the leaders to act, take, solve <...> I think that their managerial competencies strengthened, personal attitudes strengthened, self-confidence strengthened" (IK2). The collaborative school consultation approach could not be applied to the consultation provided to one of the schools (*the Green School*): the interview with the school principal revealed that one-sided, partly autocratic features were prevalent, which could be the reason why not all the school teachers were involved in the consultation process, and only part of the school teaching body applied the instructional strategies, proposed by the consultant.

On the other hand, the school consultation directly affected not only the school communities themselves, but also indirectly affected other stakeholders (municipal education specialists, education policy makers, etc.): "*<...> in the project, the cooperation with the founder was quite active. And based on this experience, I could say that the founder should be more <...> interested in what is going on in the schools and encourage the schools to move forward"* (IK2).

4.7. The model of rural school consultation: Conceptual proposal

In the following part of the article, we present a conceptual model of rural school consultation. The model is based on the theoretical approaches of the dynamic theory of the interaction of all education levels (Creemers and Kyriakides, 2010) and the ecological theory (Meyers et al, 2012).

The choice of these theoretical approaches was determined by evaluating the consultation process, carried out in the case study. In other words, the previous process lacked a clear strategy on what counselling should focus on, what agreements and directions should be achieved: *“We said ourselves, we need to clearly agree on the goals, to clearly structure the consultation model, very clearly <...> We should not be distracted. You should be consistent, go consistently, support each other, etc. Well, and very... Anyway, this project needed value agreements stated very clearly at the beginning and everything would have gone well. But there weren't any, so we saw very differently”* (IK1). It can be claimed that different

types of involvement of a whole range of stakeholders in the consultation process determined the achieved results: *“The weak link was the ministry. The municipality was very active, at the political level actually, with their understanding, with their perception, but with all respect for them, their participation was one hundred percent, their devotion, everything else. Schools were really active”* (IK1). Based on our research data and theoretical underpinnings, we propose a systemic organizational consultation model to be applied to rural schools that work with students from unfavorable SEC environments (Figure 2).

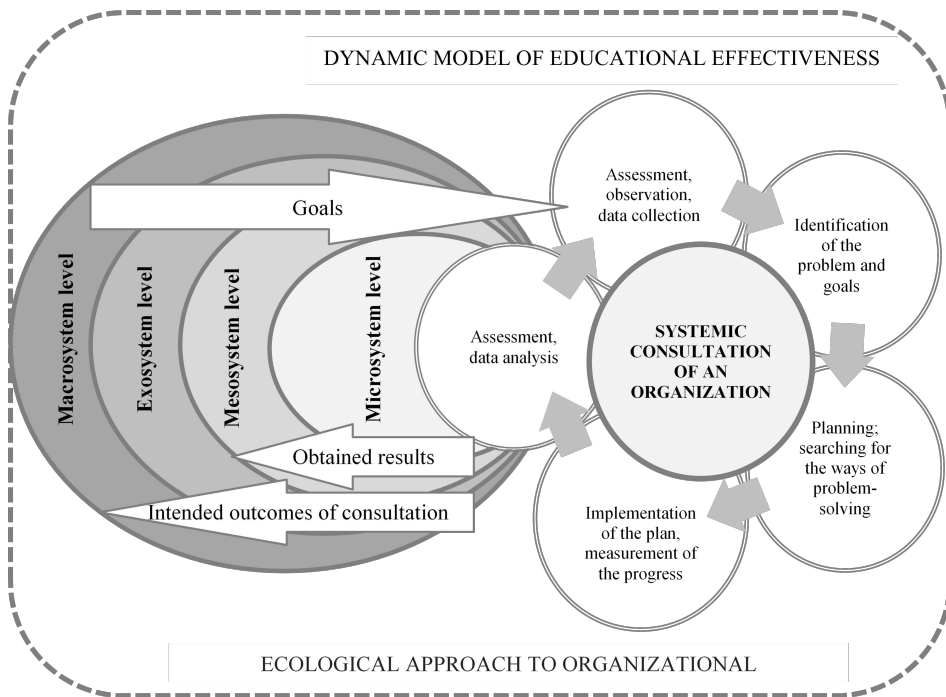


Figure 2 The conceptual model of small rural school consultation

In the case of rural schools, we wanted to ensure that the consultation is not “locked” at the school level. If the consultation is provided only within the school,

successful results can be obtained only at the micro and meso levels, despite the application of different consultation strategies, determined by the socio-cultural context.

The level of microsystem refers to the contexts, where children are directly involved (e.g. the family, neighbourhood, class). At the level of the mesosystem, the relations and connections between microsystems are fostered (e.g. between the family and the school, among the teachers of different study fields). As already mentioned, the unfavorable nature of the school location and socio-cultural context demands that the consultation is directed at the exo and macro levels in the case study. In other words, it is important to affect the contexts, where children are not directly involved (e.g. parents' working places, developers of education programmes at the level of exosystems), and yet they influence the learning achievement.

On the basis of the ecological approach, these contexts are ascribed to the level of exosystems in the model. School, even when guided by high-quality consultation, cannot change the factors of the exosystem (e.g. it cannot compel employers to pay salaries to parents, sufficient for a dignified life; it cannot make education policymakers develop curricula, directed towards maximum personal growth of children, considering their capacities rather than unconditional compliance with standards; it is not always possible to secure participation in competitions, where all schools are measured equally, etc.). It must be noted that the ecological approach does not narrow down the unfavorable SEC problems of a child to poverty or wealth, but rather encourages recognition of the complexity of school as an organization. More importantly, organizational consultation must be understood and undertaken as an activity within the system, when dealing with the factors of exo- and macro-systems and striving to mitigate their influence on student achievement. Such an approach empowers

consultants of an organization to focus on systemic goals.

The dynamic model of educational effectiveness, proposed in our consultation model, has two aspects. Firstly, it reiterates the importance of the dynamic interaction among all levels of education (national, municipal education systems, school, teacher and student) in the process of school consultation in rural areas. On the basis of such an interaction, the negative effects of unfavorable SEC factors can be mitigated and the positive effects on student achievement can be achieved. Moreover, in the context of the dynamic model of education efficiency, student achievement includes cognitive, emotional, and personality maturity results. Hence, in consulting for small rural schools in unfavorable SEC contexts, apart from improving academic achievement, the focus should be on the students' social, emotional, and cultural education, as a factor that also affects cognitive performance.

When presenting our model, we want to emphasize that external consultants were employed in the case study. These were management-level consultants, leaders in their field. It is also important that these consultants were proficient in the understanding of the entire school system, down to the classroom activities and the context in which the school operates. This resembles process consultation (Schein, 1988). We perceive it as the uniqueness of our consultation model, as there are theorists, who offer a triadic consultation model for inclusive schools. This model usually refers to having a team of professionals (e.g. a psychologist, a special educator, etc.), acting at school as a source of teacher support. In our case, the consultation provided by an external consultant proved to be efficient for the consultation of rural schools in an unfavorable SEC context. Hence, small rural schools

are advised to employ an external consultant, who is familiar with the procedural aspects of school activities and is able to direct the school towards systemic change.

5. DISCUSSION

The proposed consultation model provides guidance for the improvement of the learning achievement of children living in unfavorable SEC environments. The school alone is not capable of improving the quality of the entire education system and, consequently, the achievement of students. Therefore, interaction at all levels of education management is important. We agree with the statement of Harris et al. (2013: 14) that in *“educational effectiveness research”*, we need *“multilevel (research), involving the simultaneous study of the classroom, the school and the educational system, both local and national, since that is the world that practitioners and policy-makers inhabit”*. Our research, though rather small in its scope, covered all levels: national, regional (municipal) and school. Therefore, we would like to draw attention to several aspects that we consider highly important for school organizational improvement.

Firstly, a collaborative relationship is the key component of consultation, since interactions are at the heart of consultation (Newman et al., 2017) and only *“the collaborative consultation sessions were characterized by a joint intention to solve professional challenges”* (Pettersson and Ström, 2017: 20). It is clear that different types of collaboration are possible: from in-depth collaboration (with a clear mutual influence and with the deep interest) to surface collaboration, which is equal to information provision (low level influence and minimal interest). In all the schools

involved in our case study, the consultants aimed to achieve the deep collaboration that enabled schools to purposefully develop and strengthen the means of mitigating the impact of unfavorable socio-cultural and economic factors on student achievement. This was to be done by choosing strategic directions for consultation activities, focusing on factors that affected student achievement. Hence, through this collective collaborative process, the teachers found common solutions and gained new knowledge, whereas consultation provided to the school as an organization was significant.

Secondly, the provided consultation was applied as an intervention, since the schools of the selected region (municipality) of Lithuania were characterized by a highly unfavorable SEC context and poor student achievement. In studies (e.g. Mayworm et al., 2016; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016), analyzing the process of school consultation, intervention should be delivered at three levels: primary (prevention), secondary (corrective), and tertiary (remedial). It is important to stress that a consultant's intervention in the school context is usually delivered at the secondary and the tertiary levels, which is not always effective. In order to obtain favorable results, preventive intervention should be employed, especially considering the support offered to children from risk groups. In this regard, the PISA research data allows for distinguishing between learning achievements of fifteen-year-old students in various socio-economic environments, which can be further compared to the OECD average. Research has shown that students' socio-economic status explains 13% of the variation in student performance in science (OECD, 2017). It is noteworthy that school consultation on the peculiarities of educational processes is an effective means that should be applied

for both interventional and preventive purposes.

Thirdly, all the schools participating in our case study had a common problem – teachers’ negative attitude towards children from an unfavorable SEC environment. The teachers considered their students as unable, unwilling and incapable. A similar tendency was highlighted among the students. According to the results of 2015 PISA, there was a statistically significant difference in expectations of Lithuanian students from different SEC environments: the children with a high SEC status set higher goals for themselves than the children from a low SEC status (OECD, 2016). Therefore, one of the primary goals for organizational performance should be encouragement of these students and their teachers to promote their growth mindset. The notion that every child can grow and achieve their goals by hard work, irrespective of their immediate environment, initial skills or personal capacities, presupposes social justice, as well as aspiration for quality and equal education.

Thus, a conceptual consultation model, based on the findings of our study, can increase the effectiveness of a school as an organization (in our case, improving student achievement), if supported by a systematic organizational consultation, characterized by collaboration, preventive intervention, and clear, defined goals. In addition, the provided conceptual consulting model may be relevant to other public sector organizations, seeking to improve performance.

It is obvious that the presented research has some limitations. The main limitation of the research is its locality, i.e. the case of one small Lithuanian municipality. However, a detailed view on the consultation experience and the presented consultation model can be beneficial and interesting for further research, as well as for

theoretical and/or practical considerations. Our case study provides some knowledge and describes how systemic organization consultation in rural schools in an unfavorable SEC context can improve performance.

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MODELI ORGANIZACIJSKIH KONZULTACIJA I UNAPREĐENJA PERFORMANSI: SLUČAJ RURALNIH ŠKOLA U LITVI

Sažetak

U ovom se radu raspravlja o mogućem modelu organizacijskih konzultacija u školama u ruralnim područjima, s nepovoljnim socijalnim, ekonomskim i kulturnim (SEK) okruženjem. U istraživanju se analiziraju studije slučaja peterih ruralnih škola u jednoj županiji u Litvi. Na temelju navedenog se prezentira konceptualni model organizacijskih konzultacija za ruralne škole. Predloženi model je usklađen s teorijskim pristupima dinamičkih i ekoloških teorija. Dobiveni rezultati predstavljaju prijedloge i uvid u teoriju i praksu organizacijskog razvoja.

Ključne riječi: modeli školskog konzultiranja, školske (organizacijske) performanse, efektivnost