

The cooperation between kindergartens and families during the kindergarten closure in Slovenia due to the COVID-19 pandemic

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During 2020, kindergartens in Slovenia were fully closed in the first and partially closed in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the kindergarten practice of cooperation with the families changed. In order to obtain an insight into the new situation in this field, our research focused on the organization of the cooperation between kindergartens and families during the kindergarten closure. In November 2020, we developed an online questionnaire for parents who had at least one child enrolled in kindergarten. The questionnaire was filled in by 944 parents. More than half of the parents answered that contacts with preschool professionals had supported them during the full and/or partial closure of their kindergarten. About one half of parents answered that the kindergarten had contacted them once a week, mainly with proposals for activities and information in case the kindergarten remained closed. Most parents answered that the additional contact with the professionals had not represented an additional workload. Three quarters of parents believe that it is necessary to maintain contact even during the closure. Still, as the pandemic situation is completely new, it is still difficult to assess in what way it makes sense to maintain cooperation during the closure. With the study, we obtained insight into the importance of cooperation from the parents' perspective, which we need to consider in similar situations ahead.

Keywords: COVID-19, kindergartens, parents, preschool children, collaboration

Introduction

In March 2020, a pandemic was declared in Slovenia due to the COVID-19 disease, forcing the kindergartens throughout the country to close completely. The period of complete closure of kindergartens lasted between 16 March

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2020 and 18 May 2020 (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2020a). Due to the deteriorating epidemiological situation in the country, kindergartens were closed again from 26 October 2020 until January 2021. During this time, the mayors of the *municipalities* (the *kindergarten's founders*) had the right to determine an exception to the closure of kindergartens, organizing a minimum operation of the kindergarten intended only for parents who urgently needed child care. Emergency care was provided to the children whose parents were essential workers (e.g. health workers, employees in civil protection, the army, the police) (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2020b). Kindergarten management varied greatly both during the first lockdown (when all kindergartens were completely closed) and the second one (when kindergartens provided only emergency childcare for the children of essential workers). Each principal was autonomous in managing the kindergarten during the closure, since the national government did not provide any unified or detailed directions. According to the circular of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2020a), principals could assign different employment statuses to their employees. Most employees were granted the second possible status – “waiting for work at home”, which implied the employee stayed at home, did not work and received 80% of their monthly wage. If their nature of work allowed for it and if the employer decided so, some workers could work from home (the third possible status). During the second lockdown, when kindergartens were partially closed, some employees worked to provide emergency service in the kindergarten, while others had again been delegated one of the three possible employment statuses.

Due to various employment statuses of the kindergarten employees and based on the diverse instructions of the principals on how to operate when the kindergarten was closed, the ways of cooperation between the kindergarten and the family with children who stayed at home differed greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practices of cooperation with the families with children who stayed at home varied between the kindergartens. Moreover, some kindergartens showed different practices internally as the decision on whether, how much and how the professional/managerial staff would maintain contact with children and their families was up to the kindergarten management or professionals themselves. Therefore, children who stayed at home with their parents or relatives during the kindergarten closure engaged in various types of cooperation with families in terms of frequency and form. On the one hand, there were kindergartens that only took care of providing the most necessary information through the kindergarten's website, i.e. had no direct contact with families; on the other, there were kindergartens where certain early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals maintained regular contacts with families. In some cases, the ECEC professionals communicated with families on a weekly or even daily basis.

Preschool education is an important part of the education system and it is crucial in the earliest period of human life (e.g. Andersson, 1992; Lowe Vandell et al., 2010). It is a complement to family education; children gain experience and knowledge that cannot be acquired in the family (Eurydice, 2021). In the time of kindergarten closure, this responsibility was not divided among different adults (parents, grandparents, ECEC professionals), but was all in the hands of the parents.

Basic kindergarten tasks are to help parents with comprehensive care for children, to improve the quality of life of families and children and to create the conditions for children's physical and mental abilities to develop. Slovenian public kindergartens and private kindergartens with a concession follow the principles, goals and guidelines of the national curriculum for kindergartens (Bahovec et al., 1999). One of the goals of the national curriculum for kindergarten promotes "improving information and cooperation with parents". The "principle of cooperation with parents" (one of the principles in the curriculum) discusses various aspects of cooperation with parents in kindergarten. These include public access to written and oral information on kindergarten programmes; the parents' right to exchange information and in-depth interviews with the educators, assistants, and counsellors; the gradual introduction of children into various kindergarten programmes; and the parents' right to participate in the planning of life and work in the kindergarten (Bahovec et al., 1999). In the pedagogical literature in Slovenia (e.g. Resman, 1992; Intihar & Kepec, 2002), we find efforts to define the relationship between the family and school or kindergarten through the concept of partnership, which corresponds to the guidelines in the curriculum. The latter therefore allows and at the same time requires kindergartens to work on improving written and oral information for parents, as well as to enhance cooperation with them through gradual inclusion of children in kindergarten and through other formal and informal forms (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010). Moreover, research emphasizes the importance of quality partnerships between parents and educators (Epstein & Sanders, 1998). The OECD studies of five-year-olds have found clear links between the parents' involvement in their child's ECEC centre and the child's learning and wellbeing. The five-year-olds whose parents were strongly or moderately involved in their school or ECEC centre had higher cognitive and social-emotional skills than those whose parents were less involved (OECD, 2020).

Communication and collaboration during the closure of kindergartens had to be adapted. The communication between (pre)schools and parents increased in numerous education systems during the coronavirus lockdown (OECD, 2020). More than ever, kindergartens had to make communication plans in which they included important key messages that they wanted to share with parents and children (Lucas, 2020). They also had to adapt their ways of communication since they were not able to meet with the families in person or leave messages on the whiteboard in the hallway as they usually

do in Slovenian kindergartens. Kindergartens also had to consider that the parents were facing a greater responsibility for supervising and educating their children, while many were also trying to adjust to working from home. Kindergartens had to prepare different materials to support parents in their active upbringing role. Preschools had a critical role not only in delivering educational materials to children and their families, but also in offering an opportunity for children to interact with educators and obtain the possibility of additional counselling offered by preschool professionals. Preschools can actively promote a health-conscious schedule and good personal hygiene, encourage physical activities (Brazendel et al., 2017), and, during the COVID-19 lockdown, they could try to integrate such health promotion in the family environment as well.

Previous research (Barnet & Jung, 2020) has shown that only 10% of children were involved in distance activities on a daily basis after kindergartens had closed and that online work could not replace the educational work that took place at the premises of an institution. The authors suggest that it is necessary to improve the online way of working with the aim of daily engagement of children in activities, as well as to include training for parents. In such an unplanned situation, one of the challenges in working with children is to maintain the continuity of children's development.

In November 2020, a national *COVID-19 and Kindergarten* conference was organized by the Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education, which is one of eight research centres operating within the Educational Research Institute. The event enabled the participants to gain an insight into Slovenian kindergartens' good practices of collaboration and maintaining contact with families during the closure of kindergartens. After the conference, all the good practices were also published (Mervic et al., 2020). All these practices showed that the kindergarten professionals had a high level of awareness of the importance of maintaining contact with families and providing remote work in the emergency situations during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this situation was new for everyone and there was no framework or guidelines (yet) to follow, the practices of principals and ECEC professionals were very diverse. Furthermore, many questions remained open at that time – such as in which way and how often to contact the families; what should be the aim of this communication; what should be the content or form of their interaction etc.

As already stated, we gained some insights into the situation from the point of view of the professionals; yet, we were further interested in the way in which parents perceived such practices. In order to get a comprehensive view of the problem, which could further contribute to developing better guidelines for action in similar circumstances, we decided to do an exploratory research to obtain a better understanding of the existing situation.

Kindergartens have important roles, which exceed taking care of children and enabling parents to perform their work duties without interruption. They have an educational role with a curriculum that needs to be complied with, as

well as a complementary and compensatory role, especially in children who come from less stimulating backgrounds. Based on that, we believe it is of great significance for kindergartens to maintain cooperation with the families despite the closure. The cooperation should be further investigated and, accordingly, we set the following research questions based on the content of the research problem:

1. Which kindergarten professionals (principals, counsellors, ECEC professionals) were in contact with the families during the first and second waves of the pandemic? How often were the contacts made and through which channels?
2. What was the content of the established contact between the ECEC professionals and the families?
3. Did parents perceive such cooperation as support or as an additional burden and did parents think that it was necessary to maintain the contact with the ECEC professionals during the kindergarten closure?
4. To what extent were the activities adapted to families' home environments (e.g. materials available at home, requirement of special preparation for activities etc.)?
5. Is the parents' level of education related to their perception of their collaboration with the kindergarten (was it supportive, was it an additional load, was it adapted to home environment etc.)?

Methodology

Participants

The questionnaire was answered by 1,204 parents who had at least one child enrolled in the kindergarten at the time of the first and/or second wave of COVID-19 pandemic. After overviewing the data, we removed 270 partly completed questionnaires due to missing data.

Approximately two-thirds of parents who filled in the questionnaire stated that they came from a more suburban area (61.8%) compared to those who came from urban areas (38.2%). More participants stated that they lived in a two-parent family (90.8%) compared to those who lived in a one-parent family (9.2%). A little less than two-thirds of parents (62.6%) reported that they were highly educated (BA or higher).

The participants were also asked to state their employment status during the kindergarten closure. Most of the parents were working at their workplace (31.8%), 20.2% were working from home, while 14.3% were temporarily assigned the "waiting for work" status. Other answers included a combination of working from home and at the workplace, maternity leave, sick leave, and student status.

Instrument

We developed the *Questionnaire for parents who have at least one child enrolled in kindergarten at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic* (Mervic & Zgonec, 2020), referring to the parents' cooperation with kindergarten during the lockdown. The questionnaire was short, because we wanted to attract as many parents as possible in a short time. One of the aims of preparing the questionnaire was to gain insight into the perspective of parents and present the preliminary results at the November 2020 conference *COVID-19 and Kindergarten*. The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions divided in sections. In addition to demographic data, we were interested in the number of parents who enrolled their children in the emergency care offered by their kindergarten. Secondly, we were interested in the cooperation between kindergartens and families (frequency of contacts, who contacted the families, how were the families reached and what was the aim of the contact). Close-ended and multiple choice answers were possible for each question in this section, except for the questions about the frequency of contacts, where there was only one possible answer. Furthermore, we wanted to investigate the parents' opinion on the collaboration between the kindergarten and families (whether it was supportive, whether it was an additional load, whether it was adapted to home environment). In this section, participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale. There were additional questions related to the frequency with which parents replied to the contact from kindergarten and whether they had ever initiated the contact with the kindergarten. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question which asked about any potential extra support the parents would like to receive from the kindergarten.

The process of questionnaire implementation

The questionnaire was launched in early November 2020, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when kindergartens were partly closed due to the deteriorating pandemic situation in the country. The questionnaire was accessible online, via the 1ka online platform. It was distributed among 35 Slovenian public kindergartens that are members of the Step by Step Network for Changing Quality, which includes almost 10% of public kindergartens from different regions in Slovenia. We sent the link with the questionnaire and the presentation of the research by e-mail to our contact person from each kindergarten included in the Network. Each of them was asked to forward the e-mail to all employees in their kindergarten, who were further requested to inform the parents about the questionnaire and encourage them to complete it. The questionnaire was also published on the Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education Facebook page, which

has almost 1,300 followers, among whom there are professionals from other Slovenian kindergartens (not members of the Step by Step Network for Changing Quality), individuals of different profiles (principals, preschool teachers, counsellors) and representatives of other interested public parties. The questionnaire was available for one week.

Results

Table 1 shows the professionals who contacted the families during the first (16 March to 18 May 2020) and the second closure of kindergartens (from 26 October 2020 to the survey). Multiple answers were possible.

Table 1

Professionals who contacted the families: frequencies

Profile of preschool employees	First closure (N = 931)	Second closure (N = 932)
Preschool teacher or their assistant	658 (70.7%)	719 (77.1%)
Management (e.g. principal)	341 (36.6%)	432 (46.4%)
Counselling service	43 (4.6%)	89 (9.5%)
Other*	170 (18.3%)	63 (6.8%)

Note: *The section “Other” includes the answers of parents who did not choose any of the offered options. The answer “Other” included answers such as a speech therapist or special pedagogue; 93 out of 170 “Other” answers explained that the child had not yet been enrolled in the kindergarten in the first wave. Additional 37 out of 170 “Other” answers reported that there were no contacts from the kindergarten in the first closure and 35 out of 63 “Other” answers reported that there had been no contacts from the kindergarten during the second closure. These two numbers account for 4% of all participants. Other parents did not give an extra explanation.

Table 1 shows that most families were contacted by either preschool teachers or their assistants. More than one third of participants reported that they had been contacted by the management, while only a few (less than 10%) had been contacted by the counsellors. During the second closure, more families were contacted by all kindergarten employee profiles.

The participants were asked about the ways in which different profiles from the kindergarten contacted them and whether they could choose more than one way of communication.

Table 2
Frequencies of communication channels through which families were contacted

Communication channels	Contacted by counselling service or management (<i>N</i> = 482)	Contacted by a preschool teacher or their assistant (<i>N</i> = 795)
E-mail	378 (78.4%)	608 (76.5%)
Webpage	125 (25.9%)	147 (18.5%)
Telephone	52 (10.8%)	87 (10.9%)
Video call (e.g. Zoom)	11 (1.2%)	46 (5.8%)
eAsistent platform	60 (2.3%)	62 (7.8%)
Other	67 (13.9%)	79 (9.9%)

The most common way of communication was e-mail, followed by a webpage and telephone. Less than 6% of participants reported communication via a video call and less than 8% reported communication via the eAsistent platform. eAsistent is a Slovenian platform offering comprehensive support to educational organizations. Via eAsistent, teachers can report their daily tasks, communicate with other stakeholders, and perform other organizational tasks. "Other" included answers such as in person, via the kindergarten application or video.

The participants also reported the frequency of their contacts with the kindergarten. Their answer only relates to the preschool profiles who contacted them.

Table 3
Frequency of contacts between kindergartens and families

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once to twice a month	At least once in the whole closure period of the kindergarten
Contacted by the counselling service or management (<i>N</i> = 481)	55 (11.4%)	241 (50.1%)	103 (21.4%)	82 (17.1%)
Contacted by the preschool teacher or an assistant of the preschool teacher (<i>N</i> = 785)	105 (13.4%)	314 (40.0%)	204 (26.0%)	162 (20.6%)

The most common answer was that families had been contacted once a week by at least one profile of kindergarten employees.

There are 18.5% of participants who also answered that they had contacted the kindergarten on their own initiative. One half of parents (50.2 %) reported that they had always replied to the contact from kindergarten, an additional quarter (25.5 %) said that they had often replied to the contact; 15.9% rarely replied and only 8.4% had never replied to the kindergarten contact.

Contacts between the families and the kindergarten had different aims. The participants could choose more than one category for different aims. Different aims were chosen based on the input from preschool teachers and other professionals who presented their work at the *COVID-19 and Kindergarten* conference. We were only interested in the aims of the contacts initiated by preschool teachers or their assistants.

Table 4

Frequencies of contacts initiated by preschool teachers or their assistants according to different aims

Aims of the contacts initiated by the preschool teacher or their assistant (N = 784)	
Virtual storytelling	93 (11.9 %)
Suggestions for physical activities	232 (29.6 %)
Suggestions for creative activities	418 (53.3 %)
Suggestions for outdoor activities	231 (29.5 %)
Suggestions for other free time activities	306 (39.0 %)
Talking with the child	104 (13.3 %)
Talking with the parent	118 (15.1 %)
Other	222* (28.3 %)

Note: *114 out of 222 “Other” answers were about notices (e.g. the notice about the reopening of the kindergarten).

Preschool teachers or their assistants most often contacted the families with the suggestions for creative activities, followed by the suggestions for other free time activities, physical activities and outdoor activities. In the “Other” category, we included the participants’ answers such as additional photos from the kindergarten, the instructions to prepare the Slovenian traditional breakfast, motivational or encouraging notices, and a written message about the preschool teacher missing the children and the kindergarten, with additional questions about how they were.

Contacts were directed at the whole group of children since the suggestions were not individualized. Individual activities, such as talking to a child or a parent, were less common. Parents reported that preschool teachers made contact directly with the child to send congratulations for their birthday or to follow up with reading badge activities. The Slovenian Reading Badge Society is both the name and the trademark of an important cultural and educational movement, i.e. an activity for the development of reading habits and reading culture among youth (Mohor, n.d.).

The parents who reported having contacts with the preschool teachers answered three additional questions about their opinion on this collaboration. They answered on a five-point scale (1– *the least supportive/the least burdensome/the least adapted* and 5 – *the most supportive/the most burdensome/the most adapted*).

Table 5

Descriptive statistics for answers to the questions about the parents' opinion on the collaboration between the preschool teachers or their assistants and families

	N	M	SD
To what extent were the contacts with preschool teachers or their assistants supportive?	787	3.53	1.15
To what extent were the contacts with preschool teachers or their assistants an additional burden for you?	784	1.58	0.86
To what extent were the activities adapted to your home environment?	739	3.97	0.92

The findings indicate that 60.6% of parents think that the contacts were supportive. Around one fifth of parents (22.7%) answered using the middle answer (3 – *it was neither supportive nor unsupportive*), while 16.6% said that the contacts had not been supportive.

Research results show that 81.4% of parents reported that the contacts had not been an additional burden; 15.7% of parents answered that they could not decide, and only 2.9% of parents reported that the contacts had been an additional burden.

Among the parents who completed the questionnaire, 72.1% agreed that the suggestions for activities were adapted to their home environment, e.g. the proposed materials were also available at home or the activities did not call for a lot of preparation. Almost a quarter (23.5%) of the parents answered that activities were neither adapted nor unadapted to their home environment and only 4.3% of parents reported that the activities were unadapted to their home environment.

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked all participants ($N = 934$) to what extent they thought that maintaining the contact between the preschool

teacher or their assistant and the family during the kindergarten closure was necessary. They answered on a five-point scale (1 – *the least necessary* and 5 – *the most necessary*) ($M = 3.9$; $SD = 0.95$). It is shown that 76.2% of parents think that maintenance of the contact was necessary even during the closure; 14.0% were undecided and 9.6% of the parents did not think that maintaining contact was necessary. When the parents were asked about any extra support they would like to receive from the kindergarten (the last open-ended question in the questionnaire), the answers were extremely diverse. Their responses can be classified into two groups: a group of parents who stated that there were enough contacts or that they did not need additional contact (the provided contact was enough or they were able to find activities for their child on their own) and a group of parents who stated that they would want more contact because their kindergarten did not provide them any or did so very sparsely. When answering what additional support would be needed, a lot of parents also showed appreciation or gratitude towards the preschool teachers or their assistants. They complimented their work and reported of extremely pleasant and well-prepared contacts between them. The findings from the current study highlighted the non-homogenous nature of the experiences of families during the lockdown.

Furthermore, we analysed how the parents' level of education was related to their replies to contacts, their opinion on the adaptiveness of the activities and the supportiveness of contacts on a 5-point Likert scale. Using the Spearman's Rho, we found a small but statistically significant negative correlation between the parents' level of education and their response to the questions on their opinion on collaboration. This implies that the lower the parents' level of education, the more they found the contacts to be supportive. All other correlations did not meet the criteria for statistical significance.

Table 6
Correlations between the parents' level of education and their answers on a 5-point scale to the questions about their opinion on collaboration

		Level of parents' education	
Level of parents' education	Spearman's Rho	—	
	p-value	—	
	N	—	
To what extent do you think that maintaining contact between the preschool teacher or their assistant and the family during the kindergarten closure is necessary? (the importance of maintaining contacts)	Spearman's Rho	0.003	
	p-value	0.939	
	N	925	
How often did you reply to contacts from preschool teachers or their assistants? (replying to contacts)	Spearman's Rho	-0.074	*
	p-value	0.026	
	N	912	
To what extent were the activities adapted to your home environment? (the adaptiveness of activities)	Spearman's Rho	-0.079	*
	p-value	0.033	
	N	734	
To what extent were the contacts with preschool teachers or their assistants an additional burden for you? (an additional burden of contacts)	Spearman's Rho	0.038	
	p-value	0.293	
	N	778	
To what extent were the contacts with preschool teachers or their assistants supportive? (the supportiveness of contacts)	Spearman's Rho	-0.122	***
	p-value	<.001	
	N	780	

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

We also calculated the Pearson's correlation coefficients between the responses to the questions on the parents' opinion on collaboration. The importance of maintaining contacts has a positive correlation with replying to contacts ($r = 0.291^{***}$), adaptiveness of activities ($r = 0.193$) and supportiveness of contacts ($r = 0.296^{***}$). The importance of maintaining contacts has a negative correlation with the contacts posing an additional burden, which implies that if parents find maintaining the contacts important, contacts do not pose an additional burden. The additional burden of contacts correlates negatively with all other variables. The strongest is the correlation of the supportiveness of contacts and the adaptiveness of activities

($r = 0.506$), which means that the more the activities are adapted to the home environment, the more the contacts are perceived as supportive. Similarly, the adaptiveness of activities correlates negatively with the additional burden: the more the activities are adapted to the home environment, the less they are perceived as an additional burden. Further, the Pearson's correlation coefficients between the responses related to parents' opinions are small, but significant.

Table 7

Correlations between the answers on the questions about the parents' opinion on collaboration

	Importance of maintaining contacts	Replying to contacts	Adaptiveness of activities	Additional burden of contacts	Supportiveness of contacts
Importance of maintaining contacts	—				
	—				
	—				
Replying to contacts	0.291***	—			
	<.001	—			
	921	—			
Adaptiveness of activities	0.193***	0.174***	—		
	<.001	<.001	—		
	738	736	—		
Additional burden of contacts	-0.231***	-0.206***	-0.177***	—	
	<.001	<.001	<.001	—	
	782	776	739	—	
Supportiveness of contacts	0.296***	0.150***	0.506***	-0.120***	—
	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—
	785	778	737	782	—

Interpretation

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, kindergarten work and, consequently, the dynamics of cooperation between the kindergarten and the family, have changed greatly. The work of preschool teachers was also subject to change. Preschool teachers have many different roles – they are professionals for early childhood, activity providers and caretakers; however, they are not trained

media professionals. In the current reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing need for the ECEC professionals to communicate with families calmly, quickly, and effectively (Lucas, 2020). Due to various forms of kindergarten employee work (e.g. working from home, waiting for work) and the diverse instructions of principals on how to operate during the kindergarten closure, the ways of cooperation between the kindergarten and the family differed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The families contacted by the kindergarten staff during the COVID-19 lockdown were mostly reached by preschool teachers or their assistants (around 70% in both kindergarten closures). As most of the kindergarten staff were sent home to wait for work during both lockdowns, we believe 70% to be a high percentage of collaboration. The “waiting for work” status allowed the educators not to work and yet 70% of them chose or were directed by the principals to remain in touch with the children from their group and their families. This percentage of cooperation would have probably been lower if the questionnaire had also intentionally reached the families with lower levels of digital literacy, who were omitted from the sample of this survey due to the online form of the questionnaire. We can conclude that many ECEC professionals followed the curriculum, which allows for and at the same time requires cooperation between families and kindergartens, although the area was completely unregulated at the time and they were not officially required to do so. There was also a markedly low percentage of families that had never been contacted, which means that plenty of kindergartens that were involved in the study kept contact with the families, in the very least with instructions on or a notice about further kindergarten operation. As far as we know, the Ministry or other decision makers issued no guidelines for preschool teachers during the lockdown in October 2020. To our knowledge, the first guidelines where distance learning in preschool was mentioned were issued at the end of November (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2020c). We believe that the decision makers should have offered the kindergartens additional support and that the government should have prepared national guidelines on the cooperation between the families and kindergartens.

There were more contacts from the kindergarten staff during the second lockdown, which we believe to be expected. During the second closure, kindergartens were only partly closed, and the educators already had the experience of closure. Thus, they were able to transfer the good practices from the first lockdown. The parents most commonly reported of a once-a-week contact, which corresponds to the government’s weekly notice further instructing the management on how to operate during the second closure.

Kindergartens chose different ways of communicating with the families. The channel chosen for communication should consider the needs of the parents using the service. An e-mail may be an appropriate choice in a community where the bulk of families work desk jobs, but a poor choice where many

families have low levels of (digital) literacy. Using more than one method – for example an e-mail, a webpage post, and a video message – may be the best way to get a message out quickly and consistently (Lucas, 2020). Parents reported the usage of different channels. The channels of initiating communication by principals, counsellors, and preschool teachers or their assistants were the same, the most common being e-mail, followed by a webpage and telephone. We also believe that even more attention should be paid to providing additional communication channels, through which kindergartens would be able to reach families with lower competencies of digital literacy as well.

One fifth of parents also reported that they had initiated contact with the kindergarten on their own. Furthermore, half of the parents reported that they had always replied to the contact from kindergarten, meaning that a two-way communication was established. Yet, it should be emphasised that even if parents did reply to the received activities, a more individualized two-way communication should also have been kept. For example, if parents replied and thanked the professionals for the sent activities, this cannot be defined as a quality two-way communication. Two-way communication is significant since the curriculum states the right of parents to exchange information (Bahovec et al., 1999). Research has shown that parental involvement in the child's education process is an important predictor of the child's cognitive, social, and emotional skills development. In addition, regular cooperation and two-way communication with parents enable a smaller deficit in the acquisition of knowledge or skills that the child would otherwise acquire in kindergarten or school (OECD, 2020). If there is regular two-way communication, preschool teachers can support and guide the parents on how to provide enhanced learning at home, while parents can help the preschool teachers to understand any issues that arise for the child during the lockdown period, as well as the child's home context, interests, and concerns.

The aim of the contacts varied from suggestions for activities to talking to parents or only sharing notices. The data show that the contacts by preschool teachers or their assistants were mainly directed towards the whole group of children as the suggestions were not individualized. Individual activities (such as talking to each child or discussing the current situation with each family) were not often reported. The communication mostly included only suggestions for activities and fewer activities via video calls where preschool teachers or their assistants would lead the activity with children (e.g. morning circle, virtual story reading, virtual puppet show), which would have been even less demanding for the parents. As stated in the research by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2021), we believe that it would be important for the wellbeing of all children to have permanent remote contacts at least once or twice a week during the closure. During these meetings, children should be able to greet their preschool teacher and the other children; tell them what they were doing, watching, or reading; say how they are feeling; and show their drawings and other crafts.

We would also point out the necessity for the counsellors to be more involved in the cooperation with the families, since the lockdown could be stressful for the family, which has also been suggested in the research by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2021). We believe that, in the future, special attention should be paid to planning and providing more individualized and two-way communication with individual families (especially with the ones with lower social economic status). That is why further research should focus on, for example, whether educators reached all families; what educators did if the families did not respond; whether they asked for feedback; whether educators gathered information on the needs of the families; whether they ensured that families could ask questions of interest and provided good and applicable advice etc.

In general, parents reported that the contacts with preschool teachers or their assistants were supportive and not an additional burden. If parents thought that maintaining contacts was important, they also replied more often and believed the contacts to be more supportive – and vice versa. Based on the calculated correlations, it is important to emphasize that the activities need to be adapted in order to be supportive and not an additional burden. Most parents reported that the activities were adapted to their home environment and that they were able to carry them out. This shows the professionalism of preschool teachers and their assistants. It could mean that they were familiar with the families' home environments and had this in mind while preparing the suggestions for activities. On the other hand, there is almost a quarter of parents who answered that the activities were neither adapted nor unadapted to their home environment and only a low percentage of parents reported that the activities were not adapted. Those could be the parents of children with special needs or the families from different cultural backgrounds. There is also a chance that a few preschool teachers or their assistants did not consider the home environments. This should encourage the preschool teachers and their assistants to pay even greater attention when preparing activities in home environment and to acquire even more information about it to further adapt the activities to the families' needs and circumstances.

The correlation of the parents' level of education with their perception of collaboration was not high. The only significant result is that parents with lower levels of education (high school or lower) found contacts more supportive than the parents with higher levels of education. Maybe this sort of support was more beneficial for the parents with a lower level of education. While stronger school–parent links benefit all children, it is of paramount importance to improve equity for children from the disadvantaged families, where home learning environments tend to be weaker than in the advantaged families (OECD, 2020).

Most of the parents (regardless of their education level) thought that maintaining contact between the educator and the family during the kindergarten

closure was necessary. This is a crucial piece of information for possible further lockdowns or other situations when a child is not attending preschool (e.g. long-term illness). From the obtained data, we cannot conclude what type of contact parents wish to maintain: Do they only wish to be informed? Do they want additional activities? Do they want additional support via telephone? Nevertheless, while preschool closures have posed many challenges for the parents and preschool teachers, stronger preschool–parent links will be valuable to maintain and build when the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

Limitations

The study has several limitations regarding its sample. It is important to emphasize that the sample is not representative, which means that lessons learned cannot be generalized to all parents in Slovenia. Another disadvantage, which we did not foresee, refers to the possibility that a parent with more than one child enrolled in the kindergarten could not answer for each child separately.

The questionnaire was completely optional, therefore, only filled out by parents who felt motivated to participate in the research. Because of the online form of the questionnaire, the parents with less developed ICT skills or poorer access to computers or Wi-Fi were excluded. Parents with other characteristics, living in more challenging and adverse circumstances, perhaps did not share these same experiences during the kindergarten closure. According to the analysis of the educational structure of parents, it is evident that more parents with higher education participated in the study.

Closing remarks

The paper addresses an important issue related to the current (pandemic-related) situation within the context of early childhood education in Slovenia. From both methodological and conceptual perspectives, this study presents some descriptive indicators related to the cooperation between kindergartens and families. The central issue is whether the education systems will seek to maintain and build stronger links between the parents and preschools. Those who seek to proactively build these relationships as schools and ECEC centres re-open will support better child learning and wellbeing (OECD, 2020). We need to consider that even if kindergartens collaborated to provide freely accessible parenting resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased risk of parents and children developing mental health problems calls for further initiatives, multiple interventions, and economic resources (Fontanessi et al., 2020). It is also important to bear in mind that children's wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of their parents and other caregivers (Bartlett et al., 2020), as well as that a kindergarten professional can play an important role in supporting the wellbeing of the latter. The role of kindergarten professionals

is to support the children's positive adaptation in the context of the pandemic (or other crisis) and to maintain the familiar routine. This can be done with well-planned contacts between kindergartens and the families, with the activities adapted to home environment, and with clear guidance on how to keep in touch during the lockdown. Both the flexibility of the family support services and the cooperation between the family and the ECEC institution are very important in extraordinary situations when usual work is not possible, and/or families experience additional stress. That is why we consider this topic very important. It is additionally important to open up the question of readiness and competence of the ECEC practitioners to really support the families and provide opportunities for home learning in a flexible way. The data and discussions provided in this paper may contribute to a higher level of quality support for families in the future in case kindergartens have to close again due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that, if we continue to listen to parents, children, and preschool professionals, we will gradually build a clearer and more authentic understanding of their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the kindergarten closure. Thereby, we can help the education system to generate good practices and new guidelines by transforming the crisis into a new learning pedagogical opportunity.

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Saradnja vrtiča i porodica tokom zatvaranja predškolskih ustanova u Sloveniji usled COVID-19 pandemije

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Tokom 2020. godine, vrtići u Sloveniji bili su potpuno zatvoreni u prvom talasu pandemije kovida-19 i delimično zatvoreni u drugom talasu. Usled ovakve situacije, promenila se i praksa vrtića u pogledu saradnje sa porodicama. Kako bismo stekli uvid u novonastalu situaciju u ovoj oblasti, naše istraživanje usmereno je na način na koji je organizovana saradnja između vrtića i porodice u periodu zatvaranja vrtića. U novembru 2020. konstruisali smo onlajn upitnik za roditelje čije barem jedno dete je upisano u vrtić. Upitnik je popunilo 944 roditelja. Više od polovine roditelja odgovorilo je da su im kontakti sa predškolskim radnicima pomogli tokom potpunog i/ili delimičnog zatvaranja vrtića. Oko polovine roditelja reklo je da ih je vrtić kontaktirao jednom nedeljno, uglavnom dajući predloge za aktivnosti i informacije u slučaju da vrtić ostane zatvoren. Većina roditelja odgovorila je da im dodatni kontakt sa stručnjacima nije predstavljao dodatno opterećenje. Tri četvrtine roditelja smatra da je potrebno održavati kontakt i tokom zatvaranja. Ipak, kako je situacija sa pandemijom potpuno nova, i dalje je teško proceniti na koji način zapravo ima smisla održavati saradnju tokom zatvaranja. Ova studija omogućila nam je da steknemo uvid u važnost saradnje iz perspektive roditelja, koja treba da bude uzeta u obzir u sličnim situacijama koje predstoje.

Ključne reči: COVID-19, vrtići, roditelji, deca predškolskog uzrasta, saradnja

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