

POSSIBILITIES OF A COLLEGIAL SUPPORT GROUP FOR IMPROVING THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES OF TEACHERS DURING REMOTE WORK

Iveta Kāposta

Social Integration State Agency college, Latvia

Nils Sautiņš

Social Integration State Agency college, Latvia

Abstract. *In educational institutions, collegial support groups as the form of pedagogical work have long been known and have been incorporated into the system of the organization of methodological work. These are mainly administratively formed long-term activity groups. This study focuses on the less studied so far freely formed short-term activity groups in an educational establishment. The analysis of the activities of the above-mentioned groups as a whole highlight their capabilities in remote working conditions. The study is based on literature analysis and pooling and analysis of structured interview data. The structured interview was designed to find out whether and how teachers come together in groups during remote work, to solve problems that have arisen during the work and what results this work has given. The study concluded that the remote activities of the collegial support group are successful, provided that the educational institution already has a sufficiently long tradition of organizing these groups.*

Keywords: *collegial support group, teachers, professional improvement*

Introduction

Over the last 10-15 years, collegial support groups have been given increased attention as a form of teacher training, because traditional forms of teacher training have become less effective as the pedagogical process and the requirements for managing and organising this process are evolving and changing. There are different types of collegial support groups aimed at improving teaching and learning, and the features of these groups in the main characteristics are consistent with each other. The advantages of the collegial support group, compared to the traditional professional development of teachers, are stated as follows: “Instead of scripted, one-size-fits-all professional development, these educators held conversations, shared practice, and negotiated ways to challenge one another becoming better teachers” (Hales, 2017).

A study analysis of recent years shows that the majority of researchers have focused on the type of collegial support groups focused on long-term functioning, namely, the duration of the activity of one group within 1-3 years. These types of groups are “designed to maintain a tight focus on individual teacher instructional improvement” (Keedy, Gordon, Winter, & Newton, 2001). The functioning of such groups is, of course, significant, but they are topical when there are no major shocks in the pedagogical process. On the other hand, if changes are to be introduced rapidly and solutions are to be found, long-term mutual monitoring of activities and consultation and finding solutions are not possible.

Short-term activity groups have been studied relatively less. D.Allen (Allen, 1998) classifies short-term groups as: training groups and groups of critical friends. The researcher has provided a general description of short-term collegial support groups, including their impact on the development of the institution. The activities of the training groups and the impact on the culture of the school organisation can be identified in a schematic manner (Fig. 1). On the other hand, as the basis of the activities of a group of critical friends, the researcher pointed out supervision, during which the group members share their positive and negative experiences and listen to comments and suggestions from other members of the group.



Figure 1 The structure of short-term group activities (according to D.Allen)

Existing studies have focused on the activities of collegial support groups on-site. However, the current situation is characterised by changes in the educational process, when teachers are forced to work remotely and/or in hybrid form (at the same time, both on-site and remotely). The question arises: is it possible for collegial support groups to operate in such a situation?, what is characteristic for this situation?

In this study, the authors focused on collegial support groups, with short-term activity (1-3 months) during remote work to understand: 1. Under what conditions can collegial support groups operate in remote mode?; 2. What goals can be achieved when working remotely?

Methods and Techniques

In order to find answers to the questions raised, a study was carried out during which, in the first place, the theoretical guidelines for the activities of the collegial support group were analysed, then, on the basis of the conclusions gained during the theoretical study of the formation and activities of a collegial support group, a structured interview for teachers was established. The survey was conducted in the form of a telephone interview. It allowed the structured interview to be supplemented with elements of the free interview in order to clarify certain views expressed by respondents. In the survey were involved educators from 3 educational institutions. The experience of the freely formed short-term action groups in the 2 selected schools has been for several years, in turn, 1 school did not have experience of such groups. A total of 55 teachers from general education schools were surveyed. With some of them an additional discussion was held after the interview. Because the survey showed a small number of respondents, all data is collected and displayed in absolute figures.

The term *collegial support group* was used neither during interviews nor during discussion, as it became clear in the pre-interviews that this term, which is used in scientific literature, was not recognised by teachers in Latvia. They know the broader concept of “support group” and it relates to different areas of social support (e.g. support groups for people with addictions, victims of violence, etc.).

Exposition

In Latvian educational institutions, the collegial support group has long been known as the form of pedagogical work and has been included in the structure of the methodical work organisation: methodological commissions and pedagogical boards. But they are long-term activity groups. Short-term collegial support groups

are less common, but there are educational institutions where such groups have also become common (Kāposta, 2014).

The task of the group is to help the individual solve the problems at work so that he can try new ideas and choose the appropriate solution during his work (Keedy, Gordon, Winter, & Newton, 2001).

All the studies analyzed (Allen, Attard, Hales, Kāposta, Solis, Gordon) show identical guidelines for the functioning of collegial support groups, which we will see below.

In the course of the group's work, the following steps are consequently observed:

1. Identifying the problem. The members of the Group shall discuss their experience and clearly and accurately define the problem and issues to which answers and solutions will be sought in the course of the work.
2. Studying the problem. Each member of the group shall choose or receive a specific question, which shall be undertaken to study in theory. (It should be followed that all issues are covered.) The individual problem is studied between sessions 1 and 2. During the 2nd session, the participants shall present each other with their research results, then they shall be discussed and associated with the experience of the participants.
3. Finding solutions. On the basis of an examination of the problem, potential solutions to the problem are identified and discussed. Each member of the group shall choose one of the possible solutions to check it in practice. In the next session, participants share experience on how they have been successful in implementing the solution: the results, what was a success, what was a failure. The experience of all participants is discussed, solutions are compared with each other. As a result, you can identify one of the most optimal options for the problem, or you can get a number of options to choose from according to the specific situation.

In addition, all authors note that the work going on continuously, the members of the group work dually: in a session – in a group and in between sessions – on an individual basis.

Key principles the learning in a group is based on:

- Learning with others and with the help of others. In particular, learning needs to have a clear learning goal and that goal is being pursued through other members of the group. If there is no clearly identified learning goal, a participant tends to act uninterested and, often, even ceases.
- The problem must be topical and sufficiently significant for all members of the group. If the solution to the problem is obvious, the problem for

most of the members of the group becomes uninteresting and untimely. That, in turn, means they won't get involved in the work.

- All members of the group are equal and co-responsible for all the work and its results. (All members of the group, regardless of the nature and extent of the work done, acquire the same right to author and use of the results.)
- To comply with the pre-defined operational and cooperation conditions during all the time of problem solving.

If all the above stated conditions are met, the result of the work of the collegial support group will be the following:

1. One or more alternative solutions to the problem has been obtained,
2. The methodology for solving problems is being acquired or improved,
3. Each member of the group is better acquainted with himself and his learning process as well as with group members.

However, in each separate case, of course, the results are more specific, and each member of the group has achieved his own individual objectives, because of which he has involved in the group's work.

In order for the group work to be effective, before starting to solve the problem it is necessary to:

- update the basic principles and agree on the conditions of action and cooperation. (This is usually the case for an agreement between each other on the terms of relations and communication.)
- define the role of each member in the group.
- agree on the frequency and duration of meeting sessions. That is, when and how long the group meeting will be held.

In the empirical part of the study, first of all, it was important to find out whether teachers formed collegial support groups during remote work. As shown in Figure 2, not all teachers surveyed engaged in larger or smaller groups during remote work in order to address the problems encountered during work. 21 respondents replied that during remote work they had not been involved in cooperation with colleagues to find a solution to arising problems during remote work. These respondents were asked why they had not been involved in cooperation with their colleagues (see Fig. 3 for a summary of answers).

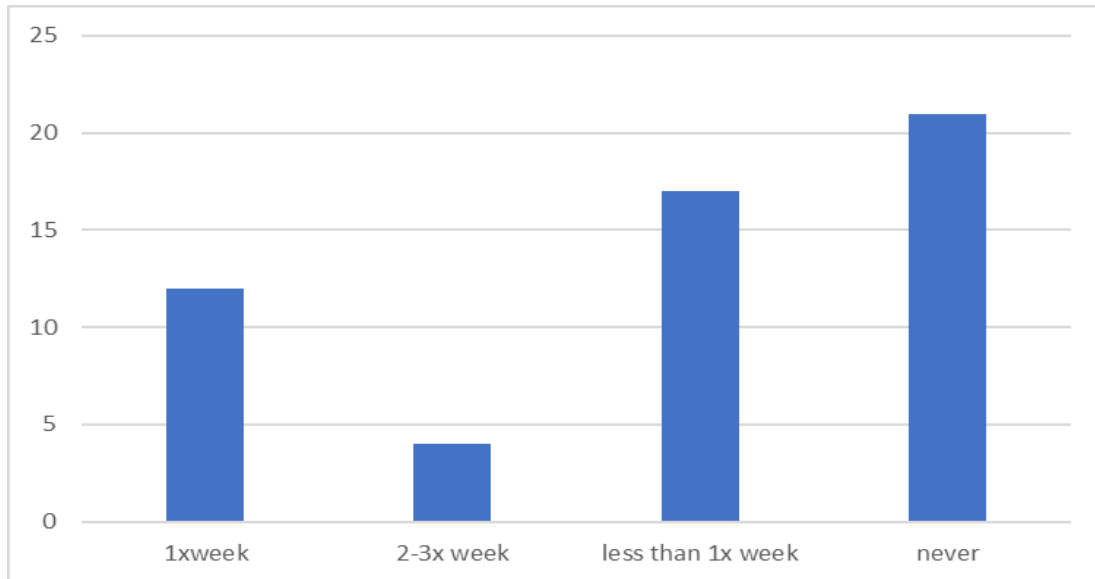


Figure 2 Frequency of group member meetings (created by authors)

An analysis of the reasons for not participating in the group (Figure 3) showed that teachers first indicated the excessive amount of time and work to be performed during remote work, but other reasons raised doubts as to whether this was the main reason. 16 out of 21 respondents indicated that their cooperation with colleagues was delayed by insecurity and fears of showing colleagues their ignorance and/or lack of competence on any issue. Such fears usually arise in those working groups where management has created conditions where employees compete with each other for recognition, where each tries to demonstrate itself as the best, most knowledgeable, most skillful, etc. This position, in turn, does not allow colleagues to be approached when the teacher is unable to cope with any problem. 8 respondents also identified other reasons where, in a different way, the fact that it was not normal in the educational establishment to spontaneously create such groups, in which to deal with topical issues together, all activities with problem-solving options (including identifying problems) were the work of the administration. In particular, teachers are not trying to improve their pedagogical process, but they expect for it either to be done or be organised by the management of the institution.

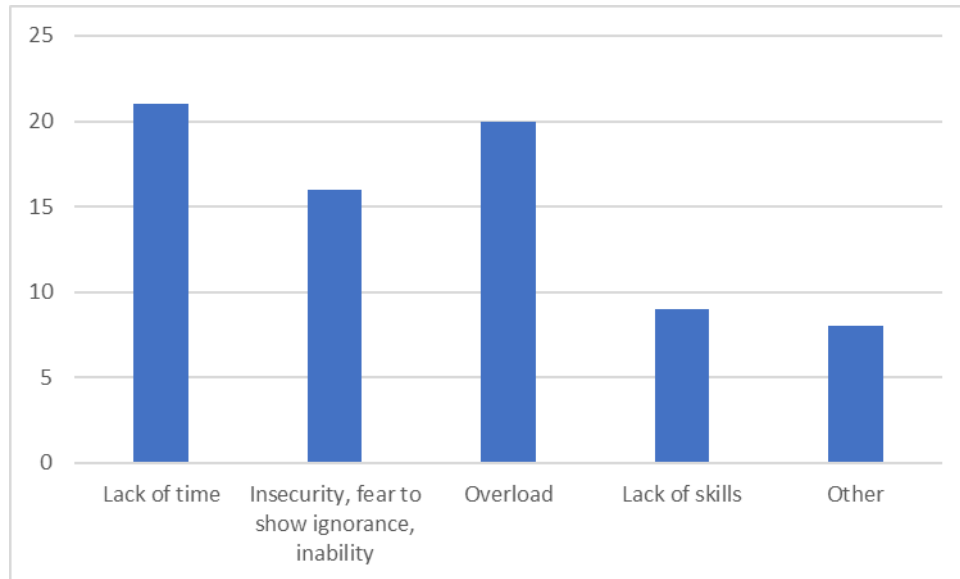


Figure 3 Reasons for not participating in support groups (created by authors)

Respondents who acknowledged that during remote work they had tried to interact with their colleagues in order to address the difficulties and problems encountered in unaccustomed working arrangements have made use of different IT resources for this purpose. Figure 4 shows what resources were used. Part of the communication was not in video format, but in correspondence. They have generally been brief statements, or an agreement on the timing of a regular or unscheduled appointment.

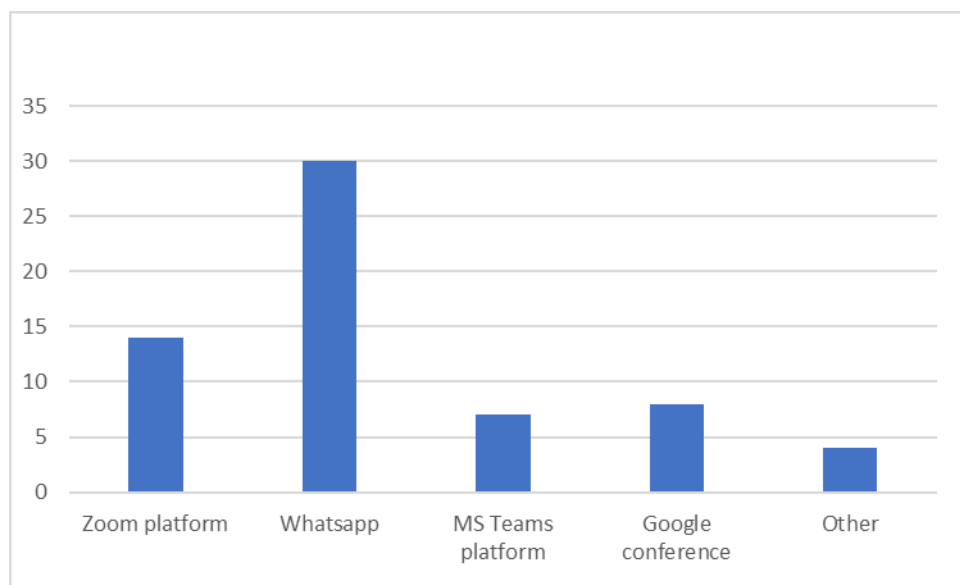


Figure 4 Meeting and communication platforms (created by authors)

The size of the groups (see Fig. 5) has been different for both the micro-groups (2-3 members) and the groups in which more than 5 members are present. But, quite a lot of respondents have pointed out that the number of members of the group has been variable during its activity time, namely, that part of their colleagues start to work, but after time, they quit the activities, there have also been cases of joining the group when it has already started. Most frequently, this has occurred in the resolution phase 2 and 3 (see page 3).

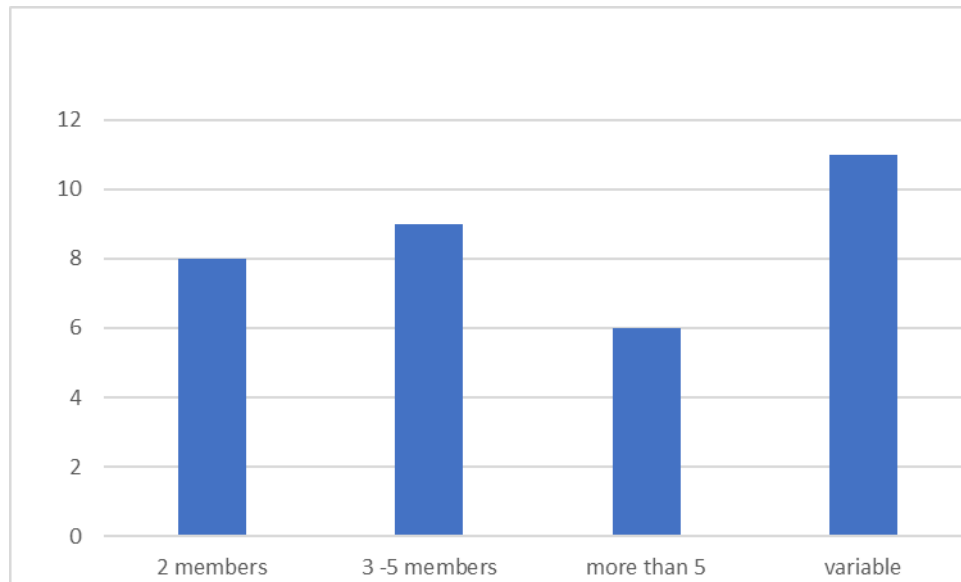


Figure 5 Number of participants in a group (created by authors)

In order for the collegial support group to be effective, one of the essential conditions is that each member of the group must have a clearly identified goal. Respondents could name 3 goals. (Not everyone used this opportunity.) Figure 6 shows that, initially, almost all members of the groups were willing to gain the support of colleagues, not to feel alone and abandoned in a difficult professional situation where, without the unusual, complicated working situation, there was also a need to overcome the long-term stress created by pandemic and lockdown. But also specific problems that occurred during the unaccustomed work needed to be identified and addressed. As we know, it is easier to find solutions collectively, particularly if there is already such a problem-solving experience.

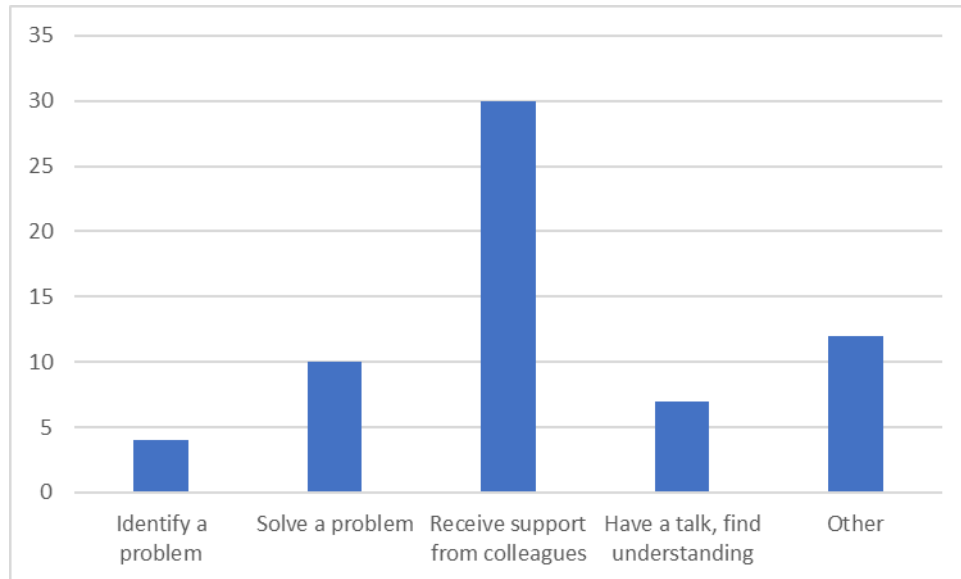


Figure 6 Goals of group members (created by authors)

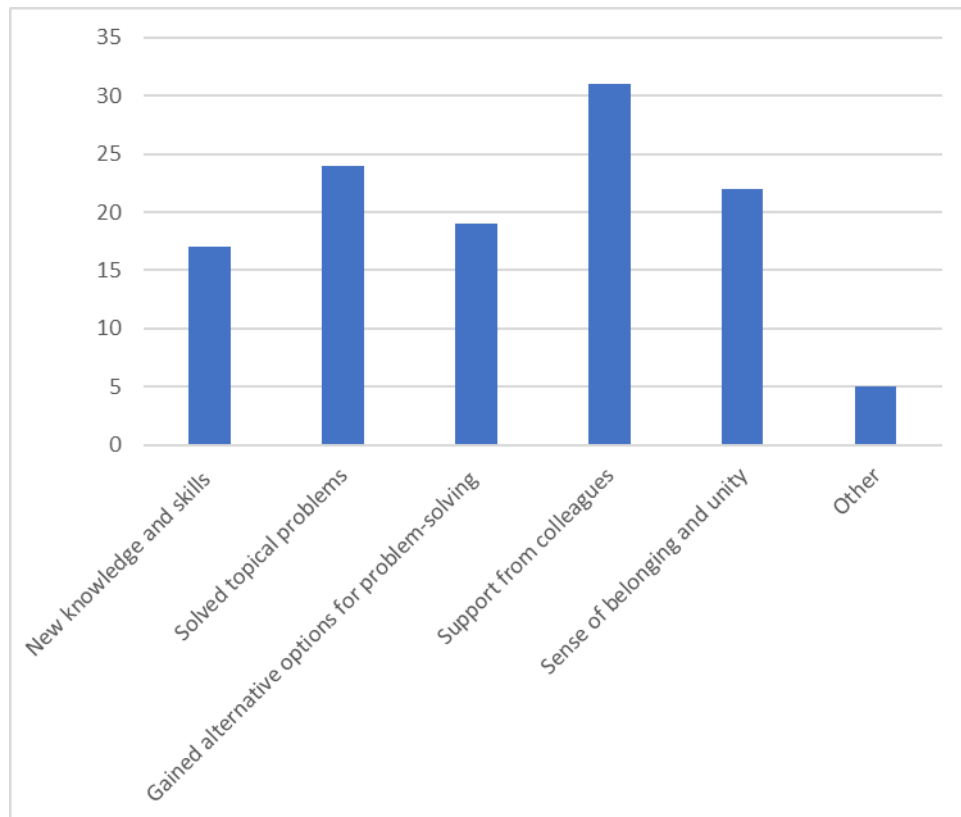


Figure 7 Work results achieved (created by authors)

According to various studies on the activities of collegial support groups (Allen, Attard, Hales, Keedy, Gordon, Winter, Newton), their results generally exceed the individual goal of each member. As a result of the group's work: one or more alternative solutions to the problem are being obtained; the methodology for solving problems is being acquired or improved; each member of the group is better acquainted with himself and his learning process and with his group members. These are the generally recognised results of the collegial support group. P.Halls indicates the following further results: professional development of participants through colleagues; tackling the challenges in cooperation; teaching and learning expertise; reflections and action. Respondents to this study also confirm the conclusions reached in previous studies relating to the results of collegial support groups, but during remote work, the support of colleagues and a sense of belonging and unity that is undeniably needed, since although the teacher works alone with his students, the objective of the teaching process can only be achieved collectively, so the teacher is a collective not an individual profession.

It can therefore be stated that the collegial support group can also operate remotely successfully. However, there are still enough questions that require further research.

Conclusions

1. The remote activities of the collegial support group are successful, provided that the educational institution already has a sufficiently long tradition of organizing these groups. If the search and resolution of solutions to the various topical challenges have been not only an administration's but also a teacher's initiative.
2. The main reason why collegial support groups are being formed during remote work is the desire of teachers to feel the support of colleagues and not to lose a sense of belonging to a collective and a particular educational institution.
3. Each member of the group must have a clear personal goal and a desire to support his or her colleagues. If there is no clear goal, it is likely that a member will untimely leave the group.
4. The remote work of collegial support groups is made difficult by the excessive amount of work of teachers, leading to time scarcity and overload.

References

- Attard, K. (2012). Public reflection withing lerning communities. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(2), 199-211
- Allen, D. (1998). *Assessing Student Learning: From Grading to Understanding*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hales, P. (2017). Shifts in teacher talk in a participatory action research professional learning community. *Studia Paedagogica*, 22(4), 31–53.
- Kāposta, I. (2014). Operational experience of support groups at educational institutions in Latvia. Rural Enviroment. *Education.Personality*. No.7, 97-102.
- Keedy, J. L, Gordon, S. P., Winter, P. A., & Newton, R. M. (2001). An assessment of school councils, collegial groups, and professional development as teacher empowerment strategies. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 27(1), 29–50.
- Solis I. R., & Gordon S. P. (2020). *Integrating Multiple Professional Learning Frameworks to Assist Teachers' Reflective Inquiry*. i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 12